Architecture and Modern Literature

Spurr, David Anton

Published by University of Michigan Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/14036

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=435462
Figures of Ruin and Restoration: Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc

The two most prominent architectural theorists of the nineteenth century—Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc and John Ruskin, both champions of the Gothic—held diametrically opposed ideas on the question of architectural restoration. Viollet-le-Duc devoted a successful career to restoring many of France’s great architectural monuments of the Middle Ages and wrote extensively in defense of his practices. Ruskin, on the other hand, abhorred restoration of any kind, and defended the aesthetic value of ruins. The reason for this difference in architectural doctrine has been put down to one of temperament between the rational architecte de terrain and the eccentric Oxford aesthete. However, in attempting to go beyond these stereotypes, I have found that the question of architectural restoration rather quickly opens out onto a wider field of inquiry that includes the relation of nineteenth-century architecture to the other arts. My approach to these two writers will propose the notion that the opposition between an aesthetics of architectural ruin and one of restoration bears comparison with another burning issue in nineteenth-century art: the opposition between allegory and symbol. At the same time, I will suggest that both of these oppositions are symptomatic of a condition marking the advent of modernity: its complex and unstable relation to the historical past.

The aesthetic of ruins in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth cen-
turies needs to be understood as part of the emerging distinction between the figures of allegory and symbol, as defined by romantic critics such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Georg Friedrich Creuzer. At the risk of covering some familiar territory, allow me to recall some of their formulations. Coleridge introduces the distinction between allegory and symbol in order to show that the latter concept is the proper way to read the Bible, against the “dead letter” of literalism or the “counterfeit product of mechanical understanding” (6:30). For Coleridge, “an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language, which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses” (6:30). A symbol, on the other hand, unifies the material object with the metaphysical, between the phenomenon and its essence. Coleridge thus speaks of “the translucence of the Eternal in and through the Temporal” as the symbolic mode that transfuses the entire Bible, while Creuzer speaks of the instantaneousness, totality, and unfathomable origins of the symbol (cited in Benjamin, *Origin* 166). The unity of the symbol is above all temporal: eternity manifests itself in the instantaneous.

It is useful, however, to understand these theories not only in their romantic formulations but also in their redefinitions by a twentieth-century theorist such as Walter Benjamin. Coleridge sees allegory, in its purely conventional relation between the sensible and the abstract, as only an artificial and degraded form of the symbol; but it is something else entirely for Benjamin. In the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925), Benjamin overturns the romantic primacy of the symbol in favor of allegory. For him, allegory is the figure that rigorously refuses the sublimation of the Fall, resists the illusory reconciliation of the temporal with the eternal, and insists on the ontological difference between the object and its meaning. Benjamin offers an emblematic image of this aesthetic of negation and difference.

Während im Symbol mit der Verklärung des Unterganges das transfigurierte Antlitz der Natur im Lichte der Erlösung flüchtig sich offenbart, liegt in der Allegorie die facies hippocratica der Geschichte als erstarnte Urlandschaft dem Betrachter vor Augen. (*Ursprung* 343)

*Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the facies hippocratica [death face] of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death’s head. (Origin 166)*
This is a powerful figuration of the two opposing rhetorical figures, and in each case there figures a face (*ein Antlitz*). In the symbol, it is the face of nature that is transfigured, its destruction idealized by the light of redemption (*Erlösung*) from the metaphysical realm. In allegory, no such redemption takes place; the face is instead that of history, and its countenance consists of the petrified features of the death's head. The death's head is, in other words, the allegory of allegory, the figure of the allegorical relation that insists on the death of the past, on the temporal distance between signifier and signified, on the ontological difference between the natural and the spiritual.

Paul de Man, who has pushed this distinction as far as seems possible, defines it quite clearly.

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its origin, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes itself in the void of this temporal difference. (*Rhetoric* 207)

De Man speaks here of the inauthentic or false nostalgia that seeks to relive the past by abstracting it from any historical reality. Allegory, on the contrary, is without illusion and inconsolable; based on the principle of disunity and discontinuity in its form of representation, it marks a permanent exile from the past and in this way acquires for the modern world a kind of authenticity that is lacking in the symbol.

