Alice's Jar

An Essay-Review on Three Recent Works on Ruins

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An Essay-Review on Three Recent Works on Ruins

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Essay-review on a series of books published in recent years, all of which share a clear common core: ruins (Schnapp, Une histoire universelle des ruines. Des origines aux Lumières, *2020; it. transl.* Storia universale delle rovine. Dalle origini all'età dei Lumi, *2023; Stewart,* The Ruins Lesson. Meaning and Material in Western Culture, *2020; Marcheschi,* Storie naturali delle rovine. Forme e oggetti del tempo nella Francia dei philosophes, *2023).*

It might seem straightforward—at least in terms of argumentative structure—to review a series of books published in recent years,[1] all of which share a clear common core: ruins. Just as straightforward, it might seem, would be the task of outlining a conceptual framework—organized around their differences and similarities—through which the reasons for this convergence of interest would emerge.

Such a framework could be structured around four principal axes: the temporal dimension—the relationship between past, present, and future; the dialectic

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of memory and oblivion; the tension between history and imagination; and the opposition between culture and nature. These axes could then be interwoven with a set of recurring themes—such as the position of the observer, shifts in meaning, and the materiality of remains. Yet as the reading of the texts progresses, this framework increasingly proves inadequate, remaining largely unfulfilled. This is not because the books fail to follow their premises, but rather because these axes and themes—although explicitly articulated in each text, albeit with different tones and emphases—never constitute the epistemological centre of the argument. Instead, they are invoked episodically, in relation to a heterogeneous array of objects (poems, paintings, engravings, sites, finds), serving as heuristic tools that enable each object to be approached each time from a specific angle—whether temporal, semantic, or imaginative. In this sense, they function as conceptual tripods: devices that provide stability to an inquiring gaze. Accordingly, rather than forming a cohesive framework, they appear as a constellation of motifs through which disparate discourses can be articulated.

If there is any structural feature that these studies on ruins share, it is a precarious one—shaped by a pervasive sense of displacement that runs through each of them. A displacement that has to do with the fact that the ruin always points elsewhere; it is, in itself, always also *elsewhere*—an elsewhere that may be temporal, mnemonic, historical, imaginary. In this sense, these inquires share an off-axis architecture: their subject matter persistently refers beyond itself, constantly shifting around the central line of argument. As a result, what lies at the intersection of these books is not a fixed object or set of objects—the ruins with their multiple meanings, temporal densities, and ambivalent power to evoke and efface—but rather a movement, a shift, which paces through a variety of items (some of which appear across all three authors). Such variety stands as an index of the ruin's capacity to "dislodge": be it Diderot's review of an "archaeological" painting,[1] an Assyrian stele from the fourteenth century BCE (Schnapp, p. 98), an Old English poem mourning the destruction of cities and peoples,[2] or the biblical narratives of catastrophe.[3] It will then be a matter

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[1] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 142; Schnapp, *Storia*, 833–34; Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, p. 214
[2] Schnapp, 356-357; Stewart, 12-15
[3] Marcheschi, *Storie*, Chapter 1; Schnapp, *Storia*, 118-129; Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, 47-50, 143-153, and 263-264.

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of bringing together and combining these texts in a way that makes it possible to observe and reproduce this erratic movement.

Such a movement is particularly heightened in Schnapp's monumental work. Here the book's length does not aim at comprehensiveness, but rather reflects an inclination toward variation. It is within this context that the title reference to the *universal* should be understood—not as a geographical expansion encompassing the entire globe, nor as a temporal sweep capturing every rise and fall to which ruins bear witness, but instead as a series of forays into various territories and epochs, in search of objects most apt to serve as spatial and historical gateways.

Moreover, it is precisely the meaning that *history* acquires in relation to ruins that provides a key to understanding what is ultimately at stake in this *histoire universelle*. From the outset, the work is placed under the tutelary figure of Johan Huizinga, whose definition of history as the "intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past"[1] recurs throughout the text, especially in its more theoretically sensitive passages. Framed within an anthropological discourse—based on the argument that if history is a mode of relating to the past, then all cultures must possess some form of history—Huizinga's definition acquires unexpected depth when applied to the problem of origins in Chapter 1.

It is hardly surprising that the volume begins in Mesopotamia and Egypt, with artifacts dating back to the third and second millennia BCE—after all, this is where most universal histories would begin. What is striking, however, is that the objects under analysis, although belonging to a period so distant as to mark the Pillars of Hercules of cultural history, nonetheless refer in turn to a lost past—a past that the present generation is either credited with retrieving (in the case of Egyptian "archaeology") or regarded as responsible for recovering (in the case of foundational Mesopotamian inscriptions).

