

I

Who Killed Daisy Miller?

In the closing scene of *Planet of the Apes* (1968) Charlton Heston, astronaut, rides away into the distance. 'What will he find out there?' asks one ape. 'His destiny,' replies another. On a desolate seashore a shadow falls across Heston's figure. He looks up, then tumbles from his horse in bewilderment. 'Oh my God! I'm back. I'm home. Damn you all to hell! . . . You maniacs. They did it, they finally did it, they blew it up!' The shadow is cast by the Statue of Liberty. She is buried up to her waist, her tablet battered, and her torch fractured. The planet of the apes is Earth, he realises, destroyed by a nuclear holocaust while the astronauts were travelling in space. He is the last man, and the lone and level sands stretch far away.

A century before the film was made, a man in a black cape sits on the arch of a ruined bridge. He holds an artist's sketchbook as firmly as if inscribing an epitaph. Blackened shells of buildings rise at the marshy edge of a slow and reedy river, one façade advertising 'COMMERCIAL WHARF'. This is London – or, rather, its future as imagined by the artist Gustave Doré in 1873. The wizard-like figure in Doré's engraving is a traveller from New Zealand, for to many Victorians this young colony seemed to represent the dominant civilisation of the future. He sits on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul's, exactly as

Victorian Englishmen sketched those of ancient Rome. The cathedral-like ruin next to the commercial warehouse is Cannon Street Station, brand-new in 1873 but here imagined with the cast-iron piers of the bridge rusting away in the tidal ooze.



The New Zealander by Gustave Doré, from *London*, 1873.

When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future. To statesmen, ruins predict the fall of Empires, and to philosophers the futility of mortal man's aspirations. To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of Time; to a painter or architect, the fragments of a stupendous antiquity call into

question the purpose of their art. Why struggle with a brush or chisel to create the beauty of wholeness when far greater works have been destroyed by Time?

Some years ago I was walking through the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, past Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* and into the rooms of hunters, skaters and merry peasants painted during the Golden Age of the Netherlands. I was brought up short by a small, dark painting which hung ignored by the crowds: a view of the interior of an artist's studio painted in the middle of the seventeenth century by a man named Michiel Sweerts. The background of the scene was absolutely predictable: in the convention of artists' academies, students were drawing an antique sculpture of a naked figure, while an older artist was casting a figure in bronze.

In the foreground, however, fragments of ancient statues of gods and heroes formed a gleaming pile of marble rubble, painted with such a heightened degree of illumination and clarity that they seemed to be a collage of photographs cut out and pasted on to the canvas. I was mesmerised by this picture, as unsettled as if I had rediscovered a forgotten nightmare. My mind travelled on to the fragmentary figures in de Chirico's surrealist paintings, and to the pallid flesh of more recent butcheries. On the left of the pile, I now noticed, was the head of a man wearing a turban, as artists did in their studios. Was this a self-portrait of Sweerts? I had never heard of him, a painter who was born in Brussels in 1618 and who died in Goa at the age of forty. Did he kill himself, for a kind of suicide is implied by the painting? There was no more information on the label but I was convinced that, at the very least, he abandoned his career as a painter. The clash of creativity and destruction in this



The Artist's Studio by Michiel Sweerts, c.1640.

canvas expressed the inner doubts of an artist confronted by the stupendous classical past but, ironically, the promise of ruin has been one of the greatest inspirations to western art.

When I turned away from Sweerts's studio, I felt oddly dislocated but also very calm. Why, I wondered, does immersion in ruins instill such a lofty, even ecstatic, drowsiness? Samuel Johnson spoke of how 'Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses – whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future, predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of human beings. . . . That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plains of Marathon, or whose

enthusiasm would not grow warmer among the ruins of Rome.' Sweerts had been to Rome, I was sure. For it is the shadow of classical antiquity which is the deepest source for the fascination with ruins in the western world. Every new empire has claimed to be the heir of Rome, but if such a colossus as Rome can crumble – its ruins ask – why not London or New York? Furthermore, the magnitude of its ruins overturned visitors' assumptions about the inevitability of human progress over Time. London in Queen Victoria's reign was the first European city to exceed ancient Rome in population and in geographical extent; until the Crystal Palace was erected in Hyde Park in 1851, the Colosseum (or Coliseum) remained the largest architectural volume in existence. Any visitor to Rome in the fifteen centuries after its sack by the Goths in AD 410 would have experienced that strange sense of displacement which occurs when we find that, living, we cannot fill the footprints of the dead.

A second shadow falls on the same ground. This is the Christian doctrine that man's achievement on earth is a fleeting transience, that pyramids and houses and skyscrapers will crumble into oblivion at the sound of the Last Trump. The apocalyptic finale is not exclusive to the Christian religion, but what is unique is the conjunction of the cult's holy shrines with the greatest ruins of classical civilisation. The two greatest influences on the mind of Europe share the same circle of hills above the River Tiber. So the Eternal City is the place to begin an investigation into the feelings of pleasure and fear which ruins suggest.

In AD 400 Rome was a city of eight hundred thousand people glittering with 3,785 statues of gold, marble and

bronze. Its encircling walls were 10 miles in length with 376 towers, and vaulted by nineteen aqueducts carrying fresh spring-water to 1,212 drinking fountains and 926 public baths. There is no evidence that any writer or painter imagined its future ruin, and the poet Rutilius Namatianus expressed his contemporaries' view that Rome was as eternal as the universe itself:

No man will ever be safe if he forgets you;
 May I praise you still when the sun is dark.
 To count up the glories of Rome is like counting
 The stars in the sky.

