

## IX

# The Ozymandias Complex

To the Royal Academy audience in 1830, Soane's picture of the Bank of England in ruins was a prophecy of the end of London. For, as we have seen, travellers to the ruins of antiquity were not only contemplating past greatness but also considering the future of their own societies. Babylon and Memphis, Mycenae and Troy, Athens, Carthage and Rome: why not London?

Soane's view of the Bank shared the walls of the Royal Academy exhibition with a multiplicity of designs by architects proposing the reconstruction of London as a city as magnificent as ancient Rome. Neo-classical splendour befitted a city which was the richest and largest in the world, the capital of a nation which had been victorious at Waterloo in 1815. It was in the years after the defeat of Napoleon that Nelson's Column was erected in Trafalgar Square, triumphal arches rose on Constitution Hill, and a colossal bronze of Wellington in the guise of a naked classical warrior was erected in Hyde Park. The wealth of this new Empire flowed from trade and navigation: the Bank of England and Royal Exchange were as monumental in their design as the Roman Forum, and in many of the architects' designs we see merchantmen unloading the tribute of the globe on quays ornamented with marble colonnades, bronze statues and mighty flights of steps. In *The Golden Bowl* (1904) Henry

James's Prince Amerigo reflected that window-shopping on Bond Street brought him closer to the reality of his native city in the days of its imperial splendour than any archaeological textbook, and standing on London Bridge to watch the ships pass by the Thames seemed to be a modern incarnation of the Tiber. But it was on a broken arch of London Bridge that we met the New Zealander, the harbinger of a future doom. As self-identification with the virtues of an ancient Empire increased in strength, so did doubts as to whether its vices would lead to decline and fall.

In Lincoln's Inn Fields, beside the view of the Stock



*The Fall of Babylon* by John Martin, painted in 1819 and published as an engraving twelve years later. This awe-inspiring visualisation of Biblical destruction attracted an audience of thousands when it was exhibited in London in 1819 – and paid off the artist's debts.

Exchange in ruins, Soane hung a lithograph of John Martin's *Fall of Babylon*, painted in 1819. At the exhibition that year the painter sold £1,000-worth of tickets in four days, as a crowd jostled in front of the 7 × 11 feet canvas which depicted the cursed city falling to the armies of Cyrus the Great in 538 BC. Elbowing their way to the rope, they could enjoy the anecdotal details of King Belshazzar surrounded by his concubines, the elephants of Cyrus belching in the streets, and the Tower of Babel behind the stormy clouds. Martin prided himself on the accuracy of his reconstructions, combining biblical texts and recent surveys in the desert, and never declared any intention to compare London to Babylon. His audience had no doubts, however, and in *The Last Judgement* of 1857 the artist admitted as much by showing a steam train with top-hatted passengers hurtling into God's gulf of fire.

Martin's younger brother Jonathan made the analogy explicit. He was an insane religious fanatic who set fire to York Minster as a warning to the bishops of the Church of England of their impending destruction. 'You blind Hypocrites, you serpents and vipers of Hell, you wine bibbers and beef eaters, whose eyes stand out with fatness', he wrote in a letter of 16 January 1832. He was incarcerated in Bedlam until his death six years later and there he scrawled an astonishing adaptation of one of his brother's prints. The scene is retitled *London's Sad Overthrow* and we see Westminster Abbey and St Paul's in flames on the horizon as the city is invaded by French armies, Napoleon on a white horse replacing Cyrus on an elephant. A lion is in the sky, and bishops carouse in the foreground. On the reverse are his precise calculations of the debts owed to him



*London's Overthrow* by Jonathan Martin, 1832. Jonathan was a religious fanatic who redrew his elder brother's visions of religious cataclysm to show God's divine vengeance on a corrupt London.

by the government, and an addled rant based upon Nebuchadnezzar's vision of the body with feet of clay:

England stands but on one foot  
And that has lost one Toe  
Therefore long it cannot stand  
For Foreign troops shall invade our Land.

Jonathan Martin believed that the end was nigh, and the 1830s were the highest point of ruin-neurosis in British history because the mass revival of millennialism coincided

with the identification with ancient Rome. Furthermore, in the years leading up to the passage of the Parliamentary Reform Act in 1832 the nation came closer to violent revolution than at any time since the Civil War. After he sold Fonthill Abbey the elderly William Beckford had built a second tower on the hills above Bath, choosing a landscape which reminded him of the Roman Campagna, the 'land of the Dead, strewn with ruins' which he had explored as a Grand Tourist fifty years before. From the tower he could see the fires burning in Bristol, as the crowd rioted in response to the House of Lords' rejection of the Reform Bill. 'I do not wonder at the process of emigration', wrote the disillusioned child of Rousseau and the Enlightenment. 'Flee from the wrath to come is sounding like a blast from the dread trumpet we read of in the Apocalypse. [The Prime Minister] keeps on-on-on- as if advancing to a bed of roses, instead of the gulph of ruins, of despair.'

