

IV

Ephesus without an Umbrella

Thanks to the rain I was the only tourist in the ruins of Ephesus, sheltering under a canopy of fig leaves. It was March and the vegetation had not yet been trimmed that year. In the amphitheatre where St Paul once preached shafts of fennel shot up higher than a man's head and away from the tourist paths the grass was waist high, with the tumbled columns as slippery as logs underfoot.

The Greek colony of Ephesus died over many centuries, slowly strangled by the River Meander's change of course: the river wriggled away, and the harbour filled with silt. The road to the sea disappears into marshland now but it is still possible to imagine the way lit with lamps, and the Ephesians strolling down to the quay to watch the sailors unloading their triremes and to hear news from distant shores. Night fell on my visit, and when the rain slackened a shepherd led his goats across the steep hillside. Their bells echoed in the darkening ruins. Eventually two soldiers on guard discovered me, and as we stepped over the puddles on the marble pavement they were polite enough to share an umbrella. In my hotel later that evening I noticed a poster which showed the Sacred Way in the tourist season, as crowded with brightly clothed figures as a shopping mall, and with no vegetation to soften the glare of marble.

'Turkey: An Open Air Museum' read the caption. But, no: a ruin is not an open air museum.

Byron's friend Percy Bysshe Shelley placed ruins at the centre of his personal and political philosophy. When he and his family passed through Rome in the autumn of 1818 the greatest surprise was the abundance of Nature within the city walls. They returned to live in Rome the following spring, and each morning he made the brisk twenty-minute walk from lodgings in the Via del Corso through the Forum and Circus Maximus, past fields of flowers and vineyards and grassy mounds of ancient pottery, to the Baths of Caracalla. His pockets were stuffed with pens, ink-horn and a small notebook bound in black leather. For Shelley scribbling in the open air was no affectation and the notebook, now in the Bodleian Library, contains drafts of the greatest passages in *Prometheus Unbound*. As he wrote in the preface:

This Poem was chiefly written upon the mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, among the flowery glades, and the thickets of odiferous blossoming trees, which are extended in ever winding labyrinths upon its immense platforms and dizzy arches suspended in the air. The bright blue sky of Rome, and the effect of the vigorous awakening spring in that divinest climate, and the new life with which it drenches the spirits even to intoxication, were the inspiration of this drama.

The Baths were begun by Emperor Caracalla in AD 217 and were the most magnificent in ancient Rome. Fifteen hundred bathers congregated in a sequence of vaulted halls

spaced around a swimming pool. It is hard to describe the magnitude of these arches. The central pool was the model for the main concourse of Pennsylvania Station in New York and when John Dyer, author of *The Ruins of Rome*, visited in 1724 he told his brother that 'Its rooms seem to have been vastly large, and noble in comparison to the trees which have shot up within them, which, though pretty large, appear but tufts'. The walls were clad with shimmering marble – now stripped away to expose the brick – and decorated with statues as great as the Farnese Hercules. The torso of Hercules was found in the Baths of Caracalla, the head at the bottom of a well in the Trastevere, and his legs in a village 10 miles (16 kilometres) south of Rome. The Baths fell into decay when the aqueducts were ruptured in the sixth century AD and, standing some distance from the centre, they remained isolated in the wilderness in Shelley's time.

Richard Holmes considers *Prometheus Unbound* to be one of the writer's four masterpieces, and his exegesis in the biography *Shelley: The Pursuit* is the finest evocation of the fusion between ruins and a writer's imagination. 'So let man be free' is the motto of the drama. Shelley inverted the story as told by Aeschylus, so that Jove becomes a cruel tyrant and Prometheus the hero who gives to mankind liberty and love, the power of speech, science, cities and music. He is chained to the rock by Jove, under whose tyrannical rule man and Nature wither with disease and poverty. When Prometheus is released, Earth is revived. Hope is achieved through suffering.

When he arrived in Rome that spring Shelley himself was suffering, depressed by the condition of Europe and by

mishaps in his own life. In his native country this was the year of the Peterloo massacre, and he had been shunned by society and rejected by his family for his atheism, his radical politics and his elopements. With Mary Godwin and her half-sister Claire Claremont he travelled through France, and saw a country exhausted by the long wars and a monarch restored to the throne. In Italy the people had been reduced to a despicable poverty by centuries of superstition and tyranny. The Venetian Republic had been annexed by the Hapsburgs after Waterloo. Rome was ruled by a Pope. And if he continued south? The Bourbon kingdoms of Naples and Sicily. East? The empire of the Ottoman despots. There was nowhere to go. All Europe was fettered by tyranny.

