

7 Life in ruins*

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I begin with a thought-experiment. Imagine, to start with, the disappearance of humans from the Earth. We are eliminated, in this scenario, not by means of a nuclear war or other pan-planetary catastrophe, but rather by a *Homo sapiens*-specific virus, which results in the swift deletion of our species but leaves our built environment intact, and the ecologies of which we are part undisturbed other than by our absence. Imagine, in fact, for the purposes of finessing the counter-factual, that the planet's last human perished at some point in the late winter of 2012. What then would happen to 'the world without us', in Alan Weisman's phrase (Weisman 2007: 5)? Or rather – for the more precise purposes of this thought-experiment – what would happen to the city of Cambridge without us? How would the city alter over the weeks, months, years, decades and centuries following its abandonment?

Allow me to hypothecate a set of futures for this post-human Cambridge. First and fastest come the hungry fungi, even at that cold time of year. In kitchens and dining rooms, moulds bloom on food left out on sideboards and worktops, spreading their mycelial nets of grey, yellow and green. With no one to chase it away, dust settles in the windless interiors of lounges and bedrooms. Decay has started, but so in its way has stasis. In March, a late spell of winter is cast. Water freezes in pipes, and then a thaw brings floods: ceilings crash down, walls fatten,

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soffit boards rupture. That summer, fire follows: lightning strikes and gas explosions, leaving cratered holes and husked houses. By August, rosebay willowherb – also known as bomb-weed, because it thrives on carbon-rich soil – flowers on these blackened sites like a pink floral fire.

Out on the streets in the first couple of years, the situation is volatile. Asphalt and paving have been cracked by freeze–thaw cycles; soil has blown into the fissures and plants have taken root. Sycamore seedlings prise up paving slabs and shift granite kerb edges, bindweed laces the spokes of rusting bicycles, jays bury acorns by the thousand in open ground. Aggressive species such as buddleia proliferate on facades and walls, their roots powerful enough to crack bricks when thirsting down for water. Buildings and thoroughfares are slowly torn apart by flora; weeds disassemble the city into tipsy chaos.

After five years, various guerrilla ecologies are well established. There are successful escapees from domestic gardens: snowberries, cotoneaster, conifers. Japanese knotweed and Japanese anemones run riot. The water in the city's outdoor swimming pools has thickened with leaf debris, which mulches darkly down; the first stage in the creation of tiny fens. Blackthorn marches from the hedges, suckering rapidly along, and elm works out in small thickets, keeping its head low (for Dutch Elm disease is still present). A soil cap deepens on the tarmac, low in nutrients and therefore highly bio-diverse, on which clover, grass, and wildflowers including orchids thrive.

Within five years, pairs of peregrines are breeding in the chalk pits of south Cambridge and on the towers of the university buildings, drawn by the increased prey and the absence of human interference. Owl populations boom, enjoying the availability of nest-sites in the ruins and the surge in mice numbers. Rabbit and fox populations fluctuate in complex relation to one another. Packs of wild dogs become the top mammal predators.

With the city's flood defences unmanaged, sluices and bridges block with debris, and the river begins to explore the possible extents of its domain. Coe Fen and Lammas Land flood: good news for little egrets and herons and for phragmites reeds. Chetti's warblers sing out of the vast stands of pink Himalayan balsam that bully the rest of the riverbank

flora. Without agricultural nitrate run-off, the Cam becomes clear and oligotrophic, its pike more abundant and larger in size. The American crayfish completes its invasion of the waterways: mink and otter, no longer depleted by traps and cars, rise in number.

Over the course of a century, on the drier ground, grass gives way to thistle, which gives way to a scrub of hawthorn and elder, which gives way to a forest that grows extensively through the city, comprising sycamores, ash and oak, beeches, hazel and lime: a return of sorts to the pre-Atlantic period wildwood that once covered the south-east of England. On Parker's Piece, the open parkland in the city's centre, the grass first rises high and then falls back as silver birch and a heathland emerge.

Within 500 years nature's reclamation project is almost complete. Little that is recognizable of today's Cambridge is still visible. The city has been re-wilded. The famous buildings are mostly rubble, enjungled like Mayan ruins. The open spaces are forest or fen, browsed by large herbivores – Konick ponies and Highland cattle, escapees from local conservation initiatives – which keep glades open between the trees.

Of course, human residue remains, even that long after we have vanished. What will survive of us is love, wrote Philip Larkin, but actually what will survive of us is plastic. When archaeologists from other planets come to analyse the late-Anthropocene, our middens will be filled not with clam-shells and nut-husks, like those of our Mesolithic forebears, but with washing-up liquid bottles and ice-cream tubs. This is how my counter-factual ends: on a summer's day 1000 years hence, the warm wind trundles an empty plastic Coke bottle past what was once Great St Mary's Church, chasing it between trees and saplings, until at last the bottle gets ensnared in weeds, hard up against the pale and prostrate masonry of King's College Chapel.

Ruinism

Ecologically speaking, ruins offer niches for species: their combination of shelter and exposure, and their broken material textures, provide ideal footholds for weeds and wildflowers. Culturally speaking, ruins also offer niches for narrative: their disrupted structures, and their resonant allusions to collapsed pasts and dreamed-of futures, provide ideal footholds

for writers and artists, who have for centuries now been drawn to ruins as sites peculiarly generative of story and of trope.

