VINTAGE

IN RUINS

CHRISTOPHER WOODWARD

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About the Book

Why are we so fascinated by ruins? Art historian Christopher Woodward takes us on a thousand year journey with artists and writers who have been inspired by ruins. We travel from the plains of Troy to the monuments of ancient Rome, from the crumbling palaces of Sicily, Cuba and Zanzibar to the rubble of the London Blitz. We meet the teenage Byron in the mouldering Newstead Abbey, Flaubert watching buzzards on the pyramids, Henry James in the Colosseum and Freud at Pompeii. Arguing for the values of solitude, mystery and picturesque decay, Woodward sees a ruin not as a pile of stones, but as a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the human imagination.

About the Author

Christopher Woodward is Director of the Holburne Museum of Art in Bath. His fascination with ruins began as a curator in Sir John Soane’s Museum, London, the creation of a visionary architect haunted by the prospect of ruin. Christopher married a Roman on the Appian Way.

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FOR MICHAEL AND ISABEL BRIGGS

Christopher Woodward

IN RUINS

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

FOR I KNOW SOME WILL SAY, WHY DOES HE TREAT US TO DESCRIPTIONS OF WEEDS, AND MAKE US HOBBLE AFTER HIM OVER BROKEN STONES, DECAYED BUILDINGS, AND OLD RUBBISH?.

Preface to *A Journey into Greece*
by George Wheeler (1682)

THAT GATE OF DREAMS WAS CLOSED, BUT I SHALL ALWAYS FEEL THAT FOR AN HOUR IT WAS GRANTED ME TO SEE THE VANISHED LIFE SO DEAR TO MY IMAGINATION … TELL ME WHO CAN BY WHAT POWER I RECONSTRUCTED, TO THE LAST PERFECTION OF INTIMACY, A WORLD KNOWN TO ME ONLY IN RUINED FRAGMENTS.

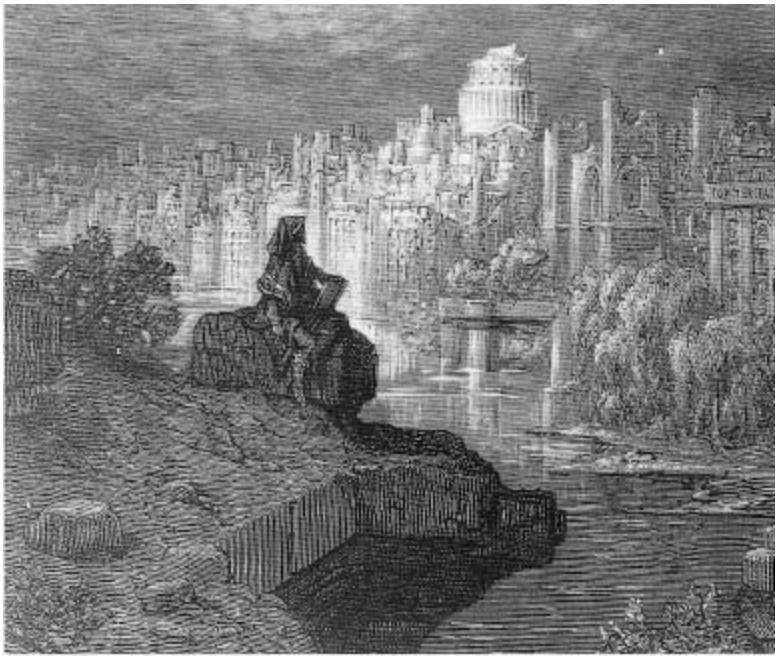
George Gissing, viewing the ruined temple
at Crotone in *By the Ionian Sea* (1901)

I
Who Killed Daisy Miller?

