

## RUINS AND THE SUBLIME

CHRISTOPHER PERRICONE

Ruins are clues for the historian, which help him to piece together the bases of our civilization and others throughout the world. So much of the historian's task has this character of putting together pieces of a puzzle from which most of the pieces are missing. But ruins are not only clues, as if our only interest in them were merely that of the detective. Ruins also consciously and unconsciously are the bases of so many of our aesthetic experiences. In terms of our civilization alone, one would wonder how profound current art experience of modern sculpture and architecture would be if that experience were not based upon some sense of Greek sculpture and architecture, or even further back to the wonders produced along the Nile. Well, if the appreciator does not have that sense of the distant past that ruins bring, one thinks that the better artists have it. And if neither have it surely taste and creativity must suffer.

In this paper, I would like to examine the character of ruins, because (1) they do play a significant role in our ongoing art experiences, and because (2) there is an aspect of them that is unique in our art experience. This aspect, as we shall see, is the feeling of the sublime that *necessarily* accompanies all experiences of ruins.

As physical objects, ruins form the class of human products that have suffered damage due to natural or human causes. These physical objects may or may not be appreciated as art objects. They may include arrowheads, spoons, jars, sculpture, papyri, temples, paintings left to rot in some museum basement. The common quality of all ruins, whether the objects be utilitarian or works of fine art, is that they have been to a greater or lesser extent damaged, and insofar as they are damaged, we no longer have before us the whole product the artist or

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*Diálogos*, 50 (1987) pp. 39-47.



the craftsman had made. The essence of ruins, then is that they are first and foremost pieces of things, and especially where art experience comes into play, their character as pieces must be taken into account.

One, for the most part, thinks that there is an organic and holistic quality to ordinary art experience. That is, for those who believe that art experience does, in fact, exist and that the phrase 'art experience' is meaningful, art experience unlike practical experience is unified in virtue of the highly refined and specialized quality of the matter, form, and expression of art objects. Art objects form a special realm of being which the artist creates, and so the attention that one focuses there is made special, too. No one would deny that in the case of some ruins, i.e. ruins of fine works, one experiences them as art. One imagines that discourse about "Apollo" from the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia is, in principle, the same as discourse about Brancusi's "Bird in Space", even though the former is a ruin and the latter is not. That is, even though the ultimate content of the discourse about the old and the new work will be quite different, nevertheless insofar as each is an object in itself in which we have intrinsic interest, there will be central discussion of matter, form, expression along with perhaps some peripheral non-artistic considerations.

Yet if we do experience "Apollo" and "Bird in Space" in the same artistic terms, as I have suggested, and we discuss them by the same terms, are we not overlooking something? Are we not, because of inattention, like the amputee who has lost his leg yet believes it to exist because he "feels" it. I look at "Apollo". I look at the weight, the strength in the stone. I look at the harmonious proportions of the man-god. I look at the light that shines from his reasonable and warm face. One can imagine himself, before "Apollo", to have come to Olympia from far, passing before the Temple of Zeus when it stood firm, and there above, as if it were further support for the omnipotent Zeus, "Apollo", whole, one of the many astounding figures where the Greeks, then, in athletic contest had come to worship the human form. Such attention, such musings are not unusual, if one is moved by "Apollo". The art experience here is dramatically re-creative. One puts together in the imagination the pieces both given and not given of the work, just as the archeologist, who finds a plain strewn with ruins, stacks up what he finds into the temple that was and fills in the rest with imagination. In the case of "Bird in Space", one might think the art experience is the same. Although not as dramatic, it is nevertheless



re-creative—the play of imagination more subtle, more refined. Yet there is an obvious difference here. “Apollo” does not have a left hand; chunks are out of his thighs; it appears that someone might have peppered him with a shot gun—his chest and abdomen marred with holes. Where do these *facts* fit in? We may yearn, as archeologists, for the missing pieces; as appreciators of art we may dupe ourselves and re-create, that is, fill in emotionally and imaginatively what is not there, in fact; yet as in the case of the amputee, the fact remains: the limb is gone.