It was in the ruins of ancient Rome that Shelley found hope for the future – more specifically, in the flowers and trees which blossomed in the Baths of Caracalla. Its mighty walls represented the power of tyranny: the power of Caracalla, of the Bourbons, the Hapsburgs and the ‘old, mad, blind, despised and dying’ King George III of England. But the structure erected by the cruellest of emperors was crumbling, as the roots of figs and myrtles and laurel loosened the masonry. Their exuberant and wild fecundity promised the inevitable victory of Nature – a Nature which was fertile, democratic and free.

The discovery had the rapture of an epiphany, and in the ruins that spring Shelley regained the guiding trajectory of his short, fiery life. Nature had never seemed more beautiful than in its destruction of tyranny, as when the release of Prometheus restores the purity of Earth’s spirit:

Which breath now rises, as amongst tall weeds
A violet’s exhalation, and it fills
With a serener light and crimson air
Intense, yet soft, the rocks and woods around;
It feeds the quick growth of the serpent vine,
And the dark linked ivy tangling wild,
And budding, blown, or odour-faded blooms
Which star the winds with points of coloured light,
As they rain through them, and bright golden globes
Of fruit, suspended in their own green heaven . . .

The paradise of Shelley’s vision is distilled from the raw experience described in a letter to his friend Thomas Love Peacock:

Never was any desolation more sublime and lovely. The perpendicular wall of ruin is cloven into steep ravines filled with flowering shrubs whose thick twisted roots are knotted in the rifts of the stones . . . the thick entangled wilderness of myrtle & bay & the flowering laurustinus . . . & the wild fig & a thousand nameless plants sown by the wandering winds [forming a] landscape like mountain hills intersected by paths like sheep tracks.

The ruins had become a work of Nature, not man, and he was reminded of the summer at Marlow two years before, when with their friend Hogg they had scrambled up the chalky, wooded bluffs above the Thames:

The perpendicular walls resemble nothing more than that cliff in Bisham wood which is overgrown with wood, & yet is stony and precipitous – you know the one I mean, – not the chalk pit, but the spot which has that pretty copse of fir trees & privet bushes at its base, & where Hogg & I scrambled up & you – to my infinite discontent – would go home.

Read that fond, boyish letter before you visit the Baths of Caracalla and I defy you not to be saddened – and then angered – by the bathos of the scene now. ‘Until 1870, the Baths were one of the most beautiful spots in the world’, wrote Augustus Hare, but ‘now scarcely more attractive than the ruins of a London warehouse.’ Passing through a steel perimeter fence tourists walk on tarmac paths between metal barriers, and underneath the arches scaffolding and trenches and desultory labourers in hard hats give the ruins the air of a modern construction site. The path terminates in a grille and a DO NOT ENTER sign. Beyond is the bathers’ dressing-room, where Shelley saw the red Roman mud dissolving to reveal a mosaic of waves in abstract patterns. The mosaic is being conserved – hence the grille – but however vigorously it is scrubbed the blue-black tesserae will never shine with such brightness again.

Beside me an American family is listening to a guide’s recital of dates, measurements and social history. They are interested, and dutiful, but do they have an inkling of the excitement possible when this bare brick chamber was a tumbling, scented jungle? Frustrated, I wander away from the path to sit on a piece of marble and face the sunshine. A guard blows his whistle, and alerts an archaeologist who

is supervising the removal of an impertinent young fig-tree from the perimeter wall. Judging by their expressions, the stubbly grass under my feet is as precious as a painted fresco. With a limp shrug I return to the prescribed path. Really, I want to tell them about Shelley, about Bisham Wood and the ‘paradise of vaulted bowers / Lit by downward gazing flowers’. I want to tell them that a ruin has two values. It has an objective value as an assemblage of brick and stone, and it has a subjective value as an inspiration to artists. You can uproot that alder tree, *superintendente*, erect more fences, spray more weed-killer, excavate and polish. You will preserve every single brick for posterity, and analyse the very occasional discovery of a more ornamental fragment in a learned publication. You will have a great many bricks, but nothing more. If the archaeologists had arrived before Shelley there would be no *Prometheus Unbound*.

Archaeologists will argue that flowers and ivy on a ruin are just Picturesque fluff, curlicues to amuse an artist’s pencil. What Shelley’s experience shows is that the vegetation which grows on ruins appeals to the depths of our consciousness, for it represents the hand of Time, and the contest between the individual and the universe.