It is possible, indeed, to construct a long and near-continuous cultural history of what might be called 'ruinism' – by which I mean the art and literature of ruins – from classical literature through to the present day, with clear peaks of interest during the Renaissance, Romanticism, and then through the late nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Within that ruinist tradition, there has been an enduring preoccupation with nature's resurgence in a context of human wreckage – the idea of 'life in ruins', in both senses. This preoccupation has often taken the form of an apocalyptic pastoral in which – as in this essay's opening thought-experiment – ruins induce green-minded and at times troublingly misanthropic futurological fantasies about humanity's large-scale depletion and nature's large-scale return. The roots of this apocalyptic pastoral go back to the early seventh century BC, to the Book of Zephaniah, which relishingly warns that after the destruction of Nineveh 'the desert owl and the screech owl shall lodge on its capitals, the raven croak on its thresholds'. All such scenarios arise from the fact that, as Georg Simmel observed in his 1911 essay 'The Ruin', a ruin is an inorganic object sliding towards an organic state: these scenarios imaginatively follow that slide forwards to the point that artifice is all but abolished and organicism all but triumphant.

This essay is interested in the ways in which writers and artists since the late nineteenth century have imagined the future ruination of the human world, and how they have conjured the place of nature – life – within those ruins. It is consciously fragmentary in its engagements with numerous different works, rather than braced by a single arching thesis, but those fragments are also tendrilled through by certain continuous preoccupations. As well as exploring ideas of life in ruin, and the work of particular modern ruinist artists, works and texts, I want also to consider some of the conceptual paradoxes that aggregate around ruinist art, as well as the uses and capacities of future ruinism. Which is to say – to explore how speculative art about the ruins of the future might have been thought able to help us to visualize possible futures for ourselves, and therefore perhaps the better both to inhabit our own time, and to choose wisely between our various available prospects.



FIGURE 7.1 Gustave Doré, 'The New Zealander', from Blanchard Jerrold, *London: A Pilgrimage* (London: Grant and Co., 1872).

Among the best-known images of modern ruinism is Gustave Doré's 1872 engraving, entitled 'The New Zealander' (Figure 7.1). Thomas Babington Macaulay had first imagined the figure of the New Zealander in an 1840 review essay warning against Whig presumptions of the

glorious continuity of English Protestantism. The Catholic Church, Macaulay concluded, 'may still exist' far in the future, when 'some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's' (Macaulay 1840: 258). The rhetorical afterlives of Macaulay's New Zealander were prolific. By January 1865, the New Zealander had become so ubiquitous that *Punch* magazine issued a parodic proclamation banning its use. Henceforth, the editorial declared, 'it shall not be lawful for any journalist, essayist, magazine-writer, penny-a-liner, poetaster, criticaster, public speaker, lecturer, Lord Rector, Member of Parliament, novelist, or dramatist' to make use of this 'threadbare' and 'hackneyed' figure (Anon. 1865: 9). Nevertheless, seven years after *Punch's* proscription, Doré included 'The New Zealander' in the set of 180 engravings he published to illustrate Blanchard Jerrold's *London: A Pilgrimage*, and Doré's image has since itself become iconic to the point of cliché. There sits the New Zealander with his sketchbook, looking across to Commercial Wharf: symbol of the city and its former life-bloods of finance and trade, now redundant on the burst banks of the Thames. Above the wharf rise ruins – and up to its capitols surges life in the form of the trees.

It is worth noting the voyeuristic aspect to Doré's image, for it shares this aspect with much of what might tendentiously be called 'romantic ruinism': there sits the witness, safe on his side of the river. He is no calamity-racked refugee: well clothed and well equipped, the ruins prompt him to cogitation, rather than challenging him to survival. And we, of course, are second-order voyeurs, watching the watcher – and ourselves able also to wallow safely in the spectacular pathos of the scene. Voyeurism is one of the two most frequent criticisms levelled at ruinist art and literature; the other is that of nostalgia or conservatism. According to this criticism, actual ruins draw the viewer's imagination always backwards in time, and the future ruin is often made emblematic – as here in Doré – of state institutions which, by being mourned in advance, are implicitly affirmed in the present. Certainly, ruins – either real or forecast – all allude to a function that is no longer fulfilled. The ruined cathedral has ceased to offer a space for worship, the ruined wharf has ceased to facilitate nation-building trade. The material incompleteness of a ruin can provoke a supplementary impulse in the viewer. We 'supply the

missing pieces from [our] own imagination', as Christopher Woodward has put it (Woodward 2001: 15). It is for these reasons among others that the nostalgic-conservative criticism is made – the suggestion that the ruinist imagination of both artist and audience is inevitably passive-regressive.

There are limits to this criticism, however, and over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ruins have come increasingly to be figured culturally not as nostalgic sites, but rather as complicatedly and diagnostically forward-looking. In fiction, sculpture, painting and film, the anticipation of a ruinous end has frequently served as a narrative means by which, or more precisely from which, we might return and make better sense of our freshly estranged present. Because future ruins allude to an end but are not quite it – matter and evidence have survived, traces are readable – they possess a peculiar power in terms of relaying the present. Again and again, imagined ruins have been pressed into cultural service, used both to diagnose and to warn.