Let us consider the facts of ruins and what these facts express. To keep the discussion simple let us continue using “Apollo” as an example, being fully aware that, in essence, since the statue is damaged, he is the same as any other ruin, be it a temple or a fragment of a manuscript. Let us, then, draw our attention to that which makes “Apollo” a ruin, that is, the places where he is broken. As I suggested before, one tends to disregard those parts. One feels it is shame that we do not have the whole. But perhaps our greed for the whole, here, is blinding, since what we do have before us is significant, and not only significant in matter, form, and expression, but also significant where the matter, form, and expression have literally broken down. Although one might say that what is broken here is non-artistic and only accidentally related to the art object, I would say, yes, what is broken is non-artistic but the relationship between the artistic and the non-artistic here is not contingent, it is necessary. The broken pieces *now* are as much a part of the *object* as are the effects of the artist’s hand.

When one looks at the place where “Apollo’s” hand was, what does one see? One sees a stump that is rough and jagged. If one saw the configuration of the stump outside the context of the statue, it would look like the so many broken things we come across in our experience: broken glass, sticks, children’s toys, vases, this and that. The stump of “Apollo’s” hand out of context is just an indication of an accident of some sort or perhaps just a thing in its crude state, something no one ever bothered to form. Yet put that stump back into context, into the frame of the art object, now what do we have? Well, we could say that we have a place where a hand was and let us now imagine it there. But that, as I suggested before, is wrong because we are not seeing what is there; we are not being open to the possibilities which the broken pieces can offer, because we are overwhelmed by the pieces that are formed. So what do we see? We see these jagged edges juxtaposed to magnificently refined forms. Of course, what strikes us immediately is



that these jagged edges were not done by the artist, even though that is not always the case, as for instance in Michaelangelo's "Captives", where having left undone parts of the work he has created a ruined effect. In the case of "Apollo", however, it is evident that the broken pieces signify non-artistic elements that have intruded themselves upon this work of man.

Like so many ruins, "Apollo" has been dug up after being buried for so long. He has been disentombed and the weight of his entombment has left its mark. Left buried long enough an "Apollo" would have become a fruit of the earth again, recaptured, no longer a product of the human hand, and being in the state he is, one can perceive that slow but inexorable process having taken root. Perhaps in the most abstract sense, what we can say is that the broken pieces of "Apollo" are the effects of time. It is time that intrudes, here. I do not merely mean that because "Apollo" is old that that will affect our art appreciation of him, even though I think that is true. More than that, I think that this non-artistic element, time, plays a most dramatic role in "Apollo" because insofar as he is ruined, not only is his age written on him. Also, by the accidents that scar him, there is a necessity added to and mingled with "Apollo's" artistic qualities. Quite poignantly, in one sense "Apollo" is ageless, in another sense, as the facts clearly reveal, he is doomed.

Among scholars, there is little discussion of the character of ruins as ruins. When one looks to the philosophies and histories of art, ruins, for the most part, are treated as if they were whole objects. Yet there are some scholars who have made insightful remarks about ruins, and perhaps they can help us along in the present discussion. I know of two scholars, in particular, who are quite penetrating. They are Sir Kenneth Clark and André Malraux. First, Clark: "She Aphrodite has come down to us, under the misleading name of 'Venus Genetrix', in a number of replicas, of which those which are fragmentary are beautiful, those which are complete are dull."<sup>1</sup> What ought to be noticed in Clark's remark is that "Venus Genetrix", is beautiful not in spite of the fact that she is ruined but *because* she is ruined. Her ruined state has made what was somewhat beautiful quite beautiful. Because she has been destroyed, more intense and perhaps new artistic qualities have

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<sup>1</sup> *The Nude*, Sir Kenneth Clark, Garden City: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1956. p. 123. cf. also, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Mikel Dufrenne, Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973, p. 162ff.



been emphasized. Carrying the idea further, Clark says, with some qualification, that "We have come to think of the fragment as more vivid, more concentrated, and more authentic"<sup>2</sup> than what the original might have been. It is as if the accidents of time had shorn away all the superfluous detail, leaving a rough but simple jewel. As a result, ruins seen as ruins have an extraordinary power over the imagination, even over the most powerful imagination of a Michaelangelo. Discussing the "Captives", Clark thinks it is the influence that ruins had on Michaelangelo's imagination that led him to leave unfinished those depictions of "spiritual struggle". Clark says again: "The influence of antique art on Michaelangelo's style derives from works of two different kinds. On the one hand, were the gems and cameos... On the other were the battered fragments, the fallen giants, half buried in the weeds and rubbish of the Campo Vaccino... These noble ruins, which seemed to be struggling to give some message of eternal order through the chaos of time and decay."<sup>3</sup>