In AD 410 the Visigoths seized and plundered the city, and in 455 the Ostrogoths. By the end of that century only a hundred thousand citizens remained in Rome, and the rich had fled to Constantinople or joined the Goths in their new capital at Ravenna. In the sixth century the Byzantines and the Goths contested the city three times and the population fell to thirty thousand, clustered in poverty beside the River Tiber now that the aqueducts had been destroyed and the drinking fountains were dry. The fall of Rome came to be seen by many as the greatest catastrophe in the history of western civilisation.

In architectural terms, however, change was slow. The Goths plundered but they did not burn or destroy. In the words of St Jerome, 'The Gods adored by nations are now alone in their niches with the owls and the night-birds. The gilded Capitol languishes in dust and all the temples of Rome are covered with spiders' webs.' The public buildings on the Capitoline Hill and the Forum were abandoned

while a new city, Christian Rome, rose around the outlying sites of St Peter's martyrdom and the Pope's palace of St John Lateran. Over the centuries the Forum became a cow pasture, and cattle drank in the fountains where Castor and Pollux were said to have watered their sweating steeds after the battle of Lake Regillus. Debris slid down the steep slope of the Capitoline Hill to bury the Temple of Vespasian in a mound 33 feet deep. Four-fifths of the vast area enclosed by the old fortified walls of Rome became a wasteland scattered with ruins, vineyards and farms. It remained *disabitato* until after 1870, when the city became the capital of a reunited nation, the 'third Rome'.

But if the Goths did not demolish the buildings, where did the dusty, cobwebbed temples disappear to? They were recycled: in the thousand years that followed, ancient Rome was remade as Christian Rome. In the darkness of the deserted ruins the colonnades echoed with the clang of mallets as thieves stole the gold and bronze statues in order to melt them down. And why open a quarry when the Forum was on the new city's doorstep, with its stones polished and ready? The Colosseum was leased as a quarry by the Popes: picking up one receipt in the Vatican archive we see a payment of 205 ducats for the removal of 2,522 tons of stone between September 1451 and May 1452. One of the first Popes to introduce legislation to protect the few monuments that still stood was Pius II, in 1462. A humanist scholar, Pius had praised the ruins in a poem written many years before:

Oh Rome! Your very ruins are a joy,
 Fallen is your pomp; but it was peerless once!

Your noble blocks wrench'd from your ancient walls
 Are burn'd for lime by greedy slaves of gain.
 Villains! If such as you may have their way
 Three ages more, Rome's glory will be gone.

Pius's laws were disregarded like many before or since, however. In 1519 Raphael told Pope Leo X, 'I would be so bold as to say that all of this new Rome, however great it may be, however beautiful, however embellished with palaces, churches and other buildings, all of this is built with mortar made from ancient marbles.' In the twelve years since Raphael had known the city the Temple of Ceres and one of its two pyramids had been destroyed. The lime-burning which Pius II and Raphael decried was the most banal, yet most destructive, aspect of the recycling. In mixing mortar the best aggregate is powdered lime, and the easiest way to obtain powdered lime is to burn marble. At the end of the nineteenth century the archaeologist Rodolfo Lanciani discovered a lime-kiln abandoned by lime-burners in a sudden hurry many centuries before. Inside stood eight marble Vestal Virgins ready to be burned, stashed 'like a cord of wood, leaving as few interstices as possible between them, and the spaces formed by the curves of the body filled in by marble chips'. Once when he was sketching in the Forum, the great French seventeenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin was asked where to find the spirit of ancient Rome. He knelt down and scooped up a handful of earth. 'Here.' The cow pasture was mingled with marble dust, the richest sediment in the world.

From the fall of classical Rome until the eighteenth century the only houses in the Forum were the cottages of



The Roman Forum by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, c.1751. At the fall of Rome, the Forum was abandoned to the lime-burners and to cattle; in the eighteenth century, it continued to be called the *Campo Vaccino*, or cow pasture.

the lime-burners, and the hovels of beggars and thieves. To Christian pilgrims in the Middle Ages the ruins were the work of mysterious giants of folklore and not fellow men, and the Colosseum was thought to have been a domed Temple of the Sun. The marshy, fetid wilderness of the Forum was to be avoided in the journey from one shrine to another. A soldier in the army of Frederick Barbarossa which invaded Rome in 1155 described the ruins crawling with green snakes and black toads, its air poisoned by the breath of winged dragons, and by the rotting bodies of the

thousands of Germans who had died of the fever during their occupation of the city. When Adam of Usk travelled from Henry V's England he saw dogs scrapping outside St Peter's: 'O God! How lamentable is the state of Rome! Once it was filled by great Lords and Palaces; now it's filled with huts, thieves, wolves and vermin, and the Romans tear themselves to pieces.'