For Benjamin, allegory is to the realm of thought what ruins are to the realm of things. In both cases, the rupture between the material signifier and the ideal signified appears irreconcilable. The parallel traditions of allegory and ruin come together, however, in the fragment, a figure both literary and architectural. Benjamin likens baroque writing to the process of ceaselessly piling up fragments, as opposed to a more organic model of literary creation, so that “the perfect vision of this new [literary] phenomenon was the ruin” (178). Baroque writing is “constructed” (*baut*), a quality that the writer does not attempt to conceal under the sign of genius or heavenly inspiration. “Hence the display of the craftsmanship that, in Calderón especially, shows through like the masonry in a building whose rendering (Verputz) has broken away” (179). The recurring image here is one of brokenness and fragmentation, both in the relation of the parts of the composition to one another and in the relation of the composition to its ostensible origin. According to Benjamin, this notion of an irreconcilable rupture lies at the heart of the cult of ruins in the baroque aesthetic of
the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for ruins testify to the irre-
versible effects of time even as they mark the rupture of the object with its
origins.

The aesthetic of ruins can thus be seen as an authentic nostalgia, as the
melancholy cult of the past arising out of the space of rupture, and con-
scious of the irremediable absence of its object. Diderot writes in his Salons
de 1767:

Les idées que les ruines éveillent en moi sont grandes. Tout s’anéantit,
tout périt, tout passe. Il n’y a que le monde qui reste. Il n’y a que le
temps qui dure. Qu’il est vieux ce monde! Je marche entre deux éterni-
ités.

Great are the ideas that ruins awaken in me. Everything is annihilated,
everything perishes, everything passes away. There is only the world that re-
 mains. There is only time that endures. How old this world is! I walk be-
tween two eternities. (Quoted in Mortier 94)

What perishes is history and its transcendental meaning; what remains are
merely the physical existence and temporal phenomena of the world. The
two eternities between which Diderot walks are not those of heaven and
hell; they are those of the void stretching out before and after life. These
reflections belong to the more general baroque cult of ruins as a cult of ab-
sence. As Jean Starobinski describes it:

La ruine par excellence signale un culte déserté, un dieu négligé. Elle
exprime l’abandon et le délaissement . . . Sa mélancolie réside dans le
fait qu’elle est devenue un monument de la signification perdue. Rêver
dans les ruines, c’est sentir que notre existence cesse de nous appartenir
et rejoint déjà l’immense oubli. (180)

The ruin par excellence is the sign of a deserted cult, a neglected god. It ex-
presses abandonment and desertion. . . . Its melancholy lies in the fact that
it has become a monument to lost meaning. To dream in the ruins is to feel
that our existence no longer belongs to us, and that it is already part of the
immense oblivion.

In speaking of the dreamlike aspect of the aesthetic of ruins, Starobinski
reminds us that, even if ruins are seen as testimony to the ravages of time,
the cult of ruins should not be confused with any sort of historical realism.
He notes that “the sacrilege, in the eyes of those who remain attached to
this feeling, is to wish to date that which should remain immemorial” (181).
There would thus appear to be a historical abstraction even in the aesthetic that sees architectural ruin as the negation of any metaphysical transcendency and as the sign of the inescapable immanence of the world in time. However, if this is one form of historical abstraction, it should not be confused with that which comes into play with the aesthetic of architectural restoration, at least as this will be put into practice by Viollet-le-Duc and his followers. Restoration implies another kind of abstraction, a different dream. Where the aesthetic of ruins fetishizes the marks of time, restoration seeks to erase them. In this respect restoration belongs to the form of nostalgia that dreams of the timeless unity of the object with its ideal origins—the unity of the symbol—whereas the ruin, as we have just seen, expresses the temporal disunity proper to allegory. In the sense that the nineteenth century gave to these terms, restoration is symbolic, whereas ruins are allegorical.

