

V

An Exemplary Frailty

I was angry as hell when they took away my title. But when you stand in the Pincio Gardens at sunset looking down on the whole of Rome, across centuries, it sorta puts things in perspective.' 'Marvellous' Marvin Hagler lost his world middleweight title to Sugar Ray Leonard in Madison Square Garden in 1986 through a referees' decision which is still argued over by boxing fans today. First Hagler hit the bottle, but then he moved to Rome and became the popular TV detective 'Sergeant Iron'. The boxing champion is the last of many proud kings who have come to Rome and been consoled by the sight of a far greater fall.

When the Vicomte de Chateaubriand visited Tivoli, a few miles south of Rome, he saw the signatures inscribed by earlier travellers in the chambers of the Emperor Hadrian's villa:

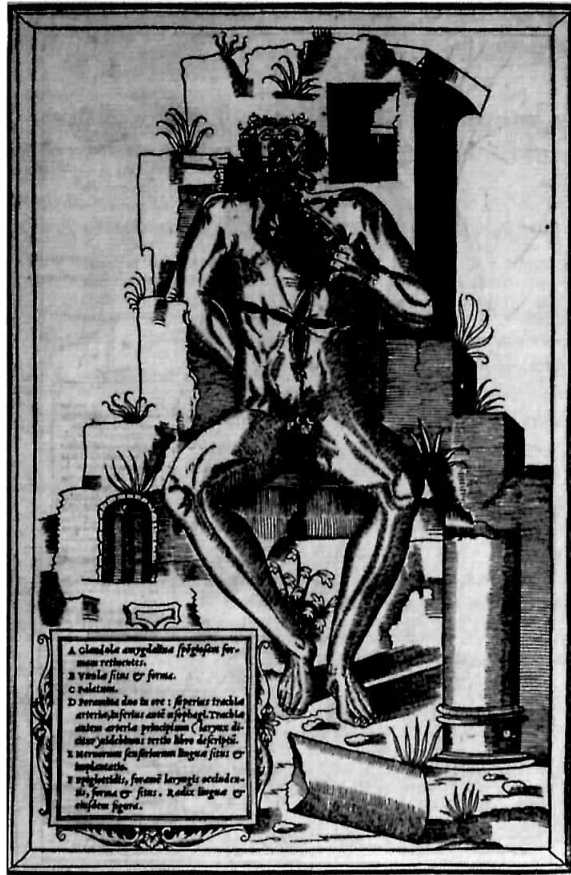
Many travellers, my predecessors, have written their names on the marbles of Hadrian's villa; they hoped to prolong their existence by leaving a souvenir of their visit in these celebrated places; they were mistaken. While I endeavoured to read one of these names, recently inscribed, which I thought I recognised, a bird took flight from a clump of ivy, and in so doing caused

several drops of water from the recent rain to fall: the name vanished.

This prospect of oblivion cheered rather than saddened Chateaubriand who was writing his *Génie du Christianisme* (1802) as a manifesto for the revival of Christianity in France after its abolition in the French Revolution. In the Colosseum he discovered that the hermit whose bell once tolled in the silence had died: 'It is thus that we are warned at each step of our nothingness; man goes to meditate on the ruins of empires; he forgets that he is himself a ruin still more unsteady, and that he will fall before these remains do.'

In Christianity the decay of the individual was a necessary prelude to resurrection. Ruins were a perfect metaphor for this process, for the skull beneath the skin; the more magnificent the edifice, the more effectively its skeleton demonstrated the futility of mortal pride. Rome's ruins were a *memento mori* on a colossal scale. When in 1462 Pope Pius II introduced the very first law to protect the classical monuments from destruction, one of his reasons for doing so was to preserve the sight of their 'exemplary frailty'.

