

The Paris Catacombs

Remains and Reunion beneath the Postrevolutionary City

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ABSTRACT Although the Paris Catacombs have been a popular space in Paris since opening to the public in 1809, this is the first academic study that seeks to situate the public ossuary within a postrevolutionary context. By examining both the early institutional history and popular reception of the Catacombs, this article demonstrates how the Catacombs were instrumental in helping the population process and resolve the dislocation of the Revolution. Specifically, it examines how visitors used the underground space to express anxieties about revolutionary values like equality and to create a sense of historical stability after the Revolution's radical rupture with the past.

KEYWORDS Catacombs, Paris, Empire, Restoration, postrevolutionary France

The Paris Catacombs are strange: a network of subterranean tunnels carefully lined with human bones, punctuated only by a few placards issuing warnings, pithy quotes, and vaguely identifying labels to guide paying visitors on their way through a macabre historical space. With the exception of electric lighting, the Catacombs have gone relatively unmodified since opening to the public in 1809. Even then, in the tumultuous cultural climate of early nineteenth-century Paris, the Catacombs were an extraordinary sight to behold. As an early visitor described his experience:

We enter into this palace of death; its hideous features surround us; the walls are papered over: bones bend into arcs, rise into columns, an artistic hand created a kind of mosaic out of these final remains of humanity, whose ordered regularity only adds to the profound contemplation that this space inspires. . . . Ten generations have been swallowed up here, and this subterranean population is estimated to be three times larger than its aboveground counterpart. . . . Inscriptions, placed

on limestone pillars, indicate which Parisian neighborhoods once contained these remains. Here, all distinctions of sex, wealth, and rank have finally disappeared.¹

Despite popular appeal since the early nineteenth century, the Catacombs have enjoyed little attention from historians. This is likely due to their regrettably scant trace in the archives and their long association with seemingly superficial popular culture, ranging from Second Empire horror stories to twenty-first-century films.² Perhaps because the Catacombs appear most frequently in works of fiction, some of the most sophisticated and useful analyses of the Parisian underground have emerged from literary scholars, most notably David Lawrence Pike.³ By contrast, when historians of France, Paris, or the dead have written about the Catacombs, their references almost always lack substantive analysis. Even Emmanuel Fureix's otherwise comprehensive study of the politics of mourning in the postrevolutionary era only addresses the Catacombs fleetingly—albeit evocatively—as “the little-known cemetery of the Revolution run wild.”⁴

This paucity of historical work on the Catacombs is unfortunate, since “the Empire of Death” (as the space was dubbed in the early nineteenth century) is perfectly positioned to offer valuable insights into the social and cultural world in which it thrived. As Fureix's vivid description suggests, the Catacombs' close relationship to the Revolution makes it a particularly good space to illuminate how Parisians responded to the trauma and dislocation of the Revolution in its aftermath. In the first two decades of their operation, the Catacombs emerged as an unexpectedly inclusive place where Parisians of all ideological stripes could air their anxieties about the present and their hopes for the future. The ossuary's egalitarian aesthetic, depicted in the quotation that opened this article, was essential to this process because it was both powerfully evocative and ideologically malleable. Such indistinguishable masses of bones could signify republican equality, disorienting social confusion, or religious memento mori, depending on the audience. These divergent readings combined with the Catacombs' symbolic and very real connection to the past to open up a space in the city that was simultaneously old and new, revolutionary and familiar, sacred and secular. Although it may initially appear to be something of a historical lark, the early history of the Paris Catacombs reveals a complex and conflicted

1. Jouy, “Les catacombes,” 361.

2. The best-known nineteenth-century fictionalizations of the Catacombs include Berthet, *Les catacombes de Paris*; Méry, *Salons et souterrains de Paris*; Dumas, *Les Mohicans de Paris*; and Zaccone, *Les drames des catacombes*. More recently, at least two Hollywood films have taken the Catacombs as their subject: *Catacombs* (dir. Tomm Coker and David Elliot, 2007) and *As Above, So Below* (dir. John Erick Dowdle, 2014).

3. Pike, *Subterranean Cities*, 101–29; Bernard, *Les deux Paris*, 164–66.

4. Fureix, *La France des larmes*, 141.

urban space that maintained a delicate balance between competing currents of postrevolutionary thought.

This article begins by chronicling the inception of the Catacombs as a sign of Parisian modernization. Although the space was officially created under the rule of Louis XVI, it has always been closely associated with the forces of the Enlightenment, Revolution, and Empire. Philippe Muray famously claimed that the nineteenth century truly began when Parisian city workers transported the first collection of bones to the new underground ossuary.⁵ As a “hygienic” solution to overflowing church graveyards, to many contemporaries the subterranean municipal ossuary signaled the triumph of reason over superstition and the forward march of progress. However, as the second part of this article demonstrates, once the Catacombs opened to the public in 1809, a competing intention to create an expiatory monument out of the space complicated this narrative. The third part explores the many contrasting ways that visitors understood and used their new underground space, often in ways that transcended the divide of 1789, merging the “old” and “new” regimes and their related cultural practices. The uniform bones on display could equally inspire Catholic reverence, egalitarian fraternal sentiment, or macabre amusement. The article ends by examining how the Catacombs’ inclusiveness helped nineteenth-century Parisians imagine their way out of the Revolution as a point of rupture. At its most functional, the Catacombs harbored more than disparate perspectives: it also housed “ten generations” of Parisian bones. When infused with a romantic historical sensibility, this palpability of the past made the Catacombs a unique bridge (or perhaps a tunnel) across the divide of 1789.

The Catacombs and the Modernization of Paris

Since their origin in the waning days of the Old Regime, the Catacombs have been intimately connected to narratives of the modernization of the French capital. Eighteenth-century engineers initially conceived and designed the space as the solution to two practical urban problems: the structural instability of the quarries that lay beneath Paris, and a lack of adequate burial spaces throughout the city. The cemetery problem in particular had been for decades the subject of complaints by Enlightenment reformers who sought to update and improve Paris’s early modern burial culture by replacing crowded urban church graveyards with verdant cemeteries outside of the city walls. It would ultimately take decades for the first of these new burial spaces, Père Lachaise, to open its doors, but the creation of the Paris Catacombs was in many ways the beginning of this process. Since the eighteenth century scholars have accordingly interpreted the

5. Muray, *Le dix-neuvième siècle à travers les âges*, 48.

circumstances surrounding the creation of the Catacombs as a dramatic break in ritual and practice. The Catacombs, in turn, have become a symbol of a distinctly modern burial culture, characterized by secular administration, the rationalization of space, and a powerful romantic aesthetic.