The next spring, in 1820, Shelley’s son William died of fever in Rome. Shelley had lost children in infancy before but William had reached the age of two and his loss was by far the hardest. The Protestant cemetery was exiled to the city walls, at the point where they are overshadowed by the only pyramid in Rome, built in marble in the first century AD as the mausoleum of a citizen named Caius Cestius. A pyramid is the most imperishable form in architecture,

a symbolic claim to personal immortality. In Shelley's personal philosophy, by contrast, immortality was an invisible process achieved through dissolution into a universal spirit followed by regeneration through Nature. But it was difficult to reconcile the concept with the palpable vacuum left by his plump, laughing little William. He was unable to finish the poem *In memoriam*.

My lost William, thou in whom
Some bright spirit lived, and did
That decaying robe consume
Which its lustre faintly hid,
Here its ashes find a tomb,
But beneath this pyramid
Thou art not – if a thing divine
Like thee can die, thy funeral shrine
Is thy mother's grief and mine.

Where art thou, my gentle child?
Let me think thy spirit feeds,
With its life intense and mild,
The love of living leaves and weeds,
Among these tombs and ruins wild; –
Let me think that through low seeds
Of the sweet flowers and sunny grass,
Into their hues and scents may pass,
A portion –

The pyramid of Caius Cestius stands as arrogantly impervious to Time as ever. Except that flowers uncurl between the joints in the marble blocks, delicate tentative

flowers which cannot but remind us of little William. 'Who, then, was Cestius? And what is he to me?' wrote Thomas Hardy when he came to the cemetery to pay homage to the two great English poets buried there.

John Keats is commemorated by a fancy but impersonal monument, erected many years after his death in Rome in 1821 by a committee of his sentimental Victorian admirers. His friend Shelley, who died by drowning a year later, lies on the highest terrace, abutting the Roman battlements. Climbing, we pass memorials to thousands of men and women from the Protestant north and the New World. There is no greater testament to the lure of Rome than the names of these unknown pilgrims and their distant, mundane places of birth: Walmer and Hastings, Winchester and Shropshire; Wisconsin and Boston; Oslo, Copenhagen, Magdeburg, Gothenburg. Mr Bowles, late of Paddington, London, has a mighty column and a lectern-thumping epitaph. A traumatised angel flutters over the Klein daughters from New York; a cherub's tears fall on the palette of a painter of unfulfilled genius from Hamburg. Shelley's tomb is an undecorated slab, and all the more moving for its silence. If a tomb is too demonstrative – an angel obstructing our path, a hysterical maiden imploring our tears – it is a natural reaction to make one's excuses and hurry past. It is the passivity of Shelley's monument which invites the imagination: its plain, marble surface at our feet is like still shining water reflecting clouds and sunlight. It is a mirror in which Shelley's image appears, in whatever form each of us imagines him.

The poet is better here than in the morgue which the Baths of Caracalla have become. This is the most beautiful

cemetery on earth; I hope there is still a plot available. It is lush and green and drowsy, the trees whirr with birds' wings, and the grass crawls with insects. The promise of continuance is not in the angels or cherubs or the stiff crosses but in this fecundity of Nature, in the ivy which effaces the chiselled letters of a name. Indeed, do we ever linger in cemeteries which are bare of vegetation? As Gustave Flaubert remarked in a letter to a friend in 1846, when he was twenty-five years old:

Yesterday . . . I saw some ruins, beloved ruins of my youth which I knew already . . . I thought again about them, and about the dead whom I had never known and on whom my feet trampled. I love above all the sight of vegetation resting upon old ruins; this embrace of nature, coming swiftly to bury the work of man the moment his hand is no longer there to defend it, fills me with deep and ample joy.

Sailing down the River Nile four years later Flaubert observed the contest between monuments and Time played out in a brutal, desperate fight to the death. Like northern Europeans in Rome, his reaction to the ruins of the Pharaohs was based upon their contrast with the modern squalor in their shadow. Letters home to his childhood friend Louis Bouilhet concentrate on whores and catamites, but the pungent, obscene correspondence is redeemed by one startling *aperçu* when Flaubert's boat sailed into Thebes at nine o'clock in the evening, and the monuments shone a bright, stunning white in the moonlight:

The enormous white ruins looked like a troop of ghosts. . . . I spent a night at the foot of the Colossus of Memnon, devoured by mosquitoes. The old rascal has a fine phizog, he's covered in graffiti. Graffiti and bird-shit, these are the only two things on the ruins of Egypt that indicate life. Not one blade of grass on even the most eroded stones. They crumble to powder, like a mummy, and that is all. The graffiti left by travellers and the droppings of the birds of prey are the only two ornaments of decay. You often see a great tall obelisk with a long white stain all the way down it like a curtain, wider at the top and narrowing towards the base. It's the vultures, they've been coming there for centuries to shit. The effect is very striking, and *curiously symbolic*. Nature said to the monuments of Egypt: you want nothing to do with me? Not even lichen will grow upon you? All right then, damn it, I shall shit all over you.