For the greater part of the two millennia, Christian visitors to the city were as uplifted as Chateaubriand by their encounters with ruins. On their way to the shrine of St Peter's pilgrims passed the mausoleum of Emperor Hadrian, the great cylindrical drum on the River Tiber which had been converted into the papal fortress of Castel Sant' Angelo. What could be a more resounding statement of futility? In *Urne-Burial* of 1658 Sir Thomas Browne considered a mound of earth 6 feet in length to be as good



Etienne de la Rivière's woodcut illustrates a textbook on anatomical dissection by Charles Estienne, published in Paris in 1545. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a ruin was a metaphor for the frailty of mortal man: 'the skull beneath the skin'.

a guarantee of immortality as the 'stately Mausoleum or sepulchral pile built by Adrianus in Rome'. A contemporary of Browne who was in exile from Cromwell's Commonwealth was James Howell, a Royalist who had first travelled to Italy on a secret mission to steal the secrets of the Venetian glass-blowers. The classical Grand Tour had begun by this date, but in his *Epistolae Hoelianaee* of 1645 Howell admitted that he felt elevated by the ruins of the Colosseum and the temples:

Truly I must confess, that I find myself much better'd by it; for the sight of some of these ruins did fill me with symptoms of mortification, and make me more sensible of the frailty of all sublunary things, how all bodies, as well inanimate as animate, are subject to dissolution and change, and everything else under the moon.

Salvator Rosa wrote:

All our works fall and sicken,
Nothing is eternal:
The Colossei die, the Baths,
The worlds are dust, their pomp a nothing . . .

The poem is one of innumerable variations upon a theme put into verse by Petrarch, by Tasso and, most succinctly, by Jacques Grevin in *Le Bruit Ruineux* (1570):

[Rome] crie en déclarant sa ruine publique
Que rien n'est éternel que le grandeur de Dieu.

And it was as symbols of Christian victory that the artists of the Italian Renaissance began to paint classical ruins. Tumbling classical monuments in the backgrounds of masterpieces such as Pollaiuolo's *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* and Botticelli's *Nativity* are there to symbolise the shattering of the pagan world at the moment of Christ's birth, and the victory of the martyrs over their murderers.



Rome grieving. Fifteenth-century illustration. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance Rome was personified as an eloquent corpse, a giant's body broken into pieces by its enemies or a mournful widow, as here in Fabrizio degli Uberti's poem *Il Dittamondo*.

The analogy between human and architectural decay explains why Rome is personified in human form in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In Fabrizio degli Uberti's thirteenth-century poem *Il Dittamondo* she is a neglected widow who guides the poet through her ruins, and in a manuscript of the poem illustrated with illuminated drawings the black-clad figure crouches sobbing inside the walls of the miniature-scale city like a child lost in Legoland. In Joachim du Bellay's sonnet-sequence *Antiquités de Rome* of 1557 the city is a speaking corpse and to Montaigne a few years later Rome was a body disfigured and broken into pieces by its enemies, who 'finding that, even though prostrate and dead, its disfigured remains still filled them with hate and fear . . . buried the ruin itself'. A recent advertisement for *Men's Health* magazine showed a muscular torso and asked, 'Is your body a temple or a ruin?'

In Britain it is in the seventeenth century that ruins become a popular metaphor for the decay of an individual life. As Roger Bowdler, the expert on the skull in art, explained in a definitive essay on the subject:

The 17th century was a solemn and serious age; from whatever religious standpoint, its outlook was dour and anxious. The period's prolonged crises and widespread wars were combined with a philosophical outlook that emphasized man's imperfections rather than his dignity and potential, and concentrated more on his short-lived place within the Great Chain of Being. As a result, ruins had a positive meaning for the earth-bound mortal, and structural collapse provided a strong metaphor for death. All flesh is grass: man must wither and die, before

the soul can escape and return to God. . . . The Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell likened dying in a devotional work *The Triumphs over Death* of 1596 to demolishing your old, rotten house in order to build a new and more handsome edifice: 'withdraw your eies from the ruine of this cottage, & caste them upon the majestic of the second building'.

Or, as William Drummond wrote in *A Cypress Grove* of 1623:

By death we are exiled from this faire cittie of the world,
it is no more a world to us, nor we any more people in
it. The ruins of Fances, Palaces and other magnificent
Frames, yeeld a sad prospect to the soul. . . . This Globe
environed with aire, is the sole region of death, the
grave where everie thing that taketh life must rotte, the
stage of Fortune and Change, onelic glorious in the
unconstancie and varying alterations of it.