Enjunglement and crystallization

Over the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ruinism tightened as a cultural fascination; in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it has approached an obsession and has therefore also often condensed as kitsch. We live now in an era of widespread ruination, and so we live also an era of widespread rumination on ruination. As Brian Dillon notes a fine short essay on the recent cultural history of decay, late modernity has experienced 'what appears to be a distinct flourishing – in the realms of global events, popular culture and the work of visual artists – of images of catastrophe and decay' (Dillon 2011: 10). One such late modern flourishing might be traced from its origin in Max Ernst's vast painting 'Europe after the Rain', thought to have been completed in 1942. The rain of Ernst's title is of course the rain of bombs delivered by Allied and Axis planes upon the cities of Europe, and the ruin of his canvas is part-masonry, part-ossuary: the humanoid figures, erotically tendrilled with lianas, seem to have been smothered rather than saved by the return of vegetation. The natural life that has returned to this debris

is neither hopeful nor benevolent; it has collaborated in the extinction of the human presence, or at least its mutation into the hybrid birdmen and tree-people that can be seen emerging here and there in the painting (such portmanteau post-humans recur in the ruinist fantasies of Japanese anime directors, most notably Hayao Miyazaki and his followers, including Kei-ichi Sugiyama, whose *Origin* (2007) is set in a reforested future Earth, and features Ernst-inspired dryads and aged tree-men).

Ernst's art turns up as a detail in J. G. Ballard's 1962 novel *The Drowned World*, which is set in a future in which climate change has resulted in massive sea-level rise and the enjunglement of great swathes of the globe. On the wall of a ruined apartment in an overgrown city, writes Ballard, the canvas of 'one of Max Ernst's self-devouring phantasmagoric jungles screamed silently to itself'; one futurological work of ruinism is seen to have predicted the scenario contained within another (Ballard 2008: 29). In 1966 Ballard published the partner-piece novel to *The Drowned World*, called *The Crystal World*, the mass-market paperback edition of which wore another of Ernst's jungular paintings as its cover. The book's conceit is audacious: deep in the jungles of Central Africa, the world begins to crystallize. From its African epicentre, the crystallization moves outwards, converting the jungle and its inhabitants into a bejewelled dream-forest, in which crocodiles encased in glittering second skins lurch down the river, and pythons with huge gemstone eyes rear and strike lapidary poses.

Ballard's crystallizations themselves recur in a recent example of ruinist art, Roger Hiorns' 2008 sculpture/installation-piece, 'Seizure'. Hiorns arranged for 75,000 l of copper sulphate solution to be pumped into an abandoned and disintegrating council flat in a low-rise late-modernist housing development in Elephant and Castle, London, where it crystallized upon every available surface (Figure 7.2). It is a troubling, even menacing precipitation, a spiky modernist super-mould that suggests a decay first accelerated then halted: the witchily beautiful bedizening of a confined living area in a troubled part of a city. It is a work that allows no easy reading or soft voyeurism: it is too ocularly and conceptually prickly for that. The 'Seizure' of its title invokes at once a physical spasm, the chemical action of precipitation, and seizure in the sense of a compulsory

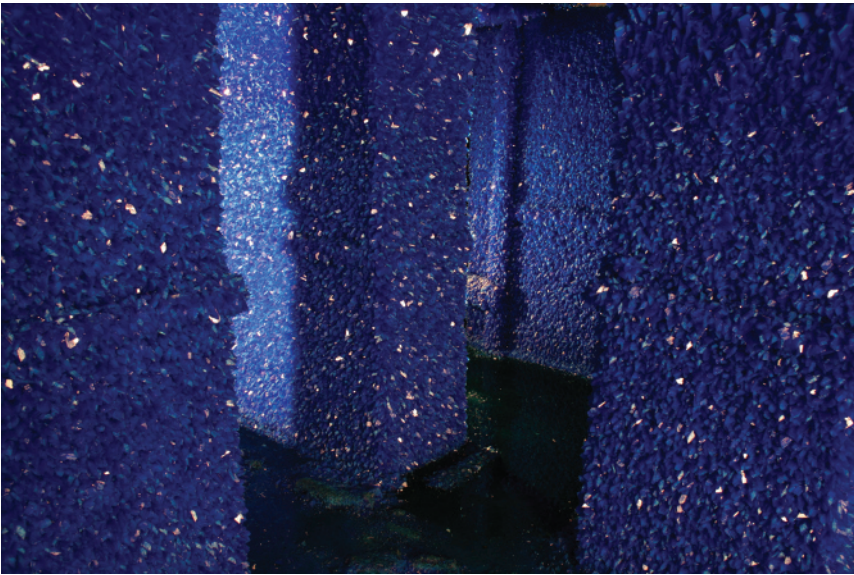


FIGURE 7.2 Detail from Roger Hiorns' 'Seizure' (2008): view of the crystallized interior of the Harper Road flat. Photograph copyright Nick Cobbing. 'Seizure' was commissioned by Artangel and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation, and supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, in association with Channel 4. Image reproduced by permission of Artangel.

purchase order or bailiff's visit to evict a household unable to pay its bills: the work was contemporary in its engagement with the consequences of financial crisis.