This excursion into an episode of the history of aesthetics is meant to prepare the ground for a more direct comparison between Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin, as the two principal nineteenth-century apologists of architectural restoration and ruins, respectively. Viollet’s work has come under intense criticism, but we nonetheless have him to thank for the fact that many of the most important buildings of medieval France remain more or less intact today. He began his career of restoration in 1840 with the twelfth-century Basilica of Vézelay in Burgundy. In the same year, with Jean-Baptiste Lassus, he undertook the restoration of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. He achieved national prominence in 1844 by winning the competition to restore Notre-Dame de Paris. The projects of the basilicas of Saint-Denis and of Saint-Sernin in Toulouse also belong to this period. Following the fall of the July monarchy, the revolution of 1848, and the coup d’état of Louis-Napoléon, Viollet continued to enjoy the favor of the ruling régime. He oversaw the work of restoration at Amiens and Chartres. In the 1850s he turned to secular architecture by rebuilding the citadel and ramparts of Carcassonne and by restoring the Château de Pierrefonds at Compiègne as an imperial residence. His last major architectural restoration was the Cathedral of Lausanne in 1874. Apart from this extremely active architectural career, Viollet sought to provide a theory for his practice in several major works. We will be concerned chiefly with the *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du XI au XVI siècle* (1854) and the two volumes of *Entretiens*, or “discussions,” published respectively in 1863 and 1872. Because of the rational approach to function and structural unity taken in these works, Viollet-le-Duc has often been considered as the first
modernist architect. Ruskin, of course, was not an architect by profession, but through his writings and lectures he had a profound effect on Victorian ideas of art in general, and of architecture in particular. We will be concerned mainly with his two major works of architectural theory, both written from the experience of his voyages to Italy as a fairly young man in midcentury: *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849); and *The Stones of Venice*, published in three volumes between 1851 and 1853.

A general comparison between Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc has been made by Nikolaus Pevsner, who remarks on several points in common between the two figures: their celebration of the Gothic art of the thirteenth century, of course, and the importance that both of them attach to a certain notion of truth in architecture in which the appearance of a building corresponds to its actual structure and material composition. In *The Seven Lamps*, for example, Ruskin tells us that the architect must avoid the suggestion of a means of structural support other than the real one, as well as the painting of surfaces to represent a material other than that of which they are made. Likewise, Viollet-le-Duc insists in the *Entretiens* that “stone appear really as stone, iron as iron, wood as wood,” and so on. (1:472). Both writers seem to agree on the role of the people in constructing Gothic architecture. For Viollet-le-Duc, it is to the common people of the thirteenth century that we owe the great monuments of that age, while for Ruskin these buildings represent the work of an entire race (Pevsner 18). In his last major work, *The Bible of Amiens* (1880–85), Ruskin several times cites Viollet-le-Duc as an authority on French medieval architecture.

The common ground ends just about there, however, and the differences between these two figures are much more significant than any points of convergence. Viollet-le-Duc, for example, privileges architectonic structure, whereas Ruskin gives greater importance to decoration. We must keep in mind that Viollet-le-Duc, as an active architect, is primarily concerned to justify the methods he has put into practice, whereas Ruskin, even more than a theorist, is above all a stylist and connoisseur who has little interest or experience in the practice of building. For Pevsner, however, the difference comes down to one of sensibility: in Viollet-le-Duc, he sees a French rationalism that favors the concrete and empirical and in Ruskin a supposedly English emotivity that privileges suggestion and evocation. In this rather facile analysis, however, Pevsner reduces important aesthetic and theoretical differences to a stereotypical view of national temperament. Let us attempt a deeper appreciation of these two theorists by looking more closely at their respective ideas on ruin and restoration.
In the article on restoration in Viollet-le-Duc’s *Dictionnaire raisonné*, we read:

Les travaux de restauration entrepris en France . . . ont sauvé de la ruine des œuvres d’une valeur incontestable. . . . Ces édifices, une des gloires de notre pays, préservés de la ruine, resteront encore debout pendant des siècles, pour témoigner du dévouement de quelques hommes plus attachés à perpétuer cette gloire qu’à leurs intérêts particuliers. (31)

The works of restoration undertaken in France . . . have rescued from ruin a number of works of undisputed value. . . . These buildings, part of the glory of our country preserved from ruin, will remain standing for centuries as a testimony to the devotion of a few men motivated more by the perpetuation of that glory than by their private interests.

This last phrase is aimed at the architects of the École des Beaux-Arts and their supposed disdain for the practical work of restorers working in the provinces. Viollet-le-Duc was to be associated with the École only briefly; appointed controversially to a professorship in 1863, he was prevented from teaching his courses by his “classical” colleagues and students.\(^3\) For our purposes, however, it is more important to note that for Viollet-le-Duc, in opposition to the baroque and romantic traditions, ruins have no value as such. On the contrary, the ruin of ancient buildings is to be avoided at all costs because their restoration can transform them into monuments of permanent and transcendent value. “The perpetual glory of the French nation” here should be understood as a rhetorical appeal directed at his imperial patrons in 1856 and not necessarily as an expression of Viollet’s own political feeling, which was essentially republican. In any case, this idealized and transcendent notion of architecture conforms to the famous definition with which Viollet-le-Duc begins his dictionary article on restoration.