What Malraux says about ruins is, in essence, no different from Clark's ideas, but he adds something which will make my ultimate point stronger. Unlike Clark, Malraux says that the "chaos of time and decay" can not only enhance beauty, as we see in the case of "Venus Genetrix", but also time and decay can metamorphize that which was utterly uninteresting artistically into something interesting and strange. Malraux says, take objects devoid of all art such as waxworks and it may well happen that after a few centuries have passed and their faces are partially destroyed "they will have the same place in art as those mediocre antiques in the Alaoui Museum, which were salvaged from a sunken ship and to which the corrosive action of the sea has imparted a curiously intriguing style; or that Palermo helmet, the effectiveness of whose warrior figures owes so much to the poisoned oysters stuck to them."<sup>4</sup>

The point I want to make, which I believe Clark and Malraux help to support, is that when one sees ruins as ruins, one cannot see them as wholes; hence judge them as wholes; furthermore in virtue of their not being wholes, there is a necessary relation between those parts of the ruin that have escaped damage and those parts that are damaged.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>4</sup> *The Voices of Silence*, André Malraux, Princeton Univ. Press, 1978, p. 277.



Perhaps this is best expressed by saying that there is a necessary relationship between art experience and the sublime.

In a ruin, such as "Apollo", we experience the feelings evoked by the art of him and the sublime as a unity. There is a marriage of the two categories, which have been traditionally seen to be at odds with each other. There are cases, indeed, where the sublime is added to the art object, or more precisely to the art experience, but in these cases no unity is formed. What I mean is something like this. When one experiences a painting, let us say a seascape by Turner or Homer, one could claim that the subject is sublime, that is, occasions a feeling of the sublime, which I believe it does. Yet being the subject matter, the sublime bears no *essential* relationship to the painting, that is, the artistic qualities of the work could be discussed without reference to its subject matter. Failure to attend to subject matter, here, is a failure to draw out certain literary implications imbedded in the painting. But as far as the painting being an art object, that is, an object of perception and a physical object, the subject matter is irrelevant. In the case of the ruin, I want to assert that the damage we perceive in the ruin is: (1) productive of the sublime experience and (2) that the sublime, here, and the art experience form a unity insofar as the ruin *must* be seen as a *part* of a whole that once was and not just some imagined whole.

Now as vague as some people think discussions of art experience are, discussions of the sublime by many more people are considered philosophically worthless.<sup>5</sup> Yet my intent, here, is not to define or defend any general concept of the sublime. I want merely to use some ideas that surround what has been called the sublime in order to understand what one experiences when one perceives ruins.

I turn to Kant, here, even though he is one who sees art experience and the sublime at odds with each other, because of all thinkers who discuss the sublime, his discussion, by common consensus, is the most profound. Also what he says about the sublime fits perfectly into the essential characteristics of ruins.

Kant distinguishes the sublime from art experience by saying that "The sublime... is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought."<sup>6</sup> Formlessness does not come from art, "nature

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<sup>5</sup> *Aesthetic*, Benedetto Croce, Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1978. Chap. XII.

<sup>6</sup> *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant, New York: Hafner Publications, 1964, p. 82.



excites the ideas of the sublime in its chaos or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided size and might perceived.”<sup>7</sup> Also, Kant makes it clear that the sublime is not a property of things: “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the (subject) judging, not in the natural object the judgment upon which occasions this state.”<sup>8</sup> The sublime is a feeling, an experience, surely occasioned by something, but it is characteristically that state of mind raised beyond form.

