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Introduction

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Introduction

Isabelle Gadoin and Catherine Lanone

1 This volume is issued from a joint conference organized by the SAIT ('Société des Amis d'Intertextes', the French Society for Intermedial and Intertextual Studies) and the SEAC ('Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines', the French Society for Twentieth-Century British Studies), which took place in November 2011 in Senate House, London—a fitting place, by Russell Square, to conjure up visions of the Blitz and rustling intertextual echoes, and connect text and image. Drawing upon key texts by Rose Macaulay, Robert Ginsberg, Michel Makarius or Sara Wasson, moving from Walter Benjamin to Jacques Derrida, the papers confront the representation of remains and an unstable age.

2 The variety of approaches at the conference was illustrated and summed up by Valérie Blanc's video creation 'The Renovation' (2007), a fluid and vibrant exploration of a house caught in the moment before renovation, with its open paneless windows, its ladder leading nowhere, and its floating fragments of the past—traces of frescoes and wallpaper, rubble accompanied by the flickering letters of the alphabet, and the lyrical music (Enrico Caruso's 'Tiempo Antico') echoing the whispers of time. The dance of the camera evokes the movement of memory fluctuating between past and present, as timeless 'shards of pottery and ceramics' are discovered side by side with traces of recent life, like 'broken remains of champagne bottles' (V. Le Blanc). Contemplation sets questions into motion, and the place turns into a riddle, a maze of fragmentary suggestions: 'the living can only guess at the answers to some of the mysteries generated by inanimate ruins' (V. Le Blanc). When the song ends, 'a lively exchange at a fish market breaks the mood' of contemplation; 'time rushes forward to the present and any unspoken mystery is broken by the clatter and banter of the living' (V. Le Blanc). Dwelling on disappearing traces, the spectator is also moved to look into possible futures. But in this pendulum process, the past is revealed to be as much of a construction as the present and future: in our tentative apprehension of time, ruins, with their gaps, crevices, and black holes, work as emblems of uncertainty. Le Blanc's work thus captures the tension at the core of the conference, which sought to explore the paradox of twentieth-century representations of ruins,

neither the death of art nor the art of death, but a locus of in-betweenness and deferral, a new space which can be inhabited by the gaze.

3 Like the fluttering traces in Le Blanc's work, all depictions of ruins are palimpsests. Spatial contemplation becomes a meditation on time; and modern representations can hardly avoid engaging with the tradition of literary and pictorial ruins: the aesthetic legacy of the eighteenth-century cult of the 'Picturesque' with its passion for ruins as crystals of time suffused with melancholy pleasure; of the Gothic with its labyrinths of vaults, broken palaces and shattered abbeys; of Romantic hubris and Turner's luminous visions; and of nineteenth-century revaluation of ruins as dwindling points of aesthetic stability as well as symptoms of mutability in a changing world stamped by Darwinian ruthlessness and degeneracy. The papers therefore aim to analyze the hybrid function of ruins, which do not only offer themselves passively for contemplation, but turn into metaphors of the literary process of construction or reconstruction, through such processes as citation, allusion, parody. They shift from sublime metonymies to broken signs of hardship and troubled consciousness, focusing not only on the visual motif of ruins but on the function of citation as an attempt to include the ruined pieces of bygone art and cultural systems, whether the purpose be to 'shore fragments' against ruin, as in the case of Modernism, or to challenge and deconstruct present exhaustion and past master discourses, as in the case of Post-Modernism. A symptom of trauma and a key to irrevocable mutations, Ruins become a way of engaging with History and the shattered self.

4 Adèle Cassigneul's analysis of *To the Lighthouse* re-enters the haunting house of traces visited by Valérie Le Blanc, from a literary vantage point. She traces the elegiac association in the novel between the decaying house and the mother's death. In the same way as the faded photographs of a family album recall and revive the memory of the departed, the house acts like a *camera oscura* revealing and multiplying or refracting shadowy images, or to quote Georges Didi-Huberman, 'surviving images' wandering in a era of ghosts. Such is the oxymoric nature of ruins, that they gather, and even superimpose, what is preserved and what is lost—a good definition for all ' *french lieux de mémoire*', public and private . . . For the family house, for all its intimate memories, also records the historical impact of World War One. Within ruins, several histories and distinct temporalities interweave. And Woolf attempts to find a fragmented, cinematic form that might capture the uneasy tension between emptiness and the metonymic impulse towards regeneration. Karen Brown further revisits the ghosts of World War One by exploring the poetic work of an emerging key figure of Irish Modernism, Thomas MacGreevy, and his poetic response to ruination. Against modern nihilism, MacGreevy looks for 'illumination' in the art of the past; against modern fragmentation, he tries to weave a tight network of mythical and intertextual references—from Titian and Giorgione to Wagner and Picasso. Even if dissonance is still at the heart of his aesthetic, such humanistic references help him negotiate memories of Ypres and the Bataille de la Somme, and to try and reconcile the Irish Civil War to his Christology.

