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Life in the Ruins: Memory, Historical Constructivism and the False Certainties of Identity

Stephen William Foster

Independent Scholar, Portland, Oregon, USA

[*]***Corresponding Author:*** *Stephen William Foster, Independent Scholar, Portland, Oregon, USA*

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ABSTRACT

Ruins seem to be empty and mute but are often a site, context and occasion for improvising memory and identities. Improvisations of all sorts are layered onto ruins, diverse styles of meaning-making. Appalachian mountaineers' promulgate a triumphalist history, occasioned by their perception of a ruin of the past they would rather forget. Moroccans articulate to outsiders a sedimented history that utilizes diverse, fragmentary pasts strategically remembered. Hopi histories of migration overlay long-term residence among past ruins. In diverse ways, ruins provoke meaning-creation. Ruins represent *pensée sauvage*, extant forms of knowledge or established patterns that become contexts for the manufacture of improvisations and histories-in-the-making, through the workings of *pensée normade*, the assembly of novel modes of history and memory, mobile refigurations that liquify and may critique the ruins of the past. *Pensée sauvage* and *pensée nomade* are dialectically related. Ruins are cues that invite new stories and practices.

KEYWORDS: *Memory, History-making, Ruins, Werner Herzog, Innovation*

INTRODUCTION

In *The Conformist* (1970), Bernardo Bertolucci's elegant and haunting film about the last days of Mussolini (Kael 2011), the ruins of the Roman colosseum, lit by lurid lights in the night, are inhabited by low-life, hustlers and prostitutes, echoing dimly the ruins' original, down-scale clientele come to watch gladiators and wild animals from Africa. In the ruins, life still goes on. The ruins themselves are a fragmentary deflection of and distraction from their lively past. In Bertolucci's striking imagery, the ruins make for an exoticized artifact of itself, tricking memory into a fictional stabilization of what the imagination now takes the ruins to have been. Memory is an illusion of certainty, while leaving opened a dialectic of Rome's falling-into-ruin political present and its storied, past glory and grandeur. Here, I consider life in the ruins in its various forms of being and an historical artifice in the present.

THE MELANCHOLY AND PLEASURE OF RUINS

Proust could be the only reference needed to understand the various modes of memory creation. *The Remembrance of Things Past* is a compelling primer on how the past is taken up in the social present. But Proust's stories, among the ruins of the French aristocracy, are more anecdotal than analytic. In this paper, I observe at close hand the interweaving of memory, history and representation in various settings in which the past is appropriated to create a consciousness of self and culture.

If they are attended to at all, ruins may be seen as an enigma, their histories and meaning lost in time as are their past perfections. They long to have significance assigned or re-assigned to them. They are ensembles of signs, empty of their original, local understandings, their once-upon-a-time, cultural accompaniments. What for a time was presumed of them has fallen into shadow.

Even Pausanias, the original, inveterate sojourner among ruins, could already do no more than record fragmentary, eroded histories. Always already subtracted from full "decoding", visiting ruins, the Flavian Colosseum, or the Parthenon to name ultimate exemplars, gather to themselves all the alleged import of "civilization", although some import may be little more than arbitrary projections and presumptions of latter-day curiosity, the "free" associations accruing to latter-day

ignorance. Ruins are a reminder that "lived experience in itself is empty. It is necessary to always introduce a question for it to be able to resonate with the vibrancy of its being." (Khatibi 2019:141) What questions are asked of ruins, these woeful or tragic ciphers of our pasts, or as some visionaries like to think, our past glories, bring us back to defining our present, the mauve twilight shadows in which we seem to live now.

In *Pleasure of Ruins*, Rose Macaulay (1953) indulges the interminable aesthetics of ruins, ignoring or keeping in shadow the mobile political economies that come to inhabit ruins from age to age. The lively theater and goings-on in ruins and ruins as figures of thought are investigated in what follows. "Shattered ruins" (they are always ever only fragmentary) and the "melancholic gaze" (Prica 2022:70-71) that we bring to them ask that we come to understand the various political economies, from that of tourism to that of nationalisms in their insistent self-promotion, which become the various meanings of ruins, in compensation for "the turmoil of temporal continuity" of ruins and for their anxiety-provoking, "threat of transience" (ibid.7). Ruins in themselves are zero-sum, innocent, mute artifacts. The meanings attributed to them are fortuitous if not entirely arbitrary ways to deal with their dormant, otherwise empty symbolics. The consequent free-play of meaning-making collapses ruins' *longue durée* into life-time manageability. The habitation of ruins in this respect is well-worth pondering. The Parthenon itself in recent memory has been replete with scaffoldings galore: the refiguration of a ruin as a reshaped context, now viewable from the Acropolis Museum which reproduces the Parthenon's exact orientation in parallel to the ruins above, the museum waiting in hope of the return of the Elgin marbles to their city of origin.