IN THE CLOSING scene of *Planet of the Apes* (1968) Charlton Heston, astronaut, rides away into the distance. ‘What will he find out there?’ asks one ape. ‘His destiny,’ replies another. On a desolate seashore a shadow falls across Heston’s figure. He looks up, then tumbles from his horse in bewilderment. ‘Oh my God! I’m back. I’m home. Damn you all to hell! … You maniacs. They did it, they finally did it, they blew it up!’ The shadow is cast by Statue of Liberty. She is buried up to her waist, her tablet battered, and her torch fractured. The planet of the apes is Earth, he realises, destroyed by a nuclear holocaust while the astronauts were travelling in space. He is the last man, and the lone and level sands stretch far away.

A century before the film was made, a man in a black cape sits on the arch of a ruined bridge. He holds an artist’s sketchbook as firmly as if inscribing an epitaph. Blackened shells of buildings rise at the marshy edge of a slow and reedy river, one façade advertising ‘COMMERCIAL WHARF’. This is London – or, rather, its future as imagined by the artist Gustave Doré in 1873. The wizard-like figure in Doré’s engraving is a traveller from New Zealand, for to many Victorians this young colony seemed to represent the dominant civilisation of the future. He sits on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul’s, exactly as Victorian Englishmen sketched those of ancient Rome. The cathedral-like ruin next to the commercial warehouse is

Cannon Street Station, brand-new in 1873 but here imagined with the cast-iron piers of the bridge rusting away in the tidal ooze.



The New Zealander by Gustave Doré, from *London*, 1873.

When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our own future. To statesmen, ruins predict the fall of Empires, and to philosophers the futility of mortal man's aspirations. To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of Time; to a painter or architect, the fragments of a stupendous antiquity call into question the purpose of their art. Why struggle with a brush or chisel to create the beauty of wholeness when far greater works have been destroyed by Time?

Some years ago I was walking through the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, past Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* and into the rooms of hunters, skaters and merry peasants painted during the Golden Age of the Netherlands. I was brought up short by a small, dark painting which hung ignored by the crowds: a view of the interior of an artist's studio painted in the middle of the seventeenth century by a man

named Michiel Sweerts. The background of the scene was absolutely predictable: in the convention of artists' academies, students were drawing an antique sculpture of a naked figure, while an older artist was casting a figure in bronze.

In the foreground, however, fragments of ancient statues of gods and heroes formed a gleaming pile of marble rubble, painted with such a heightened degree of illumination and clarity that they seemed to be a collage of photographs cut out and pasted on to the canvas. I was mesmerised by this picture, as unsettled as if I had rediscovered a forgotten nightmare. My mind travelled on to the fragmentary figures in de Chirico's surrealist paintings, and to the pallid flesh of more recent butcheries. On the left of the pile, I now noticed, was the head of a man wearing a turban, as artists did in their studios. Was this a self-portrait of Sweerts? I had never heard of him, a painter who was born in Brussels in 1618 and who died in Goa at the age of forty. Did he kill himself, for a kind of suicide is implied by the painting? There was no more information on the label but I was convinced that, at the very least, he abandoned his career as a painter. The clash of creativity and destruction in this canvas expressed the inner doubts of an artist confronted by the stupendous classical past but, ironically, the promise of ruin has been one of the greatest inspirations to western art.

The Artist's Studio by Michiel Sweerts, *c.*1640.

When I turned away from Sweerts's studio, I felt oddly dislocated but also very calm. Why, I wondered, does immersion in ruins instill such a lofty, even ecstatic, drowsiness? Samuel Johnson spoke of how 'Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses – whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future, predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of human beings. … That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plains of Marathon, or whose enthusiasm would not grow warmer among the ruins of Rome.' Sweerts had been to Rome, I was sure. For it is the shadow of classical antiquity which is the deepest source for the fascination with ruins in the western world. Every new empire has claimed to be the heir of Rome, but if such a colossus as Rome can crumble – its ruins ask – why not London or New York? Furthermore, the magnitude of its ruins overturned visitors' assumptions about the inevitability of human progress over Time. London in Queen Victoria's reign was the first European city to exceed ancient Rome in population and in geographical

extent; until the Crystal Palace was erected in Hyde Park in 1851, the Colosseum (or Coliseum) remained the largest architectural volume in existence. Any visitor to Rome in the fifteen centuries after its sack by the Goths in AD 410 would have experienced that strange sense of displacement which occurs when we find that, living, we cannot fill the footprints of the dead.