The relationship between the modernization of Paris and its underground began decades before the ossuary was first conceived, when the network of tunnels beneath the city was more simply referred to as the quarries of Paris. Since antiquity Parisians had been mining the ground beneath the city to extract necessary building materials. By the 1770s such rapacious hollowing out of the capital started to take its toll and streets began collapsing. Most infamously, an eighty-four-foot sinkhole appeared in the Rue d'Enfer near the Saint-Michel barrier in 1774. Four years later a road in Menilmontant swallowed up seven Parisians, whose bodies were recovered over the next three weeks up to eighty feet below street level.⁶ As these disasters became more regular, the government ordered a small contingent of architects and police to inspect the quarries for safety. Shortly thereafter the Ministry of the Interior created the Department of Quarries to map, reinforce, and permanently maintain the underground system of tunnels so that no more structures (or people) fell into the earth.⁷

This urgent need to update and rationalize the space beneath the city also had an aboveground corollary. Just as the city's historical foundation seemed incapable of supporting Paris's living population, its dead proved equally difficult to contain. Throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, a wide range of critics (from Enlightenment reformers to ecclesiastics) warned about the dangers of Paris's long-standing practice of burying the dead in mass graves adjacent to churchyards. Keeping the dead in such proximity to the living was not only unhygienic, they argued, but potentially lethal. A 1763 status report on all of Paris's cemeteries vividly noted that "the burials that take place in Paris are thickening the air" and surmised that "the cadavers buried beneath our feet are the source of otherwise mysterious illnesses" affecting city dwellers.⁸ The inhabitants of the Montmartre community wrote a particularly vehement complaint to the Parlement of Paris in which they made repeated references to an impending "medical epidemic" that could result from the dead infecting the living with their cadaverous vapors.⁹

6. Paris, Archives Nationales de France (hereafter AN), F13 742, "Rapport présenté au Ministre de l'Intérieur" (1798).

7. AN, F13 203, L. C. F. Héricart de Thury, "Rapport sur les travaux des carrières de Paris et environs" (1810).

8. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Collection Joly de Fleury 1209, "Avis des Officiers du Chatelet au sujet des cimetières" (1763), 14.

9. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Collection Joly de Fleury 1209, "Au monseigneur le Procureur Général au Parlement de Paris" (1786), 108–11.

Paris's oldest and largest burial space, the Cemetery of the Holy Innocents, was a primary target of these types of complaints. Reformers had been petitioning for the closure of Innocents on the grounds of public safety throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁰ These fears were vindicated in 1780 when a heap of decomposing human debris broke through the basement walls of houses that bordered the cemetery. The medical expert Antoine-Alexandre Cadet de Vaux gave a report before the Royal Academy of Sciences, where he explained that the air in Innocents was as infected and insalubrious as that in the city's worst hospitals. Relying on the most up-to-date scientific knowledge, he described the pernicious and near-lethal effects that cemetery air had on people who were exposed to it, including suffocation, trembling, paleness, vertigo, and vomiting. At the end of his report he imagined a better Paris, where everyone breathed cleaner air, where future generations would be spared the effects of "cadaverous exhalations," and where the dead would "finally stop troubling the living."¹¹ Louis XVI's government responded with a definitive decree that ordered Innocents—and eventually all urban cemeteries—permanently closed.

For eighteenth-century contemporaries as well as recent scholars, the closing of Innocents epitomized important cultural shifts that precipitated the Revolution. For classic historians of *mentalités* like Philippe Ariès, Michel Vovelle, and John McManners, this was the advent of secularization, the bourgeois emotional family, and the bureaucratic administration of city space that would characterize the modern era.¹² Most scholars pinpoint the closing of Innocents as the crowning achievement of Enlightenment scientific and medical discourse, for better or for worse.¹³ As Thomas Kselman notes, however, the transition "from churchyard to cemetery" was about much more than public health: it signaled a "new understanding of the appropriate relationship between the living and the dead."¹⁴ Fureix adds that, in addition to representing the exile of the dead and the triumph of hygiene, this moment ultimately paved the way for a modern burial culture that concealed the dead while enshrining them in individual tombs.¹⁵ Taking a more critical position, Innocents' most recent historian, Christine Métayer, refers to the moment when Innocents was shut down

10. Hannaway and Hannaway, "La fermeture du cimetière des Innocents"; Foisil, "Les attitudes devant la mort au XVIIIe siècle."

11. Cadet de Vaux, "Mémoire historique et physique sur le cimetière des Innocents," 410–11, 416–17.

12. Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort*; Vovelle, *La mort et l'Occident*; McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*.

13. Hannaway and Hannaway, "La fermeture du cimetière des Innocents"; Harding, *Dead and the Living in Paris and London*, 117.

14. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France*, 167.

15. Fureix, *La France des larmes*, 74.

in 1780 as a “fundamental rupture” in practice that distanced the dead from the living and deprived Paris of one of its most vibrant social spaces.¹⁶

The closing of Innocents occasioned the creation of a new—if less obviously vibrant—social space. Human remains had been accumulating in the cemetery and its charnel houses for eight centuries, and they urgently needed a safe new home. In 1782 an author credited simply as “Villedieu” published a short essay proposing an elegant solution to this crisis. After providing an admiring overview of ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman burial practices, he noted that late eighteenth-century Paris found itself in a fortuitous position: “The hand of art, driven by that of chance, has created for this immense city something that its people could have executed themselves only with millions of arms and centuries of work. With its comprehensively mined underground, Paris offers at both its center and its periphery perfectly prepared catacombs.”¹⁷ He urged the French state to take advantage of “these deep excavations, these subterranean deserts” and “all the secrets that chemistry uncovers daily in its laboratories” to set up a high-tech but affordable system to embalm and efficiently store the city’s dead in underground caverns.¹⁸ Four years later a modified version of this idea was put into practice, and on the evening of April 7, 1786, a small group of clergymen accompanied the top three administrators in charge of the quarries to consecrate the Paris Catacombs. From that point forward there were regular nighttime cortèges to the Catacombs as cartloads of bones were transferred into jumbled piles underground.

A Revolution Underground

This revolution in attitudes and behaviors toward the dead inevitably calls to mind the political and social revolution that was already brewing when the Catacombs were inaugurated. The relationship between the Catacombs and the French Revolution is both thematic and very direct. On the one hand, they both stand as exclamation points at the end of the eighteenth century, signaling dramatic ruptures in culture and practice. As historians have long claimed, the Revolution severely disrupted Catholic rituals, and the elimination of religious burial spaces was a particularly potent sign of this movement. As more parish graveyards were shut down in the name of public hygiene and morality, the bones of more Parisians found their way into the Catacombs (in 1789, 1792, 1793, and 1794). On the other hand, the Catacombs had much grislier ties to the

16. Métayer, “Une espace de vie,” 184. Métayer later published a much more comprehensive history of scriveners in the cemetery, *Au tombeau des secrets*.

17. Villedieu, *Projet de catacombes pour la ville de Paris*, 6.

18. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

events of the Revolution. Despite Villedieu's aforementioned enthusiasm for embalment, the Catacombs were never supposed to act as a cemetery for the recently deceased, yet after several notorious episodes of violence, that is precisely what they became. After royal guards shot and killed several Parisians during a celebration in August 1788, they transported their corpses directly to the Catacombs. The Réveillon riots a year later saw several more Parisians buried immediately in the Catacombs after falling to royal bullets. Most infamously, as many as a thousand victims from the 1792 September prison massacres found their way underground following those notorious days.¹⁹ In each of these instances, the Catacombs served as a useful space where potentially controversial bodies could be quickly stashed away in anonymity and forgotten, since the Catacombs were not yet an accessible city space.

The Catacombs sat relatively unused and unknown for over a decade after the Terror. As one contemporary article put it, "During the successive revolutions which distracted France, the Catacombs fell into a state of confusion, and in many places, of ruin, the air had become stagnant and unwholesome, and water, oozing from above, had rendered them extremely unsafe."²⁰ This situation reversed in 1809, when the minister of the interior named a thirty-two-year-old engineer, Louis-Etienne-François Héricart-Ferrand de Thury, as the new head of the Parisian underground. One of Héricart de Thury's first orders of business was to substantially renovate the municipal ossuary and transform it from a repository of scattered bones into a public monument. Within four months enough work had been completed to open the space for public visits, although construction would continue for the next three years.