Decay was necessary for every individual; conversely, when the Last Trump sounded the end of Time all human edifices would collapse, from the peasant's thatched cottage to the emperor's shining dome. An astonishing scene of the Day of Judgement visualised in toppling columns and obelisks is carved on a table-tomb in the churchyard of St Mary's, Lambeth, inside which in 1662 John Tradescant was buried beside his father, also called John. The two Tradescants were collectors of natural curiosities and gardeners, and imported the plane-tree to Britain. The epitaph read:

These famous Antiquarians that had been
Both Gardeners to the Rose and Lily Queen,
Transplanted now themselves, sleep here; and when
Angels shall with their Trumpets waken men,
And fire shall purge the World, these hence shall rise
And change their Gardens for a Paradise.

On the opposite face of the tomb the artist depicted the garden created by the elder Tradescant beside the ruins of St Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury. This is the earliest representation of the Day of Judgement in churchyard sculpture, Bowdler discovered. It was only at the very end of the Tudor reigns that painters began to introduce ruins into the backgrounds of their society portraits. They were metaphors of the inevitability of the subject's death; the grandfather of the nobleman who is portrayed with a ruin in his back garden would have been depicted with a skull in his hand.

But should the metaphorical ruin be Gothic or classical? Edmund Spenser was the first to transplant the imagery of Rome to English soil. His translation of Du Bellay's *Antiquités de Rome* was published in 1590, in his volume *Complaints: containing sundrie small poems of the Worlds Vanitie*. In the same volume were his lines on Verulam, in which the ruins of the city – like Du Bellay's Rome – lamented their fallen state:

Though nought at all but ruines now I see,
And lye in mine owne ashes, as ye see:
Verlame I was; what bootes it that I was
Sith now I am but weedes and wastfull gras? . . .

High towers, faire temples, goodly theaters,
 Strong walls, rich porches, princelie pallaces,
 Large streetes, brave houses, sacred sepulchers,
 Sure gates, sweete gardens, stately galleries,
 Wrought with faire pillours, and fine imageries,
 All those (O pitie!) now are turnd to dust
 And overgrown with blacke oblivions rust.

When Francis Bacon was raised to an earldom he chose Verulam as his title in order to balance the acquisition of worldly glory with a reminder of its transience; it is hard to imagine a newly ennobled courtier making such an eloquent choice today. Spenser overlaid the splendour of ancient Rome as imagined in engravings and tapestries on to the antiquities uncovered by farmers' ploughs in the fields around St Albans. The only problem was that the low brick walls and clay pots were utterly unimpressive to anyone who had glimpsed the real Rome. Despite a century of busy excavations they still are, and it took my own interest in the ancient world a decade to recover after a visit at junior school. The mighty Roman wall was slightly higher than the wall around my grandfather's rose beds; an education officer stood in the trench and rattled replica Roman weapons in a didactic frenzy; no, boys, don't climb on the wall, barked our teacher. But Verulam was the best England could do for a Roman city; the Baths of Bath were yet to be discovered, and Silchester was simply a pattern of streets imprinted into a cornfield.

Quickly, the poets found a new source of *vanitas*: the ruins of the eight hundred medieval abbeys which had been seized, plundered and sold by Henry VIII. Their gaunt but

lonely stone skeletons littered the countryside and towns like the bones of dinosaurs. To the ordinary passer-by their ruins seemed as raw, bare and painfully explicable as bomb sites are to the modern age, and their first admirers saw an appeal to the soul rather than the eye. These were the 'antiquarians' who appeared in the landscape early in the seventeenth century, travelling historians such as Anthony à Wood of Oxford. When he visited the abbey at Eynsham in 1677 he noted in his diary: 'W. spent some time there with a melancholy delight in taking a prospect [making a sketch] of the ruins of that place. . . . The place hath yet some ruins to show, and to instruct the beholder with an exemplary frailty.' At the age of twenty-seven William Dugdale, the future author of *Monasticon Anglicanum* (1655-73), wandered through Osney Abbey, on the outskirts of Oxford. He meditated in his diary: '*Quid digni feci hic process. Viam?*' 'Truly nothing; only umbrages, Osney abbey ruines, etc., antiquities.' Osney is now vanished, and only commemorated by the name of a lock on the River Thames.

The first poetic appreciation of Gothic ruins in English literature is in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1617), when Antonio and Delio meet in an ancient cloister. The play is set in Italy, but it is obvious that Webster has an English abbey in his mind. The cloister, says Delio:

Gives the best echo that you ever heard
 So hollow and so dismal, and withal
 So plain in the distinction of our words
 That many have supposed it is a spirit
 That answers . . .

