

III

Haunted Houses

That over there is your house,
All covered over with trees and bushes.
Rabbits had run in at the dog-hole,
Pheasants flew down from the beam of the roof.
In the courtyard was growing some wild grain,
And by the wall some wild mallows.
I'll boil the grain and make porridge,
I'll pluck the mallows and make soup.
Soup and porridge are both cooked,
But there is no one to eat them with.
I went out and looked towards the east,
While tears fell and wetted my clothes.

A soldier has returned from the wars, and a villager tells him of the fate of his home. The poem was written in China in the first century BC. The poignancy of a return to a ruined home is one of the oldest and most universal themes in literature.

In Zanzibar the ruins of the palaces of the Arab sultans who ruled the island in the nineteenth century stand surrounded by spice plantations. Bet il Mtoni was the country harem of Sejid Said, where he would be greeted by women sitting in the shade beside the lily pond. The stone basins survive under the mango-trees, and so do the columns

of plastered mud which supported the verandah. The most celebrated resident of Bet il Mtoni was the sultan's daughter, Princess Salme, who eloped with a German merchant. They fled to Hamburg, where he was run over by an electric tram. In 1885, after nineteen years of cold and penurious exile, Frau Ruete was permitted to come home for a few precious days. At Bet il Mtoni she collapsed with nostalgia:

What a sight! In place of a palace there was nothing but a fast decaying ruin. . . . The baths, once such a favourite place of resort, and always filled with such a merry throng, had lost their roofs. . . . There I stood gazing with burning eyes at the neglect and desolation around with the recollection of former and happier days filling my heart with a painful mockery of all things earthly and human. . . . The figures of former residents seemed to me to be hovering around and gliding from under the dangerously-leaning roofs, the half-hanging doors and falling beams. More and more vividly did their faces and shapes grow upon me. I was moving in their midst, and could hear their own familiar voices. How long this delusion lasted I know not, but I was suddenly roused into the actual present again by my children coming to draw me away from the scenes that affected me so deeply.

Returning to the cold fireside in Hamburg she wrote her autobiography recalling her childhood in an island which had no winter, a childhood so indulged that she was woken each morning by slaves massaging spices and oils into the soles of her feet.

Osbert Lancaster's autobiography, *All Done from Memory* (1963), begins during a black-out in the Blitz: he finds himself in North Kensington, the area in which he lived as a child in the 1900s but which had since fallen into poverty. The silence of streets deserted after the air raid tempts him to explore deeper. Moonlight gleams on the crumbling cornices and porticoes of the 'vast stucco palaces' which had once been the 'Acropolis of Edwardian propriety' but were now slums. His reverie is interrupted by a house which is uniform in its dereliction but oddly familiar. Looking closely, he sees that the house must have been

intended for some solid family of the Victorian bourgeoisie; the marked disparity of the window curtains on the various floors, all subtly different in their general cheapness and vulgarity, indicated that it now sheltered three or four perhaps separate establishments. My glance travelling disdainfully across this depressing façade, marking the broken balustrade above the cornice, the hacked and blackened lime trees, the half-erased 79 on the dirty umber of the door-pillars that had once been cream, came finally and shockingly to rest on the street-name attached to the garden wall – Elgin Crescent. This, I suddenly realised, was my birthplace.

This jarring dislocation in locality and Time led Lancaster to meditate on the decline and fall of the culture of his birth: the decent but unfashionable upper middle classes. He began the autobiography to record a stratum of society whose disappearance no one seemed to regret, or even to



No. 79 Elgin Crescent, London, drawn by Osbert Lancaster as the frontispiece to *All Done from Memory* (1963).

notice. In 1942 he was in his early middle age but many centuries seemed to separate the façade before him from a world of dancing classes on the beeswaxed floors behind the tall windows, and carriages setting down for receptions at gas-lit, shining white porches. The condition of these houses reflected the shiftless, fractured modern world, their varying shades of cheap curtains indicating ‘Viennese professors and Indian students and bed-sitter business girls’. The Edwardian Acropolis was a ruin which sheltered ‘refugees from every part of the once civilised world, like the dark-age troglodytes who sheltered in the galleries and boxes of the Coliseum’.