London was Rome, and Babylon. It had also been Troy. The first Englishman to record a description of the ruins of the city in Asia Minor was Thomas Coryate in *Coryate's Crudities* (1611); he was the countryman from Somerset who walked to India. At Troy he reflected not only on cities such as Nineveh and Babylon but on modern London. 'You may observe . . . one of the most pregnant examples of Luxurie that ever was in the world in these confused heaps of stones. . . . For Adulterie was the principal cause of the ruins of this citie' and London, the new Troy, is 'as much polluted with extravagant lusts as ever was the old Troy'.

Troy is the oldest tourist site in the world, and the scantiness of its remains allowed every traveller to discover the moral he sought. It mattered not a jot that until the

middle of the nineteenth century everyone was meditating in the wrong place, mistaking the ruins of the later city of Alexandria Troias for the plains under which Homer's heroes were buried. While Englishmen were fond of the *vanitas* of *Iam seges est ubi Troia fuit*, Julius Caesar and Caracalla had paid homage to the tomb of Achilles; the latter ordered the execution of a favourite so that he could play-act Achilles weeping over the body of his friend Patroclus. In the fourth century the Emperor Julian the Apostate witnessed the veneration of the pagan shrines to Hector and Achilles several decades after Christianity had been proclaimed the state religion; this was evidence, he claimed, that the ancient faith would withstand the Christian cult. The Ottoman Emperor Mehmet the Conqueror made a pilgrimage after capturing Constantinople in 1453 from the Byzantines – descendants of the Greeks – and announced to the ruins, 'I have avenged thee, Asia.'

It was Sultan Mehmet who has given us one of the most remarkable images of ruins as political symbols. He captured Constantinople when he was only twenty-one, and when the flag of the star and the crescent rose above the city on 29 May 1453 it announced the greatest victory in the history of the Ottoman Empire. He entered the city in triumph late in the afternoon, his first priority being to reconsecrate Hagia Sofia as a mosque. Mehmet was awed by the city's architecture, and *en route* he made a diversion to the ruins of the Great Palace on the First Hill. It had been built in the fifth century when Emperor Constantine founded Byzantium, but had been derelict ever since it had been sacked by the Crusaders in the thirteenth century. Mehmet recited a couplet by the Persian poet Saadi:

The spider is the curtain holder in the Palace of the Caesars  
The owl hoots its night call on the Towers of Afrasaib.

It was an astonishing moment to pause to consider the fragility of empire. Fires burned in the looted city, women screamed, and the treasures of a thousand years lay waiting on the most triumphant day in the Ottomans' history. Little survives of the Great Palace today. On one side of a narrow wedge of land the railway-lines curve into Istanbul; on the other side is a fortified wall, a six-lane highway and then the sea. Wooden tenements housing Kurdish refugees lead into five vaulted compartments stripped of decoration and at the entrance a junkyard dog barked and snarled, yanking at a rusty chain; I tiptoed past, as that type of chain always snaps in *Just William* stories. It was a bitterly cold day, and the polythene sheets housing homeless beggars under the arches had frozen into stiff wrinkles. I shouted Mehmet's words into the frosty air.

The spider is the curtain holder in the Palace of the Caesars  
The owl hoots its night call on the Towers of Afrasaib.

The dog barked, the chain rattled; silence. Saadi's distich was written in the eleventh century AD. In the deserts of the Middle East which were Mehmet's cradle the ruins of older empires cast long shadows. The world's earliest prophecies of future ruin are in the Old Testament. Jeremiah had prophesied Babylon's destruction years before Cyrus invaded in 538 BC, and Zephaniah the fall of Nineveh. When Zephaniah pictured the destruction of the rich and busy metropolis he summoned to mind the images of the ruins of

even older civilisations which lay abandoned in the Mesopotamian desert:

And he [God] will stretch out his hand . . . and destroy Assyria; and will make Nineveh a desolation, and dry like a wilderness. . . . The cormorant and the bittern shall lodge in the upper lintels of it; their voice shall sing in the windows; desolation shall be in the thresholds. . . . This is the rejoicing city that dwelt carelessly, that said in her heart, I am, and there is none beside me: how is she become a desolation, a place for beasts to lie down in! every one that passeth by her shall hiss, and wag his hand.

These biblical prophecies have been enjoyed by many Bible readers travelling to the Middle East. Indeed, the Rev. Henry Maundell would have been thoroughly disappointed to find Tyre plump and thriving when he made a perspiring journey there in 1697:

A mere Babel of broken walls, pillars, vaults &c., there not being so much as one entire house left. Its present inhabitants are only a few poor wretches, housing themselves in the vaults and subsisting chiefly upon fishing; who seem to be preserv'd in this place by Divine Providence as a visible argument how God has fulfilled his word concerning Tyre, viz, That it should be as the top of a rock, a place for fishers to dry their nets on.

