

## II A Perverse Pleasure

I was born in Avila, the old city of the walls', wrote the Spanish novelist Miguel Delibes in his novel of 1948, *The Shadow of the Cypress Is Lengthening*. Avila is a city high on the bare plateau west of Madrid, admired for its unbroken circuit of medieval fortifications. Today it prospers on tourists visiting the convent of St Teresa and buying trinkets in narrow streets that seem to have changed little since her time. Fifty years ago, however, half the area within the walls was derelict and abandoned, and the granite doorways were silent: no radios playing, no children, only the footsteps of widows and saints. The Avila of Delibes's childhood did not fill the footprint of its medieval pride, and its inhabitants were like those of Nîmes, Arles and Lucca who in the Dark Ages left their houses and retreated inside the walls of Roman amphitheatres. 'I was born in Avila, the old city of the walls', explains Delibes's protagonist, 'and I believe that the silence and the near-mystical absorption of this city settled in my soul at the very moment of birth.'

But I grew up in a world of relentless progress, so why should I have fallen under that soporific spell of decay? I was born in Welwyn Garden City, whose first brick was laid in 1922. Avila is encircled by eighty-eight battlemented towers, Welwyn by the creosoted fences of housing estates,



A seventeenth century drawing of the amphitheatre at Arles. During the lawlessness of the Dark Ages, the people abandoned their houses and built homes inside the walls of the Roman amphitheatre.

by playing-fields and business parks. Hertfordshire is the county of New Towns: within a radius of 15 miles from the village in which we lived were Letchworth – the first Garden City – and Welwyn, and the post-war towns of Stevenage, Hatfield and Hemel Hempstead. It was many years before I realised the village was old, but its populace was wealthy, fit and extremely healthy, the lanes gleaming with BMWs, children's bicycles and joggers in Lycra. Our neighbours were in the City, insurance, or computing. The single speck of decay on the shiny, blue horizon was the manor house. It

was the home of the Cleverdons, and Mr Cleverdon had the rustiest car in the village. When I was young I could not understand why he had a clapped-out Volvo but three boys at Eton, a house with thirty windows but holes in his sweater. The wealth of our parents – and our friends' parents – was measured in salaries and investments, in health insurance, school fees and pension funds, and was as precisely numerical as the train timetable to the City. The Cleverdons' manner of wealth was incomprehensible by contrast: wealth like a cluttered attic, a cash dividend from blowing the dust off the sideboard when the man from Christie's called.

The estate formed the boundary to the village, its mossy flint wall ignoring the disapproving glare of a new estate of bright new Lego-like houses opposite. In places the wall had tumbled, and as children we climbed inside to toboggan, climb trees, or pester the cattle. No one chased us away. Indeed, apart from the occasional sighting of the cowman, we saw no one on the lawns, or on the tennis courts, or in the greenhouses. The windows in the long, grey façade were shuttered, and the only sign of life inside was when – crawling through the rhododendrons once – we saw through the open front door the flicker of firelight on the oak panelling in the hall, and rows of stags' antlers. Trespassing in Cleverdons' I felt inexplicably at home, more at ease in one of the rotting garden pavilions than in a friend's living-room, happier to play football on their scuffed tennis court than in the public recreation ground.

I never entered the house, nor spoke to anyone. I cannot pretend to have had a dramatic, life-changing encounter there but the memory of this attraction was puzzling

enough for me to return twenty years later. I soon realised that my impulse as a child was not – as I had feared at the gates, picturing the advertisement in *Country Life* – a social aspiration. I had no sense of acquisitiveness.

It was Christmas Eve, and trees in drifts of presents were displayed in the windows of every front room in the village. No festive lights twinkled at Cleverdons'. A friend had come from London with me, and at the dairy farm we broke the ice on the cattle-trough with a puerile clattering of sticks and stones. On the tennis court the lines had still not been repainted, and the net sagged with frosted mildew. We play-acted a game, chasing an imaginary ball through the dead leaves and gasping 'pop', because – I think – my friend was studying film and had just watched Antonioni's *Blow-up*.