ANTONIO: I do love these ancient ruins:
 We never tread upon them, but we set
 Our foot upon some reverend history:
 And, questionless, here in this open court,
 Which now lies naked to the injuries
 Of stormy weather, some men lie interred . . .
 Loved the church so well, and gave so largely to't,
 They thought it should have canopied their bones
 Till doomsday. But all things have their end:
 Churches and Cities (which have diseases like to men)
 Must have like death that we have.

ECHO: Like death that we have.

DELIO: Now the echo hath caught you.

The echo isolates the eternal truth of mortality. It is tempting to see the scene of two caped men in an echoing, shadowy medieval cloister as 'Gothic literature' but this would be wrong: 'Gothic' in the sense of atmosphere and horror is an invention of writers such as Horace Walpole, 'Monk' Lewis and Mrs Radcliffe in the second half of the eighteenth century. Antonio and Delio belong to the same literary cult of melancholy as Anthony à Wood and William Dugdale, a cult exemplified in visual terms by the Dutch artist Jacob van Ruisdael's painting of *The Jewish Cemetery* of c. 1670. In the foreground are a barren tree and tombstones washed by the changing light of a storm, and our eye is led across a desolate heath to the splintered walls of a ruined building. Beyond the ruin rises a rainbow, however. Melancholy was not a mood but a lucid, thoughtful theological journey to a divine radiance in which

all shadows of doubt and loneliness disappear. In the eighteenth century there are two changes in the perception of the scene depicted by Ruisdael. First – and as we shall see in the next chapter – artists discovered a surface beauty in the jagged silhouettes and rough textures of the ruin. Second, the intellectuals of the Enlightenment no longer trusted in God's rainbow as a resolution to the doubts of human life.

So what lay beyond? One person's answer can be found under the solitary stone arch which stands in the fields at



Jacob van Ruisdael, *The Jewish Cemetery*, c.1670. Ruisdael was the only painter of the Dutch Golden Age to give a moral and emotional content to his depictions of landscape.

Pickworth, in Leicestershire, not far from the A1. In 1817 John Clare, a self-educated cottager's son born in a poor cottage in Northamptonshire, and had eked a living as a jobbing gardener and a plough-boy before arriving in the lime-kilns at Pickworth, came here as a young man of twenty-four. He was scratching together the money – a single pound – he required to print a prospectus inviting subscriptions for the publication of his first poems.

The village itself had been sacked and pillaged in the Wars of the Roses, and its ruins quarried for stone. The only survival was the pointed archway which had been the entrance to the parish church. This stood in a wilderness of brambles, nettles and elder-trees, because the fields around were too knobbly with old foundations for the farmers to plough.

At the end of a long day in the kilns Clare crossed the wilderness to sit in the archway. There he wrote his 'Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth'. The poem opens with an angry young man's sermon on the unfairness of the countryside he has traversed as an itinerant labourer:

. . . vain extravagance, for one alone,
 Claims half the land his grandeur to maintain,
 What thousands, not a rood to call their own,
 Like me but labour to support in vain!

But the ruins of Pickworth are consoling, because they show that the rich man's mansion is equal to the poor thatched cottage in the divine justice which comes with Time:

Ye scenes of desolation spread around,
 Prosperity to you did once belong;
 And, doubtless, where these brambles claim the ground,
 The glass once flow'd to hail the ranting song.

'Whatever is must certainly be just': that was the traditional consolation which Clare had been taught as a boy in church. But his growing doubt in divine justice is reflected in the poem's sudden change of direction, quickening near its conclusion with a desperate fear of extinction. 'There's not a foot of ground we daily tread . . . but holds some fragment of the human dead'.

Like yours, awaits for me that common lot;
 'Tis mine to be of every hope bereft:
 A few more years and I shall be forgot,
 And not a vestige of my memory left.