In her book, *The Ruins Lesson*, Susan Stewart (2020:69) suggests that "the appropriation of ruins becomes less a matter of still contemplation than a kind of pursuit…." Ruins provoke travel into the past, what they meant before they were ruins, and what they had come to mean in their own present. The antiquarians arrive before the ruins, awestruck, faced with their "incomparable plentitude" (Khatibi 2019:147), taken as over-loaded symbols of everything from pleasure and delight to melancholy for gone glories. As Stewart (ibid.:124-5) writes somewhat enigmatically, "if Rome had collapsed within Rome, where does Rome begin and end?" In Pausanias' guidebooks and since, ruins have been objects of nostalgia, reflection and obsession. They disclose their meaning tentatively at best, and leave themselves for the meaning-making of tourists and antiquarians alike. The guidebooks themselves combine descriptions of Rome and Athens, for instance, mingling "implausible fictions with intelligent commentary." (Grafton 2021:9) The preservation of their textures, designs and perspectives, however approximate, such as in the obsessive graphologies of Piranesi, does little to protect ruins from the violence and erosion by willful intent or by their gradual crumbling by wind and weather. The memory they are alleged to contain and convey, the histories they represent, denote a dialectic of destruction and (re-)construction, making ruins a metaphor for memory rather than a codification. Ruins as metaphor for memory is what the dialectic process of crumbling and attribution signifies, whatever the codifications of memory – of history – claimed on their behalf. Piranesi's sublime recapitulations of ruins are telling for being inhabited by modern inhabitants, raising the question of what life in the ruins then and now may claim as memory or history.

Constructing Histories

Memory and forgetting are what create history, or histories, since the concept of history as unitary or singular, as a given "fact", must give way to the realization that it is plural and constructed, indeed ever contested, never fixed in nature. Memory/history is a social artifact, seriously subject to revision, to forgetting, to obfuscation, to resituating itself within ruins, *as* ruins. Or, ruins are the mobile background, the setting for history and memory, themselves mobile productions of politics and power and particularly of desire. Subject to forgetting means that our histories and our memories, the layers of history and the microcosm of memory are both subject to refiguration based on what we desire them to be, and how we intend to utilize "the past" as *mise en scene* for our present, our lives. What we do with history or with memory depends on what we do, what we decide to do with the present, with our lives. History and memory should not be radically distinguished but conflated via how together they configure the present. As partial, incomplete, subject to erosion and fragmentation by the present, they constitute the ruins before which, *through* which we configure our present, even our futures via desire, however subliminal and veiled. This essay is an exercise in "liquifying" memory and history in terms of desire, that both of persons and of cultures. If the ruins of history tells us that history is ruins, and as such shows itself as disarticulated, fallen apart and incomplete, then at the same time, "the present is history in the making" (Foster 1988:157), and yet it will fall into ruins someday.

A poetics and politics of history is well worth pursuing because living through history -- or histories – entails living with histories, *in* histories, and living histories while creating them. Decoding, deciphering and purposefully deflecting histories is bound to disclose the dynamics of ruins, histories as ruins, revealed indirectly in fragments, little-by-little, unless they remain hidden or disguised. Sketching selected instances of constructed histories illustrate the diversity of its expression, inflected through culture.

