

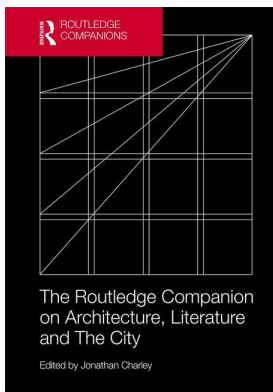
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An unliteral construct: the architecture of Graham Greene's 'The Destroyers'

A sedimentary lesson in post-war social change

Johnny Rodger

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Historically, both architecture and literature have laid claims to cultural comprehensiveness. Architecture long boasted – at least until a certain modernist functional procrusteanism cut it down to utilitarian size – that it was the ‘Mother of All the Arts’. Meanwhile Literature, in the pompous Dr. Johnson’s conception of it at any rate, has been estimated as comprising ‘pretty much the equivalent of our ‘culture’’. In his dictionary the doctor defines the meaning of the word ‘literature’ as ‘learning, skill in letters’.¹

The overlap in territory claimed by the two arts may thus seem almost complete. It is the thesis of this work however, that we might not want to conceive of this all-inclusive congruence as a simple geometric and benign play of form as per the Venn diagram, or a cheerfully coloured one, like the pie chart. It appears, rather, in the light here of a reading of Graham Greene’s short story ‘The Destroyers’, that a more sinister power struggle for supremacy in and over ‘space’ has been playing out between the two arts. This notion of a struggle between these arts may indeed help us to articulate something about the current day *ruinenlust* or obsession with ruins in literary culture, and Greene’s work could prove a particularly pliable ground on which to get at the question with its moulding of architectural matter into literary form. Before going on to examine the basis for that interdisciplinary struggle and the means which the respective arts have mustered to the struggle, it would be expedient to outline the Greene work in its most simple form and content.

The action in Graham Greene’s story ‘The Destroyers’, first published in 1954 in the collection *Twenty One Stories*, takes place in early 50s London in an urban setting redolent of broken down, austere, post-war Britain. A gang of boys have made their playground and meeting place amongst the cleared spaces and rubble of a residential area that had suffered heavy bombing during the 39–45 war. The boys are largely of a working-class background and culture, but a new boy appears, who comes from a professional middle-class family

evidently fallen on hard times. Via an audacious project to gut and completely destroy a neighbour's house – said to be the last in a terrace built by Wren and destroyed in the war – this new boy assumes leadership of the gang. The boys raze the interior of the house to the ground with their bare hands and some basic tools while they hold the occupier – their neighbour – prisoner in his outside toilet. Finally the exterior walls are pulled down as a nearby parked lorry to which the boys attach a rope, drives off from standing.

The story thus entails an engagement of those two arts, which again in recent times appear to have undergone something of a revival of their pretensions to comprehensiveness. It is within that Johnsonian wider concept of 'literature' – as learning and skill in letters, that is as a field which embraces the writerly disciplines of philosophy, history, social sciences, indeed all writing and theorising in general – that we can conceive of a further expansion of the territory claimed by literature. The work of some postmodern thinkers with their claims for linguistic relativism, such as Derrida with his famous dictum 'Il n'y a pas de hors de texte'² and equally Baudrillard with 'The Gulf War did not take place',³ presents the world as socially constructed and experienced primarily through language. We might conceivably also see the so-called 'spatial turn' in theory as part of that expansion of linguistic relativism. In his famous three part dialectic, Lefebvre argues that space is not just something which is out there, waiting to be enclosed, operated on and manipulated by architects, but is produced and revealed through the dialectical interplay between that physical space and its conceptual and social manifestations.⁴ The space in which we live, according to this tripartite understanding of it, is comprised of something like the natural and transparent space which many architects claim to see and operate with, in dialectical relationship not only with our conceptions of space, which are something akin to the Kantian notion of space as an a priori mental construct for experiencing the world, but also with our production of space through social action in a process that is driven by the forces and relations of production as analysed by the disciplines – among others – of economics, history and political science.