It was not until the Renaissance of the fifteenth century that we find a new approach, in which the study of ancient inscriptions and manuscripts replaced superstitious legends, and artists and architects tried to piece together the scattered jigsaws of antiquity. The first painting of the ruins of the Forum was made by Maso di Banco in the church of Santa Croce in Florence in 1336, and at the dawn of the following century Brunelleschi and Donatello came from Florence to study the remains. When they began to excavate, the local rabble assumed they were treasure-hunters; when they used compasses and rulers to establish the measurements they needed for their own works of art they were accused of being necromancers using occult secrets to discover the gold and silver. The antiquary Poggio Bracciolini arrived in Rome in 1430:

The hill of the Capitol, on which we sit, was formerly the head of the Roman Empire, the citadel of the earth, the terror of kings; illustrated by the footsteps of so many triumphs, enriched with the spoils and tributes of so many nations. This spectacle of the world, how it is fallen! How changed! How defaced! The path of victory is obliterated by vines, and the benches of the senators are concealed by a dunghill. . . . The Forum of the

Roman people, where they assembled to enact their laws and elect their magistrates, is now enclosed for the reception of swine and buffaloes. The public and private edifices, that were founded for eternity, lie prostrate, broken, and naked, like the limbs of a mighty giant; and the ruin is the more visible, from the stupendous relics that have survived the injuries of time and fortune.

Poggio's lament became a new way of seeing Rome. And nowhere was the lesson of *Sic transit gloria mundi* more evident than in the Colosseum. It had served as a quarry, a private fortress and a bull-ring: earthquakes had struck in 422, 508, 847, 1231 and 1349 AD. Its external arcades, littered with dunghills, were full of beggars and occupied by shopkeepers who slung their awnings on poles slotted into the holes where clamps of bronze had once held the marble cladding in place. Even inside you could smell the cabbages from the surrounding farms.

Quamdiu stat Colyseus, stat et Roma:
Quando cadet Colyseus, cadet et Roma:
Quando cadet Roma, cadet et Mundus.

As Byron translated the words of the Venerable Bede:

While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand
When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall
And when Rome falls – the world.

It is oval in plan, 617 feet in length and 513 feet in width and 187 feet high. The arena was built by Emperor Vespasian

and opened in AD 80, when it was welcomed as 'the eighth wonder of the world' by the poet Martial. It contained fifty thousand spectators. For naval battles the arena was flooded, and when gladiators fought lions, panthers, elephants and ostriches it was redecorated as a jungle or a rocky desert. Christians were fed to the lions from the earliest days of the arena, and it was they who banned the gladiatorial games in AD 404.

The Christian Emperor Constantine had deliberately placed the principal Christian shrines – such as St Peter's and the Lateran Palace – at a discreet distance from the temples of the classical gods. In the Colosseum a clash of the two religions was unavoidable, however, and the sand impregnated with the blood of martyrs became a place of pilgrimage. At the beginning of the eighteenth century it was formally consecrated to the martyrs, and pilgrims processed round the Stations of the Cross erected at the rim of the arena, or kissed the tall black cross in the centre for 100 days' indulgence. The more intrepid pilgrims climbed the tangled, slippery terraces to plant crosses at the grassy summit. A hermitage was built into the tiers of the amphitheatre; one occupant was fined for selling hay he had grown in the arena. The Colosseum showed the Romans at their mightiest but also at their cruellest, so a visit was a dilemma for any Christian with a classical education. The ambivalence is best expressed by Charles Dickens in his *Letters from Italy* (1846). The faces of Italians changed as he entered Rome:

beauty becomes devilish; and there is scarcely one countenance in a hundred, among the common people

in the streets, that would not be at home and happy in a renovated Coliseum to-morrow. . . . [Inside the arena] its solitude, its awful beauty, and its utter desolation, strike upon the stranger, the next moment, like a softened sorrow; and never in his life, perhaps, will he be so moved and overcome by any sight, not immediately connected with his own affections and afflictions.

To see it crumbling there, an inch a year; its walls and arches overgrown with green; its corridors open to the day; the long grass growing in its porches; young trees of yesterday, springing up on its ragged parapets, and bearing fruit: chance produce of the seeds dropped there by the birds who build their nests within its chinks and crannies; to see its Pit of Fight filled up with earth, and the peaceful Cross planted in the centre; to climb into its upper halls, and look down on ruin, ruin, ruin, all about it . . . is to see the ghost of old Rome, wicked wonderful old city, haunting the very ground on which its people trod. It is the most impressive, the most stately, the most solemn, grand, majestic, mournful sight, conceivable. Never, in its bloodiest prime, can the sight of the gigantic Coliseum, full and running over with the lustiest life, have moved one heart, as it must move all who look upon it now, a ruin. GOD be thanked: a ruin!

The very opposite view is given by William Beckford who came to Rome in the autumn of 1779, in the heyday of the Grand Tour. With an inheritance of £1 million in Jamaican sugar 'England's wealthiest son' – in Byron's phrase – was

perhaps the most marvellously spoiled figure in the history of English arts. Taught music by Mozart at the age of five – when the composer was seven – he wrote the oriental romance *Vathek* at the age of twenty-one. After a homosexual scandal with a young aristocrat he was banished from society for the next sixty years, and he erected in Wiltshire the mock-Gothic abbey of Fonthill as a private temple of the arts. We have an inkling of Fonthill's decadent, theatrical interiors in his response to St Peter's, which he entered the moment his retinue of carriages arrived in Rome. Banish the priests, he wrote to a confidante, and you and I could live in a tent draped over Bernini's bronze baldacchino below the dome. Drape yellow silk over the windows and we will forget the passing of days, the oil lamps in their niches, the stars in an endless night. It required an arrogant imagination to claim St Peter's as a private hermitage – and a mischievous anti-clericalism.