Late-modern ruinism has proliferated, of course, because late-modern ruins have proliferated. As Ernst suggests – and as Leo Mellor has documented in a fine recent book on the subject, *Reading the Ruins* – the Second World War made an actual ruinscape of much of Europe. During the Cold War, nuclear conflict proposed to the imagination an apocalypse that was both sudden and plausible: a day's laying waste of a planet that had taken 3 billion years of life to develop. As the Cold War threat receded, its brutalist infrastructures became redundant, and fell first to abandonment and then to ruin. And although the nuclear threat has itself receded, climate change now nourishes 'further ruinous fantasies and apprehensions' (Dillon 2011: 10). In the realms of architecture and

urban planning, infrastructure obsolescence is now more rapid: as Woodward observes, ‘destruction’ is now ‘of a different speed and scale... we construct more, and bigger, buildings than ever before – and abandon them more quickly than ever before’ (Woodward 2011: 18). Financial crises leave uncompleted building projects; drastic urbanization continues worldwide – for many reasons, our present is increasingly littered with debris of the futures that our pasts have envisaged.

The *locus classicus* of our contemporary fascination with life in ruins is Detroit, the Motor City, which, after enjoying early twentieth-century glory with architectural aspirations to Roman grandeur, experienced rapid economic collapse. The abandoned heart of the city has become enjungled, and the area now annually attracts thousands of ruin-tourists, some of whom take ‘urb-ex’ (urban-exploration) tours through the city’s dilapidating edifices. Upon Detroit in particular have descended hundreds of photographers, film-makers, artists, writers and other voyeuristic gleaners in the debris, attracted by the idea that Detroit offers a localized version of the world without us – a present-day future ruin – but often paying scant attention to the ongoing economic-social circumstances that frame the startling sights. So ubiquitous has the ‘Detroit Jungle’ become as an image, in fact, that – like Macaulay’s New Zealander – it has become denounced as cultural cliché and worse (the sub-genre of ‘ruin-porn’ has been named and shamed as visually exploitative and ethically insensitive).

There is, unmistakably, a misanthropic comfort in such deep-green dreams of a post-human world. For when imagining our own deletion, we are absolved of our monstrous success as a species: forever out-expanding our niche and bringing about as we have the sixth great extinction pulse in the Earth’s history. Our biotic hegemony can temporarily be forgotten, and the imagined return of nature offers temporary atonement. It will all be all right in the end, such fantasies assure us – the planet will recover from its infestation of *Homo sapiens*.

Various shades of green

Let me use that idea of hoped-for deep-green future to draw us out of the contemporary and back to 1885, thirteen years after Doré’s engraving, and the year in which the English naturalist, journalist, essayist and

novelist Richard Jefferies publishes his strangest book. *After London; or Wild England* is a novella in which, as result of an unspecified catastrophe, the English landscape has been dramatically re-wilded. 'The old men say their fathers told them that soon after the fields were left to themselves a change began to be visible', the book begins, in an opening whose tone is pitched partway between fairytale and lore, and which bears quoting at length (not least for its anticipation of this essay's preliminary counter-factual):

It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended, so that all the country looked alike. The meadows were green, and so was the rising wheat which had been sown, but which neither had nor would receive any further care. Such arable fields as had not been sown, but where the last stubble had been ploughed up, were overrun with couch-grass, and where the short stubble had not been ploughed, the weeds hid it. So that there was no place which was not more or less green; the footpaths were the greenest of all, for such is the nature of grass where it has once been trodden on, and by-and-by, as the summer came on, the former roads were thinly covered with the grass that had spread out from the margin.

In the autumn, as the meadows were not mown, the grass withered as it stood, falling this way and that, as the wind had blown it; the seeds dropped, and the bennets became a greyish-white, or, where the docks and sorrel were thick, a brownish-red. The wheat, after it had ripened, there being no one to reap it, also remained standing, and was eaten by clouds of sparrows, rooks, and pigeons, which flocked to it and were undisturbed, feasting at their pleasure. As the winter came on, the crops were beaten down by the storms, soaked with rain, and trodden upon by herds of animals.

Next summer the prostrate straw of the preceding year was concealed by the young green wheat and barley that sprang up from the grain sown by dropping from the ears, and by quantities of docks, thistles, oxeye daisies, and similar plants. . . . Footpaths were concealed by the second year, but roads could be traced, though as green as the sward, and were still the best for walking, because the tangled wheat and weeds, and, in the meadows, the long grass, caught the feet of those who tried to pass through. . . .

Aquatic grasses from the furrows and water-carriers extended in the meadows, and, with the rushes, helped to destroy or take the place of the

former sweet herbage. Meanwhile, the brambles, which grew very fast, had pushed forward their prickly runners farther and farther from the hedges till they had now reached ten or fifteen yards. The briars had followed, and the hedges had widened to three or four times their first breadth, the fields being equally contracted. Starting from all sides at once, these brambles and briars in the course of about twenty years met in the centre of the largest fields . . .