While western Europe was the meeting-place of Christian catastrophe and antique exemplar, to understand

the politics of the Roman model it is important to appreciate its two faces: as the republic and as the empire. Thomas Jefferson, for example, had admired the early Roman Republic, as did the French Revolutionaries ('Brutus' was the most popular name for baby boys born in France in 1790). But the model was more complex in eighteenth-century England, where Parliament and the Crown replayed the contest for power between Senators and Emperors. The Whigs, who defended the liberties won by Parliament in the previous century, feared that the Crown wished to restore its despotism and that Britons might allow this to happen. Why? Because of the moral corruption of 'Luxury': like the citizens of Rome who had exchanged their liberties for bread and circuses, Britons wanted the luxury goods in the shop windows of the West End. Byron made succinct a hundred years of political theory on the cyclical nature of empires in Canto IV of *Childe Harold*, published in 1818:

First Freedom, and then Glory – when that fails,  
Wealth – Vice – Corruption, – Barbarism at last.

The earliest warning in poetry was made by John Dyer in *The Ruins of Rome* (1740) when he ascended the hill of the Capitol and imagined the site in the days before its imperial opulence, when its architecture and its politics were each simple, honest and open:

Britons, O my countrymen beware  
Gird, gird your hearts, the Romans once were free,  
Were brave, were virtuous.

The earliest political commentary in built form was erected by Lord Cobham in his gardens at Stowe in the 1730s. An artificial ruin, his Temple of Modern Virtue faced the intact Temple of Ancient Virtue across a wooded glade. The Temple of Modern Virtue was long ago demolished, Ancient Virtue, erected as a sturdy cylinder of strong masonry, still stands. The juxtaposition of two contrasting temples in the same visual frame was inspired by an article by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*. He described an allegorical dream of the Elysian Fields. 'The great road lay in a direct line, and was terminated by the temple of Virtue. It was planted on each side with laurels, which were intermixed with marble trophies, carved pillars and statues of law-givers, heroes, statesmen, philosophers and poets.' Next, Addison wrote, he discovered a second Temple whose stones 'were laid together without mortar . . . the whole structure shook with every wind that blew. This was called the temple of Vanity . . . [and] was filled with hypocrites, pedants, free-thinkers, and prating politicians.'

The modern ruin sheltered a headless statue of a man which was rumoured to be the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. Cobham had been his ally until 1733, when a disagreement over taxation pushed him into opposition. The gardens were open to the public; it was as if *Private Eye* had a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. The audience was invited to compare the decaying state of morality in modern Britain with the upright virtue of classical antiquity; Walpole's profitable but amoral oligarchy would be the beginning of Britain's decadence, with corruption and moral degeneracy leading inevitably to decadence, decline and invasion by barbarians.

In the course of the century identification with Roman virtue advanced hand in hand with speculation on its vices. After the victorious conclusion of the Seven Years' War in 1763, the generals who had acquired the new empire in America and India were depicted in togas and Roman breastplates, and the Royal Academy of Arts was founded. *London and Westminster Improved* by John Gwynn (1766), one of its founders, was a patriotic blueprint for a neo-classical city as magnificent as Rome, and its rhetoric still echoed in the designs made by Soane, Nash and their pupils fifty years later. To Gwynn, 'The English are now what the Romans were of old, distinguished like them by power and opulence, and excelling all other nations in commerce and navigation. Our wisdom is respected, our laws are envied, and our dominions are spread over a large part of the globe.'

The victorious peace enabled Edward Gibbon to travel to Rome. 'It was at Rome, on the 15th October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started on my mind.' The Temple of Jupiter was one of the many converted into churches, and it was the juxtaposition of these two civilisations – not the classical monument in pristine isolation – that triggered his intellectual curiosity. In the conclusion to *Decline and Fall* he might have been delineating one of the porticoes erected in the days of Imperial decadence:

The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principles of decay, the causes of destruction multiplied

with the extent of conquest, and as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight.

*Decline and Fall* is a discussion of the past, the present and the future of Europe. It is not just a book of politics, but an epic of human nature, argued the literary critic Harold Bond: 'an 18th-century secular prose equivalent of *Paradise Lost*'. In Gibbon's view, the citizens of Rome had squandered their opportunity to realise the full dignity of man by abandoning their liberties for luxury but the citizens of eighteenth-century Europe had a second chance to fulfil this destiny. 'Under the mild and generous influence of liberty, the Roman empire might have remained invincible and immortal.' But Rome decayed from within, and would have fallen with or without the barbarian invasions; like a rotten tree, it needed only the slightest push.

Only the first third of *Decline and Fall* is the story of classical Rome. Gibbon's story ends with travellers of modern times being civilised by their visits to Rome; indeed, the rediscovery of the ruins might be seen as a form of redemption. The Europe of our time, wrote Gibbon, is more prosperous and educated and stable than it has ever been; like the Comte de Volney in *Les Ruines*, he represented the Enlightenment optimism that it was possible to break the cycle of rise, decline and fall. He too predicted a happy ending. 'Yet the experience of 4,000 years should enlarge our hopes, and diminish our apprehensions; we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances towards perfection: but it may safely

be presumed that no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism.' In the cautiousness of its claims, the reasonableness of its argument, *Decline and Fall* is one of the most optimistic books ever written – and in hindsight, one of the saddest. The final volumes were published in 1788, and by the time Gibbon died in 1794 the demagogic barbarity of the French Revolution had made a bloody mockery of 'liberty'.

