THE SOUND OF THE CITY COLLAPSING

The Changing Perception and Thematic Role of the Ruin in Twentieth-Century British and American Poetry

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There lies the better part of my past. What persists, writing recovers in fragments. Write, write, write in order to remember.

You only understand what you destroy

Edmond Jabbès, ‘The Desert’

Whoever loves whole buildings should be in Milton Keynes, not Herculaneum or Pompeii

Midas Dekkers, ‘The Way of All Flesh’
Introduction

For centuries, the sight of ruins has had the power to enthral, shock and inspire the viewer. Rose Macaulay speaks of the 'pleasure of ruins' and 'the impression they individually make, by their beauty, or their strangeness, or their shattered intimidations that strike so responsive a nerve in our destruction-seeking souls.'¹ For the artist and the architect and the musician, the ruin provides a living, changing structure from which ideas of space and impermanence can be explored. For the poet, there are additional dimensions. To quote Christopher Woodward: 'to a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of Time.'² From the earliest Anglo-Saxon poems to the present day, the theme of ruin, actual or symbolic, remains potent, as does the image for the reader of the poet, particularly the Romantic poet, meditating on a grand ruined structure in a natural landscape. But how does this vision change, for both writer and reader, after the Romantic period? What is our attitude to ruin in the last century, particularly in the urban rather than rural landscape? And if our ideas of what constitutes ruin have changed, how is this reflected in poetry after 1900?

Before these questions can be considered, it is necessary to define the nature of ruin. Ruin denotes a state of collapse, destruction or physical deterioration. It also can indicate something which is spoiled or damaged to such a degree that it is beyond use. This discussion will focus mainly on the concept of architectural ruin, but it is also necessary to consider natural ruin, the erosion of the landscape itself, which has come about in the last hundred years through new farming methods, deforestation, pollution and waste disposal. But perhaps the most potent idea of ruin we have as human beings is through the physical deterioration of our own bodies. We are witness to the process of ruin every day when we look in the mirror and watch ourselves age.

However, aside from the body's decline, other kinds of ageing are deemed to be positive. Midas Dekkers points out that humans enjoy ripened cheese, vintage wine, antiques -- all viewed to be of greater value with the passage of time.³ When we think of ruined buildings, we usually attach the same values to them. The older and more crumbled the structure, the more beautiful. We think of great ruins: the Coliseum, the Acropolis,

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Fountains Abbey, once the crowning architectural achievements of their day. These great structures acquired their status as ruin often through battle, or in the case of the major English abbeys, through the rise of one religion over another, or often simply through the natural passage of time. These structures were once dwellings, strongholds, places of worship – all useful and relevant to their respective communities – but passed, by virtue of their ruination, from useful to simply decorative. Dickens described the ‘solitude’ and ‘awful beauty’ of the Coliseum in 1846:

To see it crumbling there . . . is to see the ghost of old Rome . . . It is the most impressive, the most stately, the most solemn, grand, majestic, mournful site, 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! 4

While it is possible that Dickens might have seen depictions of the Coliseum as a whole building, all of which would have been speculative, he would have had no true notion of what the Coliseum would have really looked like in its 'bloodiest prime'. Dickens is just one in a long line of commentators, particularly in the mid to late nineteenth century, who wrote of his admiration for ruins, and in doing so, perhaps stated a preference for the old as opposed to the new. This preference for the old is something which has informed modern taste. These days, the conservator’s job is usually to preserve a ruined building in its current state rather than attempt to recreate its original appearance. 5 However, in Dickens’s case, there is an additional element to consider: the ruin also represents the ‘ghost of old Rome’ and by extension, the idea of the fallen empire, which would have been a potent concept in his age, the heyday of the British Empire.

But the landscape of the twentieth century holds much less grandiose ruined structures – factories, apartment blocks, sheds – and to encompass them in this discussion, their importance must be recognised. Modern ruins have become ruined in a different manner to their older, grander predecessors – through modern means of warfare and terrorism (which cause different kinds of damage), through vandalism (which is often racially or culturally inspired), or through disuse (the latter is particularly true in the case of

5. Recent taste still seems to be on the side of sympathetic restoration rather than recreation. Note the recent television programme ‘Restoration’, where the public voted to save their favourite ruin.
industrial buildings which became outdated in the move from nineteenth to twentieth century technology). Perhaps then it is the method of ruin which becomes important in the twentieth century rather than the final product. As city dwellers, we are much more used to seeing derelict buildings – they are everywhere around us, but perhaps not so beautiful or inspiring as those earlier ruins to make us consider their history. But as city dwellers, we are also much more aware of the passage of time than earlier generations, as the wrecking ball is constantly changing the landscape of the place in which we live. The title of this essay, taken from a Sex Pistols song, is meant to suggest not only that awareness of the rapidly shifting modern world, but also its impermanence. This city, the modern city, might one day be like Rome, and fall just as spectacularly. But the title is also meant to encompass the idea of 'sound', not only the terrifying sound of a structure falling, but also the sound of poetry, which, in its rhythms and cadences, attempts to find words to commemorate the fallen.

A number of texts have proved particularly useful in framing the main points of this discussion. Midas Dekker's book *The Way of All Flesh* is an exploration and celebration of decay in all its forms, with particular emphasis on the biological concepts of ruin. Christopher Woodward has explored the topic from the point of view of the architectural historian in his book 'In Ruins'. These critics have been invaluable in informing ideas of ruin from outside the literary sphere. Jonathan Bate's book, 'The Song of the Earth' pursues the links between poetry and the landscape; whereas Anne Janowitz focuses specifically on the response of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English poets to landscape in 'England's Ruins'. It is interesting to note that Janowitz's book is the only one to concentrate solely on ruins and poetry, and only touches briefly on the legacy of ruin in the twentieth century.

It is the poets of the twentieth century who have particularly explored the idea of ruin as representative of the present state of affairs rather than the past, and therefore make relevant the need to explore the idea of ruin and poetry in the last hundred years. 'That everything is new is in itself new', Midas Dekkers says. 'There used to be more of the old'. This discussion will attempt to encompass how writers react to that particular juxtaposition of modern and ancient, as well as the ideas of memory, history and the passage of time.

The Earliest Ruin Poems

The poem, 'The Ruin', according to Michael Alexander, 'may well stand at the gate of a selection of Anglo-Saxon poems' and is acknowledged as the first topographical poem in English and the first poem to meditate on ruins. The ruin in question is possibly Aquae Sulis, the Roman city of Bath, 'the work of Giants', which at the time the poem was written, was a wild and overgrown place. 'Bright were the buildings', the anonymous poet writes,

halls where springs ran
high, horngabled, much throng-noise;
these many meadhalls men filled
with loud cheerfulness: Weird changed that.

'Weird', approximately translated 'what is' — in other words, 'fate' — brought 'days of pestilence' and finally, 'waste places/ and on the acropolis, ruins'.

The irony of this remarkable early work is that the page of the Exeter Book on which the poem appears suffered fire damage, and as a result there are words missing, which renders the poem a fragment in the way its subject is the fragmentation of a once great city. The theme of an 'empire, which has seemed to us the sum of all wonders' becoming 'an endless, formless ruin' will come into its own with the rediscovery of Rome, the dawn of the industrial age, the rise of the metropolis, and its subsequent downfall in the twentieth century. In being the first poem to explore this theme, Michael Alexander suggests that 'we may think of it as the first of many English meditations on old stones', and mentions in particular Gray's reference to the 'rude forefathers' of Stoke Poges, which will be mentioned later in this discussion.

Anglo-Saxon poems which followed, such as 'The Wanderer' and 'The Seafarer', also explore ruins as a theme, and discuss the evocation of Weird's will. At the same time, there was also a Celtic tradition of such poems, common among cultures where there were many wars. In 'The Ruin', by the medieval Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, the ruined hut

8. Ibid., p. 27.
9. Ibid., p. 22.
which is central to the poem is a symbol of more prosperous and happier times: ‘Woe for us, who saw your prime/ A residence of pastime.’ He gives the building a voice: ‘I moan, a refuge blighted,’ it says, ‘the South wind’s unroofed me.’ Thus, the use of the pathetic fallacy suggests a parallel between the ruined building and the ruins of old age.

The common denominator in these early poems is the expression of the ruin as symbol of fate, and by extension, man’s fall. The ‘work of giants’, the great buildings, are impermanent, just as man himself is. On a more practical level, if the hall becomes a ruin, the entire social fabric of the community goes, and so these early poems can also be seen as social statements. Again, the ruin as social marker is a theme which will come into its own in the twentieth century.

**The Shift in the Perception of Ruin**

As Woodward notes, it wasn’t until the Renaissance that ruins became the focus of study for artists and architects rather than the symbol of superstition and fatalism. This new attitude heralded the idea of the ruin as an object of admiration, and that, combined with the rise in tourism, which culminated in the Grand Tour of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, paved the way for the Romantic, idealised image of the ruin. Those new tourists, who were comprised of the monied and cultured members of society, flocked to Rome, which by 1870, had been turned from a poverty-stricken wasteland into a reconstructed, almost ‘Disneyfied’, vision of itself. By then, the classical ruin had become fashionable in art, architecture, music, and of course, literature.

The influence of Rome can be seen in English literature from as early as 1591, in Spenser’s ‘Ruins of Rome’, which praised the power and glory of the former Empire, and found traces of this glory in its Triumphant Arcs and palaces. Spenser may be the first to echo the sentiments expressed by Dickens nearly three hundred years later, in the lines:

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O meruelous great change:
Rome liuing, was the worlds sole ornament,
And dead, is now the worlds sole moniment.

Spenser paved the way for a new positive vision of ruins. During the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, and coinciding with the rise of the Grand Tour, a deluge of 'ruin'
poems were published, some of dubious poetic merit, but all praising the ruin as a source
of inspiration and meditation. The most notable of these is arguably Byron's *Childe
Harold's Pilgrimage*.

The Romantic Period

*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is certainly the great Romantic 'take' on the Grand Tour. Canto
IV, the last section of the poem, begins in Venice, whose 'dead Doges are declined to dust'
and which, for the poet, is 'perchance even dearer in her day of woe/ Than when she was a
boast, a marvel, and a show'. This setting establishes the contemplative tone of the poem,
which has followed the poet-protagonist from a young man, excited by the exuberance of
travel, to an older, world-weary expatriate, wandering the ruins of Italy. From Venice, the
protagonist travels south, eventually to Rome, the 'lone mother of dead empires':

A ruin – yet what ruin! from its mass
Walls, palaces, half-cities, have been rear'd;
Yet oft the enormous skeleton ye pass,
And marvel where the spoil could have appear'd.
Hath it indeed been plunder'd, or but clear'd?
Alas! developed, opens the decay,
When the colossal fabric's form is near'd:
It will not bear the brightness of the day,
Which streams too much on all years, man, have reft away.

Anne Janowitz says of this passage, 'literary permanence, the immortality-of-poetry *topos*,
is challenged here by historical contingency, and as the monument crumbles, so does its
architect-builder'.15 Indeed, throughout the poem, the boundary between man and what
he has created becomes less and less clear. The reader has the sensation that it is Byron
himself, as he contemplates the idea of his legacy, who cannot 'bear the brightness of the

15. Anne Janowitz, *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (Oxford and
day. As he considers his 'hopes of being remember'd in my line', he talks of the 'dust'
of great poets before him – Petrarch, Boccaccio, Dante. Ultimately, Byron speaks of his
own mortality: 'But my soul wanders; I demand it back / To meditate amongst decay, and
stand / A ruin amidst ruins'. Janowitz sees the poem as a merging of self and ruin. 'In
Byron's case, poetic structure can no longer function as an assurance against the decay of
architectural structures, and since the self and the object of observation have also become
one thing, the poem simply records the desolate, visual fact.' The idea of the ruined
man contemplating a ruined city (also made by men) is one that had been touched upon
in Anglo-Saxon poems, such as 'The Wanderer' – in a sense, Byron is also a 'wanderer';
without home or roots. This idea anticipates the concept of the cultural and political exile
which would come to the fore in the twentieth century.

