THINKING THROUGH RUINS
GENEALOGIES, FUNCTIONS, AND INTERPRETATIONS

EDITED BY
ENASS KHANSA, KONSTANTIN KLEIN, AND BARBARA WINCKLER

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ORGANISED DECAY: GENEALOGIES, FUNCTIONS, AND INTERPRETATIONS OF RUINS

KONSTANTIN KLEIN AND BARBARA WINCKLER

"Crumbling is not an instant's Act", wrote the American poet Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) in one of the almost 1,800 poems which she had committed onto loose sheets of paper or penned into her forty notebooks. Death and mortality are recurring themes in Dickinson's work. Between a third to half of her poems circle around these topics, which fascinated the poet as the ultimate forms of limitation and transformation.[1] Within this large number of poetic reflections on death and mortality, many texts focus on the physical demise of the body.[2] In poem no. 1010, "Crumbling is not an instant's Act", Dickinson paid careful attention to metaphorical contrasts, to subtle temporal categories, and to a usage of words at the margins of their common meanings:

> Crumbling is not an instant's Act
> A fundamental pause
> Dilapidation's processes
> Are organized Decays.
>
> 'Tis first a Cobweb on the Soul
> A Cuticle of Dust
> A Borer in the Axis
> An Elemental Rust —
>
> Ruin is formal — Devil's work
> Consecutive and slow —
> Fail in an instant, no man did
> Slipping — is Crash's law.[3]

Decay usually happens over time. It is hard to notice and rarely occurs in a single moment. Instead, it is 'consecutive' and slow: first a thin cobweb here and just a mote or 'cuticle' of dust there. Already with her use of the word 'consecutive' Dickinson proposes a conundrum, alluding to a continuous, step-by-step process of decay, even though decay cannot be inherently consecutive. Moreover, the poet asserts, decay is unstoppable, and ruin (the Devil's work) is formal: it assumes a form, it takes a shape. The reader is left uncertain as to whether Dickinson is speaking about aged buildings or about the inexorable decay of the human body. Terms which are associated with the first ('dilapidation' obviously – but also 'cobweb', 'dust', 'borer', and 'rust') are combined with those which refer to the latter ('soul', 'cuticle', or 'axis' as a metaphor for the vertebral column of the body). When contemplating the decay of a building, the beholder is inevitably confronted with the power of the gnawing teeth of time; from there it is but one small mental leap to considering their own inevitable demise. In Dickinson's poem, further tension is created by a seeming paradox: How can decay, the epitome of dematerialisation, materialise? How does decay assume a form, take a shape, become or be formal?

Emily Dickinson's poetic wording incidentally reflects the original Latin etymology of the term 'ruin'. Ever since the 14th century, ruins have predominantly been associated with abandoned monumental structures, which have fallen into a state of disrepair.[4] A ruin can be a forlorn castle on a hill or a humble cottage in danger of collapsing – the word 'ruin' always denotes a man-made structure. In contrast, the Latin term *ruina*, just as its Ancient Greek equivalent *ereípion* (both usually used in the plural, *ruinae* and *ereípia*), does not denote a ruined building as such; it rather describes the process of decay or its result;[5] it is the materialisation of decay. Unlike the modern derivate 'ruin' which

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Opposite: The autograph of Emily Dickinson's poem "Crumbling is not an instant's Act"

often describes an enchanted and aesthetically delightful place,[6] a *ruina* in its original meaning was considered as something undesirable, as the contribution by Konstantin Klein demonstrates. Similarly, as explained by Phillip Grimberg in his essay, the Chinese term *canjing* translates to 'ruined scenery' and is reflective of an unpleasant distortion of the concept of cosmic unity.[7] Dani Nassif in his contribution emphasises that the Arabic term *al-aṭlāl* (once more a plural), which is often translated as 'the ruins', does not in fact simply designate remains or traces of an abandoned dwelling place but has become connoted, in the Arabic literary tradition, with the potential of such structures to resurrect personal memories. A physical ruin, in contrast, would be called *khirba*, grammatically a nominal derivation from the verb *kharaba* ('to demolish'), and thus a semantic analogy with the Latin etymology of *ruina*. An abandoned, decayed structure (*khirba*) can carry the function of *al-aṭlāl* when its beholder is haunted by a recollection of past experiences as soon as these ruins loom (*yuṭill*) in front of them.[8] The Arabic noun *khirba*, deriving from the verb *kharaba*, is but one example of how the words for 'ruin(s)' in most languages are derivates from "vibrantly violent verb[s]"[9] denoting very active deeds: demolition, devastation, destruction, and dilapidation. Ruination is not only formal, as Emily Dickinson put it; ruination is both a process and the result of this process.