The house remained silent. Smoke came from the chimney, but the shutters were closed; indeed, they might not have been opened in the past twenty years. As children we had counted the windows and argued over the number of rooms inside: twelve windows across, three storeys high, and an attic. Were there ten, fifteen, or twenty bedrooms? Our house had five but no cellar or stable loft, no space which was dusty, or cluttered, or secret. It was a new house and we had long since explored every inch of floor space – under beds, behind the machines in the utility room – with a child's microscopic, beetling scrutiny.

Next, returning that Christmas, I went in search of an old bridge which spanned a river valley some distance from the house. We had enacted set-pieces from the Second World War there, charging across with a rat-tat-tat from machine-guns made of tree branches. The stream was dry in the winter, and whatever road had once crossed the bridge was

now buried by pasture. The brick structure was – I recognised, with the hindsight of a professional architectural historian – built in the eighteenth century as an ornamental feature, carrying visitors in their carriages on a Picturesque ride around the estate. The stone parapet was carved in the form of a Doric cornice, and pieces had tumbled into the dry gully below. The paving stones were covered by long grass, slicked flat by the frost. It was so brilliant a sky that I lay on my back on the crown of the bridge. Despite the chill, I felt an elated quietude. The silence was made audible by the distant purr of traffic on the motorway. It must have been many years since the wheels of any vehicle had trundled over this curve. Its neglect – the loose stones, the brambles growing in the cracks, the lush grass, even the dryness of the water-course – seemed to be a gentle denial of the purpose for which the bridge was built, a negation of the forward impulse of the high stone arch. In ruins movement is halted, and Time suspended. The dilapidated bridge was the still point of a spinning world which moved forward day by day. Beyond the wall of Cleverdon's estate was a world in which every day was an advance towards a richer, fitter, cleaner and perhaps happier future. Its decaying embrace was a refuge from a suburban time-clock.

It was getting dark, and in the sky I could see the glow of the lights of the motorway, of Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City. Leaving the house I now understood the physical, magnetic attraction of so many features in the countryside which have been stranded by the march of progress. Picture the gates of a country house which have been locked ever since the side entrance came into use: stone piers green with lichen, ivy climbing the rusty gilding of the

ironwork, grass between the cobbles of a courtyard in which carriages once clattered to a breathless halt. Or perhaps the house is gone, and the iron gates sold for scrap, the stone piers standing alone in a trackless field. We have the equivalents of ancient aqueducts in the viaducts of disused railways, their muddy paths overhung with blackberry bushes and the arches of Victorian engineering brick as proudly and massively redundant as the Roman masonry. I pause too at petrol stations on old high roads, shut down when a by-pass opens. Rusty pumps stand to attention, peeling posters shout special offers, and on the pitted tarmac of the forecourt you can hear the traffic roaring on the dual carriageway over the hill.

In 1802 William and Dorothy Wordsworth were walking the valley of the Rye, and Dorothy left the path to explore the ruins of the twelfth-century abbey of Rievaulx. She 'went down to look at the Ruins – thrushes were singing, cattle feeding among green grown hillocks about the Ruins. . . . I could have stayed in this solemn quiet spot till evening without a thought of moving, but William was waiting for me, so in a quarter of an hour I went away.' The first attraction of architectural decay is the seductive stillness she describes. I have lost count of the number of evenings in which I have idled in remote ruins until darkness falls, and then spent a desperate evening in search of the lights of a town. Lingered inside the frescoed saloon of a sugar-planter's palace in Cuba and then rushing to pedal home through the sugar-cane before the tracks disappear into the darkness; missing the ferry back across the Bosphorus because I was unable to leave the ruins of the Byzantine castle on the hilltop with its views of the black tankers

crawling silently like slugs across the surface of the Black Sea below, the only sound in this panorama of two continents the hobbled bleat of a goat. If I am lonely in a foreign country, I search for ruins. Later in that journey through Turkey I was sodden and dejected after three days of rain, but on the morning that the sky cleared discovered the temple in the deep, green valley of Euromos. In the sudden spring sunshine flowers blossomed between the fallen columns. A Turkish family stopped for lunch there, and I played football with the two teenage sons inside the chamber of the temple. The boys did not speak a word of English but the ball's unpredictable ricochet from fluted marble goal-posts was breathlessly hilarious.