True to this idea, Byron dismisses the Empires that man has made, all fallen: 'Assyria,
Greece, Rome, Carthage, what are they?' It is nature which reigns supreme, and while
'man marks the earth with ruin', it is, in the end, the ocean which remains, and which, in
Janowitz's words, 'with its repetitive, cyclic action, and its atemporal and undifferentiated
substance persisting over time and space', cannot be mediated by man's actions or
creations.

At the same time, Shelley was also struggling with similar concepts of mortality, Empire
and greatness. For Shelley too, ruins provided access to the 'secrets of the birth of time'. In
1817, when the head of Ramases II was unveiled in the British Museum, visitors flocked
to see it. It inspired Shelley to write the lines:

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

16. Ibid., p. 43.
17. A line which anticipates Eliot's 'Waste Land': 'Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air /
Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal'.
19. Ibid., p. 38.
What is interesting about the poem, 'Ozymandias', besides its more obvious theme of fallen greatness, is the idea that the viewer has also been diminished in the passage of time. 'Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!' the king tells the viewer, who is no longer 'mighty', reduced from warrior to traveller, and — in the case of Shelley, and countless others who were interested in classical antiquity and found in the British Museum a one-stop repository — tourist. Again, as with Byron's *Childe Harold*, Shelley's poem ends with the reclamation of nature over the manmade landscape: 'boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away'. The ultimate irony is that in reality the subject has been removed even from that lone desert, and has been reduced to a museum piece, a curiosity, in a country far from his kingdom.

As travellers from Britain began to reinvestigate their own ruins in the light of classical ruins, the Picturesque was born. 'The Picturesque way of seeing is arguably England's greatest contribution to European visual culture', according to Woodward. It elevated the status of the simple thatched cottage and the tumbledown windmill, so that they could be viewed as integral parts of the landscape. But what made the Picturesque particularly appealing was its associative links: a ruined castle was symbolic of knights and damsels, a cottage the symbol of domestic peace.

The poet of this period who best expresses the aesthetics of the Picturesque is Wordsworth. His vision of what is pleasing in the English landscape and therefore what is elevating for the human soul can be seen in this passage from the 1799 version of *The Prelude*:

There was a row of ancient trees, since fallen
That on the margin of a jutting land
Stood near the Lake of Coniston, and made,
With its long boughs above the water stretched,
A gloom through which a boat might sail along
As in a cloister. An old hall was near,

21. 'Ruinmania' reached its height in the garden designs of Capability Brown and his contemporaries, who would construct 'new' ruins, complete with hired hermits. Byron himself was one of the most famous ruin dwellers, as the heir to the derelict and largely uninhabitable Newstead Abbey near Nottingham. The most extreme example of this desire to ruin is cited in Dekkers' *The Way of All Flesh* where he recounts the tale of the landowner who in 1836 moved out of his fortified house, some of which dated back to the fourteenth century, into a new house further up the hill, so he could view the decay of his former house. See Dekkers, p. 35.
Grotesque and beautiful, its gavel-end
And huge round chimney's to the top o'ergrown
With fields of ivy.

This passage could stand as a Picturesque manifesto, the way 'gloom' is celebrated, the way the ruin is rendered at the same time both 'grotesque and beautiful' and the way nature is allowed to run wild in 'fields of ivy.'

It is interesting to consider the use of the word 'grotesque' in this context. The Shorter OED gives a definition: 'of landscape: Romantic, picturesquely irregular', which enforces the idea that Wordsworth was aware of the tenets of the Picturesque movement. Later in the poem, Wordsworth swears that he will remember 'that beauteous sight before me' for all his life. However, Wordsworth's depiction of nature is not always idealised; it is often tempered with a cultural questioning. As Anne Janowitz says, Wordsworth is 'presenting a ruined nature when he intends to describe a cultural crisis'.

In his 1793 poem 'A Night on Salisbury Plain', he is reflecting upon the confusion and political uncertainty of an England which had just declared war on France. As Wordsworth himself says in the 1842 introduction to the poem: 'The monuments and traces of antiquity, scattered in abundance over that region, led me unavoidably to compare what we know or guess of those remote times with certain aspects of modern society.'

In section XIV of the poem, Wordsworth makes this comparison clear, when the soldier journeying home encounters the desolate sight of Stonehenge:

Pile of Stone-henge! so proud to hint yet keep
Thy secrets, thou that lov'st to stand and hear
The Plain resounding to the whirlwind's sweep,
Inmate of lonesome nature's endless year;
Even if thou saw'rt the giant wicker rear
For sacrifice its throngs of living men,
Before thy face did ever wretch appear,
Who in his heart had groaned with deadlier pain
That he who, Tempest-driven, thy shelter now would gain.

In these lines the poet suggests that the stones have witnessed the sacrifice of men from ancient times to the current day, thus giving the monument a kind of sagacity, particularly in the fact that it has outlived many generations of mortal beings.

Although the soldier eventually finds shelter, it is within a ‘Dead House’, a ruined ‘Spital’ on the plain. Wordsworth presents a shelter where there is no shelter, a ‘naked room’. He describes the ‘loose walls of this Decayed retreat’, where the soldier is haunted by the vision of a woman, who tells the tale of her tragic life and the death of her husband, a soldier in the American War – a conflict still fresh in Wordworth’s mind. Overall, the poem expresses a continuum of war through the construction of the personal – it is not surprising that in the later edition of the poem, the title becomes ‘Guilt and Sorrow’, which reflects more the poet’s personal response.

This early poem by Wordsworth thus could be seen to prefigure Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’, which is so resonant in its juxtaposition of the personal and the political. It also sets the tone and the scope of vision for later works, such as The Prelude. But perhaps the most interesting poem of Wordsworth’s to consider, in light of the discussion of ruins, is ‘Tintern Abbey’. This is perhaps the only ‘ruin’ poem in this discussion where the ruins of the title are strangely absent. Why does Wordsworth chose to signal the location of the poem to the reader, and mention one of the most famous ruined buildings in Britain when Tintern Abbey does not actually appear in the poem? Jonathan Bate suggests two reasons for the abbey’s absence: firstly, that Wordworth is criticising ‘the picturesque assumption that ‘artificial’ features, such as ruins . . . may be classed as part of nature.’ The second reason is ‘the transfer of religious sentiment from Christianity to nature’. But there may also be a third reason for the removal of the abbey from the poem. One of the main themes of the work is memory and the passage of time. It begins with the poet trying to locate when he was last in the Wye Valley: ‘Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / of five long winters!’ The poet tells us that he has thought of this place ‘in lonely rooms, and ’mid the din / Of towns and cities’ and hopes that he will be able to recall the scene as ‘life and food/ For future years.’ This suggests that equally important as the landscape itself is the poet’s attempt to reconstruct it, thus turning observation into image, and creating image which will pass to memory. The abbey is already part of his mental landscape.

There is something very modern in the discussion of memory in this poem. In the twentieth century, Freud used the ruins of Rome as an illustrative image for the way the mind considers time and space, and how it juxtaposes elements from different origins to create personal iconographies. 25 Ultimately, however, Freud concluded that the ruins analogy was insufficient to illustrate the mental process and concluded, ‘how far we are from mastering the characteristics of mental life by presenting them in pictorial terms.’ 26 It is a concept that contemporary poets are still struggling with.

It is also important to remember that Wordsworth’s relationship with nature was not simply poetic. Returning to the notion of personal politics in Wordsworth, he can be viewed as a forerunner to twentieth-century ‘ecopoets’ in his need to record and preserve nature in the light of increasing industrialisation. The other structure which Wordsworth fails to mention in ‘Tintern Abbey’ is the ironworks, which were located half a mile from the site. 27 Perhaps their omission is also a deliberate statement in the poem. There is something wistful about the way Wordsworth describes the natural landscape, how it is ‘wild and secluded’, how the woods are ‘deep and gloomy’. Perhaps the natural world takes on some of the disorder and impermanence of the ruin in these descriptions, suggesting that what is not permanent in the human memory may also not be permanent on the face of the earth.

The poet who most shared Wordsworth’s concern for the natural world at the time was John Clare. Clare was a farmer who relied on the land for his livelihood. His poem, ‘The Lament of Swordy Well’ is the most direct statement of man’s corruption of nature written in his day. Clare gives the land a voice:

No, now not e’en a stone can lie
I’m just what e’er they like
My hedges like the winter flye
And leave me but the dyke

26. Ibid., p. 50.
27. William Gilpin, an exponent of the Picturesque, mentions the ironworks in his Observations on the River Wye... Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty: Made in the Summer of the Year 1770, as quoted in Bate, The Song of the Earth, pp. 142–3. Bate notes that at the time, Gilpin would have had no awareness of the harmful effects of mining on the environment.
My gates are thrown off from the hooks
The parish thoroughfare
Lord he that's in the parish books
Has little wealth to spare

Through this voice, Clare describes not only the decline of the well, but the death of the community and of the entire ecosystem, down to the bees, the butterflies and the rabbits, who rely on the well's water. There is also a social implication in these lines, that the 'he that's in the parish books' is the farmer who has become dependent on the parish through bankruptcy, and is therefore 'ruined'. As the land is now speaking for him in the poem, he has literally lost his voice, a marker of the shame he would have felt as a dependent in a community where a man was expected to provide for his family. The last stanza of the poem is particularly poignant:

And save his Lordship's woods, that past
The day of danger dwell,
Of all the fields I am the last
That my own face can tell

Yes what with stone pits' delving holes
And strife to buy and sell
My name will quickly be the whole
That's left of Swordy Well

Tom Paulin has written that the common land in this poem is protesting against social engineering: 'Many of Clare's poems are pitched against the Lockean idea of individualism, personal property.' However, the reality of industrialisation and mass tourism would only cause further deterioration and erosion.

Ironically, Wordsworth himself was partly instrumental in destroying what he sought to preserve. As the most successful poet of his day writing about the English Lakes, he brought countless numbers of tourists to Windermere and Coniston. Since then, The Lake District has become one of the most popular holiday destinations in Britain, and as a result of human intervention and tourism, is in danger of losing its resources. The role of the poet in chronicling the decline of the countryside and the harmful practices of modern farming and tourism will become even more important in the century to follow.

The Twentieth Century: The First World War

But the view of the ruin was to change with the coming of the twentieth century and the First World War. As Michael Roth has written, 'the total wars of the twentieth century have shaken our framing of ruins and shattered the notion that culture can exist as an innocent, floating fragment in a powerful sea of violence.' The scale, magnitude and immediacy of ruin in the First World War was unknown in previous conflicts, and created what Roth refers to as 'premature ruins.' Hugh Clout describes the countryside of Northern France as 'devastated farmland, ruined farmsteads, flooded mines, empty shells of factories . . . and straightforward destruction, with thousands of manufacturing plants reduced to heaps of ruins.' Clout also talks about the reclamation of nature in the battlefields, a passage resonant of the manifestos of Wordsworth and Clare in the previous century:

Weeds flourished among shell holes, trenches, barbed wire and concrete bunkers, carpeting the countryside with quite different vegetation from the cereals and lush fodder crops that it had supported for so long. Across some stretches every tree had been felled or had been cut down intentionally. No birdsong was heard; no birds remained.