A second shadow falls on the same ground. This is the Christian doctrine that man's achievement on earth is a fleeting transience, that pyramids and houses and skyscrapers will crumble into oblivion at the sound of the Last Trump. The apocalyptic finale is not exclusive to the Christian religion, but what is unique is the conjunction of the cult's holy shrines with the greatest ruins of classical civilisation. The two greatest influences on the mind of Europe share the same circle of hills above the River Tiber. So the Eternal City is the place to begin an investigation into the feelings of pleasure and fear which ruins suggest.

In AD 400 Rome was a city of eight hundred thousand people glittering with 3,785 statues of gold, marble and bronze. Its encircling walls were 10 miles in length with 376 towers, and vaulted by nineteen aqueducts carrying fresh spring-water to 1,212 drinking fountains and 926 public baths. There is no evidence that any writer or painter imagined its future ruin, and the poet Rutilius Namatianus expressed his contemporaries' view that Rome was as eternal as the universe itself:

> No man will ever be safe if he forgets you;
> May I praise you still when the sun is dark.
> To count up the glories of Rome is like counting
> The stars in the sky.

In AD 410 the Visigoths seized and plundered the city, and in 455 the Ostrogoths. By the end of that century only a hundred thousand citizens remained in Rome, and the rich

had fled to Constantinople or joined the Goths in their new capital at Ravenna. In the sixth century the Byzantines and the Goths contested the city three times and the population fell to thirty thousand, clustered in poverty beside the River Tiber now that the aqueducts had been destroyed and the drinking fountains were dry. The fall of Rome came to be seen by many as the greatest catastrophe in the history of western civilisation.

In architectural terms, however, change was slow. The Goths plundered but they did not burn or destroy. In the words of St Jerome, 'The Gods adored by nations are now alone in their niches with the owls and the night-birds. The gilded Capitol languishes in dust and all the temples of Rome are covered with spiders' webs.' The public buildings on the Capitoline Hill and the Forum were abandoned while a new city, Christian Rome, rose around the outlying sites of St Peter's martyrdom and the Pope's palace of St John Lateran. Over the centuries the Forum became a cow pasture, and cattle drank in the fountains where Castor and Pollux were said to have watered their sweating steeds after the battle of Lake Regillus. Debris slid down the steep slope of the Capitoline Hill to bury the Temple of Vespasian in a mound 33 feet deep. Four-fifths of the vast area enclosed by the old fortified walls of Rome became a wasteland scattered with ruins, vineyards and farms. It remained *disabitato* until after 1870, when the city became the capital of a reunited nation, the 'third Rome'.

But if the Goths did not demolish the buildings, where did the dusty, cobwebbed temples disappear to? They were recycled: in the thousand years that followed, ancient Rome was remade as Christian Rome. In the darkness of the deserted ruins the colonnades echoed with the clang of mallets as thieves stole the gold and bronze statues in order to melt them down. And why open a quarry when the Forum was on the new city's doorstep, with its stones polished and ready? The Colosseum was leased as a quarry

by the Popes: picking up one receipt in the Vatican archive we see a payment of 205 ducats for the removal of 2,522 tons of stone between September 1451 and May 1452. One of the first Popes to introduce legislation to protect the few monuments that still stood was Pius II, in 1462. A humanist scholar, Pius had praised the ruins in a poem written many years before:

> Oh Rome! Your very ruins are a joy,
> Fallen is your pomp; but it was peerless once!
> Your noble blocks wrench'd from your ancient walls
> Are burn'd for lime by greedy slaves of gain.
> Villains! If such as you may have their way
> Three ages more, Rome's glory will be gone.