The sterile ruins on the Nile suggested no reconciliation between the opposing forces, unlike the lichenous ruins of Flaubert's youth or Shelley's Baths of Caracalla. No ruin can be suggestive to the visitor's imagination, I believe, unless its dialogue with the forces of Nature is visibly alive and dynamic. The suggestion is not necessarily an optimistic one, however, and Nature's agent does not have to be flowers or fig-trees. In the case of Van Gogh, it was the miserable mud of Flanders.

His painting of *The Church Tower at Nuenen* (1885), popularly called *The Peasants' Churchyard*, shows a ruined tower surrounded by the wooden crosses which mark the graves of the villagers. This was the period early in his career

when Van Gogh studied the rural poor – most famously in *The Potato Eaters* – and he perceived their lives and deaths as rhythms in Nature that were inevitable as the seasons of planting and harvesting. The miserable but honest crosses seem to be rooted into the squelchy earth; it is the same soil in the churchyard as in the fields. By contrast, the stone tower of the derelict church is presented as an unnatural imposition, and – by implication – religion as an alien institution which is ephemeral in comparison to the deeper cycles of Nature. This canvas, as muddy as a potato, records a profound change in Van Gogh's spirit: his loss of faith in Christianity.

In the futuristic novel *After London* (1885) Richard Jefferies used Nature as his instrument of revenge on a city he hated. Jefferies was a farmer's son from Wiltshire, a sickly mystic who became the finest nature writer of the late nineteenth century. In order to earn a living by writing for magazines he was forced to live in suburban London, in a grimy, soot-stained terrace beside the railway lines in Surbiton. He fell ill, as if poisoned. 'Putrid black water', he jotted in his diary the year before his novel was published. 'Children miserable, tortured, just the same [as in the Middle Ages]. The 21 parishes of the Lower Thames Sewage Scheme without any drainage at all. The whole place prepared for disease and pestilence . . . This W. C. century.'

His first instrument of revenge on industrial civilisation was snow. In the unfinished story 'The Great Snow' he described London slowly suffocated by an exceptional snowfall, until polar bears played on the frozen Thames and the dome of St Paul's nestled in snow-drifts. Maddened by hunger, 'The East rose and threw itself en masse upon the

West. . . . The possession of a single potato was incitement to murder.' Cannibalism followed, furniture burned and a fanatical preacher thundered:

Where now is your mighty city that defied Nature and despised the conquered elements – where now is your pride when so simple and contemptible an agent as a few flakes of snow can utterly destroy it? Where are your steam-engines, your telegraphs and your printing-presses – all powerless and against what – only a little snow!

In the later novel the cause of destruction is not snow but a natural catastrophe, but its motivating spirit is still Jefferies's disgust in urban civilisation. *After London* is a countryman's warning to a complacent, corrupt and physically poisonous metropolis. The Thames floods and the city's blocked sewers burst to create an uninhabitable, poisonous marsh 20 miles wide and 40 miles long. The houses fall: 'For this marvellous city . . . was after all only of brick, and when the ivy grew over and trees and shrubs sprang up, and, lastly, the waters underneath burst in, this huge metropolis was soon overthrown.' The pollution of centuries condenses in a miasma which is fatal to all forms of life. 'There are no fishes, neither can eels exist in the mud, nor even newts. It is dead.' The hero Felix discovers that the ruins of the houses have crystallised to a white powder, and crumble at the touch. Skeletons lie in a blackened sand formed by millions of decomposing bodies, clutching treasure and coins. These are the treasure-hunters who have fallen victim to the miasma, and as Felix stumbles towards

safety he begins to see in hallucinations the half-buried brazen statues of giants.