The War of American Independence (1775–83) had been the first shock to Britain's growing self-confidence in its empire, however, as expressed in two famous letters by Horace Walpole. 'Our empire is falling to pieces; we are lapsing to a little island', he wrote to one friend in September 1778. Four years earlier he had mused:

The next Augustan age will dawn on the other side of the Atlantic. There will, perhaps, be a Thucydides at Boston, a Xenophon at New York, and, in time, a Virgil in Mexico, and a Newton at Peru. At last, some curious traveller from Lima will visit England and give a description of the ruins of St Paul's, like the editions of Balbec and Palmyra.

To Lord Charlemont, a young Irishman who visited Athens in 1749, the ruins of Greece exhibited the same lesson of tyranny's triumph over liberty, made all the more vivid when under Turkish rule what had once been the city of Pericles was reduced to a population of a few thousand. Saddest of all was the decline in character of the Greeks: they were indolent and cunning and emasculated in consequence of being ruled by tyrants; unlike the Italians they had produced

no Michelangelo, no glimmer of the revival of the ancient spirit. In his journal Charlemont meditated on the despicable hovels:

Is this the renowned Athens? How melancholy would be the reflection should we suppose, what certainly must come to pass, that in a few ages hence, London, the Carthage, the Memphis, the Athens of the present world, shall be reduced to a state like this, and travellers shall come, *perhaps from America* [his italics], to view its ruins.

Charlemont never published his youthful journal, but we know that at various times he re-edited the manuscript with the benefit of hindsight. In his view, the decline of the British Empire began with the resignation of the elder Pitt in 1761: ‘She is fallen!’ he wrote in his journal, and when he built the Casino at Marino, a villa outside Dublin, a brass plaque on the foundation stone was dedicated to the administration of William Pitt, ‘when the glory of the British Empire arrived at its highest pitch’. It is impossible to prove, but I wonder if Charlemont inserted these prescient remarks on American tourists after the War of Independence.

The best visual illustration of this theme was in a library in Dorset, Merly House, described in a book of engravings published in 1785 by its builder, Ralph Willett, a merchant, book-collector and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Above the door at the entrance to the library was a painting of the Acropolis which visualised Athens in its days of liberty and prosperity, with philosophers discoursing on the steps of the Parthenon and trading vessels unloading in the bay.



*Athens in its State of Ruins*, engraving after a lost painting by Solomon Delane, 1785. Discovering a desolate city ruled by barbarous Turks, English travellers muse on the consequences of exchanging liberty for the seductions of luxury.

Over the exit door was Athens in ruins, with a Muslim minaret commanding the horizon, a woman begging on the crumbling steps of the temple, and the harbour empty of trade. As Turks splinter marble sculptures into fragments for lime, three English travellers – like Charlemont – contemplate the lessons of the scene. Willett added a voice-over: ‘Long, very long, may the first picture be the picture of Great Britain; and late, if ever, may the second bear the least resemblance to her sinking state!’

The French Revolution revived the millennialism which



had been dormant during the enlightened century, for the fall of the Bastille was interpreted as one of the signs in the Book of Revelation that announced the Day of Judgement was nigh. In the slums of London the millennialist preacher Richard Brothers thundered that only extreme penance conducted according to his own instructions would dissuade God from destroying this 'spiritual BABYLON'. The Revolution also smashed all political certainties. The monarchical edifice demolished by Napoleon was reassembled by the victors at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 but the brittleness of the repairs was all too visible. In Europe as a whole, according to Professor Schenk in his great book *The Mind of European Romanticism*, apocalyptic fantasies had never been so potent since the late Middle Ages. He quotes a mysterious German writer named F. G. Wetzels who predicted that 'the light will be taken from Europe, [which] will be full of demolished sites, when goblins will meet each other on her desert, and the paradise will have vanished in the great flood and the rage of fire'. An even more mysterious German writer named Schlichtegroll proposed in 1818 to export all of European culture to Iceland where, as if placed in a deep-freeze, it would be preserved from the imminent disaster.