Pius's laws were disregarded like many before or since, however. In 1519 Raphael told Pope Leo X, 'I would be so bold as to say that all of this new Rome, however great it may be, however beautiful, however embellished with palaces, churches and other buildings, all of this is built with mortar made from ancient marbles.' In the twelve years since Raphael had known the city the Temple of Ceres and one of its two pyramids had been destroyed. The lime-burning which Pius II and Raphael decried was the most banal, yet most destructive, aspect of the recycling. In mixing mortar the best aggregate is powdered lime, and the easiest way to obtain powdered lime is to burn marble. At the end of the nineteenth century the archaeologist Rodolfo Lanciani discovered a lime-kiln abandoned by lime-burners in a sudden hurry many centuries before. Inside stood eight marble Vestal Virgins ready to be burned, stashed 'like a cord of wood, leaving as few interstices as possible between them, and the spaces formed by the curves of the body filled in by marble chips'. Once when he was sketching in the Forum, the great French seventeenth-century painter Nicolas Poussin was asked where to find

the spirit of ancient Rome. He knelt down and scooped up a handful of earth. ‘Here.’ The cow pasture was mingled with marble dust, the richest sediment in the world.

From the fall of classical Rome until the eighteenth century the only houses in the Forum were the cottages of the lime-burners, and the hovels of beggars and thieves. To Christian pilgrims in the Middle Ages the ruins were the work of mysterious giants of folklore and not fellow men, and the Colosseum was thought to have been a domed Temple of the Sun. The marshy, fetid wilderness of the Forum was to be avoided in the journey from one shrine to another. A soldier in the army of Frederick Barbarossa which invaded Rome in 1155 described the ruins crawling with green snakes and black toads, its air poisoned by the breath of winged dragons, and by the rotting bodies of the thousands of Germans who had died of the fever during their occupation of the city. When Adam of Usk travelled from Henry V’s England he saw dogs scrapping outside St Peter’s: ‘O God! How lamentable is the state of Rome! Once it was filled by great Lords and Palaces; now it’s filled with huts, thieves, wolves and vermin, and the Romans tear themselves to pieces.’

The Roman Forum by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *c.*1751. At the fall of Rome, the Forum was abandoned to the lime-burners and to cattle; in the eighteenth century, it continued to be called the *Campo Vaccino*, or cow pasture.

It was not until the Renaissance of the fifteenth century that we find a new approach, in which the study of ancient inscriptions and manuscripts replaced superstitious legends, and artists and architects tried to piece together the scattered jigsaws of antiquity. The first painting of the ruins of the Forum was made by Maso di Banco in the church of Santa Croce in Florence in 1336, and at the dawn of the following century Brunelleschi and Donatello came from Florence to study the remains. When they began to excavate, the local rabble assumed they were treasure-hunters; when they used compasses and rulers to establish the measurements they needed for their own works of art they were accused of being necromancers using occult secrets to discover the gold and silver. The antiquary Poggio Bracciolini arrived in Rome in 1430:

> The hill of the Capitol, on which we sit, was formerly the head of the Roman Empire, the

> citadel of the earth, the terror of kings; illustrated by the footsteps of so many triumphs, enriched with the spoils and tributes of so many nations. This spectacle of the world, how it is fallen! How changed! How defaced! The path of victory is obliterated by vines, and the benches of the senators are concealed by a dunghill. … The Forum of the Roman people, where they assembled to enact their laws and elect their magistrates, is now enclosed for the reception of swine and buffaloes. The public and private edifices, that were founded for eternity, lie prostrate, broken, and naked, like the limbs of a mighty giant; and the ruin is the more visible, from the stupendous relics that have survived the injuries of time and fortune.

Poggio's lament became a new way of seeing Rome. And nowhere was the lesson of *Sic transit gloria mundi* more evident than in the Colosseum. It had served as a quarry, a private fortress and a bull-ring: earthquakes had struck in 422, 508, 847, 1231 and 1349 AD. Its external arcades, littered with dunghills, were full of beggars and occupied by shopkeepers who slung their awnings on poles slotted into the holes where clamps of bronze had once held the marble cladding in place. Even inside you could smell the cabbages from the surrounding farms.

> Quamdiu stat Colyseus, stat et Roma:
> Quando cadet Colyseus, cadet et Roma:
> Quando cadet Roma, cadet et Mundus.