As the shadows lengthened at Pickworth the field of brambles became a field of human bones, and it must have seemed that the sun would never rise again. There was no glimmer of resurrection. A Romantic, he had trusted in the victory of emotional instincts but beyond God's rainbow had discovered only oblivion. The buried subtext to Clare's 'Elegy on the Ruins' was his rejection by his true love, Mary Joyce. Clare met his future wife while working at Pickworth but in his heart 'sweet Patty of the Vale' never displaced Mary, a farmer's daughter in his childhood village. Earlier that summer her prosperous father had forbidden her to see the poor and strange-eyed boy, and Clare trudged away into the neighbouring country, until he found work in the lime-

kilns. Mary was to remain his obsession, the subject of hundreds of poems written until days before his death. At the heart of the poem is the fear that if Mary forgets his existence, he will be extinct.

When Clare's poems appeared three years later he became a celebrity in literary London but in the following decade his moods and hallucinations amounted to a nervous breakdown. In 1841 he was incarcerated in an asylum, where he died in 1863. His trust in the new Romantic philosophy had led him into a lonely, dark wilderness.

For Sir Walter Scott, too, memories of a first, long-buried love were awakened in 1827 by an excursion to a ruined abbey. Scott was a Stoic, not a Romantic, however, as we are persuaded by A. N. Wilson's masterly study of his work: he disapproved of the Byronic pose of emotional self-revelation in a writer's publications. It is from his private diary that we know of Williamina Belsches, 'his first, perhaps his only, love', who, Wilson thinks, he never 'got over'. Scott met Williamina in the porch of Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh after a service one Sunday morning in 1790; she was fourteen years old, he nineteen. It began to drizzle and he walked her home under his umbrella; he walked her home every Sunday for the next three years. But Scott was just a trainee lawyer and too poor to marry the granddaughter of an earl. Williamina married a banker, and they never met again.

Williamina died young, in 1810; Scott's own wife died fifteen years later, by which time he was ill with rheumatism and close to bankruptcy, owing to his publisher's incompetence. He began to commit his meditations to a private journal, in which we read how in the summer of 1827 he

and some friends travelled to St Andrew's, which he had explored with Williamina all those years before. The ruins had cooled.

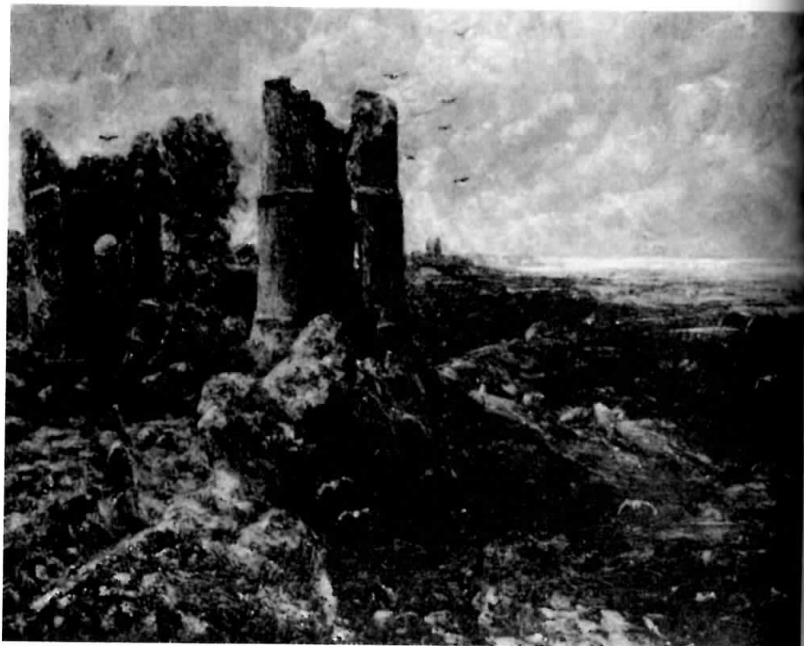
The ruins . . . have been lately cleared out. They had been chiefly magnificent from their size not the extent of ornament. I did not go up to St Rule's tower as on former occasions; this is a falling off for when before did I remain sitting below when there was a steeple to be ascended? But the Rheumatism has begun to change that vein for some time past though I think this is the first decided sign of acquiescence in my lot. I sate down on a gravestone and recollected the first visit I made to St Andrew's now 34 years ago. What changes in my fortune and my feeling have since taken place, some for the better, many for the worse. I remembered the name I then carved in runic characters on the turf beside the castle gate and asked why it should still agitate my heart. But my friends came down from the tower and the foolish idea was chased away.