As unique as the Catacombs were, they were just one component of a new culture of death and commemoration that was taking shape at the turn of the nineteenth century. As old spaces and rituals associated with the dead disappeared (or were eradicated) a new culture of the dead began to emerge that was explicitly designed to instruct and edify. During the Revolution this took the form of highly politicized state funerals and the creation of the national Panthéon, and it was continued by Napoléon Bonaparte after 1799 when even military heroes associated with the Bourbons, like the vicomte de Turenne (d. 1675), were given elaborate state reburials. This impulsion to manipulate the dead for didactic purposes also enveloped the unexceptional and ordinary dead. The years between 1795 and 1800 witnessed an unprecedented number of

19. Most descriptions of the Catacombs contain similar timelines about the order in which bones made their way into the Catacombs. The most comprehensive of these include Gérard, *Les catacombes de Paris*, 139–61; and Héricart de Thury, *Description des catacombes*. Emile Gérard's book contains information up to 1878. Héricart de Thury's contains information up to 1813.

20. Anonymous, "Thury on the Catacombs of Paris," 131.

publications about France's transforming burial culture that proposed a wide range of new practices for the struggling republic. The most extravagant included suggestions for postmortem civic trials, elaborate burial rituals, and instructions for turning bones into a milky glass suitable for sculpture and/or construction.²¹ The goal of these proposed spectacles was always the same, as Pierre-Louis Roederer explained it in 1795: "Make the grave a school for the living."²² These projects reveal a strong association between spaces for the dead and a certain educational power that persisted into the nineteenth century. Cemeteries were routinely expected to do more than honor and safely contain the dead; they also needed to improve the community of the living by providing an evocative sensory experience. In 1809 the author of one of Paris's first guides to cemeteries confirmed this when he explained, "I think and learn more standing in front of a tomb and reading an epitaph than I would from the most beautiful books in the Imperial Library."²³

So what, if anything, were the Catacombs supposed to teach their audience? On the eve of the Catacombs' grand opening, Héricart de Thury wrote a brief statement that explained the history of the Catacombs and justified his project to make a public museum out of a municipal ossuary:

I believed it was necessary to take special care in the conservation of this monument, considering the intimate rapport that will surely exist between the Catacombs and the events of the French Revolution; as a result of this work [the Catacombs] were repaired, their interior was restored, the ventilation system was improved, [and] bones were arranged with as much art as skill. Nothing was spared to make this monument worthy of public veneration.²⁴

Héricart de Thury's mention of revolutionary "events" seems a clear reference to the violent episodes that had supplied so many of the Catacombs' newest bones. Yet does this imply a counterrevolutionary expiatory intent, or simply a commemorative one? Héricart de Thury's biography offers some answers. Although he came of age under the First Republic and achieved professional success during the Empire, Héricart de Thury was from a noble family that dated its privilege back to the fifteenth century. After the Restoration, he was recognized for his loyalty and devotion to the monarchy. In his acclaimed and widely read description of the Catacombs (published in 1815), he noted that what made the

21. Many of these essays have been analyzed in Hintermeyer, *Politiques de la mort*.

22. Roederer, *Des institutions funéraires*, 11.

23. Caillot, *Voyage religieux et sentimental*, 160.

24. Paris, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, MSS 11, *Catacombes de Paris, registre de visiteurs, 1809–1813* (hereafter *Registre*), 3f. Although the front and back of each page in the Catacombs guest-book is filled with signatures and comments, only the front of each page is hand-numbered. I indicate whether I am referring to the front (f) or back (b) of the page after providing the page number.

Paris Catacombs particularly unique was its ability to “honor the reign of the best of kings, and the most unfortunate Monarch, Louis XVI.”²⁵ He was also one of the fifteen thousand people in France wealthy enough to be elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1815, where he sat with the ultraroyalist faction. His recent biographers refer to Héricart de Thury unambiguously as a resolute royalist and a “very pious and deeply faithful” Catholic.²⁶ In 1814 he even erected a small expiatory altar in front of the September bones, which he had previously concealed from view by a painted black wall.²⁷

By 1812 the Catacombs had begun appearing in French publications, and almost immediately it became something of a cliché for authors to write about people (usually young women) swooning in front of the September bones. In his lighthearted *Gazette de France* column, the “Hermit of the Chaussée-d’Antin” (Etienne de Jouy) described his visit to the Catacombs in which he found the September bones “more horrifying” than the rest of the space. The young woman who accompanied him on his visit let out a “cry of horror” when she thought she heard a low moan emanating from the sad remains.²⁸ An English article closely modeled after Jouy’s similarly referred to a “sylph-like” French woman who “sank into the arms of her deeply affected husband, who kissed the pearly drop from her silken lashes” when she saw the “ashes of her murdered parents” among the September bones.²⁹ These bones were the most vivid reminder of revolutionary violence, so it made sense for entertaining publications to make much of them. They were also the most physical link between the Catacombs and the counterrevolution: a semianonymous corollary to the venerated remains of guillotined aristocrats and the king and queen at the Madeleine cemetery.³⁰ Accordingly, they proved particularly distressing to conservative visitors. When Héricart de Thury gave a private tour to the duc d’Angoulême (the son of the future Charles X) in 1818, he described how moved the duc was by “the burial that was secretly given to the miserable victims of the prison massacres and other events of our Revolution.”³¹ In his 1821 *Martyrologe* of the Revolution, the abbé Aimé Guillon claimed that the expiatory altar attracted “an infinite number of people motivated by piety or compassion” to the Catacombs.³²

25. Héricart de Thury, *Description des catacombes*, xvi.

26. Thomas and Ramette, “La création et l’aménagement des catacombes,” 75.

27. Anonymous, “Thury on the Catacombs of Paris,” 142.

28. Jouy, “Les Catacombes,” 364.

29. T.H., “Fragments Illustrative of Paris, in 1814,” 311.

30. This project was primarily the work of the wealthy lawyer Pierre-Louis-Olivier Descloseaux, who watched over and maintained these graves from 1793 until 1815.

31. AN, F14 2728¹, letter of Apr. 10, 1818.

32. Guillon, *Les martyrs de la foi pendant la Révolution française*, 1:185.

Outside of published descriptions, however, the small monument to the September massacres does not seem to have made a substantial impact on the average Catacombs visitor. We know this because there exists an exceptional record of the ossuary's first few years in the form of a guestbook that Héricart de Thury placed at the Catacombs' exit, ostensibly to keep track of who visited the Catacombs and what they thought about such a unique new monument.³³ Between 1809 and 1813 thousands of individuals passed through the Catacombs and signed their name in the book. Fewer than ten of these people commented on the Revolution. Those who did stand out, such as "Professeur Celebrini," who transcribed two short Jean-Baptiste Rousseau poems and dedicated one of them to the remains of the victims of the September massacres. Similarly, on August 6, 1812, someone named Dupont wrote that his heart was frozen with horror and cried out for the victims of the Terror. Then, on August 11, someone else composed a poem that described the bones as the victims of wicked men that would forever "attest to the evils of our Republic."³⁴ These passages are evocative and well composed, but they do not represent the reactions of the overwhelming majority of Catacombs visitors, who appear to have paid little attention to Héricart de Thury's expiatory intent.