At the same time however, over the period of the last fifty years or so, it could be said that the discipline of architecture has also been expanding its territorial claims anew. The expansion can be seen to have taken the form of the adoption of a range of concerns and practices that explore territory outwith any limited definition of disciplinary bounds as mere responsibility for creating functional buildings. Architectural writers like Francesco Careri and Bruno Zevi have pushed the boundaries of architecture back in time, so that the discipline embraces an architectonic history 'before the building'. That might appear at first to constitute a claim of oxymoronic status. Yet the thrust of Careri's thesis that 'the path' is 'the only architecture of the Palaeolithic World',⁵ and Zevi's assertion that the history of cities could be interpreted as the clash between geometry (as a rigid imposition of the proto-fascist impulses of Neolithic settlement) and free forms (of the wandering Palaeolithic tribes, ignorant of geometry),⁶ can perhaps best be understood in the context of the abstracted definition of architecture by American philosopher Susanne Langer as 'the total environment made visible'.⁷ In this proposition architecture is concerned with constructing a world without a fetishising of physical structure. In the realm of practice itself one might also look to the work of Gordon Matta-Clark. His engagement, via cutting and deconstructing existing structures, was an opening of architectural practice to encompass not only architectonic parameters like limits, gravity, inside/outside relationships, private/public boundaries and so on, but also more abstracted concepts such as ownership, speculation, abandonment and isolation.⁸ Equally, it appears with the current obsession of architecture with the ruin (see for example St Peter's Cardross, and Murray Grigor's film⁹), that the discipline is expanding its territory forward into a concern for the architectonics of beyond the building.

There is plenty evidence of the literary concern for the ruin too, and exemplary status is granted here to Greene's story. That's not to say, however, that in 'The Destructors' we are presented with a literary version of the classic ruin. Simmel's Kantian definition of the ruin in his influential essay 'The Ruin' encompasses both an aetiological and an ontological aspect.¹⁰ As regards the former aspect the ruin is defined as a state of decay which is not grounded in 'human purposiveness'. This would mean that it has not been destroyed or damaged expressly by human hand. The ontological condition of the ruin in Simmel's definition consists in its state of being at any structural point between the complete building and a 'mere heap of stones', which has the 'formlessness of mere matter'. When its state of undoing reaches that latter 'formlessness' it becomes no longer a 'ruin'. The definition would seem to rule out the terrace house of Greene's story from the category of 'ruin' from both those constitutional aspects: From the aetiological aspect inasmuch as it undergoes a planned destruction at the hands of a gang of boys; and from the ontological aspect because the building exists in that intermediate decayed period of existence between being a complete building and a 'hill of rubble', not for years, but merely for the quasi-Aristotelian period of the action of the drama as around only 48 hours. We might then feel entitled to ask whether the process at work in Greene's story does not seem to belong more to the category of 'demolition' rather than 'ruination'? The theoretical concept of ruin has indeed undergone much development and expansion as per the case of the modern ruin noted above at St Peter's Seminary Cardross.¹¹ Nonetheless it is important to stress the distance which Greene's 'destroyed' building stands not only from the deconstructed architectonic systems of Matta-Clark's reworked edifices, but also from other established models of the ruin. For unlike Winckelmann's Romantic, Burke's sublime or Gilpen's picturesque, Greene's ruin does not belong to an aesthetic category, indeed it is never even visible as a ruin, if it be a ruin. For its destruction, and its eventual collapse into that 'hill of rubble' is carried out in private, in the interior, away from any public view, unseen until the ultimate and sudden collapse of its hollowed out exterior into the 'formless mere matter' of bricks bouncing randomly past the lorry driver's cab.

The process of 'ruination' here in Greene's story – that is to say, all that 'intermediate stage' between the complete standing building and the 'mere heap of stones' – has not been available for a general viewing as an aesthetic category (and unlike Matta-Clark's work made visible through photography and other publicity media, it remains secret, hidden, private). Even those however, who have a privileged view or engagement with this process – namely, the boys who work away in the interior hidden from public observation – evidence a particular reaction to the building's ongoing ruination. Their feelings in confrontation with the undoing and ultimate fall of the building are of a very different order from the reverential, awestruck or cowed modes of meditation provoked by the ruin as described respectively in Winckelmann, Gilpen and Burke. Greene describes the boys' work with none of the sentimental regret for a lost Wren that we might expect to find inspired by the work of those writers named above. He asserts that 'destruction after all is a form of creation', and goes on to write that 'an odd exhilaration seized them' when the boys look at the great ruined hollow of the house. Furthermore, when the lorry driver sees the result of his inadvertent wrecking of the remaining structure, he is described as being 'convulsed with laughter.' This is not, however, a unique reaction to ruination at that specific historical period. In an article titled 'The Strange Vitality of Wreckage', Francis McKee writes of James Pope-Hennessy's descriptions of the WWII bombing that was leaving London as a city of ruins¹²:

...as he describes the destruction and the wasted and decayed landscape around him. There is an excitement that he cannot conceal and perhaps cannot quite admit to either.