If it were not for the journal we would never know of Williamina, of her exceptionally pale skin and damp hazel-coloured hair in the Sunday morning drizzle at Greyfriars. At this time Scott was writing novels with a furious haste in order to pay off his massive debts. Poems on Williamina would have sold in their hundreds of thousands, but Scott was too honourable a man to exploit their past intimacy:

If I were either greedy or jealous of poetic fame – and both are strangers to my nature – I might comfort

myself with the thought that I would hesitate to strip myself to the contest so fearlessly as Byron does, or to command the wonder and terror of the public by exhibiting in my person the sublime attitude of the dying gladiator.

More affecting than the melodramatic pose of the hero slain by heart-break, however, is the thought of the rheumatic old man sitting alone on a gravestone and staring at the shadow of Williamina's name in the dew. Three months after his visit he began a correspondence with her mother. 'The very grave gives up its dead and time rolls back thirty years', he



admitted to himself, suddenly dizzy with the rush of memories.

In Clare and Scott the sadness of their inner reflections is intensified by the ruinous backdrop to the scene, as if the architecture is a sounding-board to amplify the emotions. A similar mood is evoked by Constable's painting of the ruins of Hadleigh Castle. His wife Maria died in the winter of 1828 and a few weeks later the painter was busy copying scenes of Roman ruins; then his mind turned to the ruins of the thirteenth-century castle on the shore of the Thames estuary, which he had visited during their courtship fifteen years before. It was the first picture he exhibited as a Royal



Hadleigh Castle by John Constable, 1829, painted a few months after the death of his wife Maria.

Academician in the annual show, and the blackest canvas of his career; the castle tower is utterly broken.

This is not purely a question of stage-scenery, of lighting, silhouette and texture. There is also a vestigial *vanitas*, a lingering fear that these cold, smashed and lifeless stones represent extinction. The two elements are combined in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*.

Angel, Clare and Tess are honeymooning at Wool Manor, and on their arrival she tells her story of being raped by Alec D'Urberville. Angel withdraws into a cold, polite formality, thanks to a stubborn pride in his own intellectual conceptions; in the meadows that summer he had decided that Tess the dairy-maid was the embodiment of Nature's pure, fresh virtue. It is not until the early hours of their last night together that her bedroom door opens, and in a somnambulant trance Angel bundles Tess into a sheet and plants a full kiss on her lips. 'My poor, poor Tess – my dearest, darling Tess! So sweet, so good, so true. . . . My wife – dead, dead!'

Still asleep, he is drawn by some mesmerising force towards the dark silhouette of a ruined Cistercian abbey which lies in the fields across a bridge. The road is white in the brightness of the moon. Tess dangles limp with happiness, content to be a chattel, and content to drown in his arms if he loses his footing on the narrow plank which crosses the mill-stream. In the choir of the abbey church Angel places her shrouded body inside a stone coffin, and stretches himself out on the grass alongside. In Hardy's description it is as if a spot-light shines on the two figures, projecting their silhouettes in magnified form on to the wall behind. Tess's figure rises from the coffin and with infinite

tenderness pleads with her husband to come home, lest he catch cold lying in his night-shirt in the dewy grass. The two figures stand upright and disappear, and Angel wakes in bed with his mind resolved. Later that day, he leaves her. The few minutes of the trance are Tess's only moment of happiness until the very end of the story, when for a few ecstatic days before her arrest and execution she and a humbled Angel are reunited in the solitude of a deserted, shuttered house. The ruins of the abbey amplify every beat of her heart, every whispered endearment, but the intensity of atmosphere is also the result of Hardy's own loss of faith.

Hardy's actual model was Bindon Abbey on the edge of the town of Wool in Dorset, which I visited one Saturday morning in the spring. The ruins stand in the garden of a manor house which was converted from the Abbot's Lodging, and they are no less romantic than when Hardy came. The mill-race is shredded into the same rivulets, and ivy and marigolds flow over the bases of the columns like seaweed on an old, barnacled pier. That May morning a white marquee had been erected on the grass inside the choir where Tess was laid, and a man at the gate explained that the owner's daughter was getting married that afternoon. It should be a sunny afternoon, we agreed. Inside the marquee a trumpeter began to practise his scales.

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



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