5 Before venturing further into the representations of war and texts, the analysis of intertextual and literary ruins calls for a Victorian ghost, a writer who mapped Wessex with its palimpsest of traces, its pre-historical tumuli and pagan temples, its ruined coffins and the organic legacy of past ages. Drawing upon Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Jacques Derrida, Florence Marie duly returns to the Benjaminian aura of ruins in Thomas Hardy's works, through their intertextual re-writing in two of John Cowper Powys's

novels. She defines the mythic accretion of ruins and the process of sedimentation that lead to a textual model of cross-fertilization. Just as geology reveals the layering of historical epochs, literature is a stratification of texts, where the footprints of former writers may always be spotted—the process of reading then becoming an archaeology of motifs and forms. But inheritance and transmission are never a one-dimensional process: digging into the past can bring about a 'spasmodic return of the repressed' which may shake present certainties and values . . .

6 But beyond the agonizing vision of World War One, twentieth-century representations of ruins must confront the *kairos* of World War Two, the moment when Britain teetered on the brink of collapse.

7 Sophie Aymes offers a fine study of the temporality of ruins, drawing attention to the dual concept at work: on the one hand, certain ruins may still be distanced and aestheticised. The picturesque image of ivy growing over a bony structure and filling in the holes and crevices (like the tufts of grass fighting their way among the rubbin Valérie Le Blanc's video) serves to cover over memories, and erase pathos. It serves to muffle one's sense of destruction as the 'wilderness of stone' is made to 'germinate and grow' (Wasson 6). Since there is no longer any direct awareness of the building as a whole, or of the circumstances of near-destruction, there remains but a nostalgic, beautified perception of timeless fragments. On the other hand, the most recent ruins are gaping wounds which cannot be so easily dismissed nor reintegrated within an organic movement of growth. Pitting Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf and Mervyn Peake against Rose Macaulay and Claire Leighton, her paper examines how the representation of ruins reflects the aesthetic tension between the modernist quest for purity and vernacular visions of picturesque accretion. Dessication and crystallisation convey a sense of ontological instability.

8 Thomas Dutoit, Catherine Hoffmann and Michel Morel further map the representations of the Blitz and the iconic role of ruins like Coventry Cathedral. Thomas Dutoit reads Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* in terms of Heidegger's *Dasein* and Derridean deferral, in a novel which seems obsessed with falling. He shows that ruins trope the unstable relationship of the protagonists, from their meeting among bombs falling, to the echoes of letters and resolved death. Impending ruin is inscribed in the encounter, both enabling and dooming it. Catherine Hoffmann probes into the distance between picturesque ruins and the raw experience of collapse, focusing on the motif of the ruined threshold in Antony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*, a metatextual emblem of narrative beginnings, intertextual legacy and historical trauma. She follows the shift from the nostalgic mood of noble ruins to more prosaic gaps like a damaged pub, using Parrinder's concept of 'charismatic', 'singing' ruins. In the pictorial tradition of Piranesi, Poussin, Claude or Hubert Robert, the ruined arch was used to frame a stage and organise the 'scenography' for some visual drama; in its merely vestigial presence, the arch works as a threshold to a fantasy world or dreamscape, transmuting the story of destruction into imaginary material. Michel Morel seeks to reconcile aesthetic ruins and the trauma of the recent 'history of destruction'[1] by returning to Coventry cathedral and paying tribute to Basil Spence's 1962 *tour de force*. In a brilliant architectural feat, Spence manages to negotiate the excruciating impact of recent ruins and reinvent Romanesque legacy rather than copy the Gothic remains, thereby creating an organic connection which articulates the sense of historical trauma. Comparing Spence's integrative effort with other architectural choices which favoured mere 'dualist' juxtaposition of old and

new buildings, Michel Morel shows that in Coventry the new literally grows out of the old, reinventing the Gothic with a visual and spatial oxymoronic structure, simultaneously disjunctive and conjunctive, which captures both violent rupture and temporal continuity. The 'stigmata of death' are still visible and act as a *punctum*; yet the 'prick' of pathos may be followed by the release of *studium* and the pleasure of aesthetic contemplation.