Le mot [restauration] et la chose sont modernes: restaurer un édifice, ce n’est pas l’entretenir, le réparer ou le refaire, c’est le rétablir dans un état complet qui peut n’avoir jamais existé à un moment donné. (14)

The word [restoration] and the thing itself are modern: to restore a building is not to maintain it, repair it, or rebuild it; it is to reestablish it in a complete state that might never have existed at any given moment.

For Viollet-le-Duc, architectural restoration was a new science, like those of comparative anatomy, philology, ethnology, and archaeology. Laurent
Baridon has shown how the architect’s ideas incorporate the scientific concept of organicism characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century: the architectural restorer is to the medieval building what the paleontologist is to the remains of a prehistoric animal: each of them seeks to reconstitute an organism. This theory presupposes a number of qualities in the object to be reconstituted: its unity, its internal logic, its visibility. Like the paleontologist Georges Cuvier, Viollet-le-Duc saw in the object of his study a “correlation of organs” and the subordination of its different elements, so that every part could be understood in terms of its function within the overall structure. The point, however, was not merely to re-create a building by imitating medieval practices but rather to find the solutions to architectural problems that medieval artisans would have adopted had they had the technical means available to the nineteenth century (Baridon 18–20). For Viollet-le-Duc, medieval architecture is not essentially a multiple series of historical phenomena rooted in distinct and local contexts. Rather, his theory implies the existence of an ideal form of the building independent of its concrete realization at any given historical moment.

In other words, Viollet-le-Duc reached into the art of the Middle Ages for a certain number of a priori principles, an architectural grammar that guided his projects even where the work of restoration went consciously against the historical realities of a given edifice. As the studies of Viollet-le-Duc are full of examples of this controversial practice in his major projects, I shall cite a relatively minor but nonetheless instructive example from his project for the restoration of the Chapelle des Macchabées in Geneva, built in 1405 by Jean de Brogny as an annex to the twelfth-century Cathédrale de Saint-Pierre. The chapel had been converted into a storeroom by Calvin’s reformers and later had been used as a lecture hall by the Académie de Genève, today the University of Geneva. Leila El Wakil has shown how Viollet-le-Duc, based on his own understanding of Gothic principles, proposed the “restoration” of several elements that in fact had never belonged to the building. Among these was the erection of a spire that Viollet-le-Duc freely admitted might never have existed. Nonetheless, he argued, it ought to have existed even if it never did, because such a spire conformed to “accepted practice in all independently built chapels” (El Wakil 52). Similarly, he proposed to create a rose window in the otherwise intact facade of the western gable, a pure invention justified on the aesthetic grounds that “an intact gable over the architecture of the ground-level story will appear overly heavy” (53). Characteristically conservative, the city of Geneva rejected these innovative features of the project, judging...
that “one should put aside those things which, while they might beautify
the building, one cannot claim to have ever existed” (54). Although Viol-
let-le-Duc withdrew from this project after an administrative disagree-
ment, the city went ahead with the restoration of the chapel on the basis of
his plans but without the spire, the rose-window, and other innovative fea-
tures. Viollet-le-Duc’s original plans are reproduced in figures 5 and 6. Fig-
ure 7 shows the chapel as it appears today.
A few years later, in restoring the cathedral adjacent to the chapel,
Geneva had to fend off pressure from a very different quarter. A sense of the
intense polemic surrounding the question of restoration is given in the
official report of the Association for the Restoration of Saint-Pierre, which
took on the task of restoring the cathedral proper in 1891. Having caught
wind of the new plans, William Morris’s Society for the Protection of An-
cient Buildings had made an urgent appeal to Geneva to abandon its plans
to restore Saint-Pierre, on the grounds that any such work would destroy
the work of time and risk betraying the ideas of the original builders. Mor-
ris’s society recommended instead that the protection of the cathedral be
limited to the simple reinforcement of those parts of the building that were
falling into ruin. The response of the Geneva association was unambiguous.

Donner satisfaction à des théories aussi subversives de notre raison
d’être, c’était nous suicider; nous avons préféré vivre et répondre à nos
 correspondants que nous ne partageons pas leur manière de voir.
(Fornara 104)

To give in to theories so subversive of our reason for being would be to com-
mit suicide. We preferred to live, and answered our correspondents by say-
ing that we did not share their point of view.