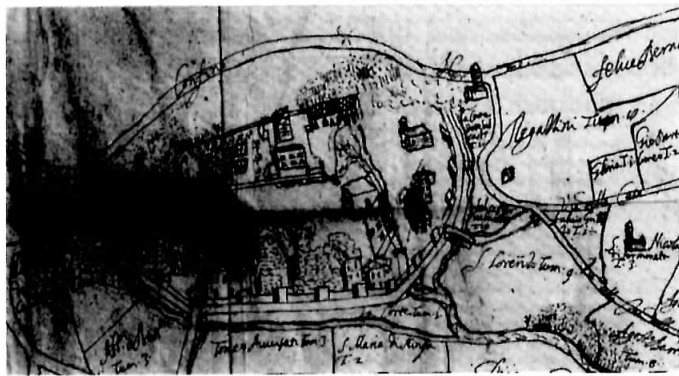
After the catastrophe the rich fled the country, and the survivors relapsed into a medieval barbarism. Outside London the symbolic ruins are those of the railways, for Jefferies was born near the railway town of Swindon. Rails and engines have been melted down, though 'Mounds of earth are said to still exist in the woods, which originally formed the roads for these machines, but they are now so low and covered with thickets':

Great holes were made through the very hills for the passage of the iron chariot, but they are now blocked by the falling roofs, nor dare anyone explore such parts as may be open. Where are the wonderful structures with which the men of those days were lifted to the skies, rising above the clouds? These marvellous things are to us little more than the fables of the giants and of the old gods that walked upon the earth, which were fables even to those we call the ancients.

The few humans who remain alive cannot withstand the fecundity of Nature. Rats eat the food stores, dogs run wild, and the weeds at the edges of the fields advance to strangle the young corn. Roads disappear under brambles, yellow charlock and wild flowers, and villages are buried by silt and reeds. Through the eyes of a writer who made his reputation with telescopic descriptions of flora and fauna, we see the virulent, wild power of Nature which lies below the peaceful, trim surface of the English countryside.

The most potent demonstration of how a resurgent but

benign Nature can overcome death is the Italian city of Ninfa, destroyed and abandoned six centuries ago. An hour's drive south of Rome, it is the loveliest lost city in Europe. 'Ninfa' means nymph, and many still believe that a nymph flits through the thickets of trees which grow in the ruins. In the classical world any spring of exceptional clarity was believed to be the dwelling of an elusive, watery spirit, and Pliny's *Natural History* describes how virgin priestesses were appointed to monitor the purity of the source. The water rises today, bubbling over a gravelly bed and between bridges and fortified walls to encircle the city like a moat. A single battlemented tower is a reminder of its medieval pride; there were ten towers and fourteen churches in the thirteenth century when Pietro Caetani purchased the estate. Ninfa was valuable enough to be sacked by Barbarossa, and to see Pope Alexander III crowned there.



Ninfa. A medieval map showing the old town surrounded by its walls, with the rivers and springs.

During the civil wars of the late fourteenth century – in 1382, to be precise – Ninfa was destroyed. Its natural spring may have been its undoing: according to one theory, the neighbouring towns were envious of the plenitude of water and were determined to see Ninfa razed to the ground. Its houses were plundered and burned, and many of its citizens put to the sword. The rich survivors fled, and the poor followed when malaria filtered into the ruins from the encroaching marshes.

Ninfa became a lost city. In the air humid with malaria the vegetation grew with a feverish vigour, as if exhilarating in the absence of human life. The ruins became a jungle, and as a jungle it was discovered by Romantic travellers. A visitor who came at the end of the nineteenth century was Gregorovius, the German historian who wrote the monumental history of Rome in the medieval era. The Caetanis were one of the families – like the Colonnas and the Cenci – whose bloody feuds stained the pages of his book, and who had cluttered Rome with the medieval towers and churches which so embarrassed the republic of 1870.

Gregorovius came to Ninfa as a refugee from the new Rome. He had passed his adult life studying medieval parchments in the libraries of the convents, and was displaced in their appropriation by the new government as offices and barracks. The monks were expelled, and their manuscripts removed to a new and bureaucratic central depot. After four years of the republic he concluded that ‘New Rome belongs to the new generation, while I belong to the ancient city in whose spellbound silence my history arose. Were I to come to Rome now for the first time, I neither should nor could conceive of such a work.’