The mountaineers of the Appalachian Blue Ridge, with whom I lived in North Carolina, created a history for themselves that is striking for its coherence and insistence on a self-understanding encompassed by an assumption of progress. It highlights an unqualified possession of their territory. Appalachia has suffered the marginalization and exploitation of a region peripheral to American centers of power. Yet, the mountaineers' insist on a self-definition that asserts a history not of suffering but its denial, and a self-assurance that may be compensatory, an assertion of certainty and progress. Their history is an expression of a present that is confident, triumphalist and noteworthy for its assumption that rural communities were built in an opened, virgin geography waiting to be occupied and developed. This history, like most histories, is self-legitimating, even self-serving. One of its published versions (Fletcher 1960) completely neglects to mention that native people already occupied the region when the mountaineers began to infiltrate what became "their" territory. They dominated the land, domesticated the landscape and its history as they construed it, which proves a progressive, built-up way of life that takes satisfaction in its territorial occupation. I was dismayed by the mountaineers' historical constructivism since it gave the lie to native Americans' being, being *there*. Mountaineers' self-deception in that respect, indeed their self-satisfaction based on that fiction precluded a serious acknowledgment of and co-existence with difference. History in this version is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Its triumphalism insists on progressive development in the context of a politics of resistance to "external" exploitation, subject as the region has been to internal colonization, in some respects comparable to the Euro-American takeover of native cultures.

In this version, history is a symbolic system (Foster 1988:156) that presents itself as "social fact" (ibid.:168). It is a controlling context for the representation of identity, of "who we are". History stylizes identity; it harmonizes experience in the present "as a way to represent current social realities" (ibid.:87). Yet, contrary to this version of history, it could be argued that identity is a scandal, an illusion created by history in the sense that the vagaries of the actual past indicate the contrary; everything changes, and history changes it. The alleged triumphs attributed to history will dissolve into ruins someday, which leaves identity, so called, in serious question.

In Morocco, the form of history is strikingly different than in Appalachia. I discuss a version of how Moroccans construe history as they present it to outsiders, tourists, non-Moslems and European visitors. If you encounter one of a legion of youthful, self-appointed tour guides, plying their trade as cultural spokesmen, they may tell you that Moroccan history is rooted in and certified by reference to once-upon-a-time Roman domination of part of the region. They talk about the Roman town of Volubilis, complete with law courts, temple and mosaics with erotic references and representations of now extinct African animals. That history is also anchored in reference to Juba I and Juba II who were the rulers of Mauritania, a breadbasket Roman province that included Tangier and costal areas to the east. Juba I was an ally of Julius Caesar, and Juba II was brought up in the household of Julius Caesar and later ruled the province under Roman hegemony for nearly fifty years. Moroccan history maybe said to have begun with the reign by Juba II, bringing the region into the civilization of the imperial world. Juba II wrote a number of literary works on historical and linguistic topics, and he promoted the arts and founded public works such as libraries and theatres. A strikingly handsome, bronze bust of Juba II resides in Rabat's archeological museum, with an exact copy in the museum in the Tangier *kasbah*. His reign brought together a heady combination of African, Greek and Roman cultural influences, and the province's economy prospered not only from grain for Rome but from the famed Tyrian purple and timber for export. As Roman power waned, a series of power centers rose and fell in the region until the arrival of Moulay Idriss in 789, with the diaspora from Arabia during the power struggles in the years after the passing of the Prophet. Moulay Idriss first made the ruins of Volubilis his outpost before widening his power base. He founded the first Moroccan dynasty and the city of Fez; his burial site in the town named in his honor remains a major sacred site for Moslems. Morocco's dynasties, Idrissid, Almoravid, Almohad, Merinid, Saadian, and Alaouite, into the present have sedimented a layered history. The anecdotal chronicle by Walter Harris (1920), *The Morocco that Was*, is an eyewitness account of Morocco's loss of self-rule to European powers that initiated Morocco's temporary domination by Europe. The interregnum of the European colonialism (1912-1956) was a further overlay of culture and politics.

Anyone coming to Morocco for the first-time encounters this sedimented history, often presented as a cultural aesthetic woven through the Moroccan present. The ruins of its earlier chapters are scattered about the landscape, not only at Volubilis but also in the broken walls of Moulay Ismail's formidable palaces in Meknes which are witness to Morocco's succession of power centers subject to periodic demise and renewal. Perhaps the grandiose, Hassan II Mosque, built on the waterfront of Casablanca (completed in 1993), will also be in ruins someday. In the meantime, it symbolizes a considerable continuity; unlike in neighboring Algeria, Morocco never came under Ottoman rule. Such is the many layered history, as guidebooks as well as the tour guides will tell you. This layered construction of Moroccan

history, as locally expressed and re-emphasized in various venues, is taken to legitimate not only the current royal regime but especially an insistence on its persisting cultural artistry.