Furthermore, as exemplified by the inscription of Khaemwaset from the thirteenth century BCE on the base of a statue that dated to more than a millennium earlier, the archaeological find becomes the site of a dialogue between different epochs—a staging ground for a temporal dynamic that opens time through

[1] Schnapp, *Storia*, p. 40.

material remains.[1] If history is a relation to the past, and ruins are the index of yet another, more remote past lying behind it, then the history of ruins enacts a kind of *mise en abyme*—or rather, a breach in time that opens it not only forward but also backward, endlessly deferring the point of origin.

In this way, ruins resignify each of the terms with which they are associated in the title. If *universal* comes to denote a rhapsodic mode of inquiry, illuminating unforeseen correspondences across space and time; if *history* bears the marks of a retrospective flight, a backward drift that destabilizes linear chronology; then *origins*, which might appear to signal the beginning of the investigation, immediately assume the status of an insoluble problem—not a point of departure, but an inevitable question, one that is perpetually deferred. A problem that does not begin and end with Egypt and the Mesopotamia; on the contrary, it recurs throughout the volume—whether in the mythological palimpsest of the Franks Casket, or in the archaeological *flesh* of relics (Chapter 4), or in Petrarch's recommencement from the Roman monuments (Chapter 6). Viewed from this perspective, the universal history of ruins reminds of Lewis Carroll's Alice and her endless fall into the well. Like the empty jar of marmalade that she replaces on a shelf while falling, ruins—hollow yet persistent—move along with the falling researcher who strives to grasp them.

How far can this research for the origins go? For the farther the inquiry into ruins advances backward, and the deeper the fall, the more the boundaries of history broaden and become indistinct. In this framework, it ceases to be solely a question of people, culture and their way of relating to the past; rather, it extends to encompass objects whose human manipulation is scarcely distinguishable from the shapes of nature. In other words, the temporal breach opened by ruins paves the way to a history before history, that "*enorme profondeur*" of time[2] that Marcheschi explores in his volume, as the outcome of a theoretical

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[1] Schnapp, *Storia*, 62–63.
[2] Marcheschi, *Storie*, 12, 228.

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investigation centred on the dialectic between time and ruins. This inquiry engages the *philosophes* of late eighteenth-century France, spanning the period between the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the publication of Georges Cuvier's *Recherches sur les ossements fossils de quadrupeds* in 1812.[1] During this time, "the ruin proves to be a peculiar object of knowledge, imbued with theoretical significance: through it, a specific form of temporality—irreversible, catastrophic, and non-progressive—becomes apparent".[2]

Ruins here acquire the status of philosophical tools through which the tension between temporal continuity and disruption is interrogated: a tension that situates nature either at the beginning of history—within the cycles of the transformation and metamorphosis of matter[3]—or at its end—natural catastrophes that obliterate civilisations and cities, as in the case of Atlantis (associated, in this context, to the destruction of Lisbon, Chapter 1), or Pompeii and Herculaneum, whose rediscovery and excavation overlap with the Enlightenment, thus becoming key archaeological *loci* for reflections on time (Chapter 2). This temporal tension is exemplified most clearly in the trajectory of Buffon's work: from *Les époques de la nature* (1749) to *Historie et Théorie de la Terre* (1778), the notions of cause and time undergo a radical transformation, marking a shift from "a natural history that resolves history into a theory of nature" to "a linear, discontinuous, and irreversible temporal structure".[4]

Caught between the irreversibility of the forces of nature that enter history, and the reversibility of natural cycles, the meaning of ruins both expands and contracts. Whether they involve an entire city with its petrified life, or the most minute geological remnants—such as shells and "all the smallest things in nature"[5]—ruins signal a transformation that has occurred—a transformation whose material residue enables the eighteenth century to "rewrite the grammar of time".[6] This is where the observer comes to the fore: it is its task to decipher the clues and evidence that the ruins display. Here, the theoretical question of ruins takes the form of a methodological problem, one that finds a paradigmatic

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[1] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 15.
[2] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 16.
[3] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 70.
[4] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 74.
[5] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 120.
[6] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 16.

