

THE RUIN

Many great works of science fiction, from Wells's *The Time Machine* onward, have attempted to portray the far future, and in reading them we look backward by the brilliant light of those distant epochs to see our own era, outlined with the vividness that surrounds something very strange, something utterly unfamiliar. Viewing the ruins of our own culture through the eyes of the denizens of the future creates a powerful effect. Thus the famous final shot of *Planet of the Apes*, the Statue of Liberty buried neck-deep in the sands of what we had thought was an alien world. Thus the glimpses of our own long-vanished era (and later eras, also long-vanished) in such books as William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland*, Brian Aldiss's *The Long Afternoon of Earth*, and Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*, and such stories as Cordwainer Smith's "Alpha Rapha Boulevard," John W. Campbell's "Twilight," Robert Moore Williams's "Robots Return," and Poul Anderson's "Epilogue," to name just a few out of a great many.

My own best shot at achieving the time-displacement parallax effect was the 1971 novel *Son of Man*, in which my bewildered protagonist, wandering through the world of some billions of years from now, comes upon the ruins of an ancient building, "a columned edifice in the classical style, gray and stolid and self-assured, fitted by style and grandeur to have been the supreme museum of Earth. . . . A scaly green lichen clings to the roughnesses of the wall, creating patterns of choked color, continents sprouting on the ancient stone. Weeds have begun to straggle across the portico. The door is gone, but, staring through it, he sees only darkness within the building." Five huge dinosaur-like beasts, remote

descendants of mankind, occupy a courtyard behind the shattered columns. What he experiences is the parallax of time, the measure of the distortion and shifting that the eons impose on the past. One of the finest things science fiction can do is show us the great span of time under the auspices of eternity, the succession of the ages, the great arch of history shading into almost unknowable prehistory at one end and the utterly unknowable future at the other.

But we don't need to turn to science fiction to get that *frisson* of awe and even terror that comes from contemplating the slow, inexorable impact of time. Our world is full of the ruined relics left behind by epochs past. The Forum and Colosseum in Rome, the Acropolis in Athens, the temples and pyramids of Egypt, the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro in Pakistan, the Mayan pyramids of Chichen Itza, the city of Petra in the Jordanian desert (that "rose-red city half as old as Time") all stir the imagination to an appreciation of the power of time in the same way that a strongly realized work of science fiction can do. These ruins have, of course, generated many a poem or novel or painting. The eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam, who had the fifteen-hundred-year-old ruins of Persia's greatest age close at hand, put it this way:

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried
and drank deep:
And Bahram, that great Hunter—the
Wild Ass
Stamps o'er his Head, but cannot
break his Sleep.

A second poem that comes quickly to mind is Shelley's "Ozymandias," which

speaks of a vast fallen statue in the Egyptian desert:

I met a traveler from an antique
land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless
legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on
the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies. . . .

And Shelley gives us, with savage irony, the inscription on the pedestal:

“My name is Ozymandias, king of
kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and
despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the
decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless
and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far
away.

There is another and much more obscure poem that provides me with an even stronger sense of one age succeeding another, generating its force for me because it is the work of a poet of one ancient vanished society writing about an even earlier one already all but unknown in the poet’s time. The displacement effect thus provided verges on something only the best science fiction has achieved for me. This is the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon poem we call in modern English “The Ruin,” a work that has come down to us only because it was collected in an eleventh-century manuscript known as the Exeter Book, which is our main source for what remains of early English poetry.

The Exeter Book is something of a ruin itself. The front cover was once used as a cutting board, and even as a beer mat. The last fourteen pages are marred by a large diagonal burn, apparently done by a branding iron and damaging much of the text. “The Ruin” is on one of the damaged pages, and so it is partly unintelligible, but what remains is one of the great works of Old English verse.

The poet is writing about a ruined city that the Romans had left behind when they abandoned their conquered province of Britain about three hundred years earlier, just as the first Saxon invaders were arriving. Most authorities consider the city to be *Aquae Sulis*, on the site of what is now the city of Bath, where Roman ruins can still be seen today. It is a masterly depiction of time’s ruination; but what gives me the true science fictional shiver is its view of the vanished Romans as a quasi-mythical race of giants:

These walls are wondrous. Destiny destroyed them.
The courtyards and battlements are smashed. The work of the giants is crumbling.
Its roofs are breaking and falling; its towers collapse.
Plundered are those walls with grated doors, their mortar white with frost.
Its battered ramparts are shorn away and ruined, eaten away by Time.
Earth’s fist and grasp
Holds mason and man, all decayed, departed. . . .

The poet tells us that for “a hundred generations” men held sway here, the red wall standing “while kingdom followed kingdom in the land,” and he gives us a picture of radiant drinking-halls, lavish baths and pools, joyous revelry. But then came mighty Fate, bringing sudden change.

Wide-wasting was the battle where the great walls fell.
Plague-laden days upon the city came;
Death snatched away that mighty host of men. . . .
There in the olden time full many a lord,
Clad in gleaming battle-armor, gazed upon his silver treasure and his jewels,
A radiant city in a kingdom wide.
There stood the courts of stone, and the hot rushing stream that carried wa-

ter to the baths, the heart of the place. . . .

And the poem trails off in the wreckage of the manuscript:

The hot streams ran to the ringed tank. . . .

Where the baths were. . . .

Then is. . . .

. . . that is a noble thing. . . .

. . . the castle. . . the city. . . .

There it ends. The Romans, those departed giants of a misty, all but forgotten age, are gone, but their shattered city remains, a mere vestige of a great civilization that this poet of the simpler Anglo-Saxon culture can scarcely imagine. It is the same effect that we get today when reading some novel of a post-apocalyptic future in which only the stumps and scattered fragments of the structures of our civilization survive, stirring awe in the few wandering people of that future age, who speculate on the identities and purposes of the unknown ancient builders. The chief difference is that the ruins of this poem are real ones, not the work of some fantasist; the similarity arises because the Anglo-Saxon poet saw them through the eyes of a mythmaker, even as a modern writer of science fiction or fantasy would do. To him, the ancients were giants, their empire a radiant one, their treasure immense, and kingdom followed kingdom for a hundred generations until, suddenly, astonishingly, the whole great city was brought to ruin and its very name lost to memory. What we take away from "The Ruin" is the knowledge that everything is transient. The present perpetually devours the future and transforms it into the past. The poem, once read, can never be forgotten: its unknown author has given us a potent view of the succession of ages. And SF, now and then, offers us the same long perspective that shows us our own era through the eyes of our remote descendants, and we shiver in a kind of pleasurable fright as the shock of recognition sweeps through us. ○