In fiction, the subtlest version of the theme of the return to the ruined house is John Cheever’s short story ‘The Swimmer’, set in the prosperous suburbs of New York. The ten-page story is a miniature masterpiece, expanded into a haunting film starring Burt Lancaster. Its protagonist Ned Merrill is the embodiment of the aspirations of the upper middle classes in 1960s America, and the story begins as he drinks highballs beside the Westerhazys’ pool one Sunday lunchtime in midsummer. ‘Why, it’s Ned! How great to see you! How’s Lucinda? How’s those pretty girls? Still running that little red Jaguar? Why don’t you ever reply to our invitations? Stay for lunch.’ Told that the Howletts have put in a pool, he realises that there is now a swimming pool in every garden until his own 8 miles away. With the sudden vision of a necklace of jewel-blue pools glinting through the haze of the wooded valley he decides to swim home. Ned is a hero when he plunges into the Westerhazys’ pool – ‘Ned, you’re still fitter than any of us!’ – and as he strides away across the lawn in blue swimming trunks he projects a

weight of success in the carriage of his college athlete shoulders alone. At each pool in the sequence an illusion falls away. Through the sideways glances of Ned's neighbours we learn that Lucinda has left, the girls are tearaways, and Ned a bankrupt. At the Welchers' the pool is empty, the deckchairs stacked away, and the bath-house locked. At the front of the house he finds a FOR SALE sign. But had not he and Lucinda had dinner there last week? 'Was his memory failing or had he so disciplined it in the repression of unpleasant facts that he had damaged his sense of the truth?'

As he limps up the drive of his own house his shoulders are slumped, and his body shivers with the chill of the fading afternoon. Exhausted, he can hardly push open the garden gate. His hands are stained red, he notices: the red is rust from its fancy iron bars. The shock of this realisation wakes Ned from his delusion. The lawn is overgrown, rain is puddled in the pitted asphalt of the tennis court, and – for it is suddenly and inexplicably autumn – leaves are rotting on the gravel drive. This is reality. Through the cracked window-panes of the darkened house he sees that the lounge is empty of furniture, its cocktail bar bare. The front door is padlocked, and we leave Ned crouching in the porch in his swimming trunks, at the mercy of the stormy night.

Soon there will be children pushing open the gate and tip-toeing up to the windows, whispering about the terrible fate of the Mr Merrill who once lived here. The house has become one we can all recognise: frightening because of the very familiarity of the features which have fallen into decay. As children we expect gates to lock, lawns to be mown, porch lights to shine, floors to be polished and windows to

be clean and unbroken. The Merrill house has become Boo Radley's home in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, its rotten porch creaking under the madman's shadow, and its rickety fence protecting a garden unkempt with 'johnson-grass and rabbit-tobacco'.

And it is Miss Havisham's house. In *Great Expectations* Pip stands at the rusty gate on the day which will change his life. The house was 'of old brick, and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. . . . Some of the windows had been walled up; of those that remained, all the lower were rustily barred. . . . The cold wind seemed to blow colder there, than outside the gate.' It is best pictured in David Lean's 1948 film. Dickens's original model is a handsome Georgian house which still stands off the High Street in Rochester, and it was there that the comedian Rod Hull spent the fortune he had earned from his Emu act on re-creating the sets from Lean's film.

It is Estella who opens the gate to Pip, but Satis is no sleeping beauty's palace entwined in ivy. Snow does not melt in the courtyard, and the garden is 'a rank ruin of cabbage stalks, and one box tree'. Fires sputter in the grates, and smoke hangs in the room like the mist on the river estuary. The story of Miss Havisham's betrayal by her fiancé many years before is narrated by objects which are broken or rotted: the clocks stopped at twenty to nine, the single slipper of yellowed silk, the wedding cake crawling with spiders. And her adopted daughter Estella is as sterile as Satis; she has no heart, she assures Pip, no emotional pulse.