In Mérida, the Roman capital of Spain, two aqueducts built by the legions span the River Guadiana. One is intact, and water still flows across. We stood and admired the engineers' design and construction of its mighty granite arches, read the guidebook for a few minutes, and then moved on. The second aqueduct collapses into ruins in the middle of the river, with storks nesting in the crumbling parapet. Without a word of discussion, my friends and I chose that spot to idle in for the afternoon. The only sound in the siesta was the frogs croaking in the reeds which clustered where the fallen stones dam the river. We only stirred when the sun moved behind the aqueduct. If I am stressed or unhappy, I close my eyes and remember these moments of absolute peace in the embrace of ruins, and castles and temples and city walls return to give me the happiness of a child, drowsy after a hectic summer's day.

The examples are innocuous, I realise. If its architectural expression in the Home Counties of England seems trivial,

go to Rome and walk the Appian Way from the city walls out into the countryside. It is flanked by the tombs of noble citizens and for the first 2 or 3 miles (3 or 4 kilometres) you are excited by the intactness of the carriageway: it is easy to imagine a legion on these flagstones and pace yourself to their quick, jangling march. But as the grassy chinks between them widen, as the slabs separate and disappear into the gathering scrub, the urge to move forward diminishes. Even the proud milestones are lethargic, the chiselled numerals yawning under their veil of moss. Time is suspended, or reversed, or erased; it is hard to say which, but for Charles Dickens, in 1846, as dusk fell it was the end of the world:

Now we tracked a piece of the old road above the ground; now we traced it underneath a grassy covering, as if that were its grave; but all the way was ruin. In the distance, ruined aqueducts went stalking on their giant course across the plain. . . . The unseen larks above us, who alone disturbed the awful silence, had their nests in ruin; and the fierce herdsmen, clad in sheepskins, who now and then scowled upon us from their sleeping nooks, were housed in ruin. . . . I almost felt as if the sun would never rise again, but look its last, that night, upon a ruined world.

I was married in Rome last summer – Anna is a Roman – and the party afterwards was on the Appian Way. The coach driver was unable to traverse the final stretch and in the dusk it was hilarious to see the English girls in high heels giggling as they tripped over the ancient flagstones. The party was in

a villa on the road of tombs, one of the many farmhouses acquired by wealthy Romans after the last war and converted into plush haciendas. The citizens who live there today are as rich as those buried two thousand years ago, and on Sunday lunchtimes the roads to the countryside are jammed with new Mercedes and Alfa Romeos. In the last fifty years speculators have built grubby, concrete tower blocks for two million new residents, and in Italy these *subborghi* are the equivalent of our inner cities, where Pasolini was murdered, and where Fellini set his film *Nights of Cabiria*. Fly into Fiumicino Airport and as you drive into Rome your eye can follow the arches of the Acqua Felice aqueduct striding away into the tall flats, highways and garden centres which have replaced the mighty old walls as the boundary of the Eternal City.

Until the twentieth century the Campagna was a melancholy and desolate shore encircling the sacred island. Its villages, infested with malaria, had remained abandoned until Mussolini drained the land in the 1920s. In Caesar's time fields of yellow corn had filled the horizon but the Goths ruptured the aqueducts and the floods turned the fields to swamps. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was deserted but for shepherds and painters, and the tinctures of light on its stubby grass, its tufty ruins and its cattle have been immortalised in the paintings of Nicolaes Berchem, Claude Lorraine and Corot. Travellers on the Grand Tour hastened their carriages towards the distant glint of the dome of St Peter's. Scrawny sheep straggled across the dreary, weed-ridden heath, with its shepherds' huts assembled from the debris of Roman ruins; how unlike the English countryside with its neat hedges and plump

sheep and warm cottages. William Beckford was an exception, halting his retinue in order to meditate in the wilderness. Stooping under an antique marble frieze which formed the lintel of a shepherd's hut he traced words on the sandy floor and murmured 'a melancholy song. . . . Perhaps, the dead listened to me from their narrow cells. The living I can answer for; they were far enough removed.'