No fields, indeed, remained, for where the ground was dry, the thorns, briars, brambles, and saplings already mentioned filled the space, and these thickets and the young trees had converted most part of the country into an immense forest. Where the ground was naturally moist, and the drains had become choked with willow roots, which, when confined in tubes, grow into a mass like the brush of a fox, sedges and flags and rushes covered it. Thorn bushes were there, too, but not so tall; they were hung with lichen. Besides the flags and reeds, vast quantities of the tallest cow-parsnips or 'gicks' rose five or six feet high, and the willow herb with its stout stem, almost as woody as a shrub, filled every approach.

By the thirtieth year there was not one single open place, the hills only excepted, where a man could walk, unless he followed the tracks of wild creatures or cut himself a path. The ditches, of course, had long since become full of leaves and dead branches, so that the water which should have run off down them stagnated, and presently spread out into the hollow places and by the corner of what had once been fields, forming marshes where the horsetails, flags, and sedges hid the water.

(Jefferies 1885: 1–5)

Only a few humans have survived the scarification of their species. Mad-Maxish tribes of 'gypsies' and 'Bushmen' roam the land, divided along ethnic as well as self-interested lines. Jefferies' book pursues its lone adventuring hero, Sir Felix Aquila, who crosses a vast inland lake to reach at last a putrid and noxious swamp, which he realizes to be the site of 'the deserted and utterly extinct city of London', now lying 'under his feet' (Jefferies 1885: 378). The capital is granted no reprieve by Jefferies; Aquila is there to witness and thus authenticate its total vanquishing by nature. The pleasure with which Jefferies visits destruction upon human structures, and London in particular, is unmistakable. Various reasons suggest themselves for this, beyond his natural green-mindedness. He was, at the time of writing *After London*, suffering from tuberculosis

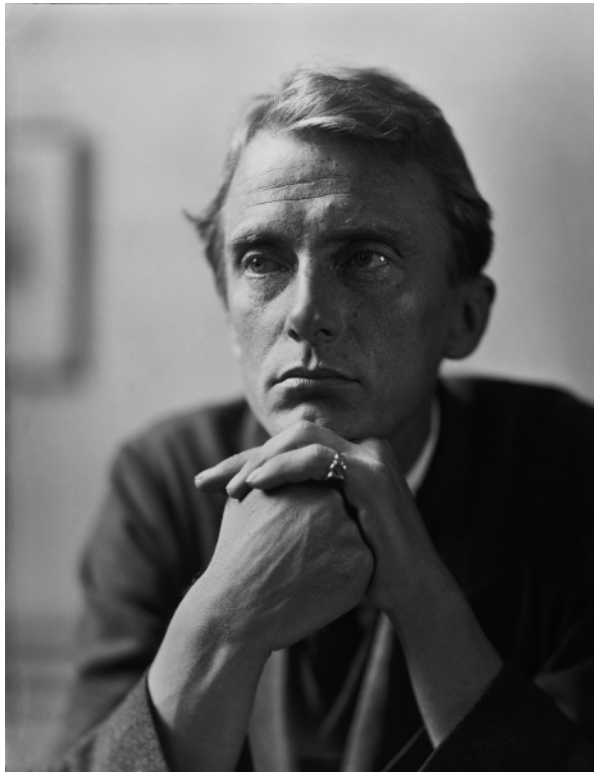


FIGURE 7.3 Edward Thomas, studio portrait by E. O. Hoppe, c. 1912. Reproduced with permission of Richard Emery.

which he figured to himself, fascinatingly, as a ‘dust’ that settled on him (and which would kill him two years later in 1887). He held London partly responsible for that illness, as he also held the swiftly expanding capital responsible for the destruction of wildlife in its environs.

After London ran through numerous editions, and among those it influenced was a writer who is not normally thought of as a ruinist, Edward Thomas (1878–1917; Figure 7.3). Thomas remains best known as the author of such often-anthologized poems as ‘Adlestrop’ and ‘As the Team’s Head-Brass’, and is popularly thought of as a pastoral poet-elegist for a rural England that was disappearing even as he wrote. He was, however,

much more than this reputation suggests: he was a novelist, memoirist, short-storyist, biographer, travel writer and nature writer. His slim output of poetry is at last being understood as acutely modern in its forms and concerns; more interested in fragment than in integrity, and more in transit and displacement than in dwelling and nostalgia.

From a young age, Thomas was a naturalist; from a young age, he was a ruinist; and from a young age, he was a noticer. The three talents converge in a moment in his late essay on the seventeenth-century antiquary John Aubrey, which Thomas starts by praising Aubrey's talent for isolating telling details: 'who but Aubrey', Thomas asks, 'would have noticed and entered in a book the spring after the fire of London "all the ruins were overgrown with an herb or two, but especially with a yellow flower, *Ericolevis Neapolitana?*"' (Thomas 1917: 90). Who but Thomas would have noticed that Aubrey had noticed that overgrowing of ruins with the flame-yellow flower? It speaks of Thomas's persistent preoccupation with life in ruins. Reading through some of the thousands of pages of his published prose, one finds him again and again imaginatively drawn to the subject. Although he worked on Welsh monuments during his brief spell in the heritage industry, and although the crumbled castles of Swansea and elsewhere do feature occasionally in his prose, his ruins tend not to be the grand singular dilapidations beloved of Romanticism. Rather, he typically describes following a modest country lane to its end, and finding there a dilapidated barn or cottage, an abandoned farm, or a crumbling chalk pit.