After leaving for London to become a gentleman Pip returns to Satis frequently. What his story shows is that you can never step into the same ruin twice. Once he finds that

Estella has blossomed into a beautiful woman, and as they walk 'in the ruined garden . . . it was all in bloom for me. If the green and yellow growth of weed in the chinks of the old wall had been the most precious flowers that ever blew, it would not have been more cherished in my remembrance.' Next, he sees in Satis his own destruction. Told that the anonymous benefactor who had paid to groom the blacksmith's boy into a gentleman is not Miss Havisham but the convict Magwitch, Pip realises that he has turned his back on honest Joe's forge to pursue a selfish fantasy of himself. At his next visit he listens to Estella recite a list of suitors she has withered with her cold eye and he understands too that she was bred to be Miss Havisham's instrument of revenge on the male sex. Staring at her stooped and wicked silhouette projected by firelight on to the wall, Pip perceives his own degradation:

My thoughts passed into the great room across the landing where the table was spread, and I saw it written, as it were, in the falls of the cobwebs from the centrepiece, in the crawlings of the spiders on the cloth, in the tracks of the mice as they betook their little quickened hearts behind the panels, and in the gropings and pausings of the beetles on the floor.

By the time of his final visit to Satis he is a redeemed man. For eleven years he has worked as a clerk in the colonies, having sacrificed his own expectations in order to rescue his friends. Satis has been demolished, and hoardings advertise that new houses will be built on the site. In the misty twilight which closes the novel, Pip walks over the

foundations and reconstructs the hallways and corridors in his memory. He is interrupted by the arrival of Estella on the scene. She has returned too, now that her well-bred brute of a husband has died; he squandered her fortune, but she sold the house last of all. But Estella has learned what it is to have a vulnerable heart, and she and Pip leave as friends. Life begins anew in the destruction. 'Some of the old ivy had struck root anew, and was growing green in the low quiet mounds of ruin.'

In Dickens architecture is the material expression of the human spirit, so that Miss Havisham's sadness and sterility solidify into brick and stone. In Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Fall of the House of Usher* the analogy between the building and its occupants is made even more explicit. Castle and family are synonymous to the local peasantry, but the stones are more alive than the people, the narrator discovers. He has come to stay with his old schoolfriend Roderick Usher, riding across a landscape whose few trees have been bleached by decay. Beside a lake whose waters are as black and stagnant as tar, and exhaling a leaden-hued mist, stands the ancient Gothic castle. From the causeway its structure appears intact, but on closer inspection has 'the specious totality of old woodwork which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of external air'. Its stones are covered with a rootless fungus, as if the condensation of the air's active malevolence.

Roderick Usher has not stepped outside for many years, and has been slowly poisoned by the atmosphere of his ancestral home: 'an effect which the *physique* of the grey walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the

morale of his existence'. For centuries the spirit of the castle 'had moulded the destinies of his family, and . . . made him what I now saw him – what he was'. He is impotent, neurotic and cadaverous, agitated at the sounds from the castle vaults far below. Roderick has buried his sister Madeline in their depths but she has risen from a catatonic trance, and the noise of her fingernails scraping on the iron seal of the tomb penetrates through stone walls as if through shredded paper. The din in his inflamed ear grows louder and louder, until his grimy, white-faced sister bursts into the room and the two last Ushers expire in a fatal embrace.

As the narrator flees across the causeway, there is a sudden radiance in the black water. It is the reflection of a blood-red moon shining through a crack in the castle wall, a crack which widens until the structure splits in two, 'and the deep and dark tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the HOUSE OF USHER'.

Poe's analogy of the castle with the Usher family was so explicit that in noting how the doors and windows in the façade represent Roderick's mouth and eyes A. E. Housman observed, tartly, that hopefully the 'winged odours' rising like mist from the tufty castle brow 'have no connection with hair oil'. At a deeper level, however, Poe explained that he intended 'to imply a mind haunted by phantoms, a disordered brain'. Writing in 1923, D. H. Lawrence recognised that the subterranean neurosis in *Usher* made Poe 'an adventurer into the vaults and cellars and horrible underground passages of the human soul'. In his view, Poe's exposure of 'the disintegration process of his own psyche' prefigured the neurosis of twentieth-century humankind. Poe prefigured Freud, who saw archaeology as an analogy

for the practice of psychoanalysis. 'Stones speak', said Freud, and every fragment must be uncovered, studied and analysed as a piece of evidence in a larger meaning. On Wilhelm Jensen's novel of 1903, *Gradiva*, a romance set in Pompeii, Freud wrote: 'What had formerly been the city of Pompeii assumed an entirely changed appearance, but not a living one; it now appeared rather to become petrified in dead immobility. Yet out of it stirred a feeling that death was beginning to talk.'