answer in Zadig's inquiry in Voltaire's eponymous novel, where the protagonist is able to gather all sorts of information by "reading" the signs registered by the environment.[1] This answer does not erase the peculiar temporal movements embodied by ruins, but, on the contrary, plays with the exchange between their capacity to open time and the subject's imaginative faculty. Abduction, in fact, projects onto the past a series of hypotheses, formulated on the basis of traces and vestiges, which act as gateways to all kinds of histories and worlds.[2]

It is in their relation to the imaginary that a peculiar character of ruins is revealed: they are not merely traces of something that has happened—persisting in the present and pointing toward the future as a time of permanence or loss—but also enduring forms that hold all the "possibles" projected onto them by the observers. In this sense, the displacement noted so far gains both plasticity and dimensionality: it unfolds not only horizontally, as a movement back and forth on the temporal line, but also vertically, across different planes—just like Alice's jar. From this perspective, Diderot's "poetics of ruins"[3] can be fruitfully repurposed beyond the late eighteenth-century sentiment and cognition of ruins, to describe the imaginary layers laid upon them by antiquarians, poets, painters, and wanderers throughout time. Within this framework, ruins can be seen as ghosts of an unforgiving oblivion or as treasure caves waiting to be explored;[4] they can function as premonitions as well as monuments of the uncanny;[5] haunted buildings teeming with obscure presences[6] or "free" elements that may be recombined at will.[7]

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[1] Marcheschi, *Storie*, 160-161.
[2] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 163.
[3] Marcheschi, *Storie*, p. 142; Schnapp, *Storia*, 833–34; Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, p. 214)
[4] Schnapp, *Storia*, Chapter 4.
[5] Marcheschi, *Storie*, Chapters 3 and 5.
[6] Schnapp, *Storia*, 750–759.
[7] Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, Chapter 5.

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Stewart's study is structured around this expanded formulation of the poetics of ruins: from the biblical tales of obliteration[1]—especially that of the Tower of Babel, which recurs throughout the book[2]—to both ancient and modern poems—such as the anonymous eighth-century *Ruin*[3] and Shelley's 1817 *Ozymandias*[4]—to a wide range of visual representations (illuminations, medieval frescoes, modern paintings, and engravings from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries), ruins are analysed as points of intersection between imaginary and history. Such an intersection is more complex than it might appear at first glance: it is not merely a question of nourishing the imagery with the "matter" of history, as happens in the romantic *rêveries* of Antiquity. Rather, it consists of a conflictual relationship, which sometimes takes the form of a reciprocal "trip": on the one hand, history—with its dates, events, facts—slows down the progression of the imaginary toward fiction; on the other, the imaginary anachronizes the time of history through its leaps forward and backward. Once again, remnants, monuments, vestiges enable this dialectic to unfold: either as disconnected elements—fragments, solitary shapes,[5] motifs, ornaments—that the imaginary may freely assemble by virtue of their detachment from their original historical context[6]; or, conversely, as presences that summon a past whose historical specificity cannot be ignored—massive as it is—and which the imagination seeks to restore to its original state.[7]

The art of Piranesi[8] is one of the most eloquent stagings of this tension that inhabits the poetics of ruins.[9] His etchings combine the antiquarian's eye with the theatrical organisation of the gaze, which brings together within a single image multiple points of view –a lateral perspective alongside a "*sotto in su*" vision,

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[1] See also Marcheschi, *Storie*, Chapter 1.
[2] Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, 47-50, 143-153, and 263-264.
[3] Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, 12-14.
[4] Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, pp. 259-60.
[5] As in the case of Philips Galle's 1549 engraving of the Destruction of Jericho, in which the collapse of the buildings is depicted as a breakdown of a complex volume into its basic forms (Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, p. 149).
[6] On the connection between ruins and context see also the *Introduction* in Schnapp, *Storia*, and Marcheschi, *Storie*, Chapter 2.
[7] Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, Chapter 6.
[8] On Piranesi see also Schnapp, *Storia*, 796-806.
[9] Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, Chapter 5.

a close-up alongside a distant view.[1] Within this composite visual structure, these etchings display the most meticulous study of ancient (particularly Roman) remains and monuments, whose precision is simultaneously undermined by the freedom with which they are assembled—disregarding philological and historical principles of material connection and chronological continuity. This kind of "archaeological inventory", of which Piranesi is among the most prominent representatives, can—by virtue of its very composition, which brings into the same fictional space objects belonging to different periods and locations—become a "projected state of mind",[2] where the projection concerns both the creative, artistic fiction and the historical reconstruction.