Thomas wrote a biography of Jefferies, he read *After London*, and he returned often to the novella's vision of a re-wilded and largely dehumanized England. At times, Thomas's writing is tinged with a milder version of Jefferies' misanthropy. He explicitly returns to Jefferies' vision, for instance, in *The South Country* (1909):

I like to think how easily Nature will absorb London as she absorbed the mastodon, setting her spiders to spin the winding-sheet and her worms to fill in the graves, and her grass to cover it pitifully up, adding flowers – as an unknown hand added them to the grave of Nero. I like to see the preliminaries of this toil where Nature tries her hand at mossing the factory roof, rusting the deserted railway metals, sowing grass over

the deserted platforms and flowers of rose-bay on ruinous hearths and walls. It is a real satisfaction to see the long narrowing wedge of irises that runs alongside and between the rails of the South-Eastern and Chatham Railway almost into the heart of London.

(Thomas 1909: 98–9)

The longing in Thomas's voice ('I like to think . . . I like to see . . . It is a real satisfaction') is audible: the perturbing pleasure which he, like Jefferies, takes in imagining the end of humanity and the supremacy of nature. Here, grass – as so often in future-ruinist literature – serves both as concealer and healer, greenly unwounding the damaged earth. Notice, too, the attention paid by Thomas to present-day metonyms of this future take-over – the miniature ruins that he spots on 'factory roofs' and in railway sidings. Such places offered him tiny scrying-glasses in which possible post-human futures of the Earth might be glimpsed.

Thomas is arguably at his most interesting and most modern, however, when he cleaves free of Jefferies' hatred of humanity, seeming to find it too easy a response. In an essay on chalk pits, Thomas explicitly acknowledged the 'misanthropy' that often accompanied the admiration of 'works of men that rapidly become works of Nature' (Thomas 2011: 513). Among his most intriguing ruin-texts is 'A Tale', a short poem written in March 1915:

There once the walls
Of the ruined cottage stood.
The periwinkle crawls
With flowers in its hair into the wood.
In flowerless hours
Never will the bank fail,
With everlasting flowers
On fragments of blue plates, to tell the tale.

(Thomas 2008: 73)

What appears to be a simple poem about natural 'absorption' of a human structure, on closer inspection rapidly complicates. There is, most obviously, an uneasy relationship between the real flowers and the porcelain pattern. The blue periwinkle seems somehow to have emerged out of the shattered crockery – artifice leapt to life – and to be trying to escape the site of ruin, rather than staying to commemorate it: it 'crawls . . . into

the wood'. 'Crawl' is itself a troubling verb: plants typically 'creep', rather than crawling, an action more quickly associated – especially given the date of composition – with a wounded human. No, nature in this poem serves neither as hopeful resurgent nor as assiduous archivist. The poem claims that the flower and the bank between them never fail 'to tell the tale', but of course no tale is fully told here. Who lived in the cottage, what their lives were like, why the cottage has fallen: all these aspects of the story go unrecorded and apparently unknown. Implicitly, also, there is a third layer to the twinned metaphor of periwinkle and flower-pattern, which is that the tropes of the poem constitute the third pattern, the third kind of memory. Certainly the poem is told in shards – consider the breaking up of the sentence that occupies the last stanza, for instance – and the reader is left to perform what partial reassembly is possible. Reading becomes an (incomplete) repair or reconstruction.

Compensatory noticings

Four months after writing 'A Tale' Edward Thomas signed up, though doubly acquitted of the obligation to enlist by being married and by being thirty-six years old. He joined the Artists Rifles and trained in England until, in December 1916, a call came round for volunteers to go out and serve with the batteries at the front. Again Thomas chose danger. He joined 244 Siege Battery, co-commanding 150 men, and on 29 January 1917 he and the troops boarded the *Mona Lisa*, bound for Le Havre and thence the frontline near Arras.

In the ten weeks he was at or near Arras, Thomas kept a war diary, dashing down in a Walker's back-loop pocket book a few hundred words for each day. These jottings provide a vivid record of his observations and imagination at the front. Among Thomas's preoccupations during those ten weeks was the relationship between life and ruin. By 6 February 1917, he was approaching the frontline proper. He had left behind the continuous and curvaceous forms of the North Downs in Kent, where he had been stationed for the final weeks of his training, and had reached a war-torn landscape of rupture and fragment – a realm of ruin. He billeted in 'half-ruined barns', he watched aerial 'shrapnel bursts', he passed a 'ruined pigeon house . . . and what was manor house', and he picked his

way round shell holes on the Arras road (Thomas 1983: 160, 161). He was inhabiting a future ruin – a thought-experiment made atrociously real.