In London the Tory government was trying to resist demands for reform, as we saw earlier, and this political conflict was the catalyst which ignited the fears of millennialists as diverse as Jonathan Martin in Bedlam and William Beckford in Bath. At dinner with the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, the French ambassador, Chateaubriand, sent to London by the restored Bourbons, 'praised the solidity of the English monarchy, kept in

balance by the even swing of liberty and power'. But Lord Liverpool had doubts: rising and stretching out his arm, the venerable peer 'pointed to the city and said "What sense of solidity can there be with these enormous towns? A serious insurrection in London, and all is lost."' The Prime Minister's foreboding prompted Chateaubriand's reverie that night. 'It seemed to me as though I were finishing a journey to England like that which I made, in earlier days, to the ruins of Athens, of Jerusalem, of Memphis and Carthage.' The England he had explored as an *émigré* exile in the 1790s was 'charming and redoubtable', with 'narrow and gravelled roads, valleys filled with cows, heaths spotted with sheep' overlooked by the steeple of Thomas Gray's country churchyard. Thirty years later

her valleys are darkened by the smoke of forges and workshops. . . . Already the nurseries of knowledge, Oxford and Cambridge are assuming a deserted aspect: their colleges and Gothic chapels, half-abandoned, distress the eye; in their cloisters, near the sepulchral stones of the middle ages, lie, forgotten, the marble annals of the ancient peoples of Greece: ruins guarding ruins.

This widespread despair was the context for 'The New Zealander', a character invented by Thomas Macaulay in a book review (1840) and who quickly acquired a cult following, as represented by Doré's subsequent engraving. But the most astonishing prophecy of destruction is Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826). Writing in her widowhood Shelley imagined a mysterious plague from the

east which extinguished the population of the known world. The novel is written as prophesying a distant future, Shelley pretending that she has pieced together the words written on the scattered leaves and bark which she and her husband had discovered in an unexplored recess of the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl at Naples; that was in the winter of 1818, shortly before their return to Rome and the writing of *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley was the model for Adrian, her philosophical King of England, and Byron – also dead by 1826 – for Raymond, his warrior friend. The narrator, Lionel Verney, is in Adrian's retinue as they leave an island extinct of life to search for survivors on the continent. Grass is growing in the silent streets of London, empty of carriages, and 'Birds and tame animals, now homeless, had built nests, and made their lairs in consecrated spots'. Lionel's last glimpse of the great city is of St Paul's dome in the smokeless air; the cathedral has acquired the aspect of a mausoleum, and 'Methought above the portico was engraved the hic jacet of England'.

When Adrian and Lionel reach Venice, Mary Shelley's description is an intensified memory of the winter when she, her husband and Byron had lingered so happily in the deserted, melancholy city. 'The tide ebbed sullenly out from the broken portals and violated halls of Venice: seaweed and sea monsters were left on the blackened marble, while the salt ooze defaced the matchless works of art that adorned their walls, and the sea gull flew out from the shattered window . . . nature asserted her ascendancy.' After a shipwreck, Lionel awakes on the Adriatic shore to find himself 'the Last Man'. Where should the last man alive go but to the world's capital, Time's widow, the 'crown of

man's achievements'? In the deserted towns through which he passes he paints on the walls 'Verney, the last of the race of Englishmen, had taken up his abode in Rome'.

The city is silent but for the fountains, and the cows who have returned to the Forum. Wandering through the Vatican, the palaces and the Forum he is consoled by the sight of the greatness of which man is capable, but as night comes he collapses with utter loneliness. He would exchange any masterpiece of art for the chatter of human company. 'I was alone in the Forum; alone in Rome; alone in the world.' Hoping that any fellow survivors would be irresistibly drawn to the Eternal City he climbs the dome of St Peter's to survey the Campagna. But no one appears in the desolation, so at the beginning of the year AD 2100, he deposits the manuscript of 'the Last Man' in the ruins and sails away down the Tiber to search for new life elsewhere.

Verney sails towards the Atlantic. What of the New World during this time of despair? Would it escape what had been described as 'the decrepitude of Europe' by Chateaubriand, who during his own exile had explored its virgin forests? Travelling on a train from London one day I share a table with three Californians who, so I gather, are travelling to the business park at Reading to make a presentation for their hi-tech company. They are tall, broad-shouldered men in their forties, affable, and funny. I write 'America in Ruins' at the top of the page in my notebook. The group's leader glances down and then stares punchily into my eyes, as if considering whether this is an insult. Face to face with the tanned man in the Brooks Brothers shirt at seven o'clock in the morning I certainly feel like the 'decrepitude of Europe'. But there is a serious issue. In the generation after

independence in 1784 Americans believed that their nation was God's chosen people and that the New World would be free of decay as if, like an infectious contagion, it could not cross the Atlantic.

Thomas Jefferson studied monuments, not ruins. When he built the Capitol at Richmond, Virginia, he commissioned from Charles-Louis Clérisseau an exact replica of the Temple at Nîmes built by the Romans in the first century AD. What crossed the Atlantic was not a capriccio of mouldering stone, of course, but a plaster model showing the structure in the perfection of its inception. The heroes of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence were the virile, honest Romans of the republic, and not the decadent subjects of the emperors. But what of the next generation? By the 1820s the preachers Lyman Beecher and Andrew Bigelow thundered in the pulpits of New York against 'luxury, the fatal bane of all republics'. It was the beginning of the American School of Catastrophe, and the seeds of a doubt which bloomed in the fallen Statue of Liberty in *Planet of the Apes*, a warning of nuclear apocalypse which was the most astonishing image of ruin in the twentieth century.

