

## Sufficiently Decayed

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### Survival

A ruin is always a temporal conundrum. It is neither nature nor art – traditionally, ruins have not only collapsed, they have been overrun by a nature they no longer exclude. It is neither past nor present: it is a past that has never been present, a presence that is not of the present it inhabits. A ruin is a distemping of times, that puts time out of joint. Ruins are persistence, insistence, survival. The word suggests more than just a continuance of existence. *Sur-vivre* names a kind of ‘over-living’ – living on, living beyond one’s time – and thus is also a kind of anomaly or scandal. A ruin has always gone beyond or retreated from the death and decay to which it bears witness. Ruins in fact hold death at bay: having undergone a first, pseudo-death, the process of decay seems now to have been arrested in them. Ruins are a kind of annealing of the mutability to which they testify. There is nothing but mortality in ruins, but it is too late for ruins to die, they are too old, too ruinous. The landscape of Salisbury Plain changes month by month and year by year, as motorways and underpasses and cafeterias and New Age travellers and gift-stores come and go, but Stonehenge stands just as it stood in the drawings and paintings of Romantic artists (for ruins, unlike intact buildings, enjoin as well as enjoying preservation). ‘After the first death’, wrote Dylan Thomas, in ‘A Refusal to Mourn the Death, By Fire, of a Child in London’, ‘there is no other’ (Thomas 1985, 192). During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ruin became the name for an economic and moral condition as well as an architectural one, of course, and Thomas Hardy plays with the curious persistence that is built into the idea of ruin in his poem ‘The Ruined Maid’, which is an interchange between a country girl and her friend who has succumbed to the ruinous temptations of the city:

"O 'Melia, my dear, this does everything crown!  
Who could have supposed I should meet you in 'Town?  
And whence such fair garments, such prosperi-ty?"  
"O didn't you know I'd been ruined?" said she.

...

"I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown,  
And a delicate face, and could strut about 'Town!"  
"My dear - a raw country girl, such as you be,

Cannot quite expect that. You ain't ruined," said she.

### **Sentiment des Ruines**

Ruins may seem to be indifferent or unconscious of our presence, but that is a part of the way in which they always intensely implicate us. Almost from the very beginning of the Western infatuation with ruins – and that beginning is long before the Renaissance unearthing of the classical past, since Greek and Roman writers themselves discoursed on the effects of ruins – they have been twinned with particular states of mind. Ruins are always a kind of mental architecture. The word ‘contemplate’ is from Latin *contemplari*, the primary meaning of which is to mark out or survey a *templum*, a consecrated site for augury. Contemplation, the action or affect most commonly provoked by and associated with ruins, is already an architectural act. A ruin is a *memento mori*, a reminder of the vanity of human ambitions, the fragility of human powers, and the transience and mutability of things. Predictably, ruins provoke sombre but imperious reflections on the inevitable decline of empires. Like tombstones, they allow us both to sympathise with the poor, superseded past to which they bear witness, and to imagine our own demise, while congratulating ourselves that it is still, for us, sweetly, in the offing. Chateaubriand articulates what had become the conventional view: ‘All men have a secret attraction to ruins. This feeling belongs to the fragility of our nature, and a secret conformity between these destroyed monuments and the fleetness of our own existence.’

But the ruin-cult that spread across Europe from the sixteenth century onwards produced more than a fascination with or reverence for existing ruins. The run on the ruin market led to shortages, to which artists and architects responded by constructing brand-new models. The first of these seems to have been a ruined house built in 1530 by Girolamo Genga in the Barchetto, the Duke of Urbino’s park. In 1678, Gianlorenzo Bernini built a remarkable ruined bridge at the Palazzo Barberini in Rome (ironically, it was never completed. So what would be the name for that, then - an unfinished ruin?). Mock ruins multiplied during the following century, with the triumphal arch built by Thomas Wright of Durham at Sugborough in Staffordshire and William Chambers’s ruined arch at Kew. Gothic ruins were more popular in Britain than classical, presumably on the grounds of their slightly greater plausibility. and, by the middle of the eighteenth century, ruined castles, like that built at Hagley Park by Sanderson Miller, ruined cottages and hermitages were springing up like mushrooms everywhere. Ruin, we can say, was vigorously on the rise. (Watkin 1999).

Ruins are more than decayed or dilapidated remains. They seem to insist on being reconstructed, urging the mind to imaginative restoration of the

wholeness they lack. As Thomas Whateley said in his *Observations on Modern Gardening* of 1770,

All remains excite an enquiry into the former state of the edifice and fix the mind in contemplation on the use it was applied to... they suggest ideas which would not arise from the buildings, if entire ... Whatever building we see in decay, we naturally contrast its present to its former state and delight to ruminate on the comparison.