This raising of the mind is occasioned, according to Kant, in two basic ways: by the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. First, the mathematically sublime is occasioned by the infinite. The infinite, according to Kant, is the absolutely, not merely the comparatively great.<sup>9</sup> And the feeling it excites is pain, an ambivalent pain. It is an ambivalent pain because in a negative sense, we are unable to grasp intuitively the infinite because it is formless, while in a positive sense we imagine we could comprehend it in spite of its formlessness. Second, “Nature”, considered in an aesthetical judgment as might that has no dominion over us, is dynamically sublime.”<sup>10</sup> The dynamically sublime excites fear but a fear which, like pain, is ambivalent. It is ambivalent because although in a negative sense we are repelled by fear, in a positive sense we can contemplate our fear itself and the objects which frighten us. In this sense, therefore, I feel “a superiority to nature even in its immensity.”<sup>11</sup> And the might of nature is “the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security.”<sup>12</sup>

The essence of a ruin as a ruin is its formlessness. In the ruin, the mathematically and the dynamically sublime come together. On the one side, the infinite is manifested in the age, the time, that is written and being written on the ruined work of art. The ruin is not only a work dated, it has an immortal quality about it; due to its age and aging it seems as if it could stand forever. This is the case with recent ruins, too, even though for different reasons. For example, in respect to some buildings that were partially destroyed in World War II, that they somehow are still standing gives one the feeling that since they had

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.



escaped annihilation then, nothing can destroy them. Hence they, too, inspire the mathematically sublime. Faced with immortality, with eternality, we feel pain in a negative sense; there is a feeling of doom because our intuitions cannot apprehend the eternal. Yet the pain is positive too, because it reveals to us that there is a supersensible realm, a realm beyond the immediately perceived, yet forever bound to it. On the other side of the sublime, the might of nature is manifested in the ruin in two ways. First, in the sudden burst of power where human products are destroyed by volcanoes or by bombs. To see the effects of such fireworks in ruins inspires fear as well as the feeling of superiority, provided we are secure. Second, there is an even more terrible display of power, where the slow and inexorable processes of nature are at work. Surely process and time are intimately related terms so that in this sense, the mathematically and the dynamically sublime become two sides of the same coin. As a result, the might that one senses to have worked on human products long buried in the ground or in the sea inspires more fear than a city suffocated by volcanic ash or the cathedral gutted by bombs. One can avoid volcanoes and bombs if one is cautious. And there is always the element of luck. So, some things have been or could have been saved from them. Yet nothing can avoid the slow might of nature. Ultimately it will consume all. Here, fear seems only negative, yet again, I think Kant is correct. The fear is positive, as well. Although the slow might of nature will consume everything, nevertheless beyond intuition, I can comprehend that might and delight in it. I realize that the slow might of nature and the inevitability of change are one. And when I contemplate that, it inspires me with hope. For without change, even if it must entail death, there is only despair.

What is the significance of the marriage of the art experience and the sublime in ruins, the marriage of art and nature, the formed and the formless? If the marriage is true, it indicates that ruins as works of art reveal in their dramatic way something which we fail to see in all works of art. What this marriage indicates is that rather than form and formlessness being antithetical terms in art, they are *complementary* terms. In every product of man, the element of formlessness is present and in the realm of art, specifically in the art object itself, that to which we direct our attention in order to appreciate it in itself, there, especially, formlessness needs to be accounted for. We must not only attend to what man can do, merely art categories: form, matter, and expression; we must also attend to the forces over which man has no power.



And it is ruins that confront us with this fact, if we see them as they are: broken. Oddly enough, as suggested in the discussion of the sublime, to attend to the effects of these overwhelming forces, to see the limitations and the imperfections that are intrinsic in our work or those same limitations and imperfections that grow after a time, does not suppress the art experience. On the contrary, to see how the art experience and the sublime are married is to enlighten and to release, now, the art experience, to free it somewhat, although not entirely from the forms of perception.

In the ruin we are drawn into the object, as we always are, by the artistic aspects the artist has worked over and refined; we are drawn into a particular locale where what is particular is celebrated. But also, as the ruin reveals, there is the feeling of the sublime, a non-artistic but necessarily related element, caused by formlessness. In a Kantian sense, formlessness in the ruin reveals that the sensuous alone can never be ultimately satisfying. Through formlessness we are elevated to another level of experience that includes the art experience but does not entail any of its limitations. Formlessness complements local form with that which we can think, with the noumenal realm, with that not determined by sense perception alone. Beyond Kant, this formlessness is best characterized by Freud. It is that in the ruin which invites us into the world of the id, the universal dream world, beyond logic, beyond the intuitions of space and time. A world that is yet the support of the forms and contents of waking life, the support of the ego, of what man designs.

*Baruch College*