The layered historicism I encountered in Morocco struck me strongly and was a kind of seduction that I found difficult to resist (I have not tried to do so). Its aesthetic bias helped make my experiences there and my relationships with Moroccans effecting and enriching. My anti-colonialism and anti-sexism seemed to me, at times, as an apologia for whatever narcissism Morocco subliminally and institutionally embraces. I have sometimes wondered whether I was engaged in colonizing them or were they colonizing me? Yet, their worldliness and apparent eagerness to engage is a compelling lesson in living. (Foster 2006)

The Hopi of northern Arizona pursue a vastly different style of historical self-presentation. Hopi historical constructionism is based on a motif of migration. Hopi stories of clan origins bring them step-by-step to their current occupation on the three mesas in northern Arizona where they have now resided for centuries. The *Book of the Hopi* (Waters 1963) notes something of this history, which conveys the cultural style of Hopi self-representation.

…Hopis were a small minority, perhaps a religious cult, who migrated to the Four Corners area of our Southwest about 700 A.D. During the next four centuries … were built all the great pueblos in the area – on Mesa Verde, in Chaco Canyon and at Aztec; Wupatki, Betatakin, Keet Seal and many others…. [T]heir occupancy by migrating Hopi clans is attested by both clan legends and clan signatures carved on walls and cliffs. (Ibid.:144)

The *Book of the Hopi* is a compendium of testimonials of Hopi elders. It includes a list of settlements of the clans in the various villages on the Hopi mesas, such as Shongopovi on Second Mesa, settled by the Bear Clan, Walpi on First Mesa, settled by the Fire Clan and Bakavi on Third Mesa, settled by the Spider Clan. (Ibid.:145) The list is extensive, and clearly each group has kept its antecedents well in mind as part of their historical consciousness. The migrations and movements of the clans, their settlements across the wider region well beyond their villages of today are well established in peoples' narratives. As means of self-representation, they disclose a telling paradox, because Hopi have been sedentary on their mesas for close to 900 years, rather than being migratory, despite the stability and ubiquity of their migration narratives, which remain lively reminders of who they are. (Unlike the Australians who "walk about", retracing and reproducing their migration stories as described by Bruce Chatwin (1987), the Hopi stay at home.) Oraibi is still a major Hopi village, "the earliest date established for it by tree-ring chronology is 1150 A.D., which still makes it the oldest continuously occupied settlement in the United States." (Waters 1963:144) Hopi insistence on and the persistence of their migration narratives, despite their lengthy settlement, indicates just how powerful their form of historical constructivism can be. This well-established motif may be a factor in Hopis' strong commitment to their culture: "We don't want to live like the white man, using the white man's things. Those are all provided in our tradition." (Bureau of Indian Affairs 1955:241) While Patrick Lyons (2003) attempts to correlate archeology with Hopi migration, the Hopi do not need such "proof" for the resonant cultural creation of their narratives.

SUBVERTING HISTORIES

Perhaps forms other than ethnography may better represent the complexity of life in the ruins. I think of autobiography, with its indirection and nuanced textures. Samuel Delany is a writer who has explored the universe of self-representation diversely, in more than one venue, the earliest being *The Motion of Light in Water* (1988), recounting his early years in New York's lower east side where I have also spent time. His recollections, vastly different from my own, have much to say about how changeable and fortuitous memory can be and how diverse its representation can be, too. Life in the ruins takes one form or another depending on how an autobiography, for instance, situates itself. Rather than keyed only to the past, history finds itself "contemporaneous with the present" (Delaney 1988:541), *in* the present. Every alleged history has a multiplicity of counter-histories. Delaney (ibid.:253) locates his autobiography securely in writing: "History is what we create by the scratching, the annoyance, the irritation of writing, with its aspirations to logic and order, to memory's uneasy and uncertain discontinuities." His reference to "aspirations to logic and order" suggests what history cannot fully achieve: logic and order. Those aspirations do not, cannot be actualized, only approximated in an infinity of forms and variations, autobiographical or otherwise.