Whole villages were reduced to rubble immediately and completely. Clout describes this devastation as a 'great scar', still visible in modern France: he describes how it is possible to 'read' a landscape, not only through military cemeteries and great memorials, but also in whole villages of which the design and building materials evoke a single construction phase.

In addition to changing the face of the landscape, The First World War changed the face of poetry, and in some ways fostered the same sort of devastation. Although many poets before had written about the experience of battle, it was the first time that such a large group of poets, from widely different backgrounds and religious and political positions, were completely focused on the horror and devastation surrounding them. Jon Silkin

30. Ibid., p. 8.
32. Ibid., p. 20.
writes, 'the war poets owe much to the early politics of Wordsworth and Coleridge... [who] were at the beginning of a consciously political ethos'.\(^{33}\) Having said that, they also created a new poetry, borne of necessity, that responded directly to the conflict.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the number of anonymous soldiers' songs, probably composed in the trenches by men who would never have considered themselves poets. In the song, 'A Poor Aviator Lay Dying',\(^{34}\) the connection is made between the equipment of battle, the aviator's plane, and the man himself: 'His comrades had gathered about him / To carry his fragments away'. What follows is a merging of man and machine, which echoes Byron's notion of man being 'a ruin amidst ruins':

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\begin{align*}
&\text{He spit out a valve and a gasket} \\
&\text{And stirred in the sump where he lay} \\
&\text{And then to his wondering comrades} \\
&\text{These brave parting words he did say} \\
&\text{'Take the magneto out of my stomach,} \\
&\text{And the butterfly valve off my neck,} \\
&\text{Extract from my liver the crankshaft,} \\
&\text{There are lots of good parts in this wreck'}
\end{align*}
\]

It is suggested at the end of the song, that by assembling these parts, the engine might be built again – but not the man. The First World War was so devastating partly because soldiers were equipped with much more accurate and powerful weapons. It was the first war to be fought from the air, and planes could scatter bombs over a great distance, causing widespread destruction. And of course, weapons factories were opened to supply the conflict, and therefore the tools of the battle could be replaced, but not the individuals wielding them.

This song echoes a line from a later poem by Edmund Blunden, '1916 seen from 1921', in which the poet writes, 'Those ruined houses seared themselves in me', which suggests that the method of fighting, the experience of the trenches – seeing men gassed and maimed before their eyes – gave poets the sensation of being inhabited by the war, that what they saw could never be erased from memory and therefore became part of them. In another poem by Blunden, 'Preparations for Victory', he asks soul and body to be strong:

\(^{34}\) This song was composed circa 1918 and has been published on the website <http://www.squaddiesongs.com/>
Manly move among these ruins, and what you must do, do well;
Look, here are gardens, there mossed boughs are hung
With apples whose bright cheeks none might excel,
And here's a house as yet unshattered by a shell.

'I'll do my best,' the soul makes sad reply,
'And I will mark the yet unmurdered tree . . .'

The use of the word 'yet' in that line suggests that it is only a matter of time until what is still intact will also be reduced to ruin. At the end of the poem, everything is lost: sky, earth, and eventually life, so that the title becomes an irony.

Another poem which adopts the idea of man as ruin is Edward Thomas's 'Gone, Gone Again', which laments the passage of time and the fading of youth. In the last four stanzas of the poem, Thomas writes:

Look at the old house,
Outmoded, dignified,
Dark and untenanted,
With grass growing instead

Of the footsteps of life,
The friendliness, the strife;
In its beds have lain
Youth, love, age, and pain:

I am something like that;
Only I am not dead,
Still breathing and interested
In the house that is not dark:—

I am something like that:
Not one pane to reflect the sun,
For the schoolboys to throw at —
They have broken every one.

There is something almost chilling about the line 'Only I am not dead', which suggests a sort of zombie-like state, 'still breathing', but numb to what is around him. Like Blunden, he is interested in what is still standing, what might be preserved, but also like Blunden, Thomas knows that the destruction will be total. He equates himself to the old house, which, at the end of the poem, is vandalised by the schoolboys, and therefore 'broken'. Thomas is still interested in the living, but the war has rendered him a broken man. The use of the word 'schoolboys' in the penultimate line reminds the reader that the soldiers were often schoolboys themselves.
One of the most direct and poignant of the First World War poems to deal with the idea of ruin is 'Youth in Arms' by Harold Monro. In part four of the poem, 'Carrion', Monro writes:

It is plain now what you are. Your head has dropped
Into a furrow. And the lovely curve
Of your strong leg has wasted and is propped
Against a ridge of the ploughed land's watery swerve.

The immediacy of the word 'now' in the first line suggests that the poet, as well as the reader, is witness to a particular moment in the process of human decay – later in the poem Monro speculates as to what will happen to the boy's body if he is not buried: 'your limbs will fall apart; / The birds will take some, but the earth will take most your heart.' In this passage, Monro tempers the gory description of the body by humanising the man, showing his beauty, even in death: the curve of his leg is 'lovely', his leg is 'strong'. This idealisation could also be seen to have roots in classicism, the way the boy's body appears almost as a sculpture of a Greek athlete.

Monro addresses the boy as 'you' throughout, as if he is able to hear. Monro refers to 'your second birth', 'you living dead', and in the end, asks him to reply:

Hush, I hear the guns. Are you still asleep?
Surely I saw you a little heave to reply.
I can hardly think you will not turn over and creep
Along the furrows trenchward as if to die.

The last line indicates that the act of dying is something continuous, even after death, and suggests the death of many soldiers apart from the one addressed in the poem.

The poems cited here stress for the most part the ruin of the individual, but other war poets expanded this theme to encompass the ruin of empire and society. This was particularly the case with poems written later, in the wake of post-war devastation.

'The Waste Land' and the Shift to Modernism

T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', is one of the most significant expressions of desire for order in post-war chaos. Like Byron and the English poets who celebrated the glory of Rome, Eliot stresses the importance of his classical roots by providing an epigraph from
Petronus's *Satyricon* in Latin and Greek, as if the epigraph itself was an inscription to be found on a Roman ruin. His original choice for an epigraph, from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, would have suggested to the reader that the poem which follows is based on recent events and the horrors of war. But Eliot is making a very deliberate decision to place the poem in the wider context of history and in doing so, perhaps he is attempting to distance the reader. The poem is not only inspired by classicism, but meshes history, reported speech (his speakers are often those who are on the fringes of society or trying to express some latent sexual desire), 35 biblical reference, Eastern mysticism, German opera, and Eliot's own notes (which often obfuscate rather than clarify meaning) to create not only a sense of confusion for the reader, but to echo the complexities of living in the modern world and producing a literary object based on that experience. Another way of looking at the disparate ideas and references gathered together in the poem is to consider them as constituting layers of meaning, like archaeological strata. Rose Macaulay writes, 'there are, above and under the earth, far more ruined than unruined buildings'. 36 Likewise, in Eliot's London, we find a city whose deep cultural and psychic layers are constantly being exposed. 37

However, it is within the natural world, the one which cannot be controlled or mediated by man, where Eliot begins section one of the poem, 'The Burial of the Dead', (which is taken from the funeral service in the Book of Common Prayer):

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

As well as the reference to the opening lines of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, given the historical context and the liturgical reference, it would be difficult to read those lines and not also infer from them the nightmare landscape of the First World War battlefields and the hundreds of thousands of casualties littering the trenched countryside. Indeed, many early critics of the poem saw it predominantly as a work of 'post-war disillusionment',

37. Even in present-day London the visitor is reminded of the city's Roman history when sections of the London Wall are revealed amidst the office blocks and shops and restaurants.
without taking in its wider references. The nightmare landscape of 'stony rubbish', so resonant of the trenches, is evoked throughout the poem, in contrast to, but also in comparison with, the landscape of the alienating city. Eliot asks what can grow out of this rubbish, and finds he is unable to provide an answer:

You cannot say or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief
And the dry stone no sound of water.

The 'heap of broken images' is an image which in itself suggests the physical appearance of ruins. This landscape represents the present, the only place its occupants know, suggesting that the past has somehow been obliterated, and the stones that remain have no meaning. This apocalyptic image provides a prelude and perhaps an associative link to Eliot's evocation of contemporary London.

Eliot's London is the 'unreal city', which, as Harvey comments, 'acquires a special significance in the poem and seems to epitomise for Eliot modern society at its most typical'. The Thames provides a linking element for the disparate images, as it flows throughout the poem. At the beginning of section III of the poem, 'The Fire Sermon', the river 'bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends/ Or other testimony of summer nights'. Eliot is indicating here that this is not the typical urban river, where one would expect to see such detritus. Later in 'The Fire Sermon, his vision of the river changes: 'The river sweats / Oil and tar / The barges drift / With the turning tide.' Eliot evokes other rivers, the Rhine of Die Götterdämmerung, the African river of The Heart of Darkness, the Thames of Elizabeth I, perhaps in an effort to set up a continuity between his London, the London of the past, and other cities and histories.

However, the landscape shifts in the final section of the poem, 'What the Thunder Said', to a rocky, mountainous place. Eliot suggests in the notes to this section that there are three key themes at play: 'the present decay of eastern Europe' the journey to Emmaus,

38. C.J.D. Harvey, A Complete Guide to T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (Capetown: Juta, 1978), p. 8. Eliot, not surprisingly, countered this in 1931, when he wrote, 'I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned but that did not form part of my intention', quoted by Harvey from 'Thoughts After Lambeth', from Selected Essays, 1932.
39. Ibid., p. 16.
and the approach to the Chapel Perilous. Here, there is no river: ‘Here is no water but only rock.’ He speaks of the city over the mountains, which:

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
Vienna London
Unreal

In this passage, the ancient cities, now in ruins, meet the modern cities, which have been ruined by war. By extension, Eliot evokes an ‘everycity’, in which all cities have been brought to the same state of ruin, a place which is not real, not fixed, a ‘smash of empires, represented by their ruling cities, in a vision of many pasts simultaneously present’. The falling towers could symbolise Babel, a place of human ambition, but could also be a reference to war torn Europe, with, as Eliot evokes, ‘empty cisterns and exhausted wells’. It is also interesting to consider that by falling, an act which is ‘irreversible yet continuous and recurring’, the towers are in the physical act of becoming a ruin, and as viewers, we usually associate ruins with stillness. Thus Eliot might be suggesting that he and the rest of society act as witnesses to this destruction.

The Chapel Perilous of the Grail legend is evoked in the following passage:

In this decayed hole among the mountains
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.

This is an empty chapel, a godless place, a place of no hope. Eliot leaves the reader with

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40. As Jesse Weston notes in *From Ritual to Romance*, the road through the Waste Land is taken by the knight in his quest for the Holy Grail. In Grail legends, ‘the hoped-for cure of the sick or maimed ruler, the Fisher King, and the restoration of his barren lands and his people to fertility and health. The return of fertility rests on the journey of the Quester, as he is sometimes known, to the Chapel Perilous, where he must undergo trials’ However, as Anne Wright points out, the quest is unfulfilled, and the destination is never reached. See Wright, *Crisis of Literature*, p. 182.
42. Ibid.
43. As Michael S. Roth points out, ‘the word *ruin* has its origins in the idea of falling and has long been associated with fallen stones. When we frame an object as a ruin, we reclaim that object from its fall into decay and oblivion and often for some kind of cultural attention and care, that, in a sense, elevates its value.’ *Irresistible Decay*, p. 1.
the image of the impotent speaker, perhaps the Fisher King, sitting on the shore 'with the
arid plain behind me / Shall I at least set my lands in order?' Anne Wright says that this
line 'implies the possibility of future events determined by human choice and action, in
a prevailing climate of passivity and stasis'.\textsuperscript{44} In other words, it is impossible to try and
achieve order where there is none. Considering what has preceded it, the line 'Shall I at
least set my lands in order?' seems ironic, the last gasp of the dying king.