Due to this ambiguity, ruins are difficult to define in simple dichotomies. Thinking about the material world, the opposite of a building is not a ruin. The true opposite would be mere empty space, while the ruin is somewhere in between. What was once a building has been transformed, in one way or another (either by ruination or by destruction), into an entity with a different status which provides a "quintessential image of what has vanished from the past and has long decayed".[10] Nevertheless, the ruin, albeit no longer a complete building, is still present as a part of the material world, it is thus both a reference to a building's prime and to its decay.[11] Ruins serve as signs and in many cases as mnemonic devices. The Greeks would describe this aspect of a ruin not with the word *ereípion* but with *séma* ('sign' or 'trace') and *mnéma* ('memorial') – the latter explicitly pointing to the mnemonic function of a building, whereas the Romans would have called such a sign *monumentum*, a noun deriving from the verb *monere* ('to admonish, to remind').[12] This word, however, could be applied to all kinds of structures that were of a certain age or occupied a prominent position in space, regardless of whether they were intact or not. Initially, it denoted the countless tombstones and funerary monuments set up along the arterial roads leading into Roman cities (Fig. 1). Not every *monumentum* was a ruin, as the contribution by Konstantin Klein shows. Ruins are semiotically different from the structures they used to be; they enjoy a different aesthetical perception determined neither by artifice nor natural beauty alone.[13]

Ruination usually deprives a building of its original function, but equally the loss of function can have ruination as its consequence. The temporal aspect of ruins is extremely complex and entails diverse interpretations. Ruins derive from the past, shape the present, and pose questions for the future – while contemporary and sometimes ephemeral attitudes towards a specific ruin often have a lasting impact on its fate and preservation. Moreover, in each moment in time in the life of a ruin, there may be individually varying degrees of meaning and significance. The perception, appreciation, and, as a consequence, attitude towards ruins is thus strongly dependant on the perception and appreciation of a certain historical period, regime, or ideology, and new meanings can be imposed upon ruins, as several contributions in this volume reveal. Alexandra Vukovich's essay, for example, shows how an Ottoman mosque in Belgrade not only lost its function, but fell prey to the nation-building process in post-Ottoman Serbia, while Phillip Grimberg's

Fig. 1: An array of Roman funeral *monumenta*, among them the large mausoleum of Cecilia Metella on the Via Appia, depicted in an Italianate landscape by the Flemish painter Jan Frans van Bloemen (between 1692 and 1749)

study discusses the destruction of the Old Summer Palace in Beijing and its afterlife as a political symbol in contemporary China. The challenges of ascribing meaning to ruins are exemplified in the contribution by Andreas Schmidt-Colinet who shows that the Temple of Bel in Palmyra is a building that had fulfilled various functions in its long life: after being a temple, a church, and a mosque, it was only from the 1930s onwards that the building became a ruin that was cherished as such by visitors from Syria and abroad. Seen from the sober perspective of alternating phases in a building's history, the temple's most recent destruction in 2015 thus only rang in a new phase – albeit a phase with yet unknown functions and meanings. The future shape of the 'ruined ruin' in Palmyra is hotly debated among a multitude of actors (politicians, scholars, and the public – both locally and globally) as are the reconstruction plans for Notre-Dame de Paris after the devastating fire in 2019. Alexander Fischer demonstrates in his contribution that there is no definitive or original building phase in the church's long history that could be used as orientation for the future reconstruction process. Johanna Blokker's contribution explains that varying attitudes towards restoration in Europe are far from new and have been shaped by the experience of two world wars. The omnipresence of ruination even brought into question the purpose of art, exemplified by the famous saying of Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), that writing poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric. With an entire continent in ruins, visual artists in particular had to reflect on why and how they should engage with their media to create a beauty of wholeness.[14] In her contribution, Karen Lang uses the example of the American artist Philip Guston (1913–1980), who conceived of painting as a kind of ruin and, as a child of Jewish immigrants who had fled the pogroms of Czarist Russia in Ukraine, struggled throughout his life to absorb history not only in a global but also in a personal dimension. His paintings which prominently figure fragment-