Thomas Cole was the first great painter of the American wilderness, an Englishman who was born in Lancashire and emigrated in 1818 at the age of seventeen. Ten years later he was celebrated for his huge canvases of the Catskills and the Hudson River, his depiction of the mighty trees and exhilarating chasms capturing the moment at which man caught his breath at the wonder of Nature. Nature was God's creation, and Americans the people chosen to cultivate its magnificence.

Cole made a journey to Italy in 1832. 'The traveller is unworthy of his privilege, and forgetful of his duty, if he extracts not from the scenes some moral lesson or religious truth', he wrote, stating what was taken for granted by contemporaries but has been forgotten today. His first moral lesson in Rome was the 'effeminacy of modern Europe' which was symbolised by the labourers who were shovelling earth from the ruins, for excavations in the Forum had now begun. The dilatoriness of the scrawny, idle labourers who shovelled away the earth was all the more remarkable when one considered that their heroic ancestors had raised the massive structures which now appeared in all their might. Cole told his parents: 'You would laugh to see modern Roman labourers *at work*', in contrast to the labourers back home. 'Their wheel-barrows were as large as a shovel-full and were pushed ten yards before they rest, and if a clod is earth as big as a fist they break it before attempting to lift.'

To a strong, young American they represented the decrepitude of Europe. More profoundly, it was there that – like Gibbon, and like Volney at Palmyra – he had an epiphanic vision of the cyclical nature of empires. A party of Americans surveyed the Forum at sunset. Cole 'unusual for him, was the first to speak, recalled a friend who was present. 'The subject was that of the future course of Empire . . . until he closed with a picture that found its parallel in the melancholy desolation by which, at that moment, they were surrounded. Such was Cole, the poet artist, in Rome . . .' On his return to New York he was commissioned by a rich man named Luman Reed to paint five great canvases on the theme for his New York apartment. *The Course of Empire*

began with a wooded seashore at dawn inhabited only by wild beasts; the second scene depicted an Arcadian idyll of hunters, shepherds and farmers felling trees to plant corn and erect the first huts. At noonday we see the empire in its dazzling glory, a city of bronze statues and marble colonnades with trading vessels in the blue bay and a military triumph crossing the scene. Then came destruction, in Cole's words 'towers falling, arches broken, vessels wrecking in the harbour'. The canvas was painted in the manner of John Martin's *Fall of Babylon*, and the decadent populace flee a catastrophic storm, flames and a vengeful invading army. The story ends at sunset with 'a desolate ruin', the ruined colonnades reclaimed by Nature as the scene reverts to a wild seashore. There are no human figures, and the only voice is that of a solitary bird. 'This picture must be as the funeral knell of departed greatness,' Cole told his client, 'and may be called the state of desolation.'

The scene echoed that sunset in Rome. In Cole's view of history, the United States stood at the transition from the taming of the wilderness in the mid-morning to the imperial dazzle at noon; it was brunch, one might say, and time for New Yorkers to change their ways. Cole, a Methodist, was already disillusioned by the dark underside of the American dream, disturbed at seeing not only the growing 'luxury' of the cities but also the economic exploitation of the wilderness by lumber mills and factories. Later in the 1830s a railway was built in the valley below his summer house in the Catskills, despoiling a valley whose virgin beauty Cole had made famous; in a canvas now in the Metropolitan Museum, he painted the view once more but ignored the railway. The luminosity of the river and its meadows is all

the more radiant, for Cole had abandoned his hope in Americans as God's chosen people and retreated into a golden, imaginary past. When he had sailed to Europe in 1832 he held in his pocket an ode dedicated to him by Asher Durand, who had eulogised in poetry the wilderness which Cole had celebrated in paint. The ode begged his friend Cole not to be contaminated by the European disease of ruin, but Cole was not the first or last tourist from the New World to succumb to the contagious malaise of the Old.

The first American citizen to study the ruins of Greece was a nineteen-year-old scholar from Philadelphia, Nicholas Biddle. He was born in 1785, the year after Independence, and as a scion of one of the leading families in New England was as carefully moulded to fulfill his nation's destiny as a tennis player might be today. He arrived in Europe with no doubts as to the superiority of America; the 'coming people' of his native state were the best in the world, he declared. It was the monuments of Athens which decided Biddle to become a statesman, because they demonstrated what could be achieved by argument and debate in a society of men who were educated and free. Eloquence had built these temples of marble, he believed. I imagine Biddle as a slim, young figure in a linen suit contemplating the Parthenon; if we turn from the dazzling marble to face him we see in his eyes the forests, homesteads and towns of the New World.