Reaching the Colosseum his impulse was to kick the tacky clutter of martyrdom into the river. 'A few lazy abbots were at their devotions before [the Stations of the Cross], such as would have made a lion's mouth water, fatter, I dare say, than any saint in the whole martyrology, and ten times more tantalising.' In the seclusion of cypresses growing in an arcade he conjured up in his mind the colourful din of an ancient Roman triumph, before wandering into the Forum. On the Palatine Hill beyond, only the cellars remained of the palaces built by the Caesars, and under one arch a 'wretched rabble' of beggars roasted wild chestnuts. Beckford observed the lessons of this tableau until the fire died 'and none remained but a withered hag, raking the embers and muttering to herself like a witch of old. But the autumn mists

which streamed through the apertures of the Colosseum had given him a headache and he returned to his hotel.

In the eighteenth century many Grand Tourists shared Beckford's Enlightenment disgust for the Catholic clergy and their institutions, while Dickens was addressing a more pious High Victorian audience. The change in religious culture is not the point, however: I choose the Colosseum to show how ruins inspire such a variety of responses. Each spectator is forced to supply the missing pieces from his or her own imagination and a ruin therefore appears different to everyone. It is an obvious point perhaps; it first struck me when visiting Captain Coram's Foundling Hospital in London, which displays the 'tokens' that accompanied the children who were placed on the doorstep by their anonymous mothers. A token was an object snapped in two, whether a gold ring or a porcelain plate, and only by reuniting the two imperfect halves could a mother reclaim her child. But what fantasies of family did each abandoned child project on to its fragment?

As if to illustrate this dialogue between incompleteness and the imagination, the most powerful response to the arena is by Edgar Allan Poe – a writer who never set foot in Italy. His poem 'The Coliseum' was published in the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* of 26 October 1833, the week after the young and unknown journalist had published his first prize-winning short story. Later, Poe incorporated the poem into *Politian*, his one attempt at a drama in verse. The play translated to Renaissance Rome the recent scandal of a love-triangle in Frankfort, Kentucky, when a jealous attorney stabbed to death a politician who had earlier fathered a child by his fiancée. The poem became a soliloquy

spoken by the hero of *Politian* as he awaits his lover in the moonlit Colosseum. Beginning with the old refrain of *Sic transit gloria mundi* – ‘Here where the dames of Rome their yellow hair / Waved to the wind, now wave the reed and thistle’ – the lover’s own voice rises to address the echoing ring of stone.

These stones, alas! These grey stones are they all
Of the great and colossal left
By the corrosive hours to fate and me?

The stones echo a reply:

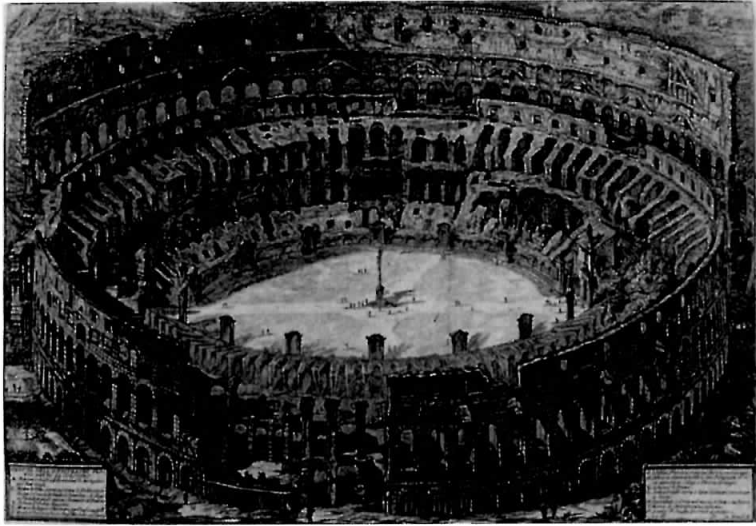
. . . Prophetic sounds and loud arise forever
From us and from all ruin unto the wise,
As from the granite Memnon to the sun.
We rule the hearts of mightiest men: we rule
With a despotic sway all giant minds.
We are not desolate we pallid stones,
Not all our power is gone – not all our Fame
Not all the magic of our high renown
Not all the wonder that encircles us
Not all the mysteries that in us lie
Not all the memories that hang upon
And cling around about us as a garment
Clothing us in a robe of more than glory.

We understand Poe’s symbolism by turning to the story he published in the same magazine the previous week. Entitled ‘MS Found in a Bottle’ it is narrated by a man whose cynicism is as expensive as William Beckford’s: ‘all my life I

have been a dealer in antiquities, and have imbibed the shadows of fallen columns at Balbac, and Tadmor, and Persepolis, until my very soul has become a ruin. . . .’ The antique dealer is rescued at sea by a ghostly vessel, made of some porous but ageless wood and crewed by somnambulant, ethereal sailors. ‘The ship and all in it are imbued with the spirit of Eld’, he notes. They drift towards destruction at the South Pole, which Poe imagined as an open spinning vortex of eternity, its walls of ice ‘a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance’.

The roaring circle of ice and the Colosseum are both ‘Eld’, a swirling infinity that was Poe’s concept of eternity. In an age of scientific progress Poe was an anti-Positivist; that is, as he wrote to a friend: ‘I disagree with you in what you say of man’s advance towards perfection. Man is now only more active, not wiser, nor more happy than he was 6,000 years ago.’ In his one non-fiction essay ‘Eureka’, he argued that the universe could not be quantified by physics or astronomy but was ‘a shadowy and fluctuating domain, now shrinking, now swelling, in accordance with the vacillating energies of the imagination’. As Poe studied engravings of the Colosseum – perhaps Piranesi’s mesmerising bird’s-eye view – he saw not an assembly of stones but a pulsating source of eternal, magical energy.