ed parts of the human body resonate with Emily Dickinson's juxtaposition of ruin in both an architectural and a corporal meaning. Lang shows how Guston's paintings can be read through their conceptual engagement with ruination. A surprisingly similar attitude can be found in the audio-visual works of Lebanese filmmaker and poet Ghassan Salhab (b. 1958), which Lotte Laub discusses in their context of post-civil war Lebanese society. While some of these works indeed show ruined buildings, they primarily portray disorientated human beings suffering from a lack of social cohesion. In one of Salhab's video works, an elegiac mood is created by including poems written by Paul Celan (1920–1970). It was precisely this poet's oeuvre, in particular his poem *Todesfuge* (*Deathfugue*, 1948) but also collections such as *Die Niemandsrose* (*The No-One's-Rose*, 1963), quoted in Salhab's video, which eventually made Adorno rethink and readjust his dictum about poetry after Auschwitz. In the audio-visual works by Ghassan Salhab, the recitation gives prominence to the materiality of both image and voice – while it remains unclear whether the poetic 'you' is being used to address an individual or the ruined city.

RUINS AND THE GAZE OF THE BEHOLDER

At the same time as Emily Dickinson was writing her poems in New England, the French artist Gustave Doré (1832–1883) was invited to spend time in London by the journalist William Blanchard Jerrold (1826–1884). In 1869, Doré had already achieved some fame for his paintings, but Jerrold suggested that they work together on a portrait of Britain's capital for which the Frenchman contributed 180 wood engravings. The completed book, *London: A Pilgrimage*, was published in 1872 and became an immediate success that would cement Doré's fame as an engraver. The last full-page image of the work (Fig. 2) depicts an
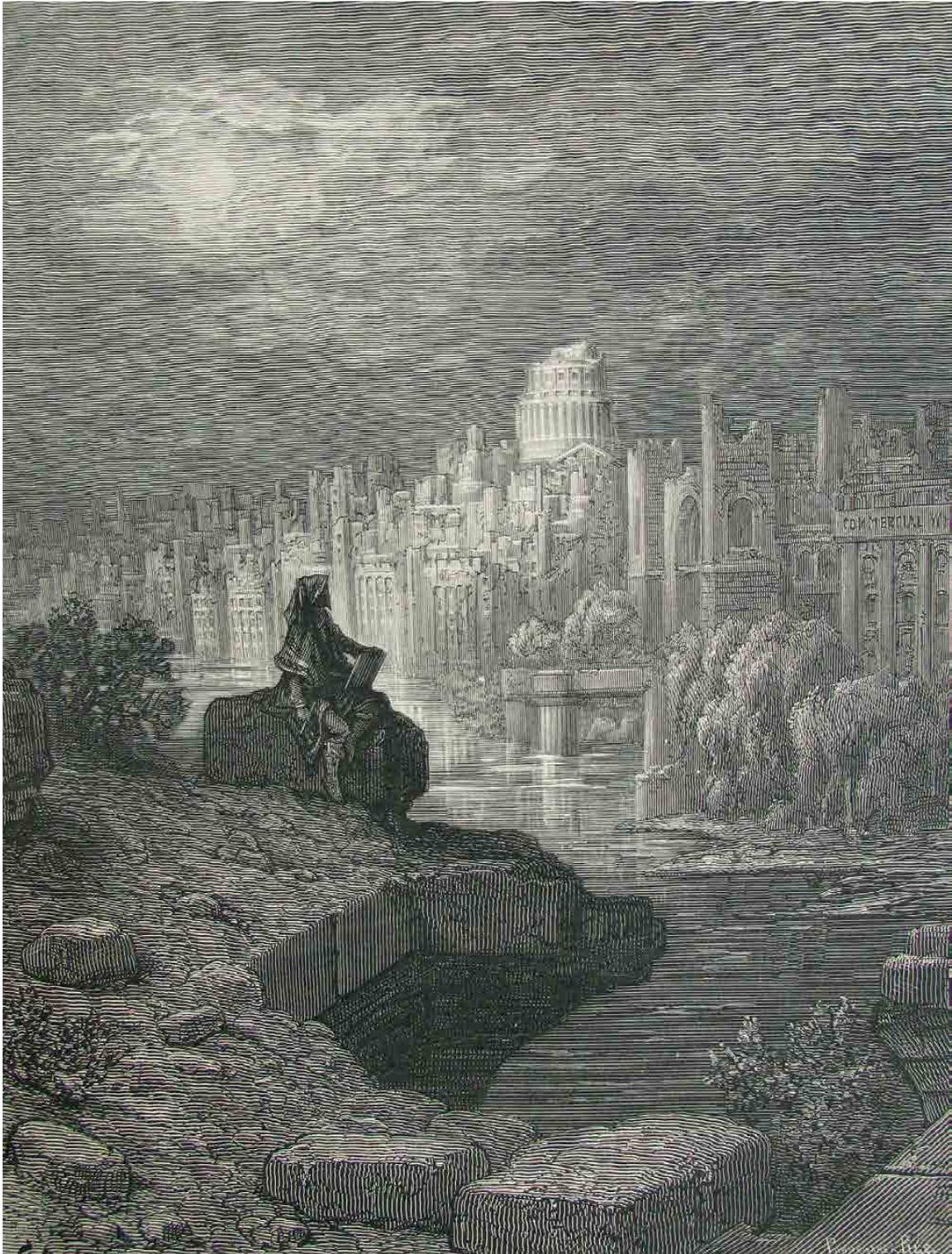
Fig. 2: Gustave Doré's engraving *The New Zealander* from *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872) depicting a traveller from New Zealand sketching the ruins of the British capital