As Byron translated the words of the Venerable Bede:

> While stands the Coliseum, Rome shall stand
> When falls the Coliseum, Rome shall fall

> And when Rome falls – the world.

It is oval in plan, 617 feet in length and 513 feet in width and 187 feet high. The arena was built by Emperor Vespasian and opened in AD 80, when it was welcomed as ‘the eighth wonder of the world’ by the poet Martial. It contained fifty thousand spectators. For naval battles the arena was flooded, and when gladiators fought lions, panthers, elephants and ostriches it was redecorated as a jungle or a rocky desert. Christians were fed to the lions from the earliest days of the arena, and it was they who banned the gladiatorial games in AD 404.

The Christian Emperor Constantine had deliberately placed the principal Christian shrines – such as St Peter’s and the Lateran Palace – at a discreet distance from the temples of the classical gods. In the Colosseum a clash of the two religions was unavoidable, however, and the sand impregnated with the blood of martyrs became a place of pilgrimage. At the beginning of the eighteenth century it was formally consecrated to the martyrs, and pilgrims processed round the Stations of the Cross erected at the rim of the arena, or kissed the tall black cross in the centre for 100 days’ indulgence. The more intrepid pilgrims climbed the tangled, slippery terraces to plant crosses at the grassy summit. A hermitage was built into the tiers of the amphitheatre; one occupant was fined for selling hay he had grown in the arena. The Colosseum showed the Romans at their mightiest but also at their cruellest, so a visit was a dilemma for any Christian with a classical education. The ambivalence is best expressed by Charles Dickens in his *Letters from Italy* (1846). The faces of Italians changed as he entered Rome:

> beauty becomes devilish; and there is scarcely
> one countenance in a hundred, among the
> common people in the streets, that would not be

> at home and happy in a renovated Coliseum tomorrow. … [Inside the arena] its solitude, its awful beauty, and its utter desolation, strike upon the stranger, the next moment, like a softened sorrow; and never in his life, perhaps, will he be so moved and overcome by any sight, not immediately connected with his own affections and afflictions.
>
> To see it crumbling there, an inch a year; its walls and arches overgrown with green; its corridors open to the day; the long grass growing in its porches; young trees of yesterday, springing up on its ragged parapets, and bearing fruit: chance produce of the seeds dropped there by the birds who build their nests within its chinks and crannies; to see its Pit of Fight filled up with earth, and the peaceful Cross planted in the centre; to climb into its upper halls, and look down on ruin, ruin, ruin, all about it … is to see the ghost of old Rome, wicked wonderful old city, haunting the very ground on which its people trod. It is the most impressive, the most stately, the most solemn, grand, majestic, mournful sight, conceivable. Never, in its bloodiest prime, can the sight of the gigantic Coliseum, full and running over with the lustiest life, have moved one heart, as it must move all who look upon it now, a ruin. GOD be thanked: a ruin!

The very opposite view is given by William Beckford who came to Rome in the autumn of 1779, in the heyday of the Grand Tour. With an inheritance of £1 million in Jamaican sugar ‘England’s wealthiest son’ – in Byron’s phrase – was perhaps the most marvellously spoiled figure in the history of English arts. Taught music by Mozart at the age of five – when the composer was seven – he wrote the oriental

romance *Vathek* at the age of twenty-one. After a homosexual scandal with a young aristocrat he was banished from society for the next sixty years, and he erected in Wiltshire the mock-Gothic abbey of Fonthill as a private temple of the arts. We have an inkling of Fonthill's decadent, theatrical interiors in his response to St Peter's, which he entered the moment his retinue of carriages arrived in Rome. Banish the priests, he wrote to a confidante, and you and I could live in a tent draped over Bernini's bronze baldacchino below the dome. Drape yellow silk over the windows and we will forget the passing of days, the oil lamps in their niches the stars in an endless night. It required an arrogant imagination to claim St Peter's as a private hermitage – and a mischievous anti-clericalism.