Its spirit was thrillingly alive for Benvenuto Cellini (1500–71), the Renaissance sculptor and goldsmith who worked for the Popes and King François I of France but is perhaps as celebrated for his lusty autobiography as for his exquisite bronzes. Furious that a teenage Sicilian girl has slipped through his fingers, he hires a necromancer to



The Colosseum by Piranesi, c.1751. In Piranesi's bird's eye view, the amphitheatre seems to be the achievement of giants, not men – or, like a volcano, a phenomenon of Nature. The engraving also shows the martyrs' cross in the centre, and, at the edge of the arena, the Stations of the Cross and the hermitage.

summon the spirits that will call her back. Cellini and his friend Angelo meet the magician in the centre of the arena, drawing magic circles in the sand, pouring perfume in the fire and spinning the pentacle until the dark tiers of seats fill with the ghosts of legionaries. In Angelo's eyes the soldiers become demons growing in size and brightness. 'These creatures are only our slaves; all you can see is smoke and shadow!' Cellini calls, but now Angelo sees the entire amphitheatre on fire and flames rushing towards them. In terror, he farts – and Cellini's laughter sends the demons scurrying back into the shadows.

The necromancers lit their fire where the black Martyrs' Cross would later be erected, and on the steps of this cross took place one of the saddest scenes in the autobiography of François-René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand. Architectural ruin was the favourite metaphor of this novelist, traveller and statesman, who was born in a crumbling ancestral castle in Brittany in 1768 and was to see his family guillotined and the châteaux and abbeys of *ancien régime* France plundered and burned in the Revolution. When he returned to Paris from exile in 1800 the Place de la Concorde 'had the decay, the melancholy and deserted look of an old amphitheatre' and he hastened past, chilled by the ghosts of his family and the imagined stains of blood on the paving stones. The saddest memento returned to him was the wedding ring of his sister-in-law, its two inscribed hoops broken in half.

The vicomte was restored to favour by Napoleon and dispatched to Rome, and it was the city's promise of oblivion that inspired him to begin his memoirs. His lover Pauline de Beaumont followed from Paris, although she was dying from tuberculosis. She summoned the energy to leave her lodgings for the last time, and expressed her wish to kneel at the Martyrs' Cross in the Colosseum. Her prayers finished, she raised her eyes to the rim of the arena and to the oval of blue sky above. "Let us go: I am cold" . . . she went to bed and rose no more.' In S. Luigi de' Francesi, the French church by the Piazza Navona with the Caravaggios, is the beautiful memorial he erected to her memory.

Did the romantic egotist theatricalise the episode? Probably, but the arena demanded drama of its visitors. Its sand was as resonant as the wooden planking of the stage, and at night its empty stalls were a hushed, dimmed

auditorium; the Colosseum had the loudest echo in the world. On a night of bright moonlight in 1787 Goethe watched the beggars who had bivouacked under the arches light a fire in the centre, and the phenomenon of the smoke swirling around the bowl gave rise to one of the most celebrated visions in *The Italian Journey* (1816):

Presently the smoke found its way up the sides, and through every chink and opening, while the moon lit it up like a cloud. The sight was exceedingly glorious. In such a light one ought also to see the Pantheon, the Capitol, the Portico of St Peter's, and the grand streets and squares. And thus the sun and the moon, as well as the human mind, have here to do a work quite different from what they produce elsewhere – here where vast and yet elegant masses present themselves to their rays.

Perversely, Henry James used the arena's amplification to place in scale the littleness of human transactions. It is here that he set the final act of his 1878 novella, *Daisy Miller*. At eleven o'clock in the evening Nigel Winterbourne is wandering through the city struggling to clarify his confusions over Daisy, a capricious American heiress. When he enters the arena his first response is to murmur the lines from Byron's drama *Manfred*, which had become the most celebrated description to nineteenth-century tourists:

When I was wandering, – upon such a night
I stood within the Coliseum's wall,
Midst the chief relics of almighty Rome!
The trees which grew along the broken arches

Waved dark in the blue midnight, and the stars
Shone through the rents of ruin; from afar
The watchdog bay'd beyond the Tiber; and
More near from out the Caesars' palace came
The owl's long cry . . .
Ivy usurps the laurel's place of growth; –
But the gladiators' bloody Circus stands,
A noble wreck in ruinous perfection!

The Colosseum is filled with mist, a miasma released into the air by recent excavations in the sewers. Seated at the base of the cross are Daisy and Giovanelli, a handsome Italian who is his sly rival. For Winterbourne the composition has a sudden, welcome clarity: 'She was a young lady about the *shades* of whose perversity a foolish puzzled gentleman need no longer trouble his head or heart. That once questionable quantity *had* no shades – it was a mere little black blot.' His mind resolved, he speaks only to instruct her that the miasma is a danger to her health. She protests: 'I never was sick, and I don't mean to be! I don't look like much, but I'm healthy! I was bound to see the Coliseum by moonlight – I wouldn't have wanted to go home without that . . .' Their last words are exchanged in the tunnel of the entrance as, driving away in a cab, she turns to cry out: 'I don't care whether I have Roman fever or not!' A week later she is dead of malaria.

When the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne had visited one night twenty years earlier, in 1858, he had been irritated by having to share the stalls with parties of English tourists led by local guides in search of Manfred's sublime solitude, of 'raptures which were Byron's, not their own'.