Although Héricart de Thury's prediction that the "events of the Revolution" would attract crowds of mourners underground proved false, he was correct in assuming that the new Catacombs would provide some measure of relief for a population recovering from revolutionary dislocation. The Catacombs were both a product and a symbol of the rupture that characterized the last quarter of the eighteenth century. A dramatic shift in attitudes toward the dead occasioned their creation, and much of their contents derived from revolutionary activity, whether episodes of violence or parish cemetery closures. The rest of this article examines how the Catacombs became a venue that soothed this rupture once they opened to the public in 1809.

"This Confused Equality of Death": Reading the Catacombs

The Catacombs' guestbook covers the period from July 1809 until August 1813 and contains a remarkable range of viewpoints from both female and male visitors of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds. Although most individuals who filled the book with extended comments were relatively educated men, Catacombs visitors represented a wide range of the population from Paris, France, and Europe. As a source, the guestbook can be problematic, since it is by its very

33. *Registre*, 1f.

34. *Ibid.*, 4f, 89f, 90f.

nature anecdotal and resistant to any coherent narrative. An 1830 article in the *Revue des deux mondes* referred to the contents of the guestbook as simultaneously profound, bizarre, and curious.³⁵ Not all writers were so generous, such as an English visitor who referred to most of the guestbook's written entries as "but sorry compositions, either with respect to the ideas or language."³⁶ These critiques notwithstanding, the guestbook provides unique and valuable insight into the range of possible reactions, interpretations, and concerns among the Catacombs' first generation of visitors, particularly when read alongside contemporary published descriptions and analyses of the underground space.

On a typical day in the Catacombs, August 8, 1811, thirty-eight individuals signed the guestbook. Of these people, two made strong references to the existence of an immortal soul, eight wrote Latin expressions, two urged the living to take advantage of their time on earth, one made a joke about the skulls on display, one made reference to the happily honored dead, another noted that he had come to the Catacombs "driven by curiosity and the desire to see a spectacle that will be entirely new for me," and twenty-three left only their names.³⁷ Although it is difficult to draw convincing conclusions about the motivations and reactions of early visitors, who were alternately mournful, amused, reverential, and blasé, this variability of responses to the Catacombs is in itself quite revealing. Despite the uniformity of the bones on display, Paris's ossuary almost immediately proved itself surprisingly multivocal and capable of sustaining a range of meanings for its diverse audience. On March 19, 1813, a group of French soldiers wrote that after their underground tour they were inspired to feel "honor and love of the fatherland," while ten days later C. Crouserieu inscribed the book by predicting that if a perpetrator of the September massacres ever made his way underground, he would surely tremble with remorse.³⁸ On the most banal level this meant that one person's expiatory space could be another's patriotic monument, but it also indicates how the Catacombs were surprisingly adept at navigating both sides of 1789.

The ability of the Catacombs to foster divergent responses from its audience was most evident in the range of reactions to its unique visual presentation. Although each section of the Catacombs featured distinctive components, like a lacrimatory, a small pond of goldfish, or a sepulchral lamp, most of a Catacombs tour would have featured the same view of a seemingly endless expanse of indistinguishable bones tightly packed from floor to ceiling. In 1815 a conservative Parisian travel writer, François-Marie Marchant de Beaumont, published a

35. Anonymous, "Album," 424.

36. Anonymous, *Memorandums of a Residence in France*, 375.

37. *Registre*, 91b.

38. *Ibid.*, 118f, 119f.

highly critical description of this sight. He found the space profoundly unsatisfying precisely because of the anonymity of the bones. He noted that the Catacombs might be a didactic space where fathers could bring their sons to learn about virtue, but because all the great men contained in the Catacombs were anonymously commingling with “vulgar” characters, this opportunity was lost.³⁹ In 1812 Thomas Détruisard, a curate from Gentilly, responded with slightly more ambivalence, describing the Catacombs as alternately “terrible” and “instructive.”⁴⁰ His reading referred specifically to the indiscriminate mixing of bones, “of men and women of all ages and conditions.” He wrote:

Oh! If all the people who once belonged to these inanimate remains could appear in one single instant before our eyes, we would see, alas! what we cannot avoid: that virtue is mixed up with crime, opulence with misery, good sense with foolishness, brilliance with stupidity, wisdom with folly, composure with debauchery, thrift with extravagance, generosity with avarice, gentleness with brutality, thankfulness with ingratitude, courage with cowardice, activity with laziness, honor and glory with shame and scorn, *and finally; humility with pride and modesty with temerity.*⁴¹

Unlike Marchant de Beaumont, Détruisard did not reject the Catacombs’ aesthetic outright, but he expressed anxiety about the blurring of social (and moral) boundaries after the Revolution.

To contemporaries reflecting on the postrevolutionary condition of France, one of the most distinctive characteristics of Parisian society was a remarkable sense of flux: the traditional social order had not survived the Revolution, but nothing new appeared to have replaced it. That Englishman who held the guestbook in such disdain also seemed particularly vexed by what he saw as a distinctively French characteristic in which the “self-respect which keeps each class distinct in our country, yet does not *seek* occasion to show itself, seems here unknown. All degrees in society appear mixt together and confounded like a shuffled pack of cards, and will require a considerable time to be sorted and re-arranged.”⁴² The Catacombs offered a stark visual analog to this postrevolutionary social scenario, which could seem either exhilarating or threatening of looming social chaos, depending on one’s positionality. Several decades later, the Catacombs’ famous first photographer, Félix Nadar, evocatively referred to the Catacombs’ arrangement as “this confused equality of death.”⁴³

39. Marchant de Beaumont, *Le conducteur*, 249–51.

40. Détruisard, *Essai sur les catacombes*, 18.

41. *Ibid.*, 16, 17–18.

42. Anonymous, *Memorandums of a Residence in France*, 320.

43. Nadar, “Le dessus et le dessous de Paris,” 1572.

For many who toured the Catacombs, the anonymity and uniformity of the bones on display were a powerful reminder that “everyone is equal here.” One visitor noted on October 15, 1810, that he and his companions had tried but failed to distinguish the bones of the rich from those of the poor. On December 26, 1811, another wrote that in the Catacombs “the nobleman is nothing but a pile of dust.” Many others made similar but simpler comments, pointing out that “equality, constant equality, here you take back your rights” and “true equality is here.” Taking a more confrontational tack, Louis Soehnée, who visited the Catacombs three times in May 1812, wrote (after his last visit), “Come, all you petty squabblers, and argue over the primitive equality of men!”⁴⁴ Léon Thiessé wrote that in the great “depot of death” he saw how “the greatest of enemies” all slept together and became friends.⁴⁵ Similarly, in an 1812 article the “Hermit of Saint-Germain” (Charles Joseph Colnet du Ravel) compared the Catacombs to aboveground Parisian cemeteries where the wealthy could still “buy the right to decay” in isolation from the poor. Colnet du Ravel explained how it was different underground, where there were “no more monuments, no more epitaphs, no more brilliant deceptions, oblivion is naked, one sees nothing but bones.” He continued by noting that only the Catacombs could reunite “the most bitter enemies,” like Jesuits and Jansenists, who spent their whole lives arguing without ever actually hearing one another. “Go ahead and argue, my good friends,” he suggested; “this is what it has taken to force you to be quiet and come together.”⁴⁶

Colnet du Ravel’s jeer was clearly meant to point out the ultimate futility of French Catholic factionalism, but these types of comments, which reveled in the leveling effect of death, also drew on old habits of interpreting death as the great equalizer. Détruisard’s anxious comment about the indiscriminate mixing of bones, quoted above, was no doubt influenced by his Catholicism. Many visitors inscribed the guestbook with passages from much older poems in the Catholic tradition of *memento mori*. For example, François de Malherbe’s 1592 work “Consolation à M. Du Perier sur la mort de sa fille” was quoted at least a dozen times by particularly literate visitors. This poem warned that

Death has his rigorous laws, unparalleled, unfeeling. . . .
The poor man in his hut, with only thatch for cover,
Unto these laws must bend;
The sentinel that guards the barriers of the Louvre
Cannot our kings defend.⁴⁷

44. *Registre*, 79f, 13b, 54b, 15b, 32b, 69f.