What follows is perhaps the most important image in the poem, and certainly the key
reference in terms of this discussion: 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins'.
Harvey indicates that the word 'shored' 'has an air of makeshift desperation about it',
and the use of the word 'ruins' 'makes clear that the cultural fabric is already collapsing.'\textsuperscript{45} However, and more to the point, the assembling of these fragments is for Eliot the actual
composition of the poem itself, as if by collecting these references, histories and voices,
he can save himself from destruction. But he has depicted a landscape where destruction
is present everywhere, and so in the end, Eliot seems to be voicing an inability, both
personal and universal, to stem the flow of destruction.

This poem sets the tone for its century. Its fragmentation, confusions, meanderings
(like the Thames of the poem) present a way to express the individual's difficulty in
understanding the time in which he lives. Poetry could no longer be a structured,
logical, formal exercise in the wake of the most horrific event in history. Thematically,
poetry could no longer make a claim for beauty in the world without contrasting it with
devastation, and so the ruin loses its romantic appeal and becomes a symbol for what is
destructive in the world. Poetry had to find a new way to catalogue experience. Janowitz
states: 'In the twentieth century, the poem itself has expanded into the category of the
anthology: The Cantos and The Waste Land are in part compilations, and they exhibit as
well the antiquarian desire to preserve relics'.\textsuperscript{46} This 'antiquarian desire' seems to be born
of the same need as an archaeologist or a conservator has in his quest to preserve the
past, and perhaps by studying the relics of a culture, understand some greater truth
about them.

\textsuperscript{44} Wright, \textit{Crisis of Literature}, p. 161.
\textsuperscript{46} Janowitz, \textit{England's Ruins}, p. 18.
Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*

Certainly Eliot and Pound shared the same concerns regarding literature and its uses in giving a voice to the modern world. As F. R. Leavis comments, 'it is not surprising that the two poets, in the age that has been described, should have learnt to express so subtly by rhythmic means the break-down of rhythm'. However, Leavis points out that whereas Eliot's concerns are 'moral, religious and anthropological', Pound's 'main concern has always been art.' Leavis describes Pound's sequence of poems, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, as 'reflecting . . . the miscellaneousness of modern culture, the absence of direction, of an alphabet of forms or of any one predominant idiom; the uncongeniality of the modern world to the artist; and his dubious status there.'

In the character of Mauberley, Pound introduces an urbane, educated, cosmopolitan figure, conscious of both a larger history and a more immediate present, but who is also capable of misjudgement and pomposity. In this sense, Mauberley is more akin to Eliot's *Prufrock*, or even to Byron's *Childe Harold*. Jo Brantley Berryman suggests Mauberley is more a state of mind than a character and certainly could be seen to reflect Pound's state of mind at the time. 'I know that I am perched on the rotten shell of a crumbling empire', Pound wrote in 1913, which says much about his feelings for England, but perhaps also what he perceived was his critical reception there. It is important to remember that both Pound and Eliot had made the choice to leave America, but were, at the same time, disillusioned with the English literary scene. In their works, both poets view Europe as the 'crumbling empire', compared to the young and brash nation they were from, one which afforded no vast historical or literary expanses.

The idea of reputation and legacy exorcised Pound to the extent that *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* opens with a funeral ode to E.P., most certainly a portrait of Pound during the time he lived in England. In the first stanza of the poem, Mauberley describes E.P. as such:

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48. Ibid., p. 29.
For three years, out of key with his time,
He strove to resuscitate the dead art
Of poetry; to maintain 'the sublime'
In the old sense. Wrong from the start –

Mauberley goes on to say that E.P. is 'bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn', in other words, his need to create poetry is out dated and foolish, and will gain him nothing (later in the sequence, Mr Nixon plainly states: 'give up verse, my boy/ There's nothing in it'). The lily here could also be a reference to nineteenth-century dandyism, as much of the sequence harks back to nineteenth-century writers and artists such as Swinburne, Rossetti, Lionel Johnson, Dowson, who are also out of date in the context of the poem. This again connects E.P. with Byron, two poets striving to be remembered for their verses, but who find that the age in which they live is not sympathetic to their art. In poem II, Mauberley turns against the Romantic view:

The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,
Something for the modern stage,
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries
Of the inward gaze;
Better mendacities
Than the classics in paraphrase!

Thus, Mauberley dismisses the Romantics, and their outdated classicism, with a sweeping gesture. Ultimately, the sequence as a whole is attempting to chart the death of art and poetry, which is reduced to 'two gross of broken statues' and 'a few thousand battered books'. Hugh Kenner writes that Mauberley 'present[s] an ideogrammatic survey of the cultural state of post-war England'. For Pound, this was a state of affairs that would not improve, neither culturally nor personally. True to the autobiographical vision of the poem, Pound left England and eventually settled in Venice, Byron's great symbol of a ruined Empire, a floating city of decay.

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H.D., the Imagists, Objectivists and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets

The vision and epic scope of *Mauberley* paved the way for the *Cantos*, Pound's greatest experiment in the fragmentation of the poetic voice. For Pound, the idea of fragment was partly based on his admiration of classical literature, but was also influenced by his readings and translations of oriental poetry, in which he praised the notion that a single image can represent a larger idea, and French Symbolism, which he saw as an attempt to 'evolve the subconscious element of life, to set vibrating the infinite within us, by the exquisite juxtaposition of images'.

The Imagist movement adopted these principles, and attempted to create a poetry which distilled language, but also took up Pound's battle-cry for a new kind of poetry to encompass the modern experience - one which relied on image rather than rhetoric, and which consciously moved away from the nineteenth-century English tradition that Pound criticises in *Mauberley*.

The American poet H.D. was a follower of Pound's Imagist ideals. Like Pound, her work relies heavily on classical allusions, but, perhaps to a greater degree than Pound, also on personal politics and mystical and emotional states. "The Walls Do Not Fall", one part of her war trilogy, is set in the London Blitz of 1940 and is arguably her greatest work. "Its search for a Word at the still centre implies a quest similar to Eliot's", Peter Jones writes, but perhaps there is something more intimate in her quest than in Eliot's great historical venture. In the first section of the poem, she sets up a continuum between the ancient ruins of Egypt and the ruins of war-torn London:

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there, as here, ruin opens
the tomb, the temple; enter,
there as here, there are no doors:

the shrine lies open to the sky,
the rain falls, here, there
sand drifts; eternity endures
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That there is nothing new in the phenomenon of ruin is a common idea. What is most interesting here is the insistence towards eternity, which perhaps sets H.D. apart from Byron and Eliot, and even Pound, and presents an uneasy optimism. It is important to

remember that the sequence is dedicated to H.D.'s companion Bryher, and therefore can be read as a love poem, so the idea of the endurance of love and human will is also present. Somehow, the idea of the shrine or temple 'open to the sky' is less ominous here than in Eliot, when he refers to the 'empty chapel'. Perhaps there is more of a sense in H.D.'s poem that there is still access to a deity, that by being open to the sky, those on earth might be closer to the spiritual, whereas in Eliot, it seems that all hope is lost.

H.D. describes the physical features of the Blitz in detail: ‘we pass on// to another cellar, to another sliced wall/ where poor utensils show/ like rare objects in a museum’. This again forces the comparison between the everyday and domestic life of ruined London and the rarified ruins of Egypt, but perhaps also elevates the civilians who survived the devastation of the Blitz. The main ideas of the poem are expressed in the following passage:

Pompeii has nothing to teach us,
we know crack of volcanic fissure,
slow flow of terrible lava,
pressure on heart, lungs, the brain
about to burst in its brittle case
(what the skull can endure!)

H.D.'s insistence on endurance, the endurance of humans in the face of both natural and man-made disaster, is imperative here. However, the line ‘Pompeii has nothing to teach us’ is not only a statement that this is not the first disaster to befall humankind, but also has a more literal meaning, perhaps suggesting that classicism has nothing to show the modern world, and we must find another way of understanding our time (which would chime with the Imagist manifesto). This passage represents another view of war, from not only a civilian stance but also a woman's stance, and stresses the everyday and domestic (Pompeii having once been a place of family life and community in the same way as London), still present in the reality of war, and also the very human desire to survive. The walls of the title are not destroyed – they remain standing, providing a structure and home.

Pound's poetic legacy, and the influence of the Imagists, paved the way for more experimental movements, such as the Objectivists, whose practitioners – including Oppen, Zukofsky and Reznikoff – distilled the linguistic ideas of Pound into an American idiom. They literally 'opened' the structure of the poem, so that the elements
of typography, rhythm and syntax were employed to create movement, and the page was viewed as a 'field of action'. These experiments with 'open field' poetry continued, primarily in the United States, and were adopted and extended by L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, who attempt to express the complications and difficulty of language mainly through textual form. Some practitioners, such as Gustav Sobin, leave gaps or lines or pauses on the page, inviting the reader to fill the silences and to complete the disjointed images.

In this section of Susan Howe's poem, 'Thorow' the words are scattered on the page, as if the poem has been exploded and the words allowed to fall where they will:

In this example, the reader is invited to rationalise the experience of reading the poem, through his or her ordering of the textual information supplied by the poet – the reader literally must reconstruct the poem. These visual experiments with text and layout represent the ultimate ruin poems, in that the poem itself appears as a fragment or a
destroyed section of some larger whole, and represents a literal attempt to frame the idea of the accidental in poetry, such as the accidental fragmentary nature of the Anglo Saxon poem 'The Ruin'.

**Later War Poetry: Shapcott’s ‘Phrase Book’**

The total wars of the early half of the century inspired a variety of strong poetic responses, just as the wars which followed in Vietnam, Bosnia and Iraq would occupy and enrage a later generation of writers, and would create new methods of framing protest in poetry.

Jo Shapcott’s poem ‘Phrase Book’ was written in response to the first Gulf conflict of the early nineties. It stands as both a statement against that war, but also an interesting appropriation of the language created for new warfare. Shapcott incorporates into the poem words and phrases such as ‘human remains pouch’, ‘bliss’ and ‘harm’, terms which were created to describe the technologies developed for that war (the first war in history to be computerised). However, they are also words which have alternate meanings, ones which can be utilised to register emotional states for the speaker. These words are woven together with sentences from a nineteenth-century phrase book full of archaic Imperialist expressions, such as ‘let me pass, I am an Englishwoman’, phrases which are useless, perhaps even comic, for the contemporary reader, but which are given weight in the poem through repetition, as if the poet is attempting to learn them by rote. The irony of these phrases is that they are from a real source, and were therefore deemed useful for a traveller, in this particular instance, a woman traveller, perhaps on her own in a foreign country.

The third strand woven through the poem is the speaker’s recollection of a lover, now gone. The sense of ruin is evoked in the poem through the conflict the speaker has within the confines of her room, which is both the setting for the war she watches on television (‘where I am lost in the action’) and the ‘bliss’ she experienced with her lover:

Bliss, the pilots say, is for evasion
and escape. What’s love in all this debris?
Just one person pounding another into dust,
into dust. I do not know the word for it yet.