Hawthorne detested the first 'cold, rainy, filthy, stinking, rotten, rascally' winter in Rome, which he had endured while he worked on the manuscript of *The Marble Faun*: 'I fully acquiesce in all the mischief and ruin that has happened to it, from Nero's conflagration onward. In fact, I wish the very sight had been obliterated before I ever saw it.' His daughter was ill with the fever, and the climate upset his own health: 'I never knew that I had either bowels or lungs before I came to Rome.' Despite this, in *The Marble Faun* he captured the magical atmosphere of summer nights when the guided tours had returned to their hotels and the locals reclaimed the arena:

Some youths and maidens were running merry races across the open space, and playing at hide-and-seek a little way within the duskiness of the ground-tier of arches; whence, now and then, you could hear the half-shriek, half-laugh of a frolicsome girl, whom the shadow had betrayed into a young man's arms. Elder groups were seated on the fragments of pillars and the blocks of marble, that lie around the verge of this arena, talking in the quick, short ripple of the Italian tongue.

The scene is enjoyed by a group of American artists. 'What a strange thought that the Coliseum was really built for us, and has not come to its best uses till almost two thousand years after it was finished!' comments one. 'The Emperor Vespasian scarcely had us in his mind,' replies another. 'But I thank him none the less for building it.' The conversation precedes a murder, which need not detain us here; nor is there time for the meditations of the poet Shelley or the

vision of the chemist Humphry Davy, who saw a spectacle of toppling worlds one starlit night; nor Lamartine's elegy to the sound of the wind whistling through its arches, nor Stendhal's romantic description which he claimed could only be appreciated if read after midnight 'in the house of an amiable woman' with a print illustrating the structure held in one's hand. But no writer saw the same Colosseum.

An English botanist named Richard Deakin in his *Flora of the Colosseum* (1855) gives the most beautiful of all descriptions of the ruin. Deakin catalogued and illustrated no less than 420 species of plants growing in the 6 acres of ruin, a micro-climate which was damp to the north but hot and dry on its southern slopes. There were cypresses and ilex, fifty-six varieties of grass and forty-one of the 'Leguminous or Pea tribe' but Deakin was fondest of the many wild flowers: the dianthus which clustered in the lower arcades, and the star-like anemone which twinkled on the stones in springtime. Some flowers in the Colosseum were so rare in western Europe that the only explanation for their presence was that nearly two thousand years before their seeds had been scattered in the sand from the bodies of animals brought from the mountains of Persia or the banks of the Nile for the gladiatorial games. Deakin's most moving specimen was the discovery of Christ's Thorn, a reminder of the 'eternal crown, without thorns' which each martyr had won. To the sensitive botanist flowers 'form a link in the memory, and teach us hopeful and soothing lessons, amid the sadness of bygone ages: and cold indeed must be the heart that does not respond to their silent appeal; for though without speech, they tell us of the regenerating power which animates the dust of mouldering greatness'.

Fifteen years later every tree was gone, every flower and blade of grass plucked from the ruins by cold-hearted archaeologists. In 1870 control of the ruins was handed over to the archaeologists by the new government which had unified Italy. 'Rome or death!' had been Garibaldi's cry. Cannon-fire at the ancient city gates at dawn on 20 September 1870 announced the end of the Pope's temporal authority and the inauguration of the 'third Rome'. As the windows in the Vatican rattled Pope Pius IX capitulated, and withdrew into internal exile inside the palace. The populace welcomed Vittorio Emmanuele II, King of Sardinia, as King of a reunified Italy.

Rome was to be the capital of a new Italy which would be modern, democratic and secular, its senators in cravats and English suits, and the shining new ministries built on the Tiber humming with elevators and typewriters. The children of their new state would not grow up in a city where the living outnumbered the dead. The Rome of the Middle Ages was now identified with superstition, poverty and civil war, an interlude between the twin pillars of heroic antiquity and the new republic. All relics of this degrading interlude were embarrassments, and several medieval fortified towers were demolished in order to create the podium for the 'wedding cake', the white neo-classical monument on the Capitoline Hill which commemorates King Vittorio Emmanuele. It was precisely this contrast between ancient grandeur and modern squalor, however, which had encouraged visitors from England, France, or America to claim for London, Paris, or New York the right to the title of the 'new Rome', which the wretched natives must surely relinquish. Rome's population doubled from two hundred

thousand to four hundred thousand in two decades. The bureaucrats who arrived with the new government required forty thousand office rooms, and modern apartments for their families. Princes sold their homes to property speculators, and palaces like the Villa Ludovisi – Henry James's favourite – were quickly demolished. On the Corso the last empty plot, valued before 1870 at a few centimes, sold for 1,000 francs per square metre. In 1882 Augustus Hare grumbled that 'Twelve years of Sardinian rule have done more for the destruction of Rome . . . than the invasions of the Goths and Vandals'.

The wilderness of pastures, ruins and vineyards inside the city walls disappeared under what Hare described as 'ugly new streets in imitation of Paris and New York', with five-storey stucco apartment blocks as monotonous as barracks. The transformation of the city was described to an English audience by the archaeologist Rodolfo Lanciani in 139 letters to *The Athenaeum* in London published between 1876 and 1913. At first, there was great excitement in removing the layers of medieval detritus to discover the Roman remains underneath. But, by 1887, it was apparent that there had been a price to pay. Rome was no longer

the Rome of our dreams, of a beautiful brownish hue, surrounded by dense masses of green: it is an immense white dazzling spot, some six miles in diameter, bordering directly on the wilderness of the Campagna . . . we miss the aged ilexes, forming as it were the frame of the picture, their deep green giving by contrast that vigour and brilliancy to the golden hue which old age lends to ruins in southern climates . . . we miss that

sense of quiet and peaceful enjoyment which pervaded the whole scene. It is impossible to imagine anything more commonplace, and out of keeping, and shabby, and tasteless, than the new quarters which encircle the city.