45. Thiessé, *Les catacombes de Paris*, 18.

46. Colnet du Ravel, “Le cimetière des Innocents et les catacombes de Paris,” 226.

47. English translation from Longfellow, *Complete Poetical Works*, 629.

The possible implications of the persistence of this tradition are striking, particularly since the purpose of *memento mori* was ostensibly not only to remind the audience of their mortality but to shock them into a more observant lifestyle. In both published descriptions and the guestbook comments, ample evidence exists to suggest that many Parisians did indeed interpret the Catacombs as a religious (Christian) space. For example, in May 1811 one guest wrote that “one hour in the Catacombs is worth a year of sermons,” while others were inspired to consoling religious thoughts, such as “one look to the heavens assuages my pain” or “what a terrible, but consoling spectacle for the religious man.”⁴⁸

Even before setting foot in the Catacombs, some visitors anticipated a powerfully emotional and religious experience, in part because their expectations had already been set by what they knew about other catacombs in the world, most notably those in Rome. As a member of the Napoleonic elite described her (disappointing) trip to the Paris Catacombs: “I thought that this subterranean trip would fill me with the same sensations that I felt when reading Delille or Chateaubriand’s descriptions of the Roman Catacombs” (it didn’t).⁴⁹ As this passage suggests, the Roman Catacombs were enjoying great popularity in France in the early nineteenth century. Héricart de Thury credited the 1810 publication of Alexis-François Artaud de Montor’s *Voyage dans les catacombes de Rome* with sparking the French population’s interest in the Parisian underground.⁵⁰ In this acclaimed work Artaud de Montor provided an unprecedentedly comprehensive description of all the Roman Catacombs, but he also dedicated himself to uncovering an accurate history of the ancient space, which had been the topic of some debate throughout the eighteenth century. Some scholars asserted that the contents of the Roman Catacombs were exclusively Christian martyrs, while others claimed the human remains were mostly those of slaves and non-Christian Romans seeking to avoid the cost of an elaborate above-ground funeral.⁵¹ By the end of his book, Artaud de Montor adopted a position somewhere in the middle, concluding that both interpretations held truth and that the Roman Catacombs were actually a religiously heterogeneous burial space.⁵²

Artaud de Montor’s conciliatory interpretation of the Roman Catacombs reflected imperial religious policy and culture. As Jacques-Olivier Boudon

48. *Registre*, 29b, 43f, 56b.

49. Ducrest, *Mémoires sur l’impératrice Joséphine*, 1:416.

50. Héricart de Thury, *Description des catacombes*, xij.

51. This controversy is the subject of the *Encyclopédie*’s article on the Catacombs (Mallet, “Catacombe ou Catacumbé”).

52. Artaud de Montor, *Voyage dans les catacombes de Rome*.

demonstrates, Napoléon was equally committed to preserving the power of a Catholic church (albeit under state control) and respecting the Enlightenment commitment to religious pluralism.⁵³ This attempt to reconcile the Enlightenment and Catholic traditions was very much on display throughout the tunnels of the Catacombs. In addition to corridors packed tightly with bones, visitors also faced a wide assortment of placards affixed to the walls. In 1810, after the Catacombs had been open to the public for about a year, Héricart de Thury decided to erect a set of small signs throughout the ossuary inscribed with inspirational maxims about death culled from a wide range of sources. He thought that the inscriptions would console visitors by providing a necessary balance to the “sinister and dark monotony” of the ossuary. Héricart de Thury’s original list was subject to state censors, but in his 1815 published description of the Catacombs he was fairly clear about the message he was hoping to craft. He admitted that as a devout Catholic he found the (ir)religious implications of many ancient texts troubling, so he flanked them with inscriptions that confirmed the existence of a Christian afterlife.⁵⁴ The result was an unlikely collection of reflections on mortality derived from such divergent sources as the Bible, such Stoics as Marcus Aurelius and Seneca, and more recent French poets, like La Fontaine, Legouvé, and Delille.⁵⁵

Most published descriptions of the placards were critical, complaining of the “incongruous mixture of opposite sentiments” and admonishing Héricart de Thury for allowing “the false philosophy” of “the Encyclopedists” to “mingle” with more conventional inscriptions of *memento mori*.⁵⁶ Etienne de Jouy similarly disapproved of “this mixture of contradictory opinions,” and in 1815 the English travel writer John Scott concluded that “nothing could be more gloomy to the mind, or more unsuitable to the nature of the place than this confusion of creeds.”⁵⁷ Yet the guests who inscribed the guestbook responded much more positively to the ambiguously religious tone of the space. One entry urged “men of the world, philosophers of all sects, politicians of all countries” to look upon the Catacombs and meditate.⁵⁸ Many more referred to feeling a generally “religious respect” or having “religious thoughts” for a space so “religiously

53. Boudon, *Napoléon et les cultes*.

54. Héricart de Thury, *Description des catacombes*, 223.

55. As a recent analysis of the inscriptions maintains, this unique “anthology” of funereal writings is as remarkable for its diversity as for its subterranean location. Ramette and Thomas, *Inscriptions des catacombes de Paris*, 23.

56. Anonymous, *Memorandums of a Residence in France*, 358; Stevenson, *Journal of a Tour through Part of France*, 174–75.

57. Jouy, “Les catacombes,” 364; Scott, *Visit to Paris in 1814*, lxvii.

58. *Registre*, 41f.

executed.”⁵⁹ One visitor from May 1812 referred to the Catacombs as one of the most imposing but religious monuments that he or she had ever seen.⁶⁰ Virtually no one inscribing the guestbook admonished Héricart de Thury or critiqued its aesthetic. Several explicitly thanked him in the guestbook for his industriousness, good taste, and sensibility.⁶¹

The most commonly expressed sentiment in the guestbook was also the most banal: “Here one can learn how to live.”⁶² Dozens of inscriptions contained some version of this basic tenet of *memento mori* that encouraged the living to improve their lives by contemplating their own impending death. Yet, as Suzanne Glover Lindsay argues, the eighteenth century in France witnessed the advent of a modified *memento mori* in which the omnipresence of corpses in public view acted as “mirrors that provided new issues to meditate.”⁶³ While it is very likely that certain Catacombs tourists emerged from their subterranean visit with renewed or strengthened faith, it seems equally possible that they would be inclined to contemplate recently politicized ideas like equality or religious pluralism and toleration. The unusual visual presentation of the Catacombs enabled guests to see the space through either or both lenses and to accommodate multiple ideological readings of the bones on display. As a place that was alternately sacred and secular, conservative and revolutionary, edifying and silly, the Catacombs became an unlikely space for, if not cooperation, then at least ideological cohabitation in the postrevolutionary city.