At Ninfa he rediscovered that ‘spellbound silence’. From a distance he saw

a great ring of ivy-mantled walls, within which lay curious mounds and hillocks, apparently made of flowers. Grey towers stood up out of them, ruins, all garlanded with green, and from the midst of this strange circle we could see a silver stream hurrying forth and traversing the Pontine marshes. . . . I asked, amazed, what that most puzzling great garland of flowers, that mysterious green ring, could be. ‘Nympha, Nympha’ said our host. Nympha! Then that is the Pompeii of the Middle Ages, buried in the marshes – that city of the dead, ghostly, silent.

The moat had the potency of myth, its stagnant water as black and still as the River Styx. Giant carp wallowed in the reeds, fattened by centuries of isolation. Crossing the drawbridge he found the gate barred by a thicket of flowers; perhaps Gregorovius was himself a little feverish, but he imagined them to be straining to defend their sanctuary from any future violence:

Flowers crowd in through all the streets. They march in procession through the ruined churches, they climb up all the towers, they smile and nod to you out of every empty window-frame, they besiege all the doors . . . you fling yourself down into this ocean of flowers quite intoxicated by their fragrance, while, as in the most charming fairy-tale, the soul seems imprisoned and held by them.

In the ruined church where Alexander III had been crowned the creepers parted to reveal mosaics depicting the Day of Judgement. At Pompeii, Gregorovius commented, the frescoes celebrated life and all its pleasures. Why was he so much more relaxed contemplating scenes of suffering and hell in this Pompeii *delle palude* – Pompeii of the marshes – than in the ossified, rectilinear city of stucco and ash? In this ‘green kingdom of spirits’ he experienced the momentary euphoria which came with the dissolution of individual identity into a flow of humanity and Time. Clumsy, shy, chafing, the wandering scholar from Neidenburg had not experienced a similar calm since his immersion in the archives of medieval Rome. But those manuscripts had been carted away, the interiors whitewashed, and their windows unbarred. Where could Gregorovius go next? It must have been very late in the evening when he returned across the drawbridge.

The marshes between the mountains and the sea – the Pontine marshes – were drained by Mussolini in the 1930s. What would Gregorovius see if he returned today? The Caetani’s tower and palace still stand, and the ground floor has been converted into a Heritage Centre which explains the social history of the community, complemented by displays of recent discoveries: pots, tiles, belt-buckles and a brooch. The frescoes of the Day of Judgement have had to be removed to a museum for conservation reasons but can be seen in the store by appointment. The scaffolding in the nave is only temporary, and by way of compensation the repairs have revealed an arched door-lintel whose profile suggests that this church incorporated masonry from the late Byzantine period. The walls are stronger than ever,

capped by cement; it is dangerous to climb on to the battlements, of course, but an asphalt path winds through the city and returns to the car park in less than half an hour. And do not walk on the grass.

I lie. If Gregorovius returned today he would find his ‘green kingdom of spirits’ as lush and mysterious as ever. Ninfa was rescued from modernity by an Englishwoman named Ada Wilbraham who married Prince Onario Caetani; in the 1880s she began to create an informal ‘English-style’ garden in the ruins, planting trees and shrubs and flowers but not disturbing the soil or the stones. Archaeologists were banned. Ada’s spirit is still alive, because her approach was continued by the next two generations of the family. The last Caetani was Lelia, who with her English husband established a foundation which opens the gardens to the public one weekend every month. Lelia was a painter who presided over an artists’ salon which met in the palace. One member was the novelist Giorgio Bassani and the atmosphere inspired the melancholy walled garden in which the past suffocates the present in his masterpiece, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. ‘*Oh distante isola del passato,*’ ‘Oh distant isle of the past,’ he wrote of Ninfa.

I first visited in the spring. A photograph can only show an assorted rubble of stones patchy with vegetation. How to illustrate the abundance of blossom, the profligacy of flowers, the pregnant softness of earth which for six centuries has been undisturbed but for the roots of trees? The butchered families and their burned homes have been mulched into a soil of delirious fertility, and the sound of water is omnipresent. The nymph’s spring bubbles from a grove of bamboo into a stream which races under a bridge

past ruined mills to the city walls. The bridge is the most photographed vignette in Ninfa: a brittle arch of stone which is no more than a metre in width, cascading with flowers whose petals are splayed on the surface of the water. It is almost too pretty to be true; as if we are inside a glass paperweight, but the blur of white is shaken blossom not snow.