In April of 1887 Thomas Hardy and his wife Emma arrived by train from Florence. No writer was more sensitive to the emotional resonance of ruined buildings than this former architect, and in Rome the overpowering spell of decay was 'like a nightmare in my sleep', he wrote. 'How any community can go on building in the face of the Vanitas vanitatum reiterated by the ruins is quite marvellous.' In his poem 'Rome: Building a New Street in the Ancient Quarter' he described the brick and stucco apartment blocks rising in the ruins of 'Time's central city', where the 'cracking frieze and rotten metope' seemed to shout a warning of futility: 'Dunces, Learn here to spell Humanity!'

And yet within these ruins' very shade
 The singing workmen shape and set and join
 Their frail new mansion's stuccoed cove and quoin
 With no apparent sense that years abrade,
 Though each rent wall their feeble works invade
 Once shamed all such in power of pier and groin.

The Forum came to resemble a 'house-breaker's yard', in the words of one of the many artists who packed up his easel in disgust. But it was the Colosseum which became the flashpoint in the dispute over the true identity of the ruins. Having removed the flowers and trees, in 1874 the

archaeologists began to excavate in the arena in order to expose the sewers and cellars. To do so, it was necessary to remove the hermit and his hermitage, the black Martyrs' Cross, and the Stations of the Cross. The Pope emerged from his exile in order to object, and every day processions of Christians came to pray on the sacred sands in protest. The archaeologists withdrew but it was too late: the trenches had filled with water and flooded the arena. It remained a lake for five years, until a new sewer could be constructed. On the day the water drained away, Lanciani told his readers in London, there were loud cheers from the 'crowd assembled to witness the ceremony', perhaps including some of the locals whom Hawthorne had observed. 'Poor Coliseum! It was no longer recognisable since the upsetting of the arena in 1874.' And poor Daisy Miller – it was the excavations that released the fatal vapours from the sewers.

The sewers and underground service corridors have remained exposed ever since, as bald as the foundations of a modern construction site. I cannot find a single writer or painter who has been inspired by the Colosseum since 1870, and only one exception to a general rule: the failed painter, Adolf Hitler, and his architects.

'*Rom hat mich richtig ergriffen!*' ['Rome completely bowled me over!'] His first sight was on a state visit in 1938. Mussolini prepared a ceremonial progression from the railway station at the Pyramid of Caius Cestius to Palazzo Venezia, his palace at the foot of the Capitoline Hill. Hitler's train arrived by night, and the proudest monuments of Imperial Rome were illuminated by 45,000 electric lamps linked by 100 miles of cabling. The Colosseum was lit



Nazi Map, 1938. This map records Hitler's journey from the station at Ostia (no. 2) to Mussolini's palace in Palazzo Venezia (no. 22) on his state visit in 1938. The ruins en route were illuminated with 45,000 red lamps.

from inside by red lamps so that, as if ablaze, it cast a bloody glow on to the grass and the ruddy brick ruins on the surrounding slopes. Heavy rain in the days which followed led to military displays being cancelled, and Hitler took the opportunity to return to the Colosseum and spend several hours alone studying designs for the new Congress Hall in Nuremberg. This was amphitheatrical in form: his architect Albert Speer had discussed Goethe's speculation that in the Colosseum the crowd became a single spirit, swaying forward and back in mesmerised loyalty. Hitler saw an even more chilling moral in the structure: the construction of these 'imperishable symbols of power' depended on slaves brought from conquered, 'uncivilised' territories.

On his return to Germany Hitler introduced an official policy, the *'Teorie von Ruinwert'*. Steel and ferro-concrete could no longer be used in the construction of official Nazi buildings because they were too perishable. The use of marble, stone and brick alone would ensure that at the fall of the 1,000-year Reich they would resemble their Roman models. As Speer explained in his memoirs:

Ultimately, all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture, he recalled. What then remained of the emperors of the Roman Empire? What would still give evidence of them today, if not their buildings. . . . So, today the buildings of ancient Rome could enable Mussolini to refer to the heroic spirit of Rome when he wanted to inspire his people with the idea of a modern imperium. Our buildings must speak to the conscience

of future generations of Germans. With this argument Hitler also understood the value of a durable kind of construction.

Speer even presented Hitler with sketches in which he imagined the marble colonnade of the Zeppelinfeld at Nuremberg as a romantic, ivy-clad ruin of the future. And in the Cabinet Room at the Reichstag Hitler hung views of the Forum painted by the French artist Hubert Robert in the eighteenth century. Should Hitler's obsession with ruins deter us from enjoying them ourselves? No; the opposite rather. To Hitler the Colosseum was not a ruin but a monument, a bottle that was half-full rather than half-empty as it were. He was attracted to the endurance of the masonry and the physical survival of an emperor's ambitions; to the lover of the ruinous, by contrast, the attraction is in the sight of transience and vulnerability. Poets and painters like ruins, and dictators like monuments.