While not exactly presenting a feminist stance against war, this poem seems to speak of male domination in times of battle, as opposed to the helplessness of women to act.
against it (and perhaps to find a language to even protest against it, as the speaker in the poem is also unable to find a language for her pain at the end of the relationship). As in H.D.'s poem, 'The Walls Do Not Fall', it finds a common ground between the conflict of war and emotional conflict, but also finds a structure, which is itself fragmented and disjointed, in which to present its multiple themes. By its borrowing of a text, it perhaps has something in common with Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est', which also utilised historical text, from Horace's Odes, rendered useless for the poet in the face of the conflict before him.

**Ecopoetry and the Natural Landscape: Maclean, Thomas and Larkin**

Until now, this discussion has focused on war as a creator of ruin in the twentieth century. As mentioned in the introduction, it is also important to examine the effects of man's interference with nature as a creator of ruin. In the twentieth century, the natural world has been harmed by global warming caused by the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, commercial fishing, intensive farming, toxic waste disposal — all of which has led to species and plant extinction. It is ironic that our culture, which is now much more aware of preserving buildings for the future, is at the same time slowly draining the planet of its natural resources.

As mentioned previously, the Romantic poets were the precursors for a new type of literature which has since evolved into the twentieth-century movement of 'ecopoetry'. Jonathan Bate provides the following definition: 'Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek poiesis) of the dwelling-place — the prefix eco- is derived from Greek oikos, 'the home or place of dwelling'. Bate goes on to say that verse is able to encompass this sense of 'dwelling' because of its intrinsic rhythms: ' . . . metre itself — a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat — is an answering to nature's own music, an echoing of the song of the earth itself'. Bate concludes by saying that 'the impossible task of the ecopoet is to speak the silence of the place'. Perhaps, by extension, it is also the ecopoet's duty to protest on the land's behalf, to give the land a voice, as Clare did. Since Clare's time, the idea of the poet as a speaker for the community

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55. Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 75.
56. Ibid., p. 76.
57. Ibid., p. 151.
has greater potency as communities become increasingly disenfranchised by corporations. 'The cleverer I am at miniaturising the world', writes Gaston Bachelard, 'the better I possess it', and through the recording of the small details of the natural world, the poet may preserve it for future generations.

The Scottish poet Sorley Maclean has always been concerned with the preservation not only of the land itself, but of the people who worked the land, in his case, the Gaelic community of Skye. By extension, he is interested in preserving for this community its history and language. In his poem 'Hallaig' he writes:

The window is nailed and boarded through which I saw the West and my love is at the Burn of Hallaig, a birch tree, and she has always been between Inver and Milk Hollow, here and there about Baile-chuire: she is a birch, a hazel, a straight, slender young rowan.

The opening image of the poem suggests that the house on the edge of the wood is abandoned, that the speaker has left his home, but that the forest of birch that he loves remains with him in recollection, like Wordsworth's Wye Valley. In the second stanza, his love is personified as a tree, 'a birch, a hazel, / a straight, slender young rowan.' He extends this image by saying that the sons and daughters of his people form a wood by a stream. This suggests that the community have literally inhabited the wood, have entered into its fibres, like spirits. Later in the poem, Maclean laments 'every single generation gone', but incants the names of their families and suggests that 'the dead have been seen alive', perhaps in their mystical presence in Hallaig. The poem's epigraph, 'Time, the deer, is in the wood of Hallaig', suggests that the subject is impermanence, as reflected in the short life of the deer, but the poem itself suggests that the people of Hallaig have left their histories embedded there as well as their names, and by extension, their customs and sense of community. The poem recalls a larger Scottish history of landowning, the Clearances of the nineteenth century and the depopulation of the twentieth, as men leave rural communities where they are no longer able to make a living.

The land and its power in the memory is a recurring theme in Maclean's work. In the poem 'The Farther End', he writes:

This is the ultimate place,
the lonely place without sight of hills,
where it is necessary to stand and wait
though our desire is not in it.

The vantage point of the speaker is undefined, but it is clear that it is far from his homeland and that it is not where he desires to be. The 'ultimate place' could be Byron's ruined Rome, or Wordsworth's lonely city, but wherever it is, there is little hope of return. Within this idea there is a tension between the ancient and the modern, the old ways and the new, and a sadness on the part of the poet that this tension remains unresolved.

The tension for R. S. Thomas concerns an appropriation of his native Wales by the English. In the poem 'Reservoirs', he states:

There are places in Wales I don't go:
Reservoirs that are the subconscious
Of a people, troubled far down
With gravestones, chapels, villages even

The reservoir provides a metaphor for a way of life which has been destroyed, swept away in the name of progress. Thomas refers to the reservoir as a 'pose', with a 'watercolour's appeal / To the mass, instead of the poem's / Harsher conditions'. The idea that language can express harsher realities than an idealised painting reminds the reader of the Picturesque need to 'order' the landscape, to leave out anything which would be unattractive to the viewer. The reservoir seems innocent, and indeed beautiful, but in reality has submerged an entire community and its history. Thomas extends the idea of submerging to include the landscape, and ultimately the submerging of the entire nation under English rule:

There are the hills,
Too; gardens gone under the scum
Of the forests; and the smashed faces
Of the farms with the stone trickle
Of their tears down the hills' side.
Where can I go, then, from the smell
Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead Nation?
The poem ends with the image of the English ‘Scavenging among the remains / Of our culture’, and finally, ‘elbowing our language / Into the grave that we have dug for it.’ There is much in common with Maclean here, in the notion that not only are villages and communities being destroyed, but the landscape as well, and therefore a sense of national identity. For both poets, this is complicated by the loss of language, the Gaelic language for Maclean, and the Welsh language for Thomas, which enable the poet to speak of his time and the way in which his people lived. By robbing the landscape of its features, both poets seem to be saying that the voice of the community that tended that land is also erased.

But what then will replace the landscape? Philip Larkin’s poem, ‘Going, Going’, was commissioned from the Department of the Environment in 1972. The year of the commission is an interesting one in terms of what was going on in Britain at the time – it was a period of recession and unemployment, not long before the election of Margaret Thatcher. The poem begins with the lines: ‘I thought that it would last my time – / The sense that, beyond the town, / There would always be fields and farms’. But it is not only the fields and farms which will disappear for Larkin, but as in Maclean’s and Thomas’s work, also a national identity:

And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
They’ll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.

In mentioning ‘the guildhalls, the carved choirs’, Larkin is also speculating on the loss of the institutions, such as government and religion. Ironically, when you consider that paper is a perishable substance 59 (look at the fate of the Exeter Book in which ‘The Ruin’ appears) it is not at all certain that we will be preserved in books. So Larkin is probably most accurate here when he states that what will replace the landscape will be ‘concrete and tyres’.

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59. Midas Dekkers mentions that paper is rich in plants, making it delicious for a number of organisms, including bookworms. *The Way of All Flesh*, pp. 188–189.
Vandalism: Harrison’s ‘v.’

It is the ‘concrete and tyres’, the urban landscape, which has occupied so many poets in the latter half of the twentieth century, as cities become even more overcrowded, more crime-ridden, more violent, more inhospitable to their citizens and visitors. In Tony Harrison’s poem ‘v.’ the ‘v’ stands for ‘versus’ (a pun on ‘verses’), as in ‘Leeds v. Derby’, a piece of graffiti Harrison saw sprayed on a grave in Beeston Cemetery in Leeds, where his parents’ grave had also been desecrated. Therefore, ‘v’ also stands for ‘vandalism’, a by-product of urban living as we know it today, and by extension, old v. new, urban v. pastoral.

The cemetery setting of the poem cannot but evoke Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard’. Indeed, not only has Harrison borrowed the elegiac form for his poem, but also the idea of the poet in the graveyard, considering not only his own mortality, but that of the generation before him. In Gray’s poem, there are the lines:

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree’s shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a mould’ring heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

While Harrison’s poem begins:

Next millennium you’ll have to search quite hard
to find my slab behind the family dead,
butcher, publican, and baker, now me, bard
adding poetry to their beef, beer and bread.

Harrison is playing with the notion of the self-consciousness of being a poet, and sends this notion up by mentioning the fact that ‘Byron’, who was a leather tanner, and ‘Wordsworth’, who built church organs (both honest Victorian trades), are buried near his family plot. But the landscape is less than poetic; there are no ‘rugged elms’ or ‘yew trees’ in sight. In fact, the graveyard has been built over the local pit:

Whose galleries once ran beneath this plot,
causes the distinguished dead to drop
into the rabblement of bone and rot,
shored black, crushed shale, smashed prop.

The worked-out pit is a symbol of a local industry which has also died, and which Harrison uses as a reference to the contemporary political landscape of Thatcher’s 1980s
Britain, particularly the miners' strikes of that period. He therefore extends the meaning of 'v' to include 'class v. class' and 'left v. right'. Although the worked-out pit is beyond use, it is actively causing subsidence in the graveyard, making the stones and obelisks list. In addition, the graveyard is 'strewn with rubbish and choked up with weeds', an unloved and forgotten place.

This setting is a far cry from Gray's country church-yard, but is a common sight in British cities. Ken Worpole notes Harrison's poem in his report on urban cemetery renewal, and comments: 'The very real images of smashed headstones, or headstones aerosoled with obscenities, name tags and football team names, was shocking. In many ways the neglected and vandalised cemetery has become an icon of our times.' Worpole goes on to describe the 'wilful neglect and even destruction' of British cemeteries:

But time has taken its toll in other ways, as inscriptions on stones have weathered into obscurity, large family vaults crumbled under their own weight, kerbing stones have come adrift, ivy has completely enveloped many grave markers, and even the trees and planting have wilted or died as a result of urban air pollution.

What would Gilpin and the followers of the Picturesque have made of that scene, where nature has remained unchecked and initially, man's intervention, and ultimately, his lack of intervention, have conspired to create destruction? A place that has already suffered such destruction is an easy target for vandals. However, Worpole suggests another reason for the vandalism of cemeteries in particular. As our culture becomes increasingly divorced from the Victorian notions of death and respect for the previous generation, the cemetery, particularly the urban cemetery (usually developed on the outskirts of town but eventually engulfed by the city as the city expanded around it) inspires fear and is viewed as an unnatural place.

The Victorian cemetery in the poem is also the symbol of the bourgeoisie, such as the banker and the former mayor who are buried there, and displays the language of their class. Their epitaphs are in Latin or from the Bible, in contrast to the 'CUNT, PISS, SHIT and (mostly) FUCK!' sprayed over the graves by the skinheads. The power of the

61. Ibid., p. 4.
62. Ibid., p. 12.
poem comes not in the use of these obscenities, but in the use of the vernacular, colloquial speech of the skinhead, who Harrison gives a voice to in the poem, versus the language of the middle classes, and of the educated poet.

It is Harrison's use of the dialect of his youth which allies him with Clare, but in trying to place this dialect in the larger scope of modern politics and contrasting it the old fashioned inscriptions on the tombs, there is much in common with Jo Shapcott's 'Phrase Book', a poem which was written at around the same time (and which also portrays the Gulf War as being a 'television war'). There is also a Larkinesque sense of a Britain which was perhaps more innocent in Harrison's youth. Ultimately, it is a poem about disintegration — of community, of society (and by extension, values), of industry, of nature, of structures (such as monuments) and of language. On its most basic level, it is a poem about mortality, the mortality of Harrison's parents and their generation, and of his wife and himself, and ultimately, of the disintegration of his body:

Home, home to my woman, never to return
till sexton or survivor has to cram
the bits of clinker scooped out of my urn
down through the rose-roots to my dad and mam.

Home, home to my woman, where the fire's lit
these still chilly mid-May evenings, home to you,
and perished vegetation from the pit
escaping insubstantial up the flue.

