Peter Wagner, Frédéric Ogée, Robert Mankin and Achim Hescher (Eds.)

The Ruin and the Sketch in the Eighteenth Century

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Achim Hescher took over the time-consuming task of copy-editing the book, which is no small achievement, given the fact that he also faced the full workload of his job as lecturer in the English department at Landau. It is due to his zeal and effort that this volume could be published in 2008.

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In No. 18 of *Cato's Letters* (February 25, 1720) the Whig journalists Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard proposed to speak of "The terrible Tendency of publick Corruption to ruin a State, exemplified in that of Rome, and applied to our own." The paper begins with a few words of Latin from Sallust that the authors expand in these terms:

> 'Mercenary city, ripe for destruction, and just ready to deliver up thyself, and all thy liberties, to the first bidder, who is able to buy thee!' said the great King Jugurtha, when he was leaving Rome (Trenchard/Gordon I: 128).

This sounds almost like a want-ad: a city, republic or empire is up for sale. In the original Latin, which Gordon and Trenchard misquote, it *is* a want-ad (*Urbem venalem et mature perituram, si emptorem invenerit*). Ruin is threatened by a social order where everything is up for sale. These, for us, are the values of commerce (and/or the lack thereof). For the eighteenth century, they also signified corruption. Ruin is a threat not only when government places are up for sale, but also where the values of commerce prevail over those of civic duty; as the word "mercenary" likewise suggests. The picture is darkening, and we have not yet mentioned the Jacobite threat to the Revolutionary settlement, or one of the great themes of *Cato's Letters*, the ruinous world of credit. The 'Letters', which ran in *The London Journal* from 1720-1723, are of course a direct response to the South Sea Bubble.

Corruption, commerce, credit, standing army, faction: we have here in a couple of lines many of the themes of a secular apocalypse, the kind that would make investigations of Roman history urgent throughout the eighteenth century. It is what twentieth-century historians have built the 18th century away from – in praising its stability – or back to, in finding it built on operations, a culture, of the imagination.

Of course the imminence of danger was not felt by everyone, and the comparisons with Rome would be more or less urgent (and secular) if you were an MP in London, or a gentlemen or scholar on the Grand Tour or a Jacobite exile in Rome. But whether they are apocalyptic or not, these elements become themes of a new social imagination in the period, the kind that will translate very naturally into Edward Gibbon's very last line in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

> It was among the ruins of the Capitol, that I first conceived the idea of a work which has amused and exercised near twenty years of my life, and which, however inadequate to my own wishes, I finally deliver to the curiosity and candour of the Public.

Gibbon closes his sixth volume having both redemolished Rome by telling the story of its decline and fall into ruins, *and* having tried to rebuild it, or give it new substance, by showing how the polite present of 1788 arose from the same fragmentary stones. More ruin was of course on the way a year later, in 1789, and that may be one reason the image of the ruined forum lingered on in Gibbon's mind when he went on to write his memoirs as well in 1790-1792. Perhaps one ruin could hide another.

For something else is happening in the social imagination. From *Cato's Letters* to the last words in Gibbon's *History*, we have moved from ruin to ruins. The mock plural apparently comes to both French and English via Latin, but the point may be that ruin or the prospect of ruin proliferates, and discovers new avenues of worldly imagination. Whether those avenues led to expressions of shared delight, to more or less muffled anxieties about the present, or (as Burke put it in 1790) vistas framing the gallows,[1] new experiences were being charted. It will be the claim of the present volume that similar achievements were also being registered in the life of the artist, and his recognition of the complexity of every moment of creation.

II

It is tempting to see Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" as both epitome and endpoint of the story. In 1817, here is the long eighteenth century's preoccupation with the unfinished and the decayed – the fragment, the ruin, and the sketch:

> 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 lifeless 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."

A sonnet that breaks the sonnet form (lines 7 and 10 find no equivalent rhymes) and employs an intricate scheme of narration, it was composed in late 1817 in competition with Shelley's friend Horace Smith and published in 1818.[2] The fact that it appeared during the craze for things Egyptian in England that followed Napoleon's expedition has led many critics to believe that the poem was directly inspired by a colossal bust of Ramses II (fig. 1). Known as the "Younger Memnon", this was presented to the British Museum by Henry Salt in 1817.

Further Egyptian antiquities arrived on English shores, aboard HMS *Weymouth*, in March of 1818. The treasure of the *Weymouth* (architectural fragments from the Roman ruins of Leptis Magna on the Libyan coast of North Africa, and Egyptian statues and other remains taken on board at Malta) was given to the British Museum, which

1 Speaking of the French revolutionaries, Burke writes: "In the groves of *their* academy, at the end of every visto, you see nothing but the gallows" (Burke 171-2).

2 One of the best discussions of the poem, with the necessary background information concerning its genesis, is Bode's article (1994).