Taken by themselves a nineteen-year-old's views on an archaeological site are of no value; their interest is in their application to the future America. Biddle was not interested in modern Europe, whose cities were oppressed by the 'pompous glare' of tyrants' palaces. 'The present generation of men is more civilised, more enlightened, better than any

of these whose exploits are transmitted by history . . . if I am not biased by affection, the coming people of Pennsylvania will be as good as any in [Europe].’ Reaching Italy he considered the modern Romans degenerate, striving ‘to hide behind a luxurious profusion the loss of the primitive virtues of their country’. The Athenians were even more wretched, but somehow the very extinction of the city made it more inspiring to an American:

Whilst therefore we feel at Rome a mingled sentiment of melancholy and admiration, Athens reflects the perfect picture of desolation and despair . . . Rome is the twilight, Athens the black night of ruin. . . . The religion of Athens is lost forever. Her temples which have resisted not only the barbarous rage of conquest, but the frenzy of the elements, now moulder under the hand of ignorance or idle curiosity, and on the noblest structures of Paganism a Turkish mosque has raised its solitary spire (shapeless column) to mock the elegance of Grecian arts and to proclaim the victory of a new religion.

Thus he wrote to his brother in June 1806, referring to the mosque and minaret built inside the Parthenon.

Her crowded theatres are deserted. . . . Where are her people? Are these few wretches, scarcely superior to the beasts whom they drive heedlessly over the ruins, are these men Athenians? Where is her freedom? Ah! This is the keenest stab of all. Bowed down by a foul oppression, the spirit of Athens has bent under its

slavery. . . . One solitary sail in the Piraeus tells the sad story of Athenian misery. It is thus by collecting the scattered images of greatness and decay, we become interested in the misfortunes of a nation, and we are instructed in the melancholy but pleasing philosophy of ruins.

In Biddle’s journal there is a sense – a confused sense, admittedly – of having discovered the fragmentary but pristine pieces of marble which will serve as building blocks for the foundations of a new society. As he wrote, however, Lord Elgin’s agents had begun to remove the marble sculptures from the pediment for shipment to London. Biddle was furious, but not because the British were robbing Greece: they were robbing America. Biddle claimed ancient Athens as the inspiration for his generation, and he wished them to remain *in situ* for future Americans to study the same moral lesson.

Sadly, Biddle never realised his ideals. He became president of the US Bank, but never the President of his country, and his enlightened view of federalism was destroyed by the demagoguery of Andrew Jackson. He is best remembered for introducing the Greek Revival style of architecture to banks in America, and on the streets of Philadelphia was called ‘Nick the Greek’, a nickname which to modern ideas has a slightly gangsterish ring. Biddle had been deceived by the ruins of Greece, in two senses. First, eloquence was not enough in politics. Second, and more subtly, he had interpreted the survival of Athens’s monuments as a demonstration of the ultimate triumph of democracy. Visiting Sparta he was uplifted by the sight of a

completely empty plain, for the disappearance of the monuments of a military tyranny gave 'a republican a melancholy pleasure. My own country offers an interesting analogy of which I have thought much.'

An analogy he did not predict was that made in Taylor Lewis's *State Rights: A Photograph from the Ruins of Ancient Greece* published in 1865, the year the American Civil War ended. Photographing the charred skeletons of the cities burned on Sherman's march through Georgia, the northerner Lewis used history to argue the triumph of his cause. 'God has given us a mirror in the past . . . all the dire calamities of Greece' can be explained by the individual states' desire for autonomy. But not only had Biddle failed to predict his own nation's destiny, he had misread the language of ruins itself. Writing at the end of the fifth century BC the historian Thucydides had predicted Biddle's visit. The Spartans 'occupy two-fifths of the Peloponnese', he said, but if the city 'became deserted and only the temples and foundations of buildings remained, I think that future generations would, as time passed, find it very difficult to believe that the place had really been as powerful . . . [because] the city is not regularly planned and contains no temples or monuments of great magnificence'. Sparta had disappeared because its soldier rulers had little interest in architectural lavishness. If, on the other hand, 'the same thing were to happen to Athens, one would conjecture from what met the eye that the city had been twice as powerful as in fact it is'. Athens would survive, Thucydides argued, not because it was greater than Sparta but because its rulers were more interested in architecture.

Monuments are deceptive, and in posterity doubly so. In



The antique statue 'Pasquino', near the church of S Pantaleo.

an alley near Piazza Navona stands the mutilated head and torso of an antique statue, nicknamed Pasquino. Pasquino shows that ruins do not speak; we speak for them. From the sixteenth century onwards Roman citizens pinned written satires to the base of the statue, and a 'pasquinade' became the name for an attack on the Establishment. In time the plinth was inscribed:

But I am that famous Pasquino  
Who makes the great lords tremble  
And astonishes foreigners and countrymen  
When I compose in vernacular or Latin.

No one would pin satires to Pasquino were he as lofty, proud and assertive as the Apollo Belvedere, or a Horse-Tamer on the Quirinal. But as he is fallen and battered we put our words into his mouth.