The 'perished vegetation' here is being compared to the human cremanes in the previous stanza. Harrison goes on to talk about how they burn in their hearth 'what was lush swamp club-moss and tree-fern / at least 300,000 million years ago.' He watches the fire die out and the images of war and violence and protest flare up on the television. It is ironic that the poem itself was later broadcast on television, and received unprecedented media coverage, not for its eloquent statements on mortality and language, but for its use of 'obscenities'. The Tory MP Gerald Howarth called for the television film to be withdrawn, and called Harrison a 'Bolshie poet seeking to impose his frustrations on the rest of us'.

So the poem did succeed in putting across its political message, and created a new battle — supporters of the poem v. detractors, who were, not surprisingly, divided fairly evenly along party lines.

63. See the 1989 Bloodaxe revised edition of the poem, which includes the press cuttings.
The Political Ruin: Walcott and Mahon

The idea of the death of an old way of life, particularly one which is class-based, is also a theme for the Anglo-Caribbean poet Derek Walcott. His poem, 'Ruins of a Great House', begins with an epigraph from Sir Thomas Browne's essay, 'Urn Burial':

though our longest sun sets at right declensions and makes but winter arches, it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness and have our light in ashes . . .

There is much in Browne's startling essay – which charts the history of entombment, cremation and bodily decay – that, interestingly, not only chimes with Walcott's concerns, but also with Harrison's:

When the Funerall pyre was out, and the last valediction over, men took a lasting adieu of their interred Friends, little expecting the curiosity of future ages should comment upon their ashes, and having no old experience of the duration of their Reliques, held no opinion of such considerations. But who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried? Who hath the Oracle of his ashes, or whether they are to be scattered? 64

This passage is resonant of Harrison's 'bits of clinker'. In Walcott's poem, the 'clinker' is the 'disjecta membra', the remaining stones of the great plantation house, 'whose moth-like girls are mixed with candledust', and in whose grounds are also scattered 'the muck of cattle droppings', dead leaves and animal bones. This is mixed with the 'smell of dead limes . . . The leprosy of empire'. Walcott reveals that the estate's lime crop was harvested by slaves. To Walcott, the crime of slavery sours (like the sour juice of the limes) the great age of 'Enlightenment' in which the house was built:

The world's green age then was a rotting lime Whose stench became the charnel galleon's text. The rot remains with us, the men are gone.

As Walcott picks his way through the ruined grounds, he is enraged to think that 'some slave is rotting in this manorial lake'. He recalls that England too was once a colony like his native St. Lucia, and of course, is also an island. In the final stanza, he quotes lines

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from John Donne's famous meditation, in which Donne states: 'No man is an iland, intire of itselfe; every man is a peece of the continent, a part of the maine . . .'

Interestingly, Walcott chooses to quote Browne and Donne, who are not only speakers for their age, which began to question the metaphysical issues of death and decay, but who were also English writers. It is as if Walcott is appropriating them for use in his cause – to speak against slavery. For Walcott, this is an uneasy reconciliation with the past. To return to his epigraph from Browne's essay, the crimes of the place are in the past, and what is left of the past are only ashes, ghosts, rotting limes.

Midas Dekkers attaches great importance to the process of 'rotting' as part of the natural evolution and eventual decay of all things. 'It's no coincidence', he writes, 'that the first thing you think of when you hear the word rotting is fungi. Where fungi are found, humidity is usually so high that it's almost impossible to stop the decay'. Dekkers also points out that house fungi have great survival skills, and once established, can create their own moisture (one species has even been given the Latin name, 'lacrymans', the 'tearful one'). They often grow well in ruined structures, and thrived in London after the second world war, where the water from extinguished fires in bombsites provided the necessary humidity for them to grow.

In the poem by Sylvia Plath, 'Mushrooms', the fungi of the title are powerful in numbers, are able to multiply, and will, by morning, inherit the earth. Thus, they somehow become quiet militants, a metaphor for the strength of the crowd. By giving them a voice, Plath is giving them human traits, and in the fact that they refer to themselves as 'we', the poem enforces Donne's idea that every man 'is a peece of the continent.'

Mushrooms also provide the central metaphor in Derek Mahon's poem, 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford'. Mahon tells us that in this shed, 'a thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole', desperate for light. Hugh Haughton writes that the poem is about 'a mushrooming [of significance], set in a context of rubbish and neglect.' Like Plath, Mahon gives the mushrooms human traits: 'What should they do there but desire?' he asks. And later: 'They have learned patience and silence.' As the poem progresses, they

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67. Ibid., pp. 72-3.
take on more and more human characteristics, and as a result, their confinement becomes more and more painful to the reader:

> There have been deaths, the pale flesh flaking
> Into the earth that nourished it;
> And nightmares, born of these and the grim
> Dominion of stale air and rank moisture.
> Those nearest the door grow strong –
> ‘Elbow room! Elbow room!’
> The rest, dim in a twilight of crumbling
> Utensils and broken flower-pots, groaning
> For their deliverance, have been left so long
> Expectant that there is left only the posture.

Mahon wants the reader to consider the mushrooms' confinement as a prison sentence, and to strengthen this association, he even refers to them as 'Powdery prisoners of the old regime'. So the mushrooms are prisoners, confined in a small space, some stronger than others, a clear case of survival of the fittest. But what about the shed itself, the place of their confinement?

Mahon begins the poem with the line, 'Even now there are places where a thought might grow'. He speaks of other abandoned places, Peruvian mines, Indian compounds - places, which like the shed, are no longer in use, but which inevitably resonate with the ghosts of their workers and captives. Mahon deliberately picks places which were once connected with human suffering, like Walcott's great house and its ghost slaves, and adds to his list later in the poem Treblinka and Pompeii. All these places have in common their present state of abandonment, but will always be connected in the mind to their cruel past. By bringing in these other places, particularly Treblinka, Mahon invites the reader to make a connection between the mushrooms and the victims of political repression.

But what does Mahon's disused shed have in common with these places? It seems innocent: 'Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel, / Among the bathtubs and the washbasins'. However Mahon invests it with a greater significance as the poem develops, thus aligning it with other places of oppression. The shed, according to Haughton, is 'a non-place that is also a kind of everyplace', linked by the poet to these other 'non-places' which are still so resonant. For Haughton, the clue to the importance of the shed is in the dedication of the poem to the Irish novelist J.G. Farrell. In Farell’s novel Troubles, the

69. Ibid., p. 185.
British-owned Majestic Hotel is destroyed after an arson attack during the Irish war of Independence. Farrell describes the ruin of the hotel a few years after the fire:

Here and there, among the foundations one might still find evidence of the Majestic's former splendour: the great number of cast-iron bath-tubs, for instance, which had tumbled from one blazing floor to another until they hit the earth; twisted bed-frames also, some of them not year altogether rusted away; and a simply prodigious number of basins and lavatory bowls . . .

Another curious thing: one comes across a large number of time white skeletons scattered round about. The bones are very delicate and must have belonged, one would have thought, to small quadrupeds . . . 70

The hotel represents not only the death of British rule and Empire, but the death of an outdated way of life. Later in the novel, one of the protagonists hides a dead Sinn Fein supporter's body in a potting shed, which smells of 'earth and rotting vegetation. Gardening implements hung from nails, some of them so rusty that they were now only skeletons of themselves . . .' 71

The 'skeletons' Farrell describes in both passages are like Mahon's mushrooms, 'moonmen, / Powdery prisoners'. Although it is clear that Mahon is linking his poem to Farrell's novel and therefore to the political situation in Northern Ireland, it is also clear by his naming of other places that he does not intend the reader to think solely of the Troubles. However, it does provide a personal vantage point for a modern Northern Irish poet from which to discuss other tragedies (and it is relevant to remember that the poem was written in 1972, one of the bloodiest years of the Northern Irish conflict). The plight of victims is in many ways the same the world over, no matter where the crisis is located, and will be captured by 'the flash-bulb firing squad' Mahon mentions in the poem, the media (the same televisions that broadcast the Gulf War in poems by Shapcott and Harrison), the witness to the nightmare.

'A Disused Shed in County Wexford' may represent an appropriate end point for this discussion, as it is in a way the most powerful contemporary poem of ruin; what is amazing is how, in its epic scale, it can focus on a tiny, forgotten bit of nature (thus

extending Bachelard's idea of possessing the world by making it small). It encompasses ideas of history and memory; past conflicts and violence which remain in the mind, as well as current atrocities; and the ideas of impermanence and its more physical manifestations, such as 'mildew', 'bone', 'vegetable sweat' and 'worms'. Somehow in its 'rag and bone' approach, it manages to span both its own time and a previous era. In its compassion for its mushroom protagonists, the smallest, most insignificant members of nature, it talks of a larger compassion for mankind. As Haughton states:

‘it remains a haunting instance of the way a forgotten place
– not an archaic, pre-historic place but a modern place
full of historical rubbish – might become a place where thought might grow. The site of a new kind of poetics of commemoration.’

The 'modern place full of historical rubbish' has resonance in the modern city, and may demonstrate a reason for the viewer to reassess the ruined factories, apartment blocks and sheds that he might pass by everyday. For our generation, these buildings may have as much historical significance as the great abbeys and classical cities did for the Romantics. Each of these structures was made and inhabited by men, and to forget their human place in our lives simply because they are ruined would be to neglect the importance of one's own house, the places from our own pasts which invariably will not exist forever. As Midas Dekkers believes, to accept ruin is to embrace life – if everything lasted forever or never changed, it would no longer have value for us. So perhaps this is the job of the poet: to immortalise and commemorate that which is fleeting, to leave a marker of his time for future generations.

Epilogue and Conclusion: Post-September 11th Poetry

As Hugh Haughton stated in his discussion of 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford', the poem explored a new kind of poetics of commemoration. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, our generation was faced with arguably the most horrific single act of terrorism in history: the destruction of the World Trade Center. The shocking image of the twin towers' collapse was played again and again on television screens the world over; never before had the almost immediate destruction of a site been viewed by so many. As a result, those who witnessed it will never be able to think of the concept of ruins without remembering those images, and what was left in the aftermath.

Two years on, the site is now an almost completely bare space. The only indication of what had been there previously is a cross constructed from two rusted girders pulled from the building. Across the street, there are still flowers, tee shirts, letters, photographs and various personal memorabilia placed there by mourners. The site is essentially a burial site, but one unlike those crowded Victorian cemeteries touched on previously in this discussion. Mourners no longer require a grave site for their flowers and letters: we see them at the side of the road after an accident, or on a more grand scale, covering a public space, as after the Hillsborough disaster, or the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, or following the murders of Holly Chapman and Jessica Wells. When did we start commemorating the dead this way and why?

The idea of public grief seems a contradiction. Grieving historically has always been a private act, reserved for the friends and family of the deceased. But people die in public these days, their faces splashed over newspapers and on television. Photography has made it possible to capture disasters, both natural and man-made, as they occur and has made our perception of events immediate (but also fleeting, as so many images of violence and destruction compete for our attention as once). As Susan Sontag writes, 'Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists.'

In a secular society, made up of people of many different backgrounds and faiths, people no longer rely on places of worship to gather in times of crisis as they once did. Because events happen so quickly, we have become used to the sound bite, the idea that grief and shock can be expressed 'in a few words' in front of a camera. The Internet has also changed our method of response — again, by the very nature of its immediacy, it requires pared down language, distilled thinking.

This may be why a great many people chose to respond to the horrors of September 11th through poetry, including a vast number who had never written poetry before. With the rise in profile of the position of Poet Laureate, both in the UK and the US, we are used to seeing topical poems in newspapers. Contemporary poetry (which discounts Wordsworth's philosophical ramblings or Eliot's erudite catalogue of references) by its very nature can be

short and emotionally charged. Poetry provided people with a channel for their feelings. Websites and small magazines were crammed full of poems about the tragedy.