It's an excitement that can be found in so many accounts of that period – the thrilling collapse of hierarchies, the emergence of now uncharted social dimensions, the birth of a new world from the old imperial order.¹³

In 'that period' – late- and post-war – Britain's experience had been one of the success of the collective, the consensual and collaborative action in the face of the Nazi threat. There was indeed a certain 'collapse in hierarchies' and in social divisions seen in the all-inclusiveness of the wartime coalition government. This can be witnessed in the universal male call-up, in the call to 'Dig for Victory', in the mobilisations of the older population for the 'Home Guard', and in the 'Woman's Land Army' to work in occupations previously reserved for men. The outcome of the 1945 election seems to carry on this spirit, with the rejection of the aristocratic and victorious Tory war leader, Churchill, at the ballot box and the voting in of a Labour government with a socialist programme of collectivisation. This was seen in the establishment of the Welfare state, the National Health Service, and a massive programme of public housing construction. It also included the 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange' via the nationalisation of railways, the coalmining industry, the steel industry and other major components of the economy.¹⁴ There was a push co-ordinated by Nye Bevan, as both Housing and Health Minister, to build social inequality out of the physical landscape. Indeed Bevan famously envisioned a dissolution of the hierarchy of class separation in the Labour Party's plan for mass council house construction as a principal means with which to build a society where 'the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived on the same street'.¹⁵

In order to understand the evidently paradoxical context both for Greene's comment that 'destruction is a type of creation' and for McKee's description of the thrill of wreckage at that time of the planned rebuilding of society and the country at large, some purchase might be found in the neo-materialistic theories of Manuel DeLanda.¹⁶ In particular we might look to DeLanda's theorising on the process of 'sedimentation', which he develops from original ideas by Deleuze and Guattari.¹⁷ Sedimentation refers to the process behind the formation of geological strata of sedimentary rocks such as limestone or sandstone. DeLanda follows Deleuze and Guattari in describing how rivers break up rocks with the power of their flow (destratification), transport them in smaller (pebble) size, and ultimately deposit them to reform and cement in layers of similar size, reformed in a new hierarchy of geological strata (restratification). The process is seen as a paradigm of a materialist 'sorting machine' whereby new forms are ordered and hierarchized in material without the intervention of any transcendental genius. According to DeLanda this 'sorting machine' can be seen as a paradigm for the materialist genesis of all types of form, e.g. also biological, financial and social formations too, whereby forms are endogenously generated and not imposed on material by some external power or intelligence as in the Christian or Aristotelian traditions.

In Greene's story there is an implicit depiction of a change in social formations, but this change in the boys' society is presented as a serious and momentous event which occurs without imposition of authority from any of the types we might expect to wield power over groups of children – parents, families, teachers, police officers, professional or political bodies of adults. The central symbol of that change, the Wren designed house, the artificially propped-up and supported last one of a terrace bombed out in the war, is the object of all the boys' attentions and efforts once the story gets going. Could it be just a coincidence that Greene invents for his central object and symbol a structure supposedly designed by the same celebrated architect, who designed the building which stood in the 1939–45 as symbol of the endurance and steadfastness of British society in the war – namely St Paul's in London?

Greene could not have been unaware of the famous 'St Paul's Survives' photograph that appeared on the front page of the *Daily Mail* (30th December) during the Blitz of 1940, in which the great Wren church is shown standing proud above all the smoke and destruction around it. British society, this image seemed to say, with all its traditions, its grandeur, its heraldry, its beliefs and its glorious history would never crumble in the face of adversity. In fact, Greene even draws our attention specifically to St Paul's and the universal recognition of its importance in this society, when on only the second page of his narrative, in answer to the question 'who is Wren?', the new boy leader of the gang, Trevor, responds 'the man who built St Paul's'.