In the summer of 1816 Seth William Stevenson, a somewhat contemptuous English antiquary, visited the Catacombs and evocatively described the range of reactions among his fellow cataphiles as “a trial of contrasts” in which “the horror-struck countenances of some were opposed to the ill-timed frivolity of gesture and discourse indulged in by others.”⁶⁴ Stevenson seems to have noticed that the only constant in the Catacombs was the remarkable range of reactions that it elicited. Such variability also made the Catacombs conducive to a new kind of historical thinking in the early nineteenth century. Just as it held in balance diverse and often conflicting ideological interpretations, the Catacombs could contain vast swaths of history, a unique feature that made it especially valuable in the postrevolutionary era.

59. *Ibid.*, 41b, 54b, 104b, 108b, 132f.

60. *Ibid.*, 65f.

61. *Ibid.*, 41f, 46f, 55b, 123b.

62. *Ibid.*, 20b.

63. Lindsay, *Funerary Arts and Tomb Cult*, 24.

64. Stevenson, *Journal of a Tour through Part of France*, 175.

“The Story of the Past, Present, and Future”

Between 1786, when the Catacombs were first inaugurated, and 1809, when they opened to the public, Parisians had experienced five forms of government, thousands of public deaths, and fifteen years of war. On a more mundane level, street names were periodically changed, neologisms had taken on epic proportions, and the state had adopted a new method of measuring time between 1793 and 1805.⁶⁵ The direct effect of this rapid, extreme, and near-constant change was a keen desire for order and stability throughout French society. As many studies of this period have illustrated, the manifestations of this search for stability played a crucial role in shaping French political and social identity for the nineteenth century and beyond. Suzanne Desan, Jennifer Heuer, and Denise Davidson convincingly demonstrate the gendered dimension of this phenomenon, calling attention to postrevolutionary policies and practices designed to stabilize the social order and provide a secure route to national belonging through hierarchical family structures.⁶⁶ Similarly, James Livesey, Isser Woloch, Andrew Jainchill, and others show the long-term political consequences of the postrevolutionary condition.⁶⁷ Most of these historians highlight the process of accommodation that characterized this search for stability, whereby aspects of revolutionary projects and ideology combined with quotidian realities to produce a distinctively “postrevolutionary” and modern French identity.

The early history of the Paris Catacombs illuminates an equally crucial process of accommodation, in which Parisians sought a soothing remedy for the Revolution’s vaunted historical break. Many scholars have commented on the growing discontinuity between the past and the present around the turn of the nineteenth century, from Michel Foucault’s “irruptive violence of time” to Peter Fritzsche’s “melancholy of history.”⁶⁸ It is similarly well known that the early nineteenth century in Europe manifested a newfound fascination with the past. Indeed, Stephen Bann claims that this intense “desire for history” was a defining feature of the romantic era.⁶⁹ Fritzsche explains the implications of this temporal rift in *Stranded in the Present*: “As past and present floated free from each other, contemporaries reimagined their relations with the past in increasingly

65. On street names, see Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution*, 11–35. On the destruction of outward signs of feudalism, see Vidler, “Paradoxes of Vandalism.” On the revolutionary calendar, see Shaw, *Time and the French Revolution*; and Perovic, *Calendar in Revolutionary France*.

66. Desan, *Family on Trial in Revolutionary France*; Heuer, *Family and the Nation*; Davidson, *France after Revolution*.

67. Woloch, *New Regime*; Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution*; Alexander, *Re-writing the French Revolutionary Tradition*; Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror*; Kingston, *Bureaucrats and Bourgeois Society*.

68. Foucault, *Order of Things*; Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*.

69. Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*.

flamboyant ways. The past was conceived more and more as something bygone and lost, and also strange and mysterious, and although partially accessible, always remote.”⁷⁰ The Catacombs were one of these “flamboyant ways” that postrevolutionary Parisians addressed the trauma of rupture. In a climate of historical instability, Parisians began interpreting the Catacombs as a space that not only collapsed moral, social, and ideological differences but also acted as a subterranean bridge across the widening gulf between past and present.

Most contemporary descriptions of the Catacombs remarked on the deep historical connection between Paris and its underground. John Griscom, an American tourist, described the “subterranean wonders” of the Catacombs as “cavernous passages in the limestone strata, on which the city of Paris is founded.”⁷¹ Similarly, the author of an 1814 poem about a visit to the Catacombs described entering the “bosom of Paris” through a deep chasm that brought him into contact with long-dead centuries assembled in the abyss.⁷² Significantly, these were not Victor Hugo’s “intestines of leviathan,” the notorious sewers beneath Paris that acted as the city’s conscience. Instead, the Catacombs provided a structurally and historically supportive framework for Paris, what Héricart de Thury described as the city’s “lining.” The Catacombs’ rapport with the history of Paris was immediately evident to every visitor because each section of displayed bones was accompanied by an identifying label that indicated their cemetery of origin and the year of their transfer underground. Early tourists would have known, for example, whether they were standing in front of the “Bones from the Cemetery of the Innocents deposited in April 1786” or the “Bones from the cemetery of St. Landry [deposited on] June 18, 1792.”⁷³ These simple markers clarified how the aboveground city mapped onto its underground, as they reconstructed a revolutionary migration of the dead in which ten generations of bones had been relocated into a new “bizarre city.”⁷⁴

An unconventional narrative of Parisian history also played out in two small but meticulous displays that Héricart de Thury organized for public view with the help of M. Gambier-Lapierre, the keeper of the Catacombs. The first was a mineralogical collection, comprising every kind of soil and rock from the earth beneath the city, as well as some fossils, shells, and pieces of an ancient Roman aqueduct. A second, “pathological” collection displayed deformed, diseased, and decomposing bones (mostly culled from Innocents), which Héricart de Thury and Gambier-Lapierre set up so that visitors could witness “with a

70. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present*, 5.

71. Griscom, *Year in Europe*, 66.

72. Anonymous, “Le jour des morts dans les catacombes de Paris,” 193.

73. Ramette and Thomas, *Inscriptions des catacombes de Paris*, 51–52.

74. *Registre*, 53f.

single glance, all traces and degrees in the slow march of destruction.”⁷⁵ Both collections emphasized the natural history contained in the Catacombs while highlighting the geological and biological processes perpetually at work. As the head engineer for Paris’s mines and quarries, Héricart de Thury was particularly interested in finding significance in the city’s underground, and his displays reflect an early nineteenth-century penchant for archaeology and a desire to interpret the subterranean world as a potentially rich source of historical knowledge.⁷⁶

The most obvious “historical” feature of the Catacombs was, of course, the “Bones! Bona fide debris of our fathers.”⁷⁷ Much like the slow march of destruction and change demonstrated in the displays, some visitors read the anonymous bones as evidence of another never-ending cycle, one that told “the story of the past, the present, and the future.”⁷⁸ On January 23, 1809, a man named Guillaume who worked for the department of tax collection visited the Catacombs and concisely described the phenomenon that linked these populations to each other and to their city: “Throughout their lives they worked the earth: After their lives, their bodies support that same earth.”⁷⁹ Thomas Détruisard’s published essay on the Catacombs made a similar observation about the organic reversal that took place under Paris’s streets. In 1812 he contemplated how “these two million individuals, who for centuries made up part of the population of this immense city, have now . . . replaced the material that once harbored them, and now harbor those who will soon join them in death.”⁸⁰ The 1816 poem about the Catacombs by M. Gouriet (most likely the journalist, poet, and prose writer Jean-Baptiste Gouriet) made a similar, though much more grim, observation about “the ravages of time” at work underground and expressed horror at the “numberless generations” that were “swallowed up” by the “immense ruin” of the Catacombs. “Paris! Oh Paris,” he asked, distraught and trembling, “is that you?”⁸¹ As though answering Gouriet’s appeal, one Catacombs visitor from July 1812 wrote in the guestbook, “It’s Paris returned!”⁸²

75. Héricart de Thury, *Description des catacombes*, 280.

76. As David Lawrence Pike has noted, men of science like Georges Cuvier and the comte de Buffon had recently begun to interpret the subterranean content of Paris as something constitutive of “history and meaning rather than merely pecuniary gain” (“Paris Souterrain,” 183).