The ‘sentiment des ruines’ prospered during the heyday of the aesthetics of the sublime (Kant used Egyptian pyramids as examples of the sublime). But ruinism is also different from sublimity. Where, on Burke’s account, the sublime causes a kind of bracing uplift in the subject, who augments himself in his attempts to raise himself to the level of what so far exceeds his imaginative and cognitive capacities, the ruin prompts about an act of imaginative supplementation in the object of contemplation. They evoke that instinct for reparation which Melanie Klein thought lay behind all artistic work, and which Peter Fuller has described in his *Art and Psychoanalysis* (1981). If I evoke Klein here, it is to remind us of her derivation of the instincts of love, protectiveness and creativity from destructive or hostile instincts: ‘Side by side with the destructive impulses in the unconscious mind both of the child and of the adult, there exists a profound urge to make sacrifices, in order to help and put right loved people who in phantasy have been harmed and destroyed.’ (Klein 1998, 311)

For there is rage, triumph and exultation as well as melancholy in the contemplation of ruin, perhaps especially when that ruin is foreseen, as in the prophecy of Zephaniah:

13 And he will stretch out his hand against the north, and destroy Assyria; and will make Nineveh a desolation, and dry like a wilderness. 14 And flocks shall lie down in the midst of her, all the beasts of the nations: both the cormorant F7 and the bittern shall lodge in the upper lintels of it; their voice shall sing in the windows; desolation shall be in the thresholds: for he shall uncover the cedar work. 15 This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none beside me: how is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in! every one that passeth by her shall hiss, and wag his hand. (*Zephaniah* 2.13-15)

Something of this ambivalence is to be found in Shelley’s brief poem ‘Ozymandias’. It is a fragmentary poem, itself truncated, elliptical, cryptic, about a vast archifictural fragment:

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
 Who said--"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert....Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
 And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,  
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The relationship between poem and subject here is not comfortable. The mockery is both that of Ozymandias (a name for Rameses the Great) and that of the sculptor who by preserving him renders him liable to mockery. It is not clear whose words 'Look on my Works ye mighty and despair' belong to – whether Ozymandias, or Time.

The sharper ambivalence in the relationship between the ruin and its contemplator is perhaps related to the ambivalence that Freud identified in thinking about the familiar dead: grief at the absence of loved ones, and desire to propitiate them, lest they (or we) tumble to the fact that we wanted them done in, to make way for us. Freud's own reflections on love, time and the unconscious were deeply marked by his own interest in ruins and archaeological remains. Sylvia Plath imagines her unresolved relationship to her father in terms of a vast and uncompletable act of restoration undertaken with respect to a gigantic ruin:

Scaling little ladders with glue pots and pails of Lysol  
 I crawl like an ant in mourning  
 Over the weedy acres of your brow  
 To mend the immense skull-plates and clear  
 The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia  
 Arches above us. O father, all by yourself  
 You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.  
 I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.  
 Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.

It would take more than a lightning-stroke  
 To create such a ruin.  
 Nights, I squat in the cornucopia  
 Of your left ear, out of the wind

### **Future Perfect**

The contemplation of ruin always in a sense attempts to expose itself to and survive the fact of ruin, even the eventual ruin of the contemplator and of contemplation themselves. Shelley wrote 'Ozymandias' in 1818 as part of a competition with a friend called Horace Smith, whose effort later appeared with the bathetic title 'On A Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below". His version adjoins to the contemplation of the amputated limb the following moral:

We wonder, and some hunter may express  
 Wonder like ours, when through the wilderness  
     Where London stood, holding the wolf in chase,  
 He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess  
     What wonderful, but unrecorded, race  
     Once dwelt in that annihilated place. (Smith 1846, I.234)

This instinct for what might be called proleptic ruin became strong during the heyday of ruin-mania during the eighteenth century. Following Hubert Robert's twin paintings showing the Louvre in 1796 <<http://www.wga.hu/r/robert/louvre2.jpg>> and in a state of future ruin <<http://www.wga.hu/r/robert/louvre1.jpg>>, Joseph Michael Gandy drew a magnificent picture of the Bank of England, showing it ravaged by time, or perhaps by social or other catastrophe. Albert Speer successfully persuaded Hitler, if not his fellow architects, of the necessity of attending to what he called the 'Ruinenwert' – the ruin-value - of contemporary buildings – that is, the ways in which they could be designed to crumble into graceful and expressive forms that would resemble the ruins of the past. According to Speer, Hitler was sufficiently persuaded to give instructions that buildings were in future to be built in accordance with Speer's 'law of ruins'. This kind of ruin-insurance, shoring up against ruin by incorporating it, seems both to bear out and to contradict Derrida's claim that 'At the origin comes ruin; ruin comes to the origin, it is what first comes and happens to the origin, in the beginning. With no promise of restoration.' This is because the ruin 'is precisely not a theme, for it ruins the theme, the position, the presentation or representation of anything and everything' (Derrida 1993, 65, 69). This is a familiar and always thrilling manoeuvre on Derrida's part. But perhaps he is anticipated and trumped by Byron: 'My soul wanders. I demand it back/To

meditate amongst decay, and stand/A ruin amidst ruins' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, 4. 217-19). And perhaps ruin is in fact always too much a theme, a resource, a repertoire, a routine. Perhaps our own fascination with contemporary ruins is an effort to accelerate ourselves into the strange, broken permanence of ruin, the preposterous perfection of the future perfect, in which we may contemplate what we 'will have been'. As Ko-Ko sings in *The Mikado*: 'There's a fascination frantic/In a ruin that's romantic/Do you think you are sufficiently decayed?'

## References

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