Yet here, like Churchill and his Tory Party rather than like St Paul's, this 'beautiful' Wren end terrace house, having endured and come through the war successfully, is brought down by popular effort in the post-war period. Greene fills the story with references to class difference and with unease between the classes. He writes of the boy Trevor's mother that she 'considered herself better than the neighbours', and also that the upper classes would be 'parodied' at the Wormsley Common Empire 'by a man wearing a top hat and a monocle with a hee-haw accent.' But Greene also gives many hints that the social class structure is unstable and about to collapse or to undergo, in Delandean terminology, a 'destratification'. Trevor's family (his father had been an architect) is described as having 'come down in the world', and the Wren house which is the last remnant of the terrace built by the architect is described, in terms which contrast it very starkly with the image of St Paul's, as being 'stuck up like a jagged tooth' and as being 'crippled'. It is significant that the boys destroy the house from within. They speak of themselves as like worms in an apple. While they describe the removal of the structure - staircase, panels etc. - from within the house, one boy points out that if caught they will 'go to jug'. It appears thus that they are not only removing the interior structure of the building but also of their language, or in other words, of their every mode of social relations: verbal, linguistic, spatial. It is not however an anarchic procedure, it is in this sense that we understand that the rubble to which they reduce the house is not in the Simmel terminology a 'mere heap of stones' at all, but is a symbol of a new order, like the egalitarian council house street of Bevan's vision, a more horizontal rather than a vertical order, a restratification. In Greene's story both the plan to carry out this project and the direction of the project itself to destroy the house are led by the boy Trevor. He is the middle class boy who has 'come down in the world' amongst the working class boys. He is the son of an architect, and when he declares his knowledge of Wren the great historical English architect, and his opinion that the house itself is 'beautiful', Greene notes of his standing in the gang that 'his position was in danger'.

One possible interpretation of Greene's story would be that the architect's son finds himself in danger in his new found social environment because his knowledge and appreciation of the history, art and beauty of architecture is neither understood, nor deemed useful, nor esteemed, and indeed is probably resented. Hence he subsequently turns his specialist knowledge instead to inform a more technical and levelling role - the organisation and co-ordination of the destruction of an architectural masterpiece - in order to ingratiate himself with his fellows. At the level of small boys playing in the park this outrageous shift in attitude may seem nonetheless believably stark, uncompromising and unobvious. The surprising thing is however that a parallel version of this behaviour seems to exist in the shift in mature culture in those years as has already been described briefly above. In his essay 'The Architectural Belief System and Social Behaviour' published in 1969, Alan Lipman noticed a similar 'dilemma' in the position of the post war professional architect. The period of British history described above as involving the 'collapse of hierarchies' and the 'rebuilding of the country',

is analysed from the point of view of that profession in Lipman's piece. He draws attention to the work of Kaye, which he says

...showed that the period up to say, World War I was characterized by an architect/patron relationship in which the erection of 'works of art' played a prominent part. Since the 1920s and especially after 1945 personal patronage has diminished, and the contemporary architect stands in a different relationship with his client.¹⁸

This 'different relationship', Lipman goes on to explain, came about as part of the shift from clients as private well-off individuals to a 'mass-clientele' whereby architects became involved principally in great public projects like the new hospitals and offices for the Welfare State as well as the 'mass council house building' mentioned above. This leads, according to Lipman, the architect 'to emphasise their social engineering claims',¹⁹ and again he cites Kaye, on the move away from

The creative artist expressing a unique vision and towards that of a professional seeking to find the best technical solution ... a trend in other words away from the artist and towards the technician.²⁰

Simmel's exclusion of 'human purposiveness' as an instrumentality in bringing about the category of 'the ruin' would appear to assimilate his concept of ruination to the destratification or sedimentation process defined by DeLanda whereby any transcendental agency is excluded from a wholly materialistic process of undoing, and ultimately remaking form. On the face of it such exclusion would also rule out the destruction of the Wren house from the category of sedimentation, or indeed, the putative sub-category of the ruin. On a more thorough examination however, we might concede that as minors the boys' express purpose in destroying the house is, notwithstanding its emphatic expression,²¹ neither clear to them nor to the reader. They act without apparent awareness of any of the historical social context described here above, and act swiftly without any discussion of motives, expected results or consequences entailed. The boys achieved, that is to say, no critical distance from the material upon which they operate. As minors they can thus hardly be described as 'transcendental agents'. The other question is one of the speed at which they act. Speed and intensity are important characteristics of the processes which Deleuze and Guattari depict as at work in a universe without transcendental agency. As Ronald Bogue puts it