The same ship which brought the ruins of Leptis Magna to Britain also carried the colossal granite head of an Egyptian prince, which had been hauled across the desert from the temple at Thebes. It was the head of Ramases II we now know, but when it was unveiled at the British Museum in March 1818 some called him 'Ozymandias'. The sight of the head of the fallen tyrant inspired the finest sonnet Shelley ever wrote:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these life less things,  
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:  
 And on the pedestal these words appear:  
 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

of the Sorbonne for her introductions to French *ruinistes* at a memorable dinner in Paris.

For the Hugos at No. 18 Rue des Petits-Augustins see Graham Robb, *Victor Hugo* (1997).

#### VIII *Self-portrait in Ruins*

See *Visions of Ruin* (1999), which includes 'Crude Hints Towards a History of My House' transcribed and interpreted by Helen Dorey. Daniel Abramson's discussion of the 'Bank in Ruins' is in his PhD thesis on *The Building of the Bank of England 1731-1833* (Harvard, 1993), pp. 425-9. For more on the tomb and its relationship to posterity, see the article by R. Bowdler and C. Woodward in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (1999).

#### IX *The Ozymandias complex*

For Thomas Coryate and his *Crudities* see Michael Strachan, *Thomas Coryate* (Oxford, 1982). Like Macaulay (1953), Strachan discusses the confusion between Priam's Troy and Alexandria Troias, a misunderstanding which continued into the nineteenth century owing to the impreciseness of ancient geographers such as Strabo and the absence of any visible remains at the real site. Julian (332-63) visited Troy before he became Emperor, and his description of Troy is in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, translated by Wilmer Cave Wright (Cambridge and London, 1990).

The continuing potency of religious imagery in eighteenth-century England is demonstrated by Terry Friedman in 'The Eighteenth-century Disaster Print' in *Proceedings of the Symposium of the Society of Architectural Historians* (1996), in which he discusses how the



destruction of churches by fire or structural collapse was interpreted by reference to the Bible. The revival of Apocalyptic imagery during the French Revolution is explored in David Bindman, 'The English Apocalypse' in *The Apocalypse*, ed. Frances Carey (1990), the catalogue to the British Museum exhibition.

For John Martin's imaginary reconstruction of Babylon see Henrietta McCall, 'Rediscovery and Aftermath' from *The Legacy of Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 184–213.

H. G. Schenk, 'The Mind of the European Romantics' (1966, pp. 30–45) discusses the foreboding of future ruin in post-Waterloo Europe, and it is he who argues that 'it would seem that the spirit of foreboding has never been so widespread' at that period. Wetzel's vision of goblins was in *Magischer Spiegel* of 1806, while the remarks of the Bavarian scholar Schlichtegroll (p. 32) on Iceland were recorded by Atterbom. Professor David Skilton has suggested in correspondence that we can plot a correlation between political unrest and imagery of ruin throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain, and will publish this in due course.

The relationship between the Temples of Modern and Ancient Virtue at Stowe and Joseph Addison's dream was revealed by George Clarke in 'Grecian Taste and Gothic Virtue' in *Apollo* (1973), pp. 568–9. For Charlemont on the Acropolis, see the *Travels of Lord Charlemont in Greece and Turkey, 1749*, ed. W. B. Stanford and E. J. Finopoulos (1984), pp. 134–5. His biography is by Cynthia O'Connor (Cork, 1999).

Horace Walpole's letter to Horace Mann, his correspondent in Florence, was written on 24 November 1774.

For Gibbon, see Harold Bond, *The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon* (Oxford, 1960). Ralph Willett, FSA, published *A Description of the Library at Merly in the County of Dorset* (1785); it was Tim Knox who drew attention to the lost peculiarity (*Apollo*, July 2000).

In the catalogue to his controversial exhibition of Richard Wilson at the Tate Gallery (1982), pp. 217–18, David Solkin argued that the artist's Arcadian landscapes were commissioned by conservative landowners who wished to show that ruin was the inevitable consequence of an increase in trade and 'Luxury'. This is true, although one would add that mercantilists such as Ralph Willett also used the same ruins to illustrate their contrary arguments.

As regards America: see Matthew Baigell, *Thomas Cole* (New York, 1981) who proposes the idea of an American School of Catastrophe, represented by the preachers Lyman and Bigelow and Cole's friend William Cullen Bryant whose poems 'The Ages' and 'The Earth' alluded to America's destruction. Cole's thoughts on *The Course of Empire* are recorded in Louis Legrand Noble's nineteenth-century biography, reprinted by the Harvard Press in 1964. Cole never painted New York, a telling point made in a recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum which examined New York's conception of itself as an imperial city: *Art and the Empire Setting*. The catalogue is edited by Catherine Vooranger and John K. Howat (New York, 2000).

Nicholas Biddle's journal was published as *Nicholas Biddle in Greece*, ed. R. A. McNeal (Philadelphia, 1993).

Mussolini's self-projection of himself as a classical hero is discussed in 'Rome Reclaims Its Empire' by Tim Benton in *Art and Power* (1996), pp. 120–39.

*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**