After Pauline de Beaumont's death Chateaubriand rode through the same wilderness until he reached the tomb of the Roman maiden Cecilia Metella, the circular drum which is the most imposing monument on the Appian Way. Chateaubriand offers the most disturbing single image of how Rome and the Campagna overturned the expectations of a visitor from the populous, booming north: not only did the dead outnumber the living but 'There are more tombs than dead in this city. I imagine that the deceased, when they feel too warm in their marble resting-place, glide into another that has remained empty, even as a sick man is moved from one bed to another. One seems to hear the bodies pass, during the night, from coffin to coffin.'

An early American tourist had never seen human progress reversed until he entered the 'dreary desert' of the Campagna. Visiting in 1821, Theodore Dwight described a phenomenon his countrymen could not believe existed:

How unlike is such a scene as this, to the first view of one of our American cities . . . Instead of the cheerful and exhilarating sight of a savage wilderness retreating before the progress of a free and enlightened society . . . here we have the poor remains of that mighty city – the cradle and grave of an empire so long triumphant on



earth – now dwindling away before the widespread desolation which surrounds it, and shrinking back upon itself, as if for dread of an invisible destroyer.

No one has written better on this melancholy landscape than the young Henry James, who on his first visit to Rome as a young man rode out daily through the city walls in several changing seasons. Just a few months before his horizon had been ‘the raw plank fence of a Boston suburb’, plastered with advertisements for patent medicine. Now he was spellbound:

[An aqueduct] stands knee-deep in the flower-strewn



*The Tomb of Caecilia Metella*, by Oswald Achenbach, late 19c. This mausoleum is the most imposing on the Appian Way, and was built in the first century BC in memory of Caecilia Metella. To Romantics such as Chateaubriand, Byron and Madame de Staël, the maiden’s tomb was a place to meditate on love and death.

grass, and its rugged piers are hung with ivy as the columns of a church are draped for a festa. Every archway is a picture, massively framed, of the distance beyond – of the snow-tipped Sabines and lonely Socrate. As the spring advances the whole Campagna smiles and waves with flowers; but I think they are nowhere more rank and lovely than in the shifting shadow of aqueducts, where they muffle the feet of the columns and smother the ½-dozen brooks which wander in and out like silver meshes between the legs of a file of giants. . . . [The aqueducts] seem the very source of the solitude in which they stand; they look like architectural spectres and loom through the light

mists of their grassy desert, as you recede along the line, with the same insubstantial vastness as if they rose out of the Egyptian sands.

Here, in the sunlight, James composes in words his version of a painting by Claude or Corot. But as the benign light fades the Campagna becomes its true self: a menacing, chilling deadness. James quickened his pace homewards but could not resist peering into the courtyards of the decrepit, sinister farmhouses on the way. Shutters slammed at unlit windows; in the shadows he glimpsed a mossy staircase and a well-head hollowed out from an ancient sacrificial altar. One farmhouse was so sinister that he suspected a suicide lay behind its 'bolted door and barred window':

Every wayside mark of manners, of history, every stamp of the past in the country about Rome, touches my sense to a thrill, and I may thus exaggerate the appeal of very common things. This is the more likely because the appeal seems ever to rise out of heaven knows what depths of ancient trouble. To delight in the aspects of *sentient* ruin might appear a heartless pastime and the pleasure, I confess, shows the note of perversity.

Pausing before the crumbling façade James seems to have glimpsed an understanding of the 'perversity' by which we find a pleasure in contemplating decay. Frustratingly, however – frustratingly for us, that is – he kicks his heels and rides away without pausing to explain. But we do realise that the answer is as likely to be found in the front yard of an ordinary house as in the arena of the Colosseum.

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



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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