ominous landscape of ruins rising over a sluggish, gloomy river. One single company sign is legible: it reads 'COMMERCIAL WHARF' and helps to locate the scene. Upon closer observation, one can identify a cathedral-like building as the ruins of Cannon Street Station, which at the time of the book's publication had just opened its doors to the public and had immediately become a landmark of the city with its two impressive towers facing towards the River Thames. In the foreground of the illustration, Doré depicted a dark figure wearing a hooded cloak, sitting on a broken arch of London Bridge, and sketching the ruins of St Paul's Cathedral which – deprived of most of its dome but significantly protracted in perspective – is towering over the entire ruinous landscape. This figure is a traveller, as Doré's description of the image explains, a New Zealander, who is depicted in a pose that must have reminded the higher echelons of society of their fellow-Victorians on their educational travels, and how they would have drawn ancient ruins in the city of Rome, in Campania near Naples, or on the island of Sicily.[15] It is no coincidence that Doré chose a New Zealander as the eponymous beholder of a utopian London in ruins, as for many Victorians the British-descended inhabitants of this new crown colony were seen as the energetic global citizens of the future.[16] The colonial tourist turns into an icon

of the British Empire's frailty and uncertain fate.[17] The engraving also shows that ruins are not only inanimate relics. The inhabitant of a British colony is confronted with the remains of an empire, and the mnemonic function of ruins comes at a price: they can be burden and ballast to those people who are forced to deal with the remains of a past to which they are vividly and/or imperceptibly bound.[18] This is demonstrated by the contribution by Dionysios Stathakopoulos on the ancient ruins of Athens, while Gruia Bădescu and Alexandra Vukovich address the varying fate of structures of dominance in the Balkans, and analyse the uneven pace at which societies cope with previous orders that are embodied by ruined buildings.

THE SUBLIME TERROR OF RUINATION

Gustave Doré's engraving is but one example of a broader phenomenon. Enchanted ruins lent wings to the arts beginning with the Italian Renaissance, when imaginary decayed structures began to populate the background of paintings. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it became fashionable to erect follies, artificial ruins (Fig. 3), in parks and landscaped gardens, which delighted their beholders as eerily

Fig. 3: Wimpole's Folly in Cambridgeshire (built in the mid-1770s), an early example of artificial ruins

Fig. 4: Astronaut Taylor (Charlton Heston) in front of the ruins of the Statue of Liberty, realising that the eponymous Planet of the Apes was the Earth all along

beautiful remains of an imagined past and at the same time served as a contrast to the magnificence of the noble (and intact) stately homes of the respective estate owners.[19] Doré's depiction of the decayed city of London also stands within a longer tradition of painting that depicted still intact buildings or landmarks in a state of imaginary desolation – a tradition which has repercussions on the visual culture of 20th-century cinema, for example the final scene in Franklin J. Schaffner's science fiction movie *Planet of the Apes* (1968, see figure 4), or of 21st-century video games, as Emma Fraser's contribution in this volume shows.