77. *Registre*, 53b.

78. *Ibid.*, 72b.

79. *Ibid.*, 4b.

80. Détruisard, *Essai sur les catacombes*, 7–8. A similar comment appears in Lamarque, *Trois élégies*, 7.

81. Gouriet, “Fragments d’un voyage aux catacombes de Paris,” 5. The *Mercur de France* indicates that this is an excerpt of a much longer piece in prose and poetry that could be purchased at the author’s house; however, no record of this publication appears in the Bibliothèque Nationale’s catalog.

82. *Registre*, 83b.

Another 1812 visitor to the Catacombs urged Parisians to “cherish this space because it contains the bones of your forefathers.”⁸³ The guestbook provides many examples of individuals who followed this advice, such as Laure Desfontaines, who wrote simply, “Pleased to see you all again,” after her tour.⁸⁴ Guests hoping to feel reunited with specific individuals were usually disappointed; one woman lamented that despite passing through the entire collection, she was unable to recognize her husband’s remains.⁸⁵ The thoroughly unimpressed Marchant de Beaumont similarly criticized the Catacombs for rendering previous illustrious Parisians anonymous: “They were our family, our friends, our elders; their talents, their piety, their wisdom exemplified our *patrie*; they enriched it with their work or defended it through their courage.”⁸⁶ Yet even such a negative reading of the Catacombs indicates how powerful the skeletal contents could be to the visiting public. Whether or not one agreed with it, the sum was greater than its parts underground, where “these heaped-up bones, these tremendous clouds of nothingness!” could also serve as valuable human patrimony.⁸⁷

The dead increasingly found themselves marshaled into service during and after the French Revolution as the classically inspired “cult of great men” gave way to the more romantic “cult of tombs.” Both the ordinary and illustrious dead became tremendously useful during this time as sources of identity and heritage for individuals, families, and political groups, as historians like Avner Ben-Amos, Joseph Clarke, and Emmanuel Fureix demonstrate.⁸⁸ But more than any other space of its era, the Catacombs manifested Paris as a whole. Vast new cemeteries like Père Lachaise effectively and beautifully housed the Parisian dead after 1804, but their overwhelming aesthetic was one of individuality and social stratification: the poor lay in plain common graves, the very wealthy purchased elaborately ornamented permanent tombs, and those in between enjoyed temporary five-year concessions. Epitaphs emphasized biographic details that sought to distinguish the dead as individuals. Similarly, elaborate public monuments like the Panthéon or the Mars Temple commemorated exceptional Frenchmen as national heroes, around whom the postrevolutionary population was supposed to rally. However, as recent historians argue, such “public pantheons” never effectively engaged the population in cohesive national sentiments.

83. *Ibid.*, 79f.

84. *Ibid.*, 20b.

85. *Ibid.*, 75f.

86. Marchant de Beaumont, *Le conducteur*, 249.

87. *Registre*, 96f. Dominique Poulot has produced a comprehensive body of work on the development of *patrimoine* in France around the turn of the nineteenth century. In particular, see *Musée, nation, patrimoine* and *Une histoire du patrimoine en Occident*. For Poulot’s work in English, see “Birth of Heritage.”

88. Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France*; Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France*; Fureix, *La France des larmes*.

Instead, these sites became self-aggrandizing tools for states, which feared the loss of authority.⁸⁹ By contrast, masses of indistinguishable anonymous bones in the Catacombs offered a much more accurate and effective national monument, because they actually seemed familiar to visiting Parisians. For some, the Catacombs' aesthetic probably recalled the charnel houses that had flanked Innocents since the late fourteenth century, but for others the contents of the ossuary made it feel strangely like home.

Visitors to the Catacombs often identified with the space by casting forward in time and imagining themselves as future residents. For example, "three young people who are between them forty-four years old" visited the Catacombs in 1810 because they wanted "to see what they will one day become."⁹⁰ Another guest surmised in July 1812 that "perhaps one day I will reside in this empire of death."⁹¹ More humorously, F. De Oprey explained that "when buying a house, one begins by visiting it; this is what I've today; but this house won't cost me a thing."⁹² Similarly, Fabien Pillet published a short poem in which he referred to the space as the "sombre manor house" in which everyone would eventually sleep.⁹³ One of the more frequent refrains in the guestbook was for guests to bid a temporary farewell to the Catacombs, with the understanding that they would return after death. "I hope to return here," one visitor wrote in March 1811, "because there is nothing quite so sad as dying away from one's country."⁹⁴ Others were less sanguine, writing such comments as "I won't be coming back to this somber place until someone carries me down" or, less realistically, "I hope that I won't come back here for two hundred years."⁹⁵ One could interpret these statements as run-of-the-mill memento mori, in which returning to the Catacombs is a euphemism for death more generally, but such pointed references to place seem to indicate how quickly the Catacombs had become an integral part of the city. Moreover, as placards throughout the tunnels reminded guests, the Catacombs were very much an ongoing project: new bones had been transferred underground in 1804, 1809, 1811, 1813, and 1814. Indeed, it is quite possible that some of these early Catacombs visitors did end up underground, since major Parisian cemeteries, including Père Lachaise, continued to supply the ossuary with new bones well into the twentieth century.⁹⁶

89. Bouwers, *Public Pantheons in Revolutionary Europe*, 5. Clarke makes a similar argument about the early years of the Panthéon in *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France*.

90. *Registre*, 12f.

91. *Ibid.*, 82f.

92. *Ibid.*, 123f.

93. Pillet, "Vers faits dans les Catacombes de Paris," 208.

94. *Registre*, 22f.

95. *Ibid.*, 120b, 22f.