It is for similar reasons that the artist is inevitably at odds with the archaeologist. In the latter discipline the scattered fragments of stone are parts of a jigsaw, or clues to a puzzle to which there is only one answer, as in a science laboratory; to the artist, by contrast, any answer which is imaginative is correct. For five centuries the Colosseum nourished artists and writers, but it was precisely the features which conflicted with the original 'truth' of the Colosseum which triggered their creativity. The black Martyrs' Cross, on whose steps sat Daisy Miller, Chateaubriand and Pauline de Beaumont. Moonlit solitude, and the owl's cry heard by Byron. The spectral smoke which drifted away to reveal Cellini's demons, Goethe's geometries and Poe's dizzying vortex of

Eld. The hermit who grew his hay; William Beckford's reverie in the cypresses; and Deakin's Christ's Thorn. All have gone, and the Colosseum is extinct. Today it is the most monumental bathos in Europe: a bald, dead and bare circle of stones. There are no shadows, no sands, no echoes and if a single flower blooms in a crevice it is sprayed with weed-killer. The monument is open to the public from nine-thirty a.m. to six p.m., when the gates are locked. At night-fall one day in the 1820s Stendhal watched an Englishman ride his horse through the deserted arena. I wish that could be me.

Notes

The place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated.

I *Who Killed Daisy Miller?*

Michiel Sweerts is one of the most enigmatic and admired Dutch painters of the seventeenth century, the subject of several studies by Rolf Kultzen. Born in Brussels in 1618, his training as an artist remains a mystery but by 1646 he was recorded as living in Rome; on his return from Brussels in 1656 he opened a life-drawing academy and at the same time began to reveal his religious fanaticism; it is this, I imagine, which explains the painting in the Rijksmuseum. Sweerts joined a party of Catholic missionaries travelling through Syria to the Far East, and he died in Goa in 1664.

For the disappearance of classical Rome, the *disabitato*, and the appearance of the ruins to Christian pilgrims in the early Middle Ages, see Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308* (New Jersey, 1980). Rodolfo Lanciani (1847–1929) drew his conclusions in *The Destruction of Ancient Rome* (1906) and his letters to the fine arts journal *The Athenaeum* were published as *Notes from Rome*, edited by Anthony L. Cubberley (British School at Rome, 1988). These are the best eye-witness accounts of excavation in the years after unification; Lanciani was one of the leading archaeologists of the period, but had an eye to the

Picturesque beauties which have since disappeared. *The Eagle and the Spade* by Ronald Ridley (Cambridge, 1992) is a vivid study of the first systematic excavations in the Forum, those made during the Napoleonic occupation of Rome from 1809–14. Ridley (p. 141) describes the French plan of 1812 to turn the Forum into an ‘English garden’, referred to in Chapter Six.

For a narrative of visitors’ reactions to the Colosseum in visitors’ eyes, see Peter Quenell, *The Colosseum* (London and New York, 1973), which also includes an anthology of their descriptions; for a study of its design, G. Cozzo, *The Colosseum* (Rome, 1971).

Among the biographies of Edgar Allan Poe the best analysis of the poem ‘The Coliseum’ and its relationship to *Politian* and *MS Found in a Bottle* is Kenneth Silverman (*Edgar Allan Poe*, 1992), pp. 92, 115. The letter to a friend relating to ‘man’s advance towards perfection’ written in 1844 is quoted in Jeffrey Meyers, *Edgar A. Poe* (1992), p. 293, as are D. H. Lawrence’s observations on the author. Meyers discusses the background to *Politian* (p. 77), extracts from which Poe published after his appointment as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in December 1835.

Chateaubriand published the final volume of *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* in 1850, and it was translated into English by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos in 1902 (Freemantle).

Alex Scobie’s definitive book *Hitler’s State Architecture* (Philadelphia, 1990) studies all aspects of the dictator’s interest in classical architecture, and reveals his obsession with ruins.

Doré’s image of the New Zealander appeared in *London*,

a book of his views of the modern city published in 1872 and accompanied by text by Blanchard Ferrol. The metaphor was conceived by Thomas Macaulay in his review of Von Ranke’s *History of the Papacy* published in *The Edinburgh Review*, October 1840.

II *A Perverse Pleasure*

For the aqueducts, see *The Waters of Rome* by H. V. Morton (1966). Beckford’s descriptions of Rome are in *Dreams, Waking Thoughts and Incidents*, a travel book which he published in 1779 but soon after suppressed; Robert Gemmett edited a version (New Jersey, 1971).

III *Haunted Houses*

The poem of the soldier’s return is translated by Arthur Waley in *170 Chinese Poems* (London, 1923). Several of the poems chosen by Waley have ruins as their subject and he notes that by the T’ang dynasty (618–905 AD) the re-visiting of a ruined city or old home is an established literary trope.

Emily Ruete, Princess Salme of Zanzibar and Oman, wrote her *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar* in German; a translation was recently published by the eccentric and wonderful Gallery bookshop in Stone Town, Zanzibar.

The best study of Byron at Newstead aside from Leslie Marchand’s standard biography of 1971 is the catalogue edited by Haidee Jackson for the exhibition held at Newstead Abbey in 1998, ‘Ruinous Perfection’.

IV *Ephesus without an Umbrella*

Richard Holmes’s study of the Baths of Caracalla and

For Michael and Isabel Briggs

In Ruins

Christopher Woodward



Pantheon Books, New York

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For I know some will say, why does he treat us
to descriptions of weeds, and make us hobble
after him over broken stones, decayed buildings,
and old rubbish?

Preface to *A Journey into Greece*
by George Wheeler (1682)

In Ruins