In suggesting a revision of the truth of histories and the histories of truth as well, perhaps I only traverse the well-worn ground mapped out by previous critics, not only by Walter Benjamin but more pointedly by filmmaker Werner Herzog. He wends his way – our way, via the eye of his roving camera – through discontinuous scenarios and fractured stories that purposefully subvert received wisdom and what he calls "the truth of accountants". (Hegnsvad 2021:109) In his controversial classic, *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) nothing goes right. The film's hero, who sets out to build an opera house in the jungle, is unsurprisingly foiled at every turn. The production was similarly plagued by the formidable difficulties of filming in the Peruvian Amazon where dream and reality are problematic at

every phase, indeed "the boundary between them is blown part". (Ibid.:35) The film's major star had to leave the production due to a jungle-acquired illness, a crew member is killed, local natives understandably become a threat to the production's intrusions, and another crew member has his foot amputated in an accident. Regardless, Herzog insists upon seeing the film's production through to the end, despite having to grovel, and making us grovel, in the adversities and nightmares as portrayed in Les Blank's film *Burden of Dreams* (1982, Blank 1984), a striking documentary of the making of Herzog's film. As a sympathetic critic of Herzog's work says of another of his films, in *Fitzcarraldo* and the misadventure of its making, "the whole story descends into a fevered dream". (Hegnsvad 2021:189)

Herzog pushes his subversion of historical truth further in his pseudo-documentary of the Gulf War in Kuwait, *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) which "did not aspire to realism" (Ibid.:56), far from it. Instead Herzog re-writes the alleged step-by-step narrative of the war by CNN and conventional journalism, putting before us "a moment of stasis in which matters can be rethought". (Ibid.:46) In *Lessons of Darkness*, the war's story never really coalesces into a form but remains in a state of becoming. That is precisely Herzog's intention. He goes so far to aestheticize war so as to dismay and confound critics who accuse him of fascism; they imagine that his war images show the situation as a way of those involved glorying in fire and destruction. The film discloses a landscape of end-stage cataclysm, ravaging apocalypse and world-ending devastation. Madness engulfs any semblance of reality, obscure doomsday geographies overrun unrelieved, embattled scenarios, and an irony of horror is bizarrely refigured into a phantasm of irresistible beauty. The film goes a long way to "brush history against the grain" as Benjamin (1968:257) terms it; the "documentary" refuses the usual, journalistic "fly-on-the-wall" observation of events. "We should be like the hornet that stings", which is what Herzog's film recommends: "a superheated semiotic furnace". (Ibid.:54)

In Herzog's film, there is no straightforward path through the ruins of history. Instead, he interweaves war's horror with images that may allow a distancing from the immediacy in which actors seem engulfed but in which they also seem to revel. The disorder and indirection are in intentional contrast to realism, instead an invitation to move on, to move *through*, to enter a liminal state of self-conscious, new beginnings: *pensée nomade*. Such a mode of being, of thought, is less a settled longevity like that of the Hopi than pathways that twine and intertwine not only the landscape but the culturally constituted world, entangling history in a richness of contradictions. Such a prospect is furthered in Herzog's *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984) in which meandering pathways "constitute an alternative to settled society" (ibid.:224) for native Australians. In *Lessons of Darkness* the aesthetics of war give way to its bidding to leave the ruins, the ruins of war and those fragments of the past, making them a point of departure for the next stage of life, a moving on that assembles and reassembles remains and lost elements of ruins into … something else: other thoughts and other forms of transient being, which is all we ever really have: *pensée nomade*.

Such is the paradox of *Lessons of Darkness*, which turns documentary on its head, adopting "a grandiose opulent aesthetic: beautiful images, rather than grainy media realism, and rather than synchronous sound, the opera of Wagner". (Ibid.:48) Those of us outside the flames are singed nevertheless by its "superheated semiotic furnace" and thrown beyond the horror and flames into some other form of "truth", re-assembling not its truth but our own. The odd stasis, even the muteness of ruins, requires us to move away from invariant, narrow-minded truths to somewhere else where we must come to terms with ourselves always moving *through* history, *in* history, passing by the ruins.