Reaching the Colosseum his impulse was to kick the tacky clutter of martyrdom into the river. 'A few lazy abbots were at their devotions before [the Stations of the Cross], such as would have made a lion's mouth water, fatter, I dare say, than any saint in the whole martyrology, and ten times more tantalising.' In the seclusion of cypresses growing in an arcade he conjured up in his mind the colourful din of an ancient Roman triumph, before wandering into the Forum. On the Palatine Hill beyond, only the cellars remained of the palaces built by the Caesars, and under one arch a 'wretched rabble' of beggars roasted wild chestnuts. Beckford observed the lessons of this tableau until the fire died 'and none remained but a withered hag, raking the embers and muttering to herself' like a witch of old. But the autumn mists which streamed through the apertures of the Colosseum had given him a headache and he returned to his hotel.

In the eighteenth century many Grand Tourists shared Beckford's Enlightenment disgust for the Catholic clergy and their institutions, while Dickens was addressing a more

pious High Victorian audience. The change in religious culture is not the point, however: I choose the Colosseum to show how ruins inspire such a variety of responses. Each spectator is forced to supply the missing pieces from his or her own imagination and a ruin therefore appears differently to everyone. It is an obvious point perhaps; it first struck me when visiting Captain Coram's Foundling Hospital in London, which displays the 'tokens' that accompanied the children who were placed on the doorstep by their anonymous mothers. A token was an object snapped in two, whether a gold ring or a porcelain plate, and only by reuniting the two imperfect halves could a mother reclaim her child. But what fantasies of family did each abandoned child project on to its fragment?

As if to illustrate this dialogue between incompleteness and the imagination, the most powerful response to the arena is by Edgar Allan Poe – a writer who never set foot in Italy. His poem 'The Coliseum' was published in the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* of 26 October 1833, the week after the young and unknown journalist had published his first prize-winning short story. Later, Poe incorporated the poem into *Politian*, his one attempt at a drama in verse. The play translated to Renaissance Rome the recent scandal of a love-triangle in Frankfort, Kentucky, when a jealous attorney stabbed to death a politician who had earlier fathered a child by his fiancée. The poem became a soliloquy spoken by the hero of *Politian* as he awaits his lover in the moonlit Colosseum. Beginning with the old refrain of *Sic transit gloria mundi* – 'Here where the dames of Rome their yellow hair / Waved to the wind, now wave the reed and thistle' – the lover's own voice rises to address the echoing ring of stone.

> These stones, alas! These grey stones are they all
> Of the great and colossal left
> By the corrosive hours to fate and me?

The stones echo a reply:

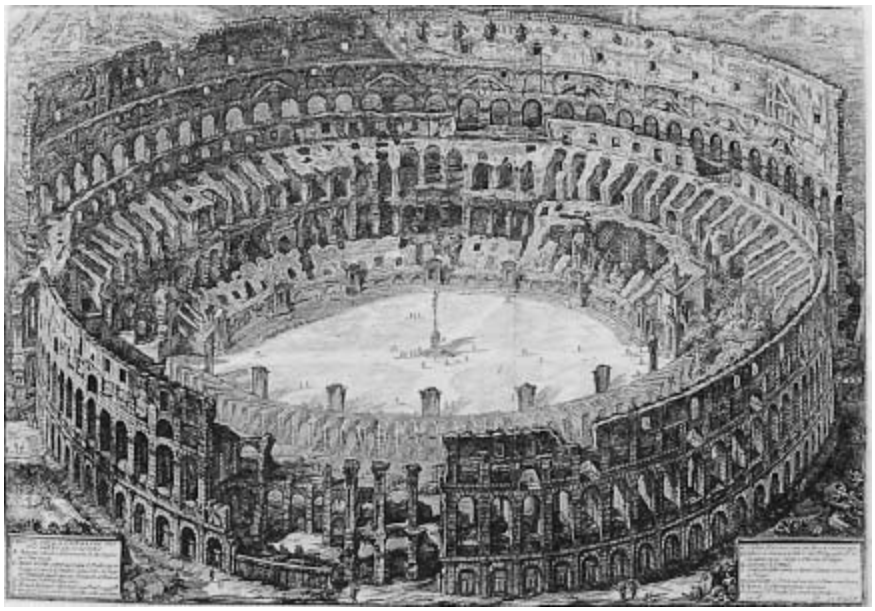
> … Prophetic sounds and loud arise forever
> From us and from all ruin unto the wise,
> As from the granite Memnon to the sun.
> We rule the hearts of mightiest men: we rule
> With a despotic sway all giant minds.
> We are not desolate we pallid stones,
> Not all our power is gone – not all our Fame
> Not all the magic of our high renown
> Not all the wonder that encircles us
> Not all the mysteries that in us lie
> Not all the memories that hang upon
> And cling around about us as a garment
> Clothing us in a robe of more than glory.