96. Ramette and Thomas, *Inscriptions des catacombes de Paris*, 120. Gilles Thomas and Xavier Ramette note that it was long believed that transfers to the Catacombs had stopped in 1859, but a photograph

Although only a few Catacombs visitors explicitly historicized their experience by directly commenting on the ossuary's ability to bring together the past, present, and future, many guests and commenters effectively used the Catacombs as a temporal link, "to see people who are no more" and to visit their "future *patrie*."⁹⁷ Others contributed to this narrative by quoting contemporary writers whose words highlighted the Catacombs' unique temporal qualities. One of the first people to visit the Catacombs, Armand du Tremblay, quoted short passages from Jacques Delille's 1806 poem *L'imagination*. This celebrated work expounded at length on how the "salutary cult" of the dead linked generations across time and space.⁹⁸ Héricart de Thury also found Delille's work relevant to the Catacombs' mission; he inscribed several placards with his words, including "Protecting tombs honors the dead," "Your friends and family sleep in this place, a venerable monument of love and grief," and, most famously, "Halt! This is the Empire of Death," from Delille's translation of the *Aeneid*.⁹⁹ After similarly referencing *L'imagination* in his description of the Catacombs, Etienne de Jouy turned to Delille's contemporary, François-René de Chateaubriand. He quoted a passage from *Génie du christianisme* that ended with "Everything announced that we were in the empire of ruins; and, from whatever odor that emanated from the scattered dust beneath these funereal arches, *one felt as though they breathed in the past*."¹⁰⁰ Although Chateaubriand was writing about a different burial space (the royal tombs at Saint-Denis), this passage could just as well describe the experience of the Catacombs, where one could establish a strong physical link with the past, and the past took the form of ten generations of dead Parisians.

Few French people who visited the Catacombs in the early nineteenth century were explicitly concerned with historical narratives, and they rarely expressed interest in such formal political issues as the events and effects of the Revolution, despite Héricart de Thury's hope that the ossuary would become an expiatory space. However, as this article demonstrates, people were using the Catacombs to quietly process and resolve some of the most difficult problems of the postrevolutionary era. Most notably they were working to belie the historical rupture of 1789 by envisioning an unbroken chain between the past and the present. Certain features of the Catacombs made them conducive to this kind of imaginative historical work. The thousands of bones on display (and millions

from 1957 shows a placard (now disappeared) indicating that bones were transferred from the "Cemetery of the East" (Père Lachaise Cemetery) as late as December 1933.

97. *Registre*, 90f, 131f.

98. *Ibid.*, 7b.

99. Ramette and Thomas, *Inscriptions des catacombes de Paris*, 101–2, 44.

100. Jouy, "Les catacombes," 362. The italics are not in the original.

contained just out of view) acted as a physical link with the past: a community not imagined but manifested through generations of dead Parisians. When millions of Parisian bones embodied the French past, it was far from hostile; on the contrary, the subterranean population in the “Empire of Death” ultimately proved an unlikely source of communal identity and cohesion for the population living after the Terror.

Conclusion: The Catacombs as an “Other Space”

Spaces for the dead have a long history of bringing Parisians together. During the Wars of Religion the cemetery of the Innocents fostered a strong sense of civic identity based on a common religion and shared history.¹⁰¹ During the equally tumultuous 1790s citizens rallied around dead heroes, fallen martyrs, and slain villains to assert a coherent republican identity. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the Paris Catacombs stimulated a different sense of community that accommodated multiple ideological and religious perspectives. In this way, the Catacombs provided an ideologically neutral alternative to more politicized spaces of memorialization, like the Panthéon, the Mars Temple, or even Père Lachaise Cemetery. By resisting any coherent narrative, commemorative or otherwise, the Catacombs opened up a subterranean civic space that simultaneously represented the “old” and “new” regimes. This malleability makes the Catacombs somewhat unwieldy to interpret, a problem compounded by limited and problematic sources, but as this article argues, it also turned the Catacombs into a veritable portal into a past that could still be difficult to access in the second decade of the nineteenth century.

By way of conclusion, I suggest that we consider the Catacombs not just as a burial site, a tourist destination, or public monument but as a unique and powerful “other space” in the city, what Foucault famously called a “heterotopia.”¹⁰² Unlike utopias, these are actually existing places in society that are isolated but accessible to those willing to make an effort. Heterotopias also differ from utopias because, rather than present society in a radically perfect or imperfect form, they host all possible alternatives. As Foucault explained in “Des espaces autres” (1984), they operate as countersites “capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.”¹⁰³ As the often contradictory readings of the Catacombs detailed above

101. Harding, *Dead and the Living in Paris and London*, 105, 280.

102. The first published version of Foucault’s essay appeared as “Des espaces autres” in the October 1984 issue of the French journal *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité*, based on a public lecture Foucault gave in March 1967. The English translation appeared two years later as “Of Other Spaces.”

103. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 25.

reveal, the ossuary could sustain within its tenebrous tunnels multiple versions of postrevolutionary society, from the secular to the sacred, from the expiatory to the celebratory. Finally, the Catacombs' unique temporal abilities make sense if we think of it as an "other space," since heterotopias can collapse and contain accumulating time, as in a museum, library, or archive. They also "begin to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time."¹⁰⁴ The Catacombs were at once a result of, a reaction to, and a solution for the jarring rupture of the French Revolution.

Since the publication of "Des espaces autres," scholars have disagreed over the implications of heterotopias. For some, they open up valuable sites for resistance, designed to "detonate and deconstruct" existing orthodoxies.¹⁰⁵ More moderately, Kevin Hetherington describes how heterotopias "organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things."¹⁰⁶ The ordering of the Catacombs was nothing if not unconventional. The view of an expanse of almost identical bones stimulated the most discussion among contemporaries, who responded to the site in many contrasting ways. The cohabitation of princesses and paupers underground was mirrored in the Catacombs' guestbook, where the words of mourning royalists were joined by those of patriotic soldiers and apolitical civilians. In an era characterized by a conservative search for stability and order in all things, such interpretative cacophony seems almost radical.

Yet heterotopias can also be deceptive. As David Harvey argues, "other spaces" may initially seem to engender radical alternatives, but they often end up supporting precisely the hegemonic powers that they appear to subvert.¹⁰⁷ With this in mind, it seems telling that the heterogeneity on display in the Catacombs was remarkably reminiscent not only of Napoleonic religious policies, as mentioned above, but also of the "very pragmatic politics of reconciliation" that characterized the first decade of the Restoration.¹⁰⁸ In the "historical introduction" to his poem about the Catacombs, Nestor Lamarque captured this lofty goal when he wished "peace" to the dead but "union and forgetting" to the living.¹⁰⁹ The Catacombs' guestbook is an excellent testament to this postrevolutionary

104. *Ibid.*, 26.

105. Soja, *Thirdspace*, 163.

106. Hetherington, *Badlands of Modernity*, viii.

107. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 183–85. A similar argument can be found in Harvey, "Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographic Evils."

108. Scholz, "Past and Pathos," 49.

109. Lamarque, "Les catacombes de Paris," 23. This poem was first published in Lamarque's 1824 *Trois élégies*, but with a much shorter and less detailed introduction.

desire to build a new France that accommodated (almost) everyone in a mildly apolitical society. However, when the diverse ideological positions that had been commingling underground (and in the pages of the guestbook) began to surface toward the end of the Restoration, they did so in much less conciliatory ways. As royalists, Bonapartists, liberals, and republicans competed for control and influence in postrevolutionary France, the Catacombs' ability to reunite "men of all merits and conditions" proved unsustainable, and the ossuary was closed to the public shortly after the 1830 revolution.¹¹⁰ Two years later the comte de Rambuteau, prefect of the Seine, explained why: "There is something profane about exposing these masses of bones, arranged with such inappropriate symmetry, to public view."¹¹¹ As this article demonstrates, the most provocative and defining feature of the Catacombs had always been their ability to collapse many into one and to quietly support a wide range of ideological positions. In an era of reignited political activity, this reunion was no longer necessary, and it no longer made sense.

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110. *Registre*, 50f.

111. Viré, preface, 38.

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