The result is the series of *capricci* and *grotteschi* in which real and imaginary ruins, monuments, artworks are mingled together, producing a sense of estrangement. This estrangement arises from the juxtaposition of recognisable archaeological elements that do not correspond to one another—or to the context—thus generating dissonance and temporal dislocation. An estrangement that endures in later art, particularly in the work of Hubert Robert. Indeed, his *Ruins d'un arc de triomphe et autres monuments*[3] presents, through its "leftovers of an arch of triumph, of a portico, of a pyramid, of a temple, of a palace" an occasion to "anticipate the ravages of time" so that, by analogy, "our imagination disperses across the world the buildings in which we live". In this sense, ruins work both as marks of lost worlds and prefigurations of a fate that holds the present in checkmate, suspended in a state of perpetual precariousness—a tangled temporality that lays the groundwork for "the first line of the poetics of ruins"[4].

Imagination and history find in ruins—particularly in their eighteenth-century artistic representations—a site for a virtuous circle that interrogates time and its structure. On the one hand, there is the movement from the past, through the present toward the future and back again: comings and goings that ruins have the capacity to set in motion and sustain. On the other, there is the uncanny effect of a temporal suspension that arises when an archaeological remain is

[1] Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, p. 18.
[2] Stewart, *The Ruins Lesson*, p. 189.
[3] Marcheschi, *Storie*, 141-142; Schnapp, *Storia*, 808-809.
[4] Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, in John S.D. Glaus and Jean Seznec (eds.), *On Art and Artists. An Anthology of Diderot's Aesthetic Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), p. 146.

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extracted from its historical and spatial environment. After all, the poetics of ruins develops at the very moment when aesthetics and art history become autonomous disciplines—precisely on the basis of the detachment, enabled by imaginative forces, of ancient artworks from their original contexts. It is during this period that Johann Joachim Winckelmann publishes his *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764), in which the sculptures of Classical Age are interrogated through the lens of eighteenth-century theories of beauty and the ideal.

This does not mean that history is irrelevant—on the contrary: it is here that the hypothesis is formulated of an art that could attain such unparalleled heights precisely because of a sense of freedom rooted in the political structure of the fifth-century polis, a freedom deemed essential to the achievement of artistic perfection[1]. However, the historical dimension is invoked not to reinsert Classical Greek art in its proper framework, but rather to account for the vicissitudes of the ideal. That is, Winckelmann's inquiry proceeds from the premise that if art, properly conceived, consists of a synthesis of beauty, ideal and freedom, then one must search for the place and time in which this conjunction was most likely to have occurred. Aesthetic theory, in this sense, precedes historical analysis, rather than the former being the outcome of the latter.

From this point forward the remains of Antiquity would increasingly be viewed in terms of their suspended aesthetic existence, or as objects of study by the emerging discipline of art history, rather than for their temporal complexity. Fragments of sculptures, destroyed buildings, scattered traces of uncertain artistic value would gradually give way to fully recognised artworks—those deemed worthy of being collected in the first galleries and museums from Early Modernity onward. This shift in the perception of ruins would in turn open the way for archaeology to establish itself as an autonomous discipline, primarily

[1] Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 303-304; 312-312.

concerned with reconstructing the original context in which the objects of its inquiry were produced and functioned.

It is not by chance that all three books conclude at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century: the unravelling of the temporal, historical, and imaginary knot that had long been tied around ruins, together with the concurrent institutionalisation of separate disciplines that fragmented them into distinct objects of study, signals the end to their poetics. From this point on, there will be aesthetic objects, artworks, archaeological remains—each entailing a multifaceted yet specific notion of time, and a corresponding relation of the imaginary. The fall that accompanied the descent into the temporal well of ruins, is now arrested: either in the atemporal suspension of aesthetics, or within the bounded time and space that archaeology seeks to reconstruct, or along the historical lineage of artistic transmission—of styles, motifs, themes. Within this framework, the displacement inherent to ruins gives way to a certain form of belonging. This may offer a fruitful perspective from which to interrogate the recent revival of ruins studies as witnessed by Schapp, Marcheschi, and Stewart. It should be clear by now that what links these books is not merely an antiquarian interest in ruins, but rather a concern for their temporal eccentricity—for their power to set time 'out of joint', so to speak. Indeed, each of them, in its own way, reactivates the temporal enigma of ruins not in order to resolve it, but to probe the peculiar sense of loss and dislocation that they carry with them.

And what better way to question our own 'interesting times'—what better moment to do so than in the midst of the fall?

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