In other words, Geneva sought a middle way between the conservative
movement, which, following the principles of Ruskin, opposed restoration
of any kind, and the radical restorations of Viollet-le-Duc.
Viollet-le-Duc’s practice of restoring buildings from a priori principles
rather than historical evidence continues to attract controversy today. One
of his more severe critics finds that his theory amounts to a “delirium”
founded on a fundamental tautology: “[His] observations allow the defini-
tion of a law, but the law pre-exists, so that the observations conform to
the law” (Leniaud 91). Despite the often brilliant investigations that Viol-
let-le-Duc conducted in order to discover the history of a building, his
principles tend to make an abstraction of history in two ways. First, he ide-
Fig. 5. Viollet-le-Duc's plan for the restoration of the Chapelle des Macchabées, west face, 1875. (Musée d’art et d’histoire, Geneva.)

Fig. 6. Viollet-le-Duc’s plan for the restoration of the Chapelle des Macchabées, south face, 1875. (Musée d’art et d’histoire, Geneva.)
alizes a given period, the Gothic era, as the privileged moment of all architectural history. Second, by consciously reconstructing a building into a form that does not correspond to any of that building’s past forms, he refuses a rigorously historical approach in favor of an aesthetic of timeless unity. Of course, one might ask how could it be otherwise, once one has started down the path of restoration. Given a building such as Notre-Dame de Paris, which underwent continual transformation from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, how does one decide which of its many forms to restore it to unless one has, for example, an ideal notion of what it might have been in the thirteenth century? The point is, however, that for Viollet-le-Duc Gothic architectural form is not primarily historical; rather it consists of an ideal unity that is structurally analogous to the unity of the romantic symbol, even if its content is different.

By its very nature, the romantic symbol represents the secularization of
the metaphysical qualities once attributed to the sacred object. Given the declining authority of religious institutions, the symbol responds to a demand in the nineteenth century for a language that would bring material being into harmony with spiritual being in atemporal but secular terms. In Viollet-le-Duc the Gothic cathedral, like the romantic symbol, is secularized as an aesthetic object. Neither his writings nor his architectural practices take seriously the status of the medieval Gothic church as an edifice designed for the ritual of worship and the administering of the holy sacraments. On the contrary, he writes in the *Entretiens* that the great Gothic cathedrals of medieval France are essentially the work of lay craftsmen organized into guilds. While employed by the bishops, these craftsmen worked independently, adopting a new system of construction and new forms in architecture and sculpture. Whereas the religious institutions of the early Middle Ages could only reproduce designs in the Romanesque and Byzantine traditions, the “lay school” of the late twelfth century made a complete break from these traditions, replacing them with principles founded on reason, that is, the principles of Gothic architecture. It is only at this point, argues Viollet-le-Duc, that there emerges “le génie propre à la nation française” (the special genius of the French nation) (*Entretiens* 1:265). From here it is a relatively short step to the national ideology that Viollet-le-Duc invokes in support of his projects of restoration. In this way the metaphysical dimension of the symbol, traditionally given the name of the infinite, the eternal, and so on, acquires an identity rather more specific but equally eternal: the glory of France. This is a rhetorical strategy that we might call the appropriation of the symbolic structure by ideology.

In order to understand Viollet-le-Duc’s aesthetic, we need to see it in the context of France’s Second Empire and its ideology, which, while aspiring to recover the imperial glories of the first Napoleonic era, nonetheless embraced the values of industrial progress inherited from the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe. We see both elements in the discourse of Viollet-le-Duc, who pays homage to Napoléon I while insisting on the progress made in the artisanal industries of the provinces, thanks to the works of architectural restoration under way all over France. To take up just the first of these elements, we note that for Viollet-le-Duc, restoration is above all a national project whose origins lie in the First Empire and “the will of the Emperor Napoléon I, who was ahead of his times in all things, and who understood the importance of restoration” (*Dictionnaire* 22). Viollet-le-Duc’s politics, however, are not a simple matter, for they suggest a certain discrepancy between his personal convictions and his public dis-
course. If, after the fall of the Second Empire, he showed himself to be an ardent republican, there was little to suggest such a conviction in his close connections to the authoritarian regime of Napoléon III, connections he needed for the support of his architectural projects. By no means the least of these was his restoration of the fourteenth-century Château de Pierre-fonds into an imperial residence, where his energetic direction of court entertainments earned him the nickname “the stage prompter of Compiègne” (Gout 51).

