

Medieval and Early Modern Science

Sabrina Ferri, *Ruins Past, Modernity in Italy (1744–1836)*, Voltaire Foundation: University of Oxford, 2015, 258 pp. + 9 illustrations, 60£, ISBN 9780729411714.

Ruins Past is about the metaphorical, symbolic, philosophical, poetical and – more broadly – cultural significance of the imaginary of ruins in Italy between the Enlightenment and Romanticism (1744–1836). It unpacks such significance in order to explore the multiple ways in which the ruin was used and appropriated – in its visual, material but also discursive aspects – in the contexts of science, art and literature. It also addresses the question of Modernity, conceived as the belief in the human capabilities to shape, transform and improve the future, that is, the belief in the possibility of progress itself. Finally, the book engages with the narrative of the interaction between past and present, natural and human, offering a fresh perspective on antiquarianism and the way ruins featured in its representation of the rise and fall of human civilisations, of the eternal and restless cycles of time.

The book is structured in six chapters. The first one focuses on Giambattista Vico's understanding of the past in his *La Scienza Nuova* (1744), and especially on Vico's attempt at reconstructing a holistic, yet entropic vision of human history by piecing together the remnants of the past, “an appeal to the present that the memory of the past be preserved and thence transmitted to the descendants” (p. 24).

The second and third chapters, which represent the core of this fascinating monograph, and of its complex and original methodological stances, are about how the occurrence of natural catastrophes helped in the elaboration of conceptions of time and history and how ruins started to be seen as materialised forms of the historical past. More specifically, chapter two focuses on how contemporaries made sense of natural catastrophes such as the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 or the eruption of Vesuvius which led to the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79AD (pp. 45–48). Drawing on the examples of poets, intellectuals and naturalists such as Alfonso Varano (1705–1788), Mario Pagano (1748–1799), Ferdinando Galiani (1728–1787) and Alberto Fortis (1741–1803), Ferri argues that natural catastrophes brought to light the contradictions lying in late eighteenth-century Italian society, and paved the path for the production of ideas of a social and natural palingenesis, tapping into the discursive space of the short-lived and experimental Napoleonic Republics at the turn of the century (pp. 74–78). Ferri claims that eighteenth-century Italian intellectuals saw change as intrinsic to both society and nature, and that natural catastrophes could be used as a paradigm to understand it.

Chapter three continues the exploration of how the narrative of ruination and destruction intersected with that of social change. It shifts the focus from the political discourse towards the history of geology and of art history and architecture, by looking more closely at figures such as the geologists Alberto Fortis (1741–1803) and Antonio Vallisneri (1661–1730), and the artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778). Ferri's main point in this chapter is to highlight the similarities between Fortis' and Piranesi's representational practices; she argues that, although Fortis' illustrations are mostly geological, and Piranesi's archaeological, they both "actively engage the reader in an effort to bring the past to bear upon the present" (p. 98); they both stir human imagination, creating a space between the past and the present, a hiatus of possible action which hints to the realms of the future.

The fourth chapter is about the Picturesque imaginary of ruination, in which natural landscapes commonly depicted "in an atemporal succession of images become inflected with temporality precisely through the presence of a ruin" (p. 122), thus giving birth to the awareness of the irreversible nature of time and of the inadequacy of human beings before it.

The fifth chapter deals with Alessandro Verri's *Notti Romane* and its creation of the "myth of origin" and process of "musealisation of the past" (p. 178), highlighting Verri's central discourse on bridging the past and the present, the dead and the living, the ancient and the modern.

The sixth and last chapter represents a step further towards the nineteenth century, enquiring into Giacomo Leopardi's poetics of ruins and into how he believed that "the death of antiquity, inextricable from the idea of cultural decline, brought with it the fading of poetry itself" (p. 187). Situating Leopardi in the context of an eschatological vision of history as a process of dissolution and ruination, the sixth chapter delineates the conception of Leopardi's poetry as "able to defy death by salvaging from the oblivion of time the memory of such individuals and of their actions" (p. 193).

Basing on sources as diverse as philosophical and political treatises, scientific and travel accounts, as well as poems, prints and etchings, this book is an important contribution to literature in the field of Italian studies and, more broadly, cultural history as much as to the history of science. Putting at the centre of her enquiry a material object, namely, the ruin, Ferri acknowledges the enhanced value of materiality in comparison with exclusively intellectual speculations or merely textual analyses. She uses the ruin and the various political, philosophical, literary and scientific imaginaries that surround it, as a lens through which to enquire into broader eighteenth/nineteenth-century debates regarding themes such as the place and role of mankind in nature, the perception of time and its relation with the evolution of the study of geology, and the

function of imagination and art forms (literary and visual) in shaping narratives on the past and its remnants. Although Ferri's focus is the Italian peninsula at a time of historical turmoil and social and political changes, the purpose of this monograph falls well beyond the geography of eighteenth/nineteenth-century Italian States, instead also looking at how suggestions coming from France, and especially from a thinker such as Boulanger and a naturalist such as George Louis Buffon, contributed to shape Italian conceptions of historical time and the process of ruination.

Drawing on more than one scholarly methodology and discipline, Ferri carefully weaves a complex narrative which also tries to make sense of how contemporaries understood the passage from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, thus attempting to answer the long-standing historiographical problem of how the divide between *Ancien Régime*, Napoleonic Republics and Bourbon Restoration was interpreted and comprehended by contemporaries at various levels in the Italian peninsula. Although it is true that historiography has not always kept these two centuries separated, and rather tried to explore historical continuities, in practice only a few books in cultural history and the history of science have done so. The reason probably lies in the fact that the passage between *Ancien Régime* and Napoleonic Republics, leading to the Restoration, also resulted in a seemingly radical transformation of institutional and administrative structures, as well as of cultures and practices of power, thus making the construction of coherent and accurate historical narratives challenging. Ferri's book defies such periodisation; furthermore, her combination of methodologies from the history of science, to cultural history and the study of literary text enriches the monograph further, making it part of a broader wave of current interdisciplinary trends of historiography. Its eschatological, almost Berlinian conclusion "poetry alone consoles the deserts of modernity" (p. 220) perfectly encapsulates the disenchantment of Italian intellectuals towards scientific pursuits and progress, making it part of a melancholic vision in which knowledge itself, as the epitome of positivist narratives of advancement and improvement, can only be apprehended ex post, in the form of archaeological remnants of an irretrievable past.

Lavinia Maddaluno

Scaliger Institute, Leiden

laviniamaddaluno@gmail.com