I swam under the bridge and have never tasted water so clean, as gaspingly fresh as pure oxygen. The water races with a speed that suggests it is thrilled to escape from its underground caverns into the sunshine; weeds strain to grip the gravelly bed, extended to the tips of their roots. Only when the stream rushes under the walls and into the fields beyond does it relax, slowly curling into lazy meanders. When I climbed out of the water, breathless and shivering – it was March – a party of Italians stood on the river-bank, dressed in English brogues and Barbour jackets. They stared with open mouths. ‘*Inglese,*’ said one, and the others nodded, ‘*Si, inglese.*’ The guide added, ‘*Loro sempre la problema. Sempre vogliono lasciare il grupo, e fare il picnic.*’ They are always a problem. They always want to leave the guided tour, and have a picnic.’

But Ninfa has a diametrical opposite which is as depressing as she is invigorating: the town of Ghibellina in Sicily, devastated by an earthquake in 1968. I had never heard of the place but a sign on the motorway reading THE RUINS OF GHIBELLINA was too tempting to ignore. We turned off, but after 20 kilometres of a pebbly lane twisting through valleys which were fertile and cultivated but oddly bare of houses my wife was beginning to lose patience. ‘What ruins are these anyway? More dead stones?’ I was

resigned to abandoning the diversion, when she saw on the hillside ahead a vast, shallow flow of white concrete. It was in the form of a triangle, pointing down the slope as if it were an avalanche petrified in mid-flow. In such a lush valley the pristine concrete was surreal, dazzlingly white in the midday Sicilian sun.

There was a car park, and a sign confirming that these were I RUDERI DI GHIBELLINA but no further explanation. The perimeter of the concrete – about 10 feet high – was pierced by narrow pathways, so we entered. At first we scrambled up and down the walls as if it were an adventure playground but as we walked further and further into the maze the blind white walls became sinister. The twisting and turning channels were oddly similar to wandering in the lanes of a medieval town. But, of course, that was the answer: this was the medieval town, and its ruins were encased in a concrete mould. I knocked on the walls, wondering if the dead were entombed inside. It was the first sound in the valley since we had arrived. There was no reply, but a lizard flickered into a chink where the concrete had blistered.

When we returned to the car we breathed deeply. At the next motorway junction the signs read GHIBELLINA NUOVA and we found a bold and brand-new town of apartment blocks spaced around playgrounds and public art. No one was visible, however; no one sat at the neat, gleaming tables outside the cafés. There was no visible life, no laughter or children’s yelling to pop the numbness of old Ghibellina.

Later, all was explained. Ghibellina had been hit by the earthquake which devastated the south of Sicily in 1968. The devastation was so great that the town was abandoned,

and the survivors were resettled in a new model town. Artists were invited to suggest how to monumentalise the tragedy and the winner was Alberto Burri, a 'land artist'. The shattered houses were levelled to a uniform height, boxed in by wooden planking, and the white molten concrete poured into the mould. The result is a powerful experience for the tourist, but what the Ghibellini think I never discovered; it was their siesta, after all. There was no evidence of a dialogue between old and new, and I wondered what hope a memorial of such anonymous sterility promised the survivors. The fields in the valley flourish but Nature will never revive under the impervious, suffocating concrete.

We drove onwards, passing through areas where the earthquake had been less devastating and settlements



Ghibellina. In 1968 the town of Ghibellina, in Sicily, was destroyed in an earthquake. As a memorial to the dead, its ruins were encased in concrete by the sculptor Alberto Burri.

rebuilt. It is interesting how rarely people abandon their cities after natural disasters: Lisbon, San Francisco, Anchorage in Alaska, Managua in Nicaragua. Even Hiroshima was resettled in a hurry, survivors returning before they knew what the effects of radiation would be. In Sicily in 1693 an earthquake flattened forty towns. Eight of these were rebuilt on new sites in a style of glorious Baroque: domed Ragusa, hexagonal Avola and golden Noto. It was Noto we reached that evening.

I insisted on visiting Noto Antica first, the old city in the mountains which was reached after following a winding mountain road for many miles. 'Dead stones. It's depressing,' announced Anna as soon as we passed under the medieval gate. She was right about the day's second diversion. No wall was more than knee-height, and a recent forest fire had left every stone charred, every tree black and leafless. Deprived of Nature's magic wand the ruin was lonely and sinister, and we dashed to the new city by the sea.

The earthquake had struck the prosperous city of twelve thousand people on 11 January 1693, a Sunday morning. 'The soil undulated like the waves of a stormy sea', recorded an eye-witness, 'and the mountains danced as if drunk, and the city collapsed in one miserable moment killing a thousand people.' The survivors stayed to piece together the rubble of their homes until the Spanish viceroy – Sicily was then ruled by Spain – decreed that the city should be removed from its isolated mountain ridge to a more convenient site on a hillside above the sea. The people bivouacked in tents and wooden huts on the appointed site. It was breezy and spacious but with no fresh water; that summer three thousand died of the plague.