In his depiction of subterranean neuroses Poe was a prophet of modernity but – ragged, stained and rancorous, reeking of drink and rejection – not a prophet respectable people feel comfortable to stand beside. Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* is the extreme expression of the literary Gothic which had begun with Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* a century before, and it was writers who demonstrated to architects that the cellars, towers and shadows of medieval ruins touched recesses in the soul which were unmoved by the classical. Despite this literature, and its illustrations, the vividness of Poe's architectural depictions remains something of a puzzle. He and his foster parents arrived in London in 1815, when he was six, and stayed until he was ten. During this time they travelled to Scotland, and into Devon and Gloucestershire. No one knows which abbeys or castles they visited but it is tempting to speculate.

Such ruins are potent to children, and it was in the ruins of a medieval abbey that the last Lord Byron enjoyed a childhood that might have been imagined by Poe. Newstead Abbey, near Nottingham, is England's House of Usher. At Christmas time in 1811 a young man named William

Harness rode beside a vast and stagnant lake towards the house, to renew a friendship with Byron begun at Harrow ten years before. 'It was winter,' he recalled, 'dark, dreary weather – the snow upon the ground; and a straggling, gloomy, depressive, partially-inhabited place the Abbey was.' London was full of rumours of Byron's orgies, and Harness was perhaps a little disappointed to report that 'nothing could be more quiet and regular than the course of our days'.

The thirteenth-century abbey had been acquired by Sir John Byron during Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, and converted into a house. All that remained of the monks' church was the gaunt silhouette of the entrance façade, a 'yawning arch' with broken tracery like splintered teeth. The poet was the sixth and last Lord Byron. The fifth lord, the 'wicked Lord Byron', had bankrupted the estate by his whims, which included the construction of 'folly' castles on the lakes and bombarding them with a toy navy crewed by boys from the estate. According to the local legend, he lived his final years in the only dry room in the abbey, the kitchen, alone but for a serving girl and his tame crickets. The moment he expired the crickets marched out of the house. The fifth lord's body lay mouldering for a month because there was not enough money to pay an undertaker.

It was only the sudden death of a cousin serving in the navy which, unexpectedly, made Byron heir to his great-uncle's estate. Ten years old, a robust but club-footed boy, he was living with his mother in a furnished flat in Aberdeen, his dissolute father – 'Mad Jack' Byron – having abandoned them to die in Paris. It was some months before

they could afford the coach-fare south. But Newstead, although vast, was not the mansion they had imagined. The oaks lining the 2-mile drive had been felled to pay the grocer's bill and inside the house bales of hay were stashed in the halls and cattle stabled in the corridors. The chill forced the Byrons to rent the abbey to a tenant farmer and move to a flat in London. When he was at school at Harrow he would spend holidays in the lodges to the estate, now let to Lord Grey de Ruthyn. The two noblemen were enthusiastic shots and became inseparable friends, ignoring the estate manager's grumbles that they were letting the land become a wilderness in order to provide better cover for hares and pheasants. But in the spring of 1804 – when Byron was still only fifteen – he was molested by Grey and fled Newstead.



The sixth Lord Byron inherited the mouldering ruin of Newstead Abbey, a thirteenth-century Priory near Mansfield, when he was ten years old.

Byron did not live in the abbey until he was twenty-one, by which time he was an undergraduate of prodigious charisma and talent at Trinity College, Cambridge. But we cannot understand the melancholia and introspection – or the egotism and snobbery – which were inseparable from his creativity as a poet without understanding these years at Newstead. He was a lonely boy who hobbled through the wild woods or swam with a favourite dog in the sludgy lakes, exploring the ruined cloisters and dreaming of the monks buried there and of the exploits of his notorious Byron ancestors. But he was living in the lodge while a tenant's fire blazed in the abbey hearth. Pride in that inheritance was inseparable from a consciousness of his family's decay and the fear that – in his own words – he was 'the wreck of the line'. At eighteen he wrote:

Newstead! What saddening change of scene is thine!
 Thy yawning arch betokens slow decay;
 The last and youngest of a noble line,
 Now holds thy mouldering turrets in his sway.