9 Moving towards postmodern representations of war, Sylvie Maurel shows that with *Atonement*, Ian McEwan explores the possibility (or lack thereof) of mending ruins, interrogating less the aesthetics than the politics of ruins. The Surrey country house is a token of Victorian artifice, a *construction* meant to suggest stability, and therefore an imposture rather than a remnant from the past. Interestingly, the ruined Gothic temple is here denounced as a sham and an eyesore—a metatextual emblem that lays bare McEwan's indictment of social and ethical dereliction. Similarly the depiction of the Dunkirk retreat does against the grain of conventions, refusing to dwell on British heroism and offering a fragmented view of a ruined army on a shameful move. With its final challenging narrative reversal, *Atonement* uses irony to challenge melancholy myths (the Victorian legacy, the heroic war) and return instead to the cutting edge of historiographic metafiction and wounds which may never be atoned for. Jean-Michel Ganteau also interprets images of ruins from the angle of trauma and trauma theory, to underline the ethical impact of the poetics of ruins as a 'poetics of vulnerability', in three of Peter Ackroyd's novels: *Hawksmoor*, *The House of Doctor Dee* and *Chatterton*. These novels are haunted by urban vestiges and waste, a landscape of incompletion which reminds us of the presence of an unknowable and un-representable other at the very heart of our lives. This radical otherness is also understood in temporal terms, as revealed by the layered structure of narrations that alternate between different places and distinct moments of time, cut across by sudden uncanny moments of resurgence of the repressed other. Thus the temporality of ruins is that of a disjointed time 'indexed on *kairos*', the instant of revelation that defeats any reading of History as linear and causal logic. Yet this disjointed vision of time and society calls as a counterpart an awareness of human frailty, of the socially invisible, that points in the end to an ethics of 'care'. Bringing vulnerability—be it architectural or human—into visibility is part of the moral function of ruins.

10 In spite of this shortly-glimpsed 'ethics of alterity', it is a darker and darker vision of the self, groping for definition through the ruins of European civilisation, that is developed in many post-World War Two novels. Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès shows that W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* both works within and yet challenges the tradition of *memento mori*. Sebald plays with referentiality by inserting within his narrative photographs, newspaper articles, drawings and other visual documents which might initially be read as archival material, meant to authenticate the narration. Yet, although the montage at first sight seems to bind all those documents together seamlessly, the effect is rather that of an intermedial landscape of textual and visual ruins not easily mended—in other words the 'fractured narrative' of a 'fractured nation' (Wasson 15). The tantalising structure finally foregrounds the mirage of purely 'objective' testimony, and the fundamental unreliability of all historical documents. Individual and collective memory merely attempt to work their way through trauma by reconstructing history into narratives, but thereby reveal the fragility and transience of the human condition. This rewriting of *memento mori* is also at the heart of Liliane Louvel's and Frédérique Amselle's articles, which explore

fragmented visions of the self in a shattering sense of history—after World War Two. For Frédérique Amselle, the self-portraits by Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud explore the self as ruin in the making, offering slippery visions of the elusive relation to identity and the passing of time. Like Picasso's last self-portraits which seem to sculpt the skull beneath the very features of the face, Bacon's and Freud's dual self-portraits practice 'autobiography as defacement', as shown by Paul de Man: they strip the sitter's face and break aesthetic conventions in order to deconstruct flesh and mind. Thus the horror of the century is nowhere directly represented or referenced, but seeps through Bacon's paintings, in the flickering intensity of distorted interiority, like a silent scream. Liliane Louvel also reads Anita Brookner's *The Next Big Thing* as a modern *memento mori*. Replete with pictorial allusions to Titian, Rembrandt, Claude, Turner, Delacroix, the novel explores physical and social decay, dramatizing the loss of self, and the difficult acceptance of loss, through mirror vision and the final collapse of the protagonist. This is set within the wider echoes of the Shoah, suggesting that an individual's progress is the metonymy for a more poignant, more violent *memento mori*, connoting the ruin of humanism. Liliane Louvel explores the paintings of Félix Nussbaum as the ultimate *memento mori*, a view of a French concentration camp painted during a period of relative freedom, *before* the horror of deportation, and yet giving a paradoxical glimpse of the unrepresentable doom awaiting him.

11 Liliane Louvel's meditation on double vision offers a fitting conclusion for this volume on fragments and ruins, hovering between collapse and survival, reconstruction and deconstruction, memory and loss, aesthetic sublimation and the pathos of open wounds. Ruins open fault-lines, exposing, rather than the smell of smouldering remains, a sharp division between before and after, an intense sense of the collapse of ideologies and promises. The ultimate negotiation of the bankruptcy of meaning may lead to repetition and elegy, or to parody, in the attempt to create ephemeral art retaining the traces of the past but displacing them, leading to brief presences and suddenly glimpsed vanishing points, as residue becomes resistance and art articulates waste.

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NOTES

1. See W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* [1999], Penguin Books, 2004. The 'destruction' dealt with is of course anything but 'natural', since the book attempts to lift the taboo, or to denounce the work of 'liquidation' (p. 7), or the 'individual and collective amnesia' (p. 9) which repressed the very awareness of the full extent of human and material destruction in Germany.

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Mots-clés: W. Benjamin, R. Ginzberg, R. Macaulay, M. Makarius, S. Wasson, épuisement, fragment, incertitudes, ruines, sublime
Keywords: exhaustion, ruins, uncertainty, sublimity

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