In Hubert Robert's *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins* (1796), most of the Grand Galerie's ceiling has caved in (Fig. 5). The French painter (1733–1808) had studied in Rome with Giovanni Paolo Pannini (1691–1765), one of the most famous *vedutisti* ('view painters') of the age. It was in Italy that Robert became acquainted with the etchings of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), who in his *Vedute* (1748) had depicted not only the technical engineering of ancient buildings but also the poetic aspects of their ruination, thereby creating striking effects by adding human figures whose poverty, disabilities, or drunkenness echoed

Fig. 5: Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins*, Louvre, 1796

the decay of architecture.[20] In Robert's painting of the Louvre's Grande Galerie, ferns have grown on top of the walls that are blackened with soot. Some people are cooking food in a cauldron, others stare in bewilderment at pieces of art which lay scattered across the floor. The painting was executed shortly after the so-called Reign of Terror ('la Terreur') of the years 1793–1794, when a series of executions and massacres took place in the turmoil after the French Revolution. Robert too found himself incarcerated for ten months in the prisons of Saint-Pélagie and Saint-Lazare and narrowly escaped the guillotine. The Louvre, the former royal palace and symbol of the Ancien Régime, was still in the process of transformation into a national art museum although it had already hastily opened its doors to the public in August 1793. Robert was eventually placed on the committee in charge of this institution after his release from prison. In his painting of the Grande Galerie, which was, of course, not ruined but an intact part of the building, Robert depicted this main exhibition space of the Louvre not as a temple of culture and revolutionary enlightenment which it was meant to become "but as the remains of a dying world".[21] The terror that had haunted the streets of Paris, however, is artistically transformed into a sublime terror which fascinated the cultivated minds of the 18th century. One of them was Denis Diderot (1713–1784), who had fulsomely discussed and praised Robert's earlier paintings in his *Salon de 1767*. Diderot had stressed in his art historical writings that a painting which conveyed the feeling of terror could pave the path to the sublime, especially when employing dark and gloomy colours,[22] as Robert did in his *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins*.

RUINS BEYOND TIME

Hubert Robert had already painted scenes depicting the demolition and ruination of structures that held contemporary importance for the French nation before and during the French Revolution as well as during the Reign of Terror. His imaginary view of the Louvre, however, is different from these earlier works that were vignettes of real fires, demolitions, and destructions. Were it not for the title of the painting, the ruins depicted in it would be quite difficult to recognise; they could be part of any abandoned palace. Beholders might not identify the building as the Louvre but would still recognise the space as a museum. The white marble statue in the foreground, for instance, is the *Dying Slave* sculpted by Michelangelo between 1513 and 1516, which some time after 1546 came into the possession of King Francis I of France. The bell-shaped antique vessel in the centre is the Borghese Vase, named after the aristocratic family which had acquired it in 1566.[23] Some people in the background might even be interpreted as strolling through the ruin and marvelling at a column – foreshadowing future museum visitors inspecting pieces of art at the Louvre as the renowned art museum it was yet to become. In the centre, a young man is depicted sitting on a pile of rubble in a similar position to Doré's New Zealander. Robert's youth is a lover of art amidst commoners who barely notice the majesty of the ruined Grande Galerie. The young man is sketching the only piece of art that is completely unharmed and still standing: the famous Apollo Belvedere. A Roman statue from the second century AD, which the art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) considered to be the greatest work of ancient sculpture, the Apollo Belvedere was regarded as the pinnacle of artistic perfection by the Neoclassical movement, which followed Winckelmann in his aesthetic approach to ancient art. Like the Borghese Vase, however, the Apollo Belvedere was not part of the Louvre's collections in 1796, and unlike the vase, it is not part of its collections today. The statue was brought to Paris as war booty after Napoleon Bonaparte's 1796 Italian Campaign. Two years later, the Apollo Belvedere would indeed be on display at the Louvre

Fig. 6: Detail from Hubert Robert's *Imaginary View*: The young painter sketching the Apollo Belvedere, while three people hasten towards the head of the goddess Athena

but was eventually returned to the Vatican Museums from where it had been taken by the French troops. At the time when Robert painted these objects in the ruins of the Grande Galerie, the Borghese Vase was one of the most admired marble vases from Antiquity and it was often imitated or copied, for example, for the gardens of Versailles. It was, however, still owned by the Borghese family who in 1808 (twelve years after Robert's painting) sold it to Napoleon who had it displayed at the Louvre from 1811. Thus, in 1796, Hubert Robert had painted a museum in ruins that was not actually ruined, and he had filled this museum with objects which were not actually on display.