When Grey's lease expired Byron was heavily in debt, and he returned with the intention of selling Newstead. He fell in love with the house, however, and redecorated a suite of rooms with plush upholstery and furniture. Five years later rain would be pouring through the ceilings but Byron had neither the funds nor the inclination to repair the basic structure of the building. His only architectural commissions were a monument to his dog Boatswain placed on the site of the high altar of the abbey church, and a plunge-pool installed in the cloister. This 'dark, and cold, cellar-like

hole, must have required good courage to plunge into', wrote Nathaniel Hawthorne when he made a pilgrimage to the abbey. It is a dreary little cellar now, but when the keeper unlocks the oak Tudor door the gloom still reverberates with Byron's boisterous laughter.

In the summer of 1809 his friends from Cambridge came to stay, joining the wolf and the bear already quartered in the abbey to play at being 'the merry monks of Newstead'. Breakfast was never before noon, recalled Charles Skinner Matthews, and the afternoon was occupied by 'reading, fencing, single-stick, or shuttle-cock in the great-room – practising with pistols in the hall – walking, riding, cricket – sailing on the lake – playing with the bear or teasing the wolf. Between seven and eight we dined, and our evening lasted from that time till one, two, or three in the morning.' At dinner they dressed in habits hired from a theatrical costumier and took turns to drink claret from a monk's skull, 'From which, unlike a living head / Whatever flows is never dull'. The skull had been dug up in the garden and polished into a cup set on a silver base by a jeweller in Nottingham.

Monastic dome! Condemned to uses vile!
 Where superstition once had made her den
 Now Paphian girls were known to sing and smile.

The protagonist in Byron's *Childe Harold* inherits an ancient abbey and these opening lines added credence to the rumours about the events of that summer. The reality was more straightforward: there were no orgies, just draughty chambers noisy with shuttlecock, pistol-shots, yapping animals and friendly laughter.

Two summers later Byron returned from the balls of London in order to bury his mother. He could not bring himself to follow the funeral cortège but stopped in the doorway. When her coffin had disappeared from sight, he summoned a servant into the hall for a boxing match: all his life he was to combat depression with furious physical activity, as when he swam far out to sea during Shelley's funeral on the beach in the Bay of Spezia. A few days after his mother's death the mischievous and brilliant Matthews was tragically drowned in the River Cam. The autumn brought news of a third sudden death: Christopher Edleston, the choirboy with whom he had been besotted as an undergraduate. Newstead would never be the same as in that hilarious summer of 1809. The aspect of the ruin changed:

In the Dome of my Sires as the clear moonbeam falls
Through Silence and Shade o'er its desolate walls . . .

And the step that o'er-echoes the gray floor of stone
Falls suddenly now, for 'tis only my own.

Many years later a friend asked how Byron could bear to remain in Venice during its depressing winter. 'I have been familiar with ruins too long to dislike desolation,' the poet replied. By this time Byron had left England for good, having sold Newstead in 1816. He had clung to this ancestral legacy until huge debts made its sale inevitable.

Byron had encountered his first classical ruins on a journey through Europe to Greece and Istanbul in 1808

with John Cam Hobhouse. He was more interested in Nature than in marble jigsaws, however, and while Hobhouse studied epitaphs he ascended to the heights of Parnassus:

They had haunted my dreams from boyhood; the pines,
eagles, vultures and owls were descended from those
Themistocles and Alexander had seen, and were not
degenerated like the humans; the rocks and torrents the
same. John Cam's dogged persistence in pursuit of his
hobby is to be envied; I have no hobby and no
perseverance. I gazed at the stars and ruminated; took
no notes, asked no questions.

At Ephesus Hobhouse continued his research but as Byron stood in the ruins between the steep green hillsides and the sea, he was alert to a deeper resonance than epitaphs could tell. He absorbed the sadness of the 'dramatic barking of jackals . . . a mixed and mournful sound which bayed from afar complainingly'. He was sensitive to a profound spiritual desolation.

On his return to London the publication of *Childe Harold* made Byron a celebrity and it is here that we somehow lose sight of the boisterous and vulnerable boy, whirled away by the adulation of society. In his final years he is an elusive figure, distanced by irony, lust and flattery, and so jaded that when in Venice he was caught climbing a young girl's balcony he did not care, he said, if her father had him shot, or married.

To understand Byron we must always return to

Newstead. 'If I am a poet the air of Greece has made me one,' he is reported to have said. No. It was not the warm south which made Byron a poet but the clammy mists of a ruined English abbey. His genius germinated in the damp shadows of ancient decay.

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