We understand Poe's symbolism by turning to the story he published in the same magazine the previous week. Entitled 'MS Found in a Bottle' it is narrated by a man whose cynicism is as expensive as William Beckford's: 'all my life I have been a dealer in antiquities, and have imbibed the shadows of fallen columns at Balbac, and Tadmor, and Persepolis, until my very soul has become a ruin. …' The antique dealer is rescued at sea by a ghostly vessel, made of some porous but ageless wood and crewed by somnambulant, ethereal sailors. 'The ship and all in it are imbued with the spirit of Eld', he notes. They drift towards destruction at the South Pole, which Poe imagined as an open spinning vortex of eternity, its walls of ice 'a gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance'.

The roaring circle of ice and the Colosseum are both 'Eld', a swirling infinity that was Poe's concept of eternity. In an age of scientific progress Poe was an anti-Positivist; that is, as he wrote to a friend: 'I disagree with you in what you say of man's advance towards perfection. Man is now

only more active, not wiser, nor more happy than he was 6,000 years ago.’ In his one non-fiction essay ‘Eureka’, he argued that the universe could not be quantified by physics or astronomy but was ‘a shadowy and fluctuating domain, now shrinking, now swelling, in accordance with the vacillating energies of the imagination’. As Poe studied engravings of the Colosseum – perhaps Piranesi’s mesmerising bird’s-eye view – he saw not an assembly of stones but a pulsating source of eternal, magical energy.

Its spirit was thrillingly alive for Benvenuto Cellini (1500–71), the Renaissance sculptor and goldsmith who worked for the Popes and King François I of France but is perhaps as celebrated for his lusty autobiography as for his exquisite bronzes. Furious that a teenage Sicilian girl has slipped through his fingers, he hires a necromancer to summon the spirits that will call her back. Cellini and his friend Angelo meet the magician in the centre of the arena, drawing magic circles in the sand, pouring perfume in the fire and spinning the pentacle until the dark tiers of seats fill with the ghosts of legionaries. In Angelo’s eyes the soldiers become demons growing in size and brightness. ‘These creatures are only our slaves; all you can see is smoke and shadow!’ Cellini calls, but now Angelo sees the entire amphitheatre on fire and flames rushing towards them. In terror, he farts – and Cellini’s laughter sends the demons scurrying back into the shadows.



The Colosseum by Piranesi, *c.*1770. In Piranesi's bird's eye view, the amphitheatre seems to be the achievement of giants, not men – or, like a volcano, a phenomenon of Nature. The engraving also shows the martyrs' cross in the centre, and, at the edge of the arena, the Stations of the Cross and the hermitage.

The necromancers lit their fire where the black Martyrs' Cross would later be erected, and on the steps of this cross took place one of the saddest scenes in the autobiography of François-René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand. Architectural ruin was the favourite metaphor of this novelist, traveller and statesman, who was born in a crumbling ancestral castle in Brittany in 1768 and was to see his family guillotined and the châteaux and abbeys of *ancien régime* France plundered and burned in the Revolution. When he returned to Paris from exile in 1800 the Place de la Concorde 'had the decay, the melancholy and deserted look of an old amphitheatre' and he hastened past, chilled by the ghosts of his family and the imagined stains of blood on the paving stones. The saddest memento returned to him was the wedding ring of his sister-in-law, its two inscribed hoops broken in half.

The vicomte was restored to favour by Napoleon and dispatched to Rome, and it was the city's promise of