Speed is a characteristic of the plane of consistency, the plane of events and becoming, whose time is not that of Chronos, 'the time of measure that situates things and persons, develops a form and determines a subject'.²²

Equally, Delanda writes of the flows of energies and materials that leave us the temporary coagulations of homogenised layers of forms we recognise in our world of relative geological, biological, social, linguistic, institutional and economic stability. But the stable world we perceive is only a transitory hardening as are our individual bodies and minds 'mere coagulations or decelerations and coagulations in the flows of biomass, genes, memes and norms'.²³ And the visibility in turn of this continual flow through the universe, through processes of destratification and restratification, between hierarchized structures (as in the class system and its gradation of education and appreciation of art and architecture), and more horizontal structures (as in the 'heap of rubble' and the post-war consensus with decent housing for

everyone), depends on the speed at which it takes place and the make-up of the materials involved. It is thus, in 'The Destructors', the swiftness and the naivety of the boys' actions which allow us to see at once the long hierarchical history of that society in the form of its two-hundred-year-old 'beautiful' and art historical house, and the undoing of that society – the sudden 'collapse' – of its vertical divisions and its restratification into a more horizontal and democratic form – a 'meshwork' as Delanda would call it. In short answer to the question above, then, the house in Greene's story appears to neither undergo ruination (it happens too quickly) nor demolition (the final form of its material is too specific and imbued with significance), but an evident and meaningful process of sedimentation. Is it, now pulled to its new horizontal form by a starting lorry, still an architecture though? That might depend on whether you consider an architecture without buildings and with no architects, without, as noted above, a fetishising of physical structure – thus one analogous to the forms with no transcendental maker in Delanda's theories – is possible. There can be no disputing, however, that the story of this building belongs to literature.

Notes

- 1 G. Gissing, *New Grub Street*, Smith Elder & Co., 3 vols., 2nd ed., 1891, vol. III, p. 120.
- 2 J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 158–1599.
- 3 J. Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) *passim*.
- 4 H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).
- 5 F. Careri, *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2002), p. 49. 'The only architecture in the Palaeolithic world was the path, the first anthropic sign capable of imposing an artificial order on the territories of natural chaos.'
- 6 B. Zevi, *The Modern Language of Architecture* (Washington, DC: University of Washington, 1978).
- 7 S. K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 98.
- 8 E. Alliez, 'Gordon Matta-Clark: Somewhere Outside the Law', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 15:3, 2016, 317–333.
- 9 M. Grigor, *Space and Light Revisited*, Film 1972.
- 10 G. Simmel, 'The Ruin', *The Hudson Review*, 3, 1958, 379–385.
- 11 See D. Archibald and J. Rodger, 'St Peter's Seminary Cardross: The Ruin of Modernism', *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 20:3, 2015, 103–111.
- 12 J. Pope-Hennessy, *History Under Fire* (Londo: Batsford, 1941).
- 13 F. McKee, 'The Strange Vitality of Wreckage', *The Drouth*, 52, 2015, 52–57, at 54.
- 14 Clause IV of the British Labour Party constitution drafted by Sidney Webb in November 1917 (and dropped in 1995) read
To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service. Gani, A. (9 August 2015), 'Clause IV: A Brief History', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/aug/09/clause-iv-of-labour-party-constitution-what-is-all-the-fuss-about-reinstating-it> last viewed 05/11/16
- 15 C. Beckett and F. Beckett, *Bevan* (London: Haus Publishing, 2004), p. 76. Bevan made the statement in 1945.
- 16 M. DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).
- 17 G. DeLeuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 18 A. Lipman, 'The Architectural Belief System and Social Behaviour', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 20:2, (Jun., 1969), 190–204 at 196–197. B. Kaye, *The Development of the Architectural Profession in Britain: A Sociological Study* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), p. 23.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 200. It is notable on this point that in the second paragraph of the story, Trevor's father is described as 'a former architect and present clerk'.

- 21 The character Trevor says of his plans for the house ‘we’ll pull it down’ and also ‘we’ll destroy it’.
- 22 R. Bogue, *Deleuze’s Wake: Tributes and Tributaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 96. The citation is from G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Volume Two, Translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 262.
- 23 DeLanda, pp. 258–259.

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