PARADOXES OF MEMORY

Pensée nomade is wayward and whimsical, always a flirtation with difference. Practicing and inhabiting *pensée nomade*, knowing its invitations and demands, contrasts sharply with *pensée sau*vage, which attempts to impose order on the burgeoning plethora of nature. As Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) describes it, *pensée sauvage* is a grid of intelligibility comprising taxonomies and totemic classifications, resembling incipient science even among small scale societies. In surveying the ubiquity of such systems at considerable length, Lévi-Strauss also registers a critical proviso. Such systems, he writes, "are vulnerable to the effects of diachrony". (Ibid.:67) This vulnerability denotes "historical and geographical problems", thus acknowledging the contingent aspect of *pensée sauvage*. Indeed, its vulnerability is to *pensée nomade*, indicating a dialectic between structure – stasis – and change. *Pensée sauvage* is ever subject to transformation, deterioration and erosion, to the mobile refigurations of *pensée nomade*. *Pensée nomade* is a pervading force that subverts, mobilizes, even "liquifies" and critiques *pensée sauvage*. In this sense, *pensée nomade* supersedes *pensée sauvage*, whatever the effects of the latter to shore up invented orders. *Pensée nomade* is the way of the world, the way of life. It overrides the apparent fixity of ruins, remobilizing them in spite of themselves. Any ordered system of knowledge is an order within a limited time frame, the synchronic context sometimes favored by ethnographic portrayals. When the time frame is extended, the vulnerability of systems to change begins to be evident, and the vagaries of *pensée nomade*

become dominant. As a critique of *pensée sauvage*, the precedence of *pensée nomade* can be regarded as *more* ethnographic, in a sense more accurate as descriptive of realities than *pensée sauvage*. Its subversion of received wisdom is ubiquitous and unavoidable and is itself a form of wisdom, as the "perversity" of Werner Herzog's films show.

Ruins are clues and cues to history and memory as plurality rather than as fact. They are controversial and rightly contrary. Ruins are easily construed as a dead void or zero-sum emptiness that elude positive meaning, a past that merely leaves itself in the past. As I have pointed out, they are rather a beginning point for further understandings of the past, of histories; they are likewise an occasion for constructing our present, our now. Their value or "relevance" may easily be denied, but that is only a surface effect, a bias that conceals a deeper semiotics of time's passage, of change, a dynamic of memory and forgetting that insists on its complexities, its contrariness and controversy. Ruins resist being theorized but paradoxically demand and long to be theorized, as I have been doing throughout this essay.

Ruins are thus generative precisely because they are ruins. They can be seen as a blank or a zero that serve as sites for projecting desire. But ruins are rather a representation of an incompleteness, whether *passé* or potential, of an idea, ideal or crystalline image, perhaps in mind but not in fact or reality. That makes them good to think, if not always comfortable to inhabit. Their imperfection is what invites stories, storytelling as if to fill in the cracks, the incompleteness, the ruin. That is what makes possible, what provokes a Proust or a Joyce, among others, and not only to write but to life, a mode of living. The deficits and flaws of ruins are what invoke desire, a desire for restitution, indeed for perfection, perhaps beyond completion. Perhaps we live for such desire, such beauty, such fancy beyond "fact" or "reality". That suggests that what ruins generate is not exactly their completion – their perfection – but an overreaching of their form, an over elaboration, their baroque refigurations, or new elaborations like Proust or Joyce or the new pathways of the latter-day figures in Piranesi's etchings, or even a poet's artistic dreams. That is how memory as ruins supersedes itself. History – histories – too must be understood in terms of this dynamic.

The process of meaning-making and history creation is subject to contradictions and constraints, its liquidity encompassed by the fixity of ruins, a fixity that is itself qualified by their status as ruins; they crumble and deteriorate, which is what makes them ruins, "negation pure and simple" (Stewart 2020:260). After all, ruins can be context for meaning creation; they represent *pensée sauvage*, structures that limit and control yet shape the free play of *pensée nomade*. Such is the dialectic interplay between *pensée sauvage* and *pensée nomade*. As with the cultural structures defining Appalachian or Moroccan or Hopi stylizations of history, already established cultural patterns, *pensée sauvage* very broadly defined, is context for the manufacture of subsequent forms and improvisations through the working of *pensée nomade*. The inherent ambiguity of this unsettled and unsettling process is eloquently conveyed in the following:

> Ruins resist meaning but also at times cannot bear up under a surplus of meaning, that what seems to have been finished has not yet met its day, and that form cannot express everything it is and has been, especially once it loses its finality. These aspects of ruins are tied to the inherent violence of all representation, which reifies or fixes its object, making living things dead and bringing dead things to life. (Ibid.:259)

Perhaps no response to ruins more eloquently expresses the doubling and stratigraphic layering of meaning than Shelley's well-known sonnet, "Ozymandias" (Shelley 1945) which witnesses a latter-day witness of the head and torso of Rameses II in the British Museum. The poet has the ruin declare "look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" But the poet has repositioned Rameses in the emptiness of the desert ("the lone and level sands stretch far away"), and who knows whether "despair" refers to that of the inevitable ruin of the grandiosity that once was, or to the remaining grandiosity of the ruins as such, compared to the witness's inevitably ephemeral existence. The sheer ambiguity of ruins provokes and supersedes latter day history-making and meaning-making as well, forever "ruining" whatever we create. The project of history-building and meaning-making goes on in the ruins of ruins.

The open work of *pensée nomade* is an unbounded project as are most projects of cultural creation. A self-awareness of that process, however torturous and tortured, is not easily achieved. As Susan Stewart (ibid.:256) proposes: "… the poet/maker can take heart in knowing that whether or not works of art are completed, the task of art itself is ongoing and unending." Makers may be daunted in knowing that ruins are built on ruins, ruins burying ruins, but they can find solace in knowing that participating in *pensée nomade* means that new projects are always on the way. That interminable mobility, creation and re-creation, or writing as re-writing, means that memory and history are subject to that process, the point of Proust's *Rembrance of Things Past*. The same goes for identity: "… any identity – semantic, generic, personal or cultural – is always [a] disjunctive illusion." (Delany 2004:232) Rather than desiring or insisting on a fixed identity or undebatable history, why not take pleasure in the possibilities and potential of *pensée nomade*? Rather than history as fact or memory as insistent truths of oneself (often meaning only self-legitimation and self-aggrandizement), why not accept the delights of *bildung*,

development, growth and process as the name of the game, as a style and way of life?

Conclusion

A quintessential ruin is not only the Flavian Colosseum in Rome, but perhaps more so the ruins of Pompeii, near Naples. Pompeii is famous for having been tragically buried in ash and lava in 79 A.D. when nearby Vesuvius erupted, sending doom and destruction to Pompeii, nearby Herculaneum and the Roman settlements around the Bay of Naples. Pompeii had an estimated 11,000 residents when it was destroyed. It is an amusing irony, that now more than four million tourists visit Pompeii each year. Pompeii puts life in the ruins in perspective, more dramatically than Piranesi's latter-day denizens in the ruins he represents in his magnificent etchings. An added drama of the site is Vesuvius itself looming over the region with its undeniable threat of further destruction – the complete burial of Naples when (not if) the volcano erupts again. Vulcanologists keep constant surveillance on the mountain with such a danger well in mind. But one imagines that denial is an easy thought for the average Neapolitans. And if the surveilling vulcanologists find evidence of an impending disaster, little more than a warning could be sounded.

When building meaningful histories, necessarily over the ruins – literally and figuratively – of previous histories, the unending process of that project comes to the fore. It is difficult indeed to know what Piranesi's fictional inhabitants of the fanciful ruins he so eloquently constructed in his etchings would have thought or would have imagined in their own time as to the past that those ruins represent. It is only possible to project our own theories and speculations, whatever "evidence" could be brought to bear on our constructs, or on Piranesi's. We must make our peace with the indeterminacy and speculative uncertainty of the historical constructions we impose in the present. Tourists may find wonder and the unexpected in their travel adventures, however tame and benign, given the relatively mild and protected milieu established for their convenience. Their gentle, carefully plotted itineraries are domesticated and programmed enough to make tourists forget the impending, perhaps inevitable repetition of the volcano's 79 A.D. or 1872 and 1944 eruptions. Perhaps for a few, the adventure of making an itinerary into history, into memory, may become more than "mild". Perhaps it can become a major, life changing adventure, a defining episode in life in which what I have been calling *pensée nomade* opens to them. For a few, it may become a life adventure which gives a definitive spin to their memory, even as ruins are destined to be restored or built over, memory becoming ruins, fragmentary perhaps, but deeply meaningful all the same.

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Ethical Consideration and Informed Consent

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