Thomas's work at the front was mostly as a watcher or noticer: his perilous job was to take up observation posts in ruined buildings – in one case in a part-collapsed factory chimney – and then use his field glasses to examine what he described as 'snowy broken land with posts and wires and dead trees', trying to work out the locations of the German guns or to track the fall of his own gunners' shells (Thomas 1983: 161). It was dangerous work; vulnerable to shells and to snipers, as well as to the collapse of the structures in which he was hiding. '4 shells nearly got me while I was coming and going', he notes calmly in his journal of a day spent up the chimney (170). Up at the front he was working in ruins. Behind the lines he was living in ruins. And during time off, he became a recreational ruin explorer, wandering through abandoned houses in Arras, and itemizing the objects he found inside them: 'an engraved 1850 portrait hanging on wall high up, without glass broken', '[a] crucifix, statuette, old chair', and on 'the top storey of high house', a 'ruined cloth armchair' with 'a garment laid across it after shell arrived' (164, 163). He began to see literally in and through the optic of ruins: 'How beautiful' – reads a journal entry from 29 March, that uncannily anticipates both Ballard and Hiorns – 'like a great crystal sparkling and spangling, the light reflected from some glass which is visible at certain places and times through a hole in cathedral wall, ruined cathedral' (173; Figure 7.4).

Thomas was not blithe about his material circumstances – writing of 'ghastly trees and ruins', and of living among 'rubble, rubbish, filth' – but he does not seem to have been drastically discomforted by his newly textured world (Thomas 1983: 166, 167). Much of his stability seems to have derived from his naturalist's habits of attention to the life that persisted even in the ruin of the trenchscape. On 13 February 1917 he noted the 'hare, partridges and wild duck in field S.E. of guns' (162). 'Black-headed buntings talk', he wrote on 14 February, 'rooks caw . . . grass rustl[es] on my helmet through trenches' (162). He watched kestrels hovering in pairs above the trenches, while above them wheeled 'four or five planes' (163). His attuned ornithologist's ear, superb at species identification, picked out a 'chaffinch say[ing] "Chink" in the chestnut', 'Partridges twanging in the fields', and '2 owls in garden at 6' (164–5). He heard '[]innets and

W. Thomas in Stord all day in trench behind
 left hand side with sharing of Wancour &
 Meville Vitasse & the ground between & beyond.
 An odd but sunny day. Many R.F.A. & infantry
 fired the O.P. We were discovered & the O.P. 20
 ft away had a shell which rose but several on
 our shoulders. Larks singing. Drawing panoramas
 left Thomas then at 6 pm. tired enough. Letter for
 Portmuen, Fovolyan & Guttere.

26. Preparing report of panoramas for 35 H.A.G. Raining &
 dull. Letter to Brownson. Pulling up for on me to
 the camp. A letter in empty bullet washing for
 SC courses to come up. Spent last night in the
 kitchen & letter at 1 in white cordite place in dark web.

27. Rain & clear sun. getting guns camouflaged
 in Dauling & Decanville track. Beyond my things &
 letter from Hodson, Hemon, & Sgt Pelleser. Still
 that evening below the body & neck of my neck since
 night O.P. day. Sat to tell it to my letter. As I was falling
 asleep - not about to think of the horror & wonder
 which from our own firing in evening bursts new
 could not be in my dream, but I did not doubt of my heart
 to myself so that if they had seen I don't suppose I might
 have stopped. A small dog tried to jump up at
 the end before. Albatross Hemon.

28. Foggy day, some hailish sign at 11 am but can
 in the garden exhausted & dry, everyone pulling back
 at 10.30. and very still & clear. but three days sleep
 my hair & my eyes with it - one not almost the same as
 they were illusive. Panache morning in high white
 cloud & vapour low to the ground & cover like bright
 white tracks in snow - I had a dream that
 my hat I have forgot but moisture in dishes.

29. Wet again. Getting reports from the dug for
 detachments. Many nests on map. How
 beautiful, like a great crystal sparkling & spangling
 spangling, the light reflected from some glass
 with a visible of certain places & forms thro
 a hole in Cathedral wall, ruined cathedral.

30. Bright early, then rain. New 200 line
 plant by pickets. Arranging for millent for

FIGURE 7.4 A page from Edward Thomas's war diary. The entry for '29'
 (29 March 1917) reads: 'How beautiful like a great crystal sparkling and spangling, the
 light reflected from some glass which is visible at certain places and times through
 a hole in cathedral wall, ruined cathedral.' The curved crease-marks visible on the
 page are thought to have been left by the air-blast from the shell that killed Thomas.
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chaffinches sing in waste trenched ground . . . between us and Arras', and observed '[m]agpies over No Man's Land in pairs' (170). 'The shelling must have slaughtered many jackdaws but has made home for many more', he remarked on 23 February, a note that recalls a pre-war essay in which he imagined a ruined London as a 'pleasant' place in that it would provide dwelling places for jackdaws (165; Thomas 2011: 513). Reading the diary, one repeatedly encounters these compensatory noticings and narrations. The integrity of attention is used as a stay against the disintegrations of his context. Thomas's field-note-style diary jottings, broken in form, serve as a kind of ethical residue: fragments of concentration that might themselves, paradoxically, be whole and enough.