In the January 2002 issue of *Acumen*, which featured 'poems of peace and war' to commemorate September 11th, Patricia Oxley, writes:

> Suddenly, as an editor, I felt the need for public poetry; for poetry giving people's responses to these horrific acts both politically, emotionally and on behalf of the public... Poets should be the unacknowledged critics of the time... 74

Rather than quote one single poem as an example of the work collected in that issue, it might be more useful for this discussion to excerpt some words which appear more than once in the selection of poems: 'evil', 'destroy', 'spirit', 'war', 'ghosts', 'earth', 'heaven', 'enemy', 'wreckage', 'violent', 'grief' and, not surprisingly, 'ruin'. Perhaps it is wrong to assess the quality of the poems although for the most part it can be said that they are predictable, in many cases, bordering on cliché. On the whole, their messages are not subtle, and they are direct in expressing shock, horror, despair and anger, often without the use of image or reference. This is poetry as sound bite, easy to understand, simple and direct in its message. Its emotive subject matter and the obvious empathy it has for the victims of the disaster make it almost impervious to criticism — as these poems are, for the most part, an extension of an emotional truth, how could one disagree with their honest assessment of the scale of tragedy?

Returning to the idea of poet as witness, this may be the most popular age of poetry we have seen for some time, as poetry fulfills the public need to find an outlet for emotion. This impetus may not produce work of great literary merit, but maybe our ideas of poetry and the role of poetry in society have changed enough to encompass a different kind of poem, one that serves a more public rather than private function, one which is accessible to many rather than the chosen few.

Having said that, when trying to find a poem for this discussion which would encapsulate the emotions stirred by the tragedy of September 11th, there was not one contemporary poem which spoke about the place of the event in history. All the poems were too close to the event, too overwhelmed in the horror of the moment. Perhaps it is too much to ask of a poet writing about an event as it happens. And so, here is the beginning of a poem by someone who would never know about the World Trade Center or its collapse:
I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,
Rayless and pathless, and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went – and came and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation; and all their hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:
And they did live by watchfires – and the thrones,
The palaces of crowned kings – the huts,
The habitations of all things that dwell,
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consumed,
And men gathered round their blazing homes
To look once more into each other's face;
Happy were those who dwelt within the eye
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:
A fearful hope was all the world contain'd:
Forests were set on fire – but hour by hour
They fell and faded – and the crackling trunks
Extinguish'd with a crash – and all was black.

Byron could imagine the end of the world by fire and violence. He had travelled to Rome, seen the mighty ruins of the city and felt awed and humbled by the experience. He had seen the graves of poets from a previous age and understood their legacy. Perhaps we are lacking distance, a sense of history, a way to put recent events into a larger context. Perhaps our 'premature ruins' are too recent for us to be able to consider then properly, perhaps we need to allow the dust to settle before we can find a way to write about them. There may be no conclusion to this discussion, as the process of ruin is ongoing, and therefore ever-changing. Things will continue to age and crumble, even in modern times. Even poems become monuments, and some take on the quality of ruin, the way they capture a past life, speak a dead language or adopt an outdated phrase. But it is all of relevance to us, as both writers and 'dwellers' on the earth. To quote Novalis:

only the gaze that is turned backward
   can bring us forward
for the gaze that is turned forward
   leads us backward
APPENDIX ONE
A Personal History of Ruins and Poems

As a very small child, I used to press my face against the car window when we drove by the great hulking mass of the umbrella factory in Freehold. I'm not sure how long it had been closed, but by the seventies, it had weeds growing from the crevices between the bricks and every window was broken, jagged bits of glass still clinging to the panes. Freehold, where Bruce Springsteen was born, was a blue collar town in the mid-twentieth century, and besides umbrellas, Freehold also produced coffee. The Nestle factory was still open for business, and on certain days that acrid smell would hit you when you went for the school bus first thing in the morning. But even Nestle finally cleared out of the centre of town and moved to new premises a few miles away, where agriculture and industry competed for space on the flat plains of New Jersey.

By the time I was growing up, the Main Street of Freehold was a ghost town. True, it had a few municipal buildings, and one of the oldest Presbyterian churches still standing, remnants of its great pre-Revolutionary past. But the little clapboard houses along the railroad were falling against each other, rusted cars littering the dirt roads that ran alongside them. I was fascinated by these houses, by the black women who sat in rocking chairs on their porches and stared at passing traffic. There were no black families down the road in Colts Neck, and the cars that sat in our neighbours' driveways were shiny Chryslers and Cadillacs. Any sense of what might have been there before had been obliterated by the new intake of doctors and lawyers, who wanted to live in housing developments with names like Sleepy Hollow and Shady Oaks, in houses that were mock Tudor or modern Colonial.

But I used to go into the woods behind my house, where there was an abandoned shack. I never knew what the shack had been used for. I found the remnants of a leather belt, its buckle still intact, an empty bb gun cartridge. I kept treasures like these in a sack in my parents' garage. I found flakes of mica and shells, bird skulls and strange seed pods. But the best finds were arrowheads. The conditions for finding them had to be right. It was best after rain or after the field had been ploughed. I suppose all these things signalled a past, a time before myself and my parents. In a country where nothing was really very old, I was able to find traces of some of the earliest inhabitants. I never found history that interesting in school, but to hold an arrowhead in my hand, a thing I had unearthed, that might have been used by someone three hundred years ago, was thrilling. The idea of sneaking into
the derelict umbrella factory was thrilling. The abandoned shack was thrilling. No one else of the derelict umbrella factory was thrilling. The abandoned shack was thrilling. No one else seemed to want it, so I could make a claim for it. It was my first secret place.

It becomes impossible to understand now what constituted that early fascination with all things ruined or abandoned or derelict. I can still picture those black women on their porches, and how years later I found a photograph of my father when he was a young boy, standing on a similar sort of porch, the broken window behind him stuffed with rags. I am only one generation removed from that sort of poverty – I often wonder if some sense of your ancestry is part of your genetic make up. That might explain part of it, although my father has always been obsessed by new things. In the forties, when my father set up his own business, the concept of ‘antiques’ didn’t exist. My mother still talks about the ugly coloured glass my grandmother bought cheaply in instalments, which is now worth a fortune to collectors – ‘depression’ glass, a name conjured up by dealers who are too young to remember the depression. In the teens and twenties, the Jersey shore had been a playground for New York millionaires, many of whom built mansions along the coast and the Navasink River, which flows into the Atlantic. This was the heyday of Gatsby. Twenty bedrooms, staff wing, fifty foot swimming pool. Once the depression hit, these houses became ridiculous. After the country had emerged from the depression and the war, people didn’t live that way anymore, even those who were relatively well off. I was at school with a boy called Matt who had ten brothers and sisters. His parents had bought one of those mansions for a rock-bottom price and used the grand ballroom as a play area for the kids. It was the cheapest option for a family that size in seventies recession America. The houses that hadn’t become nursing homes or hotels stood empty.

So that’s an economic reason, perhaps even a genetic reason. I suppose the most important reason was to do with early points of reference. When I was little, I liked Scooby Doo and The Addams Family. In those shows, the haunted, derelict house (usually high Victorian Gothic) was something to conquer, somewhere exciting. I progressed to books – Harriet the Spy and The Famous Five, who were always poking around in other people’s houses, trying to discover their secrets (it would be some years later when my friends and I nearly got arrested for trying to break into one of those mansions along the Navasink). By the time I discovered The Famous Five, I had started visiting England. I saw ruined castles which were built five and six hundred years before the oldest buildings in New Jersey. I was never that impressed with castles that were intact. They had to be crumbling, with a thick carpet of grass and crows perched in their open towers. I discovered the Brontës
- Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights, in which the ruin becomes a romantic outpost. I hung Waterhouse's The Lady of Shallot on my wall, and Millet's Ophelia. I wanted to be dark and broody, holed up in an ancient tower. I started writing poetry.

I still have what is perhaps my earliest 'ruin' poem, composed when I was sixteen, about St Catherine's chapel in Abbotsbury, Dorset. Average romantic teenage girl stuff. It wasn't until recently, when someone pointed out to me how many of my poems feature abandoned buildings, that I realised the fascination has never really left me. Why am I still writing about ruins? I suppose my early tastes have remained with me, but does it go beyond aesthetics? Mark Doty says that working on drafts of a poem is like walking though a house. It is only by visiting the house thoroughly, going into all the rooms, that the writer can explore all the possibilities of the poem. The ruin takes this analogy one step further - what if the house no longer contains rooms, what if it is open to the elements, what if its contents are long dispersed? The writer then needs to put together the puzzle of the house from scraps of knowledge, from memory or report, from what remains. The ruin becomes more than a pleasing aesthetic principle on which a poet can muse, it becomes an imaginative construct, or more to the point, a 're-construct'. It asks you questions: What kind of man lived in this place? Why did he leave? Was he forced to leave? Was he happy here? In London, the city where I now live, there are ruins everywhere - not only grand ones, like the bits of the London Wall that suddenly appear amidst the concrete fortress of the Barbican, or the remains of Winchester Hall, its rose window set against an office block on Clink Street, or the gothic splendour of the Midland Grand Hotel; but also disused tube stations, the arches around Kings Cross, any number of condemned houses, boarded up or cowering behind scaffolding. London is a city that is built layer upon layer: Roman, Renaissance, Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian, post-war, postmodern, and in most neighbourhoods, you can see the remains of all its previous tenants. In the ruins of St Luke's Old Street, which suffered damage during the war, they recently unearthed five hundred skeletons of parishioners, dating as far back as the 1730s. A discovery like that makes my arrowheads seem very small, insignificant, just a tiny piece of the whole picture of birth, life, death and what comes after - the Romantic notion of the ruin as a slice of mortality. It's not exactly original, the realisation that everything rises, fades, then dies, but the discovery is made through the things that fall around you. The umbrella factory in Freehold was my first view of mortality, its workers long gone, long dead. Not exactly Ozymandias, but for me, significant - the first inkling of something that existed before me and what it left behind.
APPENDIX TWO
Poems which Explore the Notion of Ruin

The Atlantic at Asbury Park

Palace Amusements has lost an 'a',
another 'a', its 'ents'. It seems to say
pale face museum from this distance,
and its chuckling mad boy,
once lit up, has left for good.

I used to watch him twinkle
from Annie's bedroom in the eaves
of her gingerbread house,
once a winter lodging for spinsters.
Her parents were like the elders
in some book. They sat in flowered armchairs
all evening and never spoke.

The wind whipped visitors past the IHoP,
a perched spacecraft, serving pancakes
in sickly syrup. Men basked
in the rain, tattoo ladies pecking
from beneath their sleeves.

Madame Marie hovered over
her crystal ball, the lunar surface
of her face tense in concentration.
Annie and I would sit cross legged
in the bandstand, making plans.

The carousel house still stands,
its candy stripe horses flown.
Only the ocean is the same,
black for miles, white caps, grey sky.
At the other end, there's another coastline,
an abandoned arcade, the remnants
of a carousel. I travelled all that way
to see it for myself.