After five years a referendum was held and the majority voted to rebuild the ruins. But these were farmers and artisans, and the educated minority – the nobles, clergy and lawyers – put their faith in the economic potential of the new site. Two Notos competed for a while but in the end, inevitably, the poor had to follow the rich. Like a trail of ants lumbering under crumbs of bread they hauled the rubble of their homes down the winding mountain road; new stone for new houses was too expensive. By 1702 a government official reported that at Noto Antica ‘One sees nothing but the ruins from the earthquake except for two very small forts made by a shoemaker and two brothers that live there.’

The new Noto was *barocco* – indeed, *barroccissimo*. It is a city of palaces designed with an operatic gusto, and convents whose bell-towers sway dizzily with swollen curves. Few ordinary homes are visible; it is a stage-set erected in honey-coloured stone. Each façade has a triumphal gateway as its entrance, each window an extravagantly carved frame and an iron balcony of the type known as *panciuta* – ‘bellied’. The courtyards are handsome, immaculate, but silent. The city creaks with solitude.

The haunting emptiness has drawn many artists to Noto, most famously Antonioni in his 1960 masterpiece *L'Avventura*. Film guides invariably describe this ‘a study in alienation’. A party of socialites on holiday off the Sicilian coast swim from their yacht, and a girl disappears. Her lover and her best friend elope to Noto. Has the girl drowned? We do not know. They kiss, and gaze past each other. Are they in love, or just alienated? We do not know. At the end of the film they stare over the rooftops of the empty city while church bells clang in every tower. For Antonioni Noto

was the perfect vacuum, a city whose own gaze is intense, beautiful and empty.

When we arrived a wooden platform had been erected in the square below the cathedral. There was a performance of dance tonight: a teacher of Latin dance had been in the city for several weeks, and as a farewell his pupils would demonstrate their new steps. The Netini filled the square. Smiling, plump and talkative, they appeared not to realise that artists had declared their city a necropolis, and its inhabitants ghosts. The teacher’s capped heels clicked on the marble paving stones. In a crowd of swarthy, stocky Sicilians he was tall, slender and marvellously effete, and adored by pupils from girls of ten to men of sixty. After the individual performances the audience left their seats to dance a traditional Sicilian number. Midnight chimed from the cathedral tower, and they danced on in a trance of moonlight and marble and squeaky, blaring music from the gramophone. I was mesmerised by the rows of dark eyes sparkling in concentrated satisfaction. The formation moved forward and back, and back, and back, until I seemed to see the light in their eyes receding, and the waves of Netini dancing towards death, vanishing into the shadows to leave us alone in this beautiful, vacuous and suddenly terrifying city. Why such sadness in the face of such shared happiness? But it had been a long day, with too much sun.

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

Prometheus Unbound is in *Shelley: The Pursuit* (1974), pp. 489–509.

Flaubert's letter on Thebes was written to Louis Bouilhet on 2 June 1850 and is published in *Selected Letters*, ed. Geoffrey Wall (Harmondsworth, 1997), p. 149.

The rebuilding of Noto is the subject of an excellent book by Stephen Tobriner (1982).

The Roman Journals of Ferdinand Gregorovius (1821–91) were translated into English by Mrs Gustavus Hamilton in 1911.

V *An Exemplary Frailty*

The relationship between architectural decay and human mortality is analysed by Dr Roger Bowdler in 'A Sad Prospect to the Soul' in *The Cult of the Ruin*, the Proceedings of the Georgian Group Symposium of 1998 (2001: to be published). The discussion of the seventeenth century is based on Bowdler's work.

The Tate's picture of Hadleigh Castle is a full-size sketch, and the final version which he exhibited at the Royal Academy is in the Paul Mellon Center for British Art, Connecticut. The episode is described in *The Later Paintings and Drawings of John Constable* by Graham Reynolds (Yale, 1984), pp. 199–202. The castle is on the Thames shore, near Southend-on-Sea.

For Walter Scott and Williamina Forbes I paraphrase A. N. Wilson, *A Life of Walter Scott* (1996 edn.), pp. 60–64.

VI *Time's Shipwreck*

Goths and Vandals by M. S. Briggs (1952) remains the best overview on how attitudes to medieval buildings have

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