By late March 1917, the first major Arras offensive was approaching. Thomas had been at or near the front for six weeks, and ruin and nature had moved so close to one another in his imagination that they began to merge as perceptions. One of his last forward observation posts was in an old chalk pit. Another one was in a ruin, by a lilac tree, looking out through a hedge that provided his cover from snipers, and out of which blackbirds sang. When the German guns fired above his head and into Beaurains, he wrote, the shells came over 'like starlings returning, 20 or 30 a minute' (Thomas 1983: 171). A 'piece of burnt paper', which he saw blown towards him over no-man's land, turned out 'to be a bat shaken at last by shells from one of the last sheds in Ronville' (169). Machine-gun bullets 'snak[e] along – hissing like little wormy serpents' (174). Among the two things that Thomas recorded are that on 5 April the 'sods on f/c's dugout' had begun 'to be fledged with fine green feathers of yarrow' and then on 7 April that 'a great burst in red brick building in N.– Vitasse stood up like a birch tree or a fountain' (175). On the final pages of the diary, Thomas wrote single lines of verse, possible fragments of future poems. These were his last works, and as such they bear a family resemblance to the last work of another combatant-artist, the painter Rex Whistler. Whistler took part in the Normandy advance after the D-Day landings: shortly before he was killed, he pulled blue and red chalks from his battledress pocket and chalked a Madonna and Child on the exposed wall of a shelled church in northern France.

At dawn on 9 April 1917, Easter Monday, the first battle of Arras began. The morning was a triumph for Thomas's gunners. The British

batteries disabled almost all of the German heavy guns with their counter-battery fire, and their troops took ground. As the guns fell silent the British soldiers emerged to shout and dance. Thomas stepped from his dugout, then leaned back into the doorway to fill and light his clay pipe. He had part-filled the pipe when a German shell fell near him and the vacuum caused by its passing threw him hard to the earth, killing him by pneumatic concussion. His body was left whole and unmarked, and beside it lay his clay pipe, unbroken. His war diary was recovered and returned to his family, and the folds visible on the pages of the diary are thought to be the pressure ridges caused by the fatal shell.

Modern ruinism and the ethics of futurology

Thomas might be taken to mark an important moment in the history of ruinism, in that he began to extricate himself both from the misanthropic absolutisms of apocalyptic ruinists such as Jefferies, and from the melancholic ruminations of Romantic ruinists such as Doré. Thomas was, or at least began to be, a modern ruinist: fascinated by the process and textures of ruin, but resistant to being cast either nostalgically backwards or hatefully forwards. His writings on ruin, especially his war writings, are motivated by what Andreas Huyssen calls a 'remembrance of nature in all culture': by his realization that all our sites are, to some degree, sliding towards the organic, as Simmel proposed (Huyssen 2006: 13). We need, Thomas part-understood, to come to an accommodation with nature, rather than wishing for its utter eradication or total triumph, and in his writing he began – as Alan Weisman put it a century later – 'to dream of a way for nature to prosper that *doesn't* depend on our demise' (Weisman 2007: 5).

This essay opened with a thought-experiment, and it ends with consideration of another: Cormac McCarthy's 2006 post-apocalypse novel *The Road*, described by George Monbiot as 'the most important environmental book ever written' (Monbiot 2007). It imagines a future America brought to ruin by a swift pyrocaustic disaster of unspecified cause. So severe has been this calamity, however, that nature is not resurgent but obliterated. The landscape has been charred to cinders. No 'fine green yarrow feathers' fletch the land here. The light is grey, the forests are burnt, ash blows

in loose swirls over the blacktop. The earth has been scorched back to its blackened residues, and so too has the novel's language, which exists as a rubble of paragraph blocks and verbless sentences. Through this ruinscape trek two refugees, a father and son, moving in order to keep out of the clutches of other survivors, and to find food. In the opening pages of the novel we watch the father keeping to cover, and using his binoculars to 'glass' the landscape ahead of him: 'Looking for anything of color. Any movement. Any trace of standing smoke' (McCarthy 2006: 4). He is a version of Edward Thomas, ninety years on: the watcher scanning no-man's land, looking for life amid the ruins.

Only three sources of hope survive in McCarthy's bleak novel. The first is narrative itself, hopeful in terms of the persistent paradox of apocalyptic art, which is that to annihilate the world artistically one must simultaneously summon it into being. The second source of hope is the boy, who the father keeps alive and who keeps the father alive, and promises the possibility of a future after ruin. Third are the father's memories of a better and earlier world, a world before the fire, a world not wholly unlike our own, in which human relations with nature have not yet been irrevocably broken. In the closing paragraph of the novel, after a desperate journey through the ashy land towards a dark future, the narrative voice – its source shifting and unsure – casts back to that earlier world – notionally our present world – and recalls, for the second time in the novel, 'brook trout' finning against the current in a stream:

They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional.
On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in
its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back.
Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things
were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

(McCarthy 2006: 241)

The language itself here hums with mystery – moss, muscular, maps, mazes, man, becoming – and is itself syntactically mysterious. Read through, the 'thing which could not be put back' is at first the fish themselves, there in 'your hand', lifted from the stream – but it is also 'the world in its becoming': 'put back' in the sense of 'made right'. The prose

serves here as elegy and celebration, warning and plea, tocsin against toxin: do not lose what you have before it is too late for it to be repaired or to be restored. 'We run the danger of bearing witness to history too late to effect change', as Jean Baudrillard observed (Baudrillard 1989: 33). McCarthy's novel – like other constructive visions of life in ruins – might enable us to bear witness to our own future history, and in this way help us also to avoid ruining life.

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