'The Atlantic at Asbury Park' begins with the lines: 'Palace Amusements has lost an 'a', / another 'a', its 'ents'. I had the idea for the beginning of this poem after reading Sheenagh Pugh's poem, 'Id's Hospit', where she describes the derelict hospital building she passes on the bus and its sign which is missing its letters. The missing letters represent a place which is no longer whole, no longer can perform the function it was built for. Like that poem,
mine is about a memory of a childhood place which, although it still exists, stands as a slightly surreal monument to itself (in Sheenagh Pugh’s poem, she describes the one wall remaining of the hospital as a ‘film set’). I wanted that notion of a filmic place, one which is almost frightening, but also romantic in a ‘trashy’ way, with its run-down carousel and its ancient fortune-teller. It is deliberate that the characters in the poem are as run-down as their surroundings – not only Madame Marie, but also the tattooed man and Annie’s parents (and, by extension, the laughing mad boy; although he is not real, he represents the decline of the human spirit in the place). The poem is ultimately about trying to gauge the future, with its crystal ball, and the two girls planning their escape. Although the speaker ultimately does leave, she finds that at the other side of the ocean, the same pier exists, in the same state of dereliction; dereliction is universal, not isolated to her particular circumstances.
Christmas in London

The skaters glide across the ice like songs
like the skaters who sliced the frozen Thames.

A bus stutters across the bridge; red
lights of OXO, cranes dressed in lights,

the restless Eye lit blue, its tourists lifted
above the skyline, above tower blocks
above the wedding-spire of St Bride's
above the fat dome of St Paul's,

shivering allotments, ragged greens
the greens where houses stood, where houses stand

no more. The alleys wet with condensation,
darkened streets, the rivers running

just below the ground, the Wandle, the Walbrook,
the Tyburn, the Fleet. The silent churchyards

with their crooked stones, each stone
a marker for a man.

This poem was originally begun as a Ghazal, a Persian verse form in self-contained couplets, where the last word of each line is repeated. Although I have for the most part kept the couplets self-contained, and have tried to carry repeated words through each couplet (i.e. 'skaters' in couplet one, 'lights' in couplet two, etc.) I found I needed to break down the rather stilted nature of the form to get a sense of movement. I wanted to write a poem which begins by romanticising modern London (envisioning it as a scene from a Christmas card) and, as the movement through the city becomes more retrospective and subterranean, would leave the reader with a more menacing prospect. I wanted to move the reader's eye from the skyline to what lies underground. I also wanted to contrast Dickensian London (the London of 'A Christmas Carol') with modern London, with the London Eye and the tower blocks, and perhaps reverse expectations (i.e., Victorian London is picturesque, while modern London is gritty and unattractive). This poem is similar to an earlier poem of mine, 'Fleet', which also imagines the subterranean life of the city, and invokes the names of the underground rivers.
The Graveyard on the MOD Range

They are suspended – like a spire
rising above the waterline, its village submerged –
behind the high wall their ancestors built
stone by stone, before the army came.

The army has more ingenious ways to keep us out:
acres of razor wire, electrified gates.
This land that no one seemed to want, generations
of Macleans, Maxwells, Dundonalds

all fled. Those they left behind would have died
as most did, working the fields or in their beds,
their hearts finished, or simply tired. They died
where they were born, with the sea behind them,
the church long gone. Their valley cradled every sound,
sailed it on the wind, so when the gunfire came,
shaking the rooks from their trees, it shivered
their bones; their epitaphs

which might have promised eternal rest, were safe
not only from sea and storm, but from the first war
and the next, the tangled map of countries that once
didn't exist, a new century.

"The Graveyard on the MOD Range": This poem begins with the image of the village
submerged by the reservoir, which is also the central image in the poem 'Reservoirs'
by R.S. Thomas. Like Thomas, I wanted to convey the notion of a place that had been
appropriated, in the same way that villages were evacuated and flooded to create reservoirs
(only in this case, the inhabitants of the graveyard are not able to move elsewhere). I
also wanted to convey the notion that somehow this place has been frozen in the time
of its burials, that the history of the world that followed would have been inconceivable
to those buried there. On a more subtle level, it is a an anti-war poem, in its criticism
of the army's disrespect for the land and its inhabitants, and in the evoking of the total
wars of the last century at the end of the poem, which necessitate the existence of the
MOD range. I wanted to contrast the simple community of the Macleans, Maxwells,
Dundonalds, who could no longer make their livings from the land, and 'the tangled map
of countries' that suggest the modern world of conflict.
House

The concrete fills the spaces between
the walls and what they held — a child's cry,
an argument, dulled. It hardens, cools.

The house is peeled away like a skin:
a fire protrudes from the shell of a room,
the ghost of a fire gone out.

A mausoleum to newspapers and spoons,
deep pile carpets, nights consumed
by the bluish glow of the TV,

perched in a field, a grassed-over street
where once other houses stood,
gathering lives together.

This poem was based on the Rachel Whiteread sculpture of the same name, which was a cast of an ordinary early thirties semi-detached house in East London, scheduled for demolition. The irony of the piece is that she created a memorial which was eventually destroyed, thus raising questions about what and how we commemorate. I was not familiar with H.D.'s poem 'The Walls Do Not Fall' when I was writing 'House', but it occurs to me there are similarities in the way both poems memorialise the domestic (H.D. makes a comparison between the bombed ruins and ancient Egypt, and in an earlier draft of my poem, I had a line about the previous owner of the house as a 'Pharaoh'). Although I cut that line in the final draft, I retained the idea of a 'mausoleum'). The ordinary Victorian terraced house is a monument to the families who have resided there. I responded in my poem to the way that Whiteread was attempting to memorialise the ordinary and the poignancy of that act.
Lekaki

We repeated the name, its 'k's like peaks,
but the old man pointed into the valley - a river
only in flood time, bed like ancient bones.
We began to walk, over stones then boulders -
nothing to them, the men who fled to these caves,
first from Turks then Germans. We hacked
through thorn and gorse, until a wall was in our sights,
then the whole church, as if it had fallen at our feet.

We stood on the threshold, blinded by dark
and the dark gave up its saints, halos flaked
to gold dust, their names spelled out on the wall
as if they'd whispered them, strange words
hanging in airless space, and above, the soldiers
tormenting Christ on the cross, the grinning skull
at the base, and to his left, Saint George,
a boy, lance raised - his dragon faded away.

Your hand skimmed a crack that severed a saint,
veered straight through the Last Judgement,
vehicles tumbling, a cavern within a cavernous Hell,
a slow grind to dust. As we turned to Kardamyli,
the church vanished under grape, once the only house
of God along the Viros, where ferry men had stopped
to pray for six hundred years until the river
seeped away, the last monk arriving on foot.

I was attracted to the idea of writing about a ruin, such as the monastery in the poem,
that one 'discovers'. What I remembered most about my journey to the monastery was
how it could only be reached through great physical effort, and through that effort, was
more rewarding to have found, like a modern 'pilgrimage'. There is a religious element to
the poem, but very much through the perspective of a modern, secular viewer. I wanted
to contrast the endurance of the native population to the 'softness' of the tourists, and
that somehow, the rugged landscape of the place reflected its inhabitants, who had, over
time, lost the sustaining river that ran through their villages, but remained on the land.
The monastery too had been affected by the loss of the river, and eventually had to be
abandoned. Although it is now a ruin, it clings stubbornly to the hillside, although, as
I allude to in the poem, it is in peril. Having said that, I wanted to convey the notion
that the building was very much an 'active' ruin, in that it was in such a serious state
of disrepair, that it was in danger of disappearing very soon, and therefore, constantly
altering with each new challenge to the landscape.
The London Necropolis Railway

One day the dead outnumbered the living.
Whole streets wore black wreaths.
Corpses rose from the earth when it rained.
They erected monuments to themselves,
Egyptian pyramids, gothic temples in granite and marble.
They travelled in horse-drawn carriages
and wore their finest clothes.
Even those we thought were one of us
took on a quality we came to know,
the blood-splattered cough, the bloodless cheek.
It became fashionable to be dead.
Artists chose delicate models and painted them
swooning in their deathbeds, or if still alive, in mourning.
Poets drank absinthe in bars that looked like coffins
and kept a vial of laudanum under the bed.
Black glistened during the day
and glowed at night.
After a while we tired of their cold embrace
and banished them to the country.
From Waterloo to Woking,
they filled the carriages with their velvets and mahoganies,
the curtains drawn on the poor house
and the factories, the railway that spidered
through London, and gave way
to green, to clean air and cloudless sky.
There they finally lie in the shade of the trees,
while we go about our lives.

This poem was conceived as a an elegy; I was attracted to the idea of writing an elegy not
to a person, but to an entire culture of mourning which has been lost to contemporary
Western society. I have always been fascinated by Victorian mourning practices and
attitudes to dying, and in this instance, how the modern technology of the railway was
adopted to suit the Victorian cemetery industry. The railway ran from Waterloo Station in
London to Brookwood Cemetery in Woking, which was at the time the largest cemetery
in the world. Brookwood was opened in 1854 to accommodate the dead of London, as the
inner-city cemeteries were already oversubscribed, and it was apparent that there would be severe overcrowding by 1900 (an issue that Ken Worpole discusses in his essay "The Cemetery in the City", and which Tony Harrison touches upon in his poem 'v.'). The station building still stands; the entrance is alongside Waterloo Station on Westminster Bridge Road, and although it is no longer used as an arrival point for the railway (which closed in the 1920s), there is still a shipping company whose offices occupy the upper floors. The is an huge arched entrance at street level, which would have been built to accommodate horse-drawn hearses. Although the building is still in use, and therefore cannot be described as a ruin, its strange and menacing architecture suggests that it is somehow part of the past, particularly as it is now surrounded by post-war structures (it is one of the few pre-WWII buildings on that stretch of road, an area which sustained heavy bombing, so perhaps there is also something significant about its survival, in the way that the 'dead' survive in the poem).
Navasink

Terri’s sister never spoke. She went to doctors who’d look into her eyes, write prescriptions for tranquillisers, use words like dysfunctional and impaired, then send her somewhere else.

We were scared of them, always on their own, the hems of their uniforms skimming the rules, buttons straining against their breasts, Terri’s hint of Maidenform lace. But where she led, we went.

That’s how we arrived at the mansion: Terri was sure it had been deserted for years, so we crept round the back, cicadas trilling our arrival onto the marshy banks where as a child I searched for arrowheads, last trace of the tribe who named this river.

The house seemed to glitter in lights from the opposite shore, fireflies like little candles.

You could almost hear the laughter of summer millionaires still singing in the trees, the veranda spilling over with women in filmy gowns, maybe even the architect who was later gunned down in a duel over his beautiful actress wife. We wanted men to fight for us, we wanted moonlight streaming on a veranda in a country far away.

We sat on the pier, passing a bottle of vodka; I choked on its fire. Terri was gazing into the black river, her silence too hard to fathom. She and her sister could speak just with their eyes.

We never went back. I watched boys aim air guns at the windows, a gale plunged a tree through the roof. In the end it was levelled to make way for condominiums with riverside views.

We all heard the story: how Terri had followed a trail of blood, black against her mother’s orange pile, to her sister’s closed door. By the end of the year her family had moved. We never saw them again.
The house which was the model for the mansion in this poem is mentioned on page iii of Appendix One. I wanted to write a narrative poem, which had the principles of a short story, but in verse form. I had 'great American novels' in my mind as I was writing it, such as 'The Great Gatsby' and E. L. Doctorow's 'Ragtime' (which has as one of its sub-plots the story of the murder of the architect Stanford White, which I allude to in the poem). It seemed appropriate to consider the wealth and position of the people who owned the house, and to contrast that with the culture of the girls in the poem (I originally had more about Terri's poverty in an earlier draft, but I felt it was too much background information, so I took it out). As I mention in appendix one, there was no practical use for these summer millionaire's houses in contemporary New Jersey, and as land there was at a premium, a number of these grand houses were torn down.
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