By choosing the guise of a utopian ruin, Hubert Robert removed all logical indications regarding the scene's position in time. The dark colours and the decayed architecture point back to an overcome past, when the Louvre was a royal palace and a symbol of the Ancien Régime. The antique masterpieces which were not yet displayed in the museum, by contrast, stem from an even more remote past but

are indicating the future. However, since they lie shattered on the floor after a future process of decay had begun, they might just as well be the remnants of a future past. Detached from the logical timeline, the beholder inevitably must wonder whether the painting also contained admonitive references to the present. Among the larger figures depicted in Robert's *Imaginary View*, three people in the foreground agitatedly hasten towards a bust of Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom (Fig. 6).[24] Perhaps not accidentally, they are dressed in the three colors of the revolutionary cockade of France and the newly adopted French flag. But wisdom lies decapitated amidst the debris – perhaps a hint to the guillotine, the emblematic apparatus that became a symbol for the French Revolution but even more for the Reign of Terror. It was the execution mechanism from which Robert himself had escaped just three years before he presented the painting to the public. All figures in the painting appear agitated and lost; they are a handful of survivors in a fragmented and ruined world of old. It is only the young painter at the cen-

tre of the scene who is calm and who is creative: sketching the Apollo Belvedere, he is copying the ideals of classical beauty for yet another future generation. This single piece of art in the painting that has escaped ruination, is, of course, a statue of the god that stands for light, rationality, and artistic expression. It seems that the process of artistic creation is Robert's answer to the traumatic changes that had nearly engulfed himself and the world he grew up in. Even if Robert had been completely unaware of Winckelmann's ecstatic verdict on the Apollo Belvedere (and this is quite unlikely) – it was this statue that for him and all his contemporaries paradigmatically incorporated a timeless beauty aloof from political change, forms of government, and individual fates. Yet, integrating this statue into the painting on its own was not enough. Only by adding the young artist who sits on a pile of rubble and actively recreates the already masterful creation, has the artist Robert turned the fragmented, the ruined, the timeless into time-transcending art and into a supratemporal new creation.

ICONS OF LOSS

Gustave Doré's engraving of the New Zealander in London, the 18th-century follies in stately landscaped gardens, and Robert's *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins* displayed different levels of depth in their respective engagements with ruins. What they had in common was that they all dwelled on a fascination with decay and invited their beholders to reflect upon time and glory as well as upon frailty and mortality. The larger cultural framework was defined by the fascination that ruins had inspired since the rediscovery of Classical Antiquity and its subsequent position at the centre of elite education. The European aesthetic imagination was initially – not least due to Johann Joachim Winckelmann and his followers – much more shaped by Greek and Roman ruins than by

the experience of and the engagement with nature, which only became formative through the writings of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804),[25] even though, as Julian Schreyer shows in his contribution in this volume, ruins had already influenced the aesthetics of the sublime in Graeco-Roman times. The obsession with Antiquity and its remains in the 18th century was facilitated by the growing opportunities for physically beholding the remains of the past through the emergence of travel and eventually tourism. By the time of the Neoclassical Movement (c. 1765–1830), ruins were no longer viewed as objects of deficiency but had turned into places of longing and inspiration. They reminded people of their aspirations and capacities. The glory that was once Rome,[26] to use but one prominent example, could be re-built and re-created by a critically thinking, cultivated, and creative society, which aspired to revive the past and model itself on it.[27] A few decades later, in the Romantic Era (c. 1800–1850) ruins were fully established in the wider imagination as sites of the sublime. They commanded over the capacity to redirect this sentimental approach towards the inner self as a catalyst for aesthetic contemplation (Fig. 7): Perhaps the limitedness of human beings could be accepted, when even the great monuments of the past withered away? Ruins became "icons of a romantic loss"[28] which inspired the melancholic gaze of writers, philosophers, and painters who devotedly made pilgrimages to them. Alexander Fischer in his analysis of the emotional impact of the Notre-Dame de Paris fire in April 2019 shows that such ways of thinking are certainly not confined to the past. He explains how ruins stimulate our emotions, and establishes the role of social media within a 21st-century discourse of ruins. In Emma Fraser's contribution, the fascination with decayed buildings attains the next level: artificial ruins in a fully digital world. Ruins, as Fraser argues, stand for an instability of meaning which links them to the fractured form of the digital, which is likewise perpetually changing and unfinished.