Viollet-le-Duc’s discourse on art, however, is not predominantly royalist. It is instead a texture of theories and observations that reflects all of the tensions inherent in mid-nineteenth-century aesthetics. This tension is evident from the very first of the Entretiens. On one hand, in keeping with the emerging symbolist aesthetics of his age, Viollet-le-Duc argues for the essential unity of art and its value as independent of historical circumstances: “Art has its value independent of the milieu in which it is born and grows up.” On the other hand, and in keeping with the scientific humanism of Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, Viollet-le-Duc sees the form if not the essence of art as intimately tied to the way of life of a people: “[T]he arts of the Middle Ages follow step by step the manners and customs of the people in the midst of which they develop” (Entretiens 1:11). This double discourse allows Viollet-le-Duc to argue both for an ideal Gothic, independent of historical specificity, and for the revival of the Gothic as an expression of national unity and character. Thus, in the seventh Entretien, Viollet-le-Duc claims that “l’art en France, dès les premières années du XI-IIe siècle, est un instrument dont le pouvoir royal se sert pour développer ses efforts vers l’unité nationale” (art in France, from the early years of the thirteenth century, has been an instrument used by royal power in its efforts to develop national unity) (1:282). This is not offered as a critique of the instrumentalization of art for political ends. On the contrary, Viollet-le-Duc is citing the precedent of the thirteenth century as an argument for the continued support of his various projects of restoration by the imperial regime. National unity is offered as a political justification for the pursuit of an essentially aesthetic ideal.

Like Viollet-le-Duc, Ruskin defends the Gothic against architectural classicism but with a very different declared ideology. For Ruskin, the individual freedom inherent in the Gothic style stands in opposition to the authoritarian classicism of the ancien régime, while the nineteenth-century revival of the Gothic marks a parallel revival of Christian faith, in reaction to the declining authority of religious institutions in modern life.
When Ruskin first went to Oxford in 1836, the Oxford movement of John Keble and John Henry Newman had already begun. It helped to create an intellectual climate in which Ruskin could write of art and architecture in strongly ethical terms, which, in his work, resonated with the egalitarianism of the equally important political movement that produced three reform bills between 1832 and 1884.

Like Viollet-le-Duc, Ruskin also speaks of a national architecture, declaring, for example, in *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), that “all good architecture is the expression of national life and character; and it is produced by a prevalent and eager national taste” (*Library Edition* 18:434). But this national character is to be distinguished from Viollet-le-Duc’s discourse of national unity. For Ruskin, it is a matter of the impact of architecture on public life, of the manner in which a building becomes a permanent part of the landscape, and of a certain ethical responsibility of the architect toward the people. The monumental character of the Gothic building resides in its capacity to bear witness to the history of a people, which it does through the richness of documentation contained in its ornamentation.

Its minute and multitudinous sculptural decorations afford means of expressing, either symbolically or literally, all that need be known of national feeling or achievement. . . . Better the rudest work that tells a story or records a fact, than the richest without meaning. (8:229–30)

Already we may note two points on which Ruskin’s discourse differs from Viollet-le-Duc’s. First, although he speaks of feeling and national achievement, Ruskin does not privilege any nation in particular. Where Ruskin affirms the style and the moral force of what he calls the Goth (the Englishman, the Frenchman, the Dane, the German) against the supposed languor and subjection of Mediterranean peoples, his use of *nation* is essentially racial in the nineteenth-century sense and has little to do with the meaning given this word by the nationalism of the modern state. Second, Ruskin wishes to affirm the *memorial* function of the Gothic building: if poetry constitutes what a people has thought and felt, then architecture constitutes “what their hands have handled, and their strength wrought, and their eyes beheld, all the days of their life” (8:224). For Ruskin, the Gothic building has the same *aura* that Benjamin will attribute to the work of art that still bears the marks of the artist’s hands, a quality lost in reproduction. In general, Ruskin’s notion of the memorial function of the Gothic contrasts with Viollet-le-Duc’s ideas, which are both more abstract and more pragmatic. Stephen Bayley has
remarked that in the French architect the Gothic is made into “a flexible system adapted to all needs and their changing nature. The Gothic describes a language of many words” (32).

For Ruskin ruins also have a memorial function, but they are distinguished from other architectural formations by the quality of what he calls “parasitical sublimity,” the sublime that derives, somewhat paradoxically, from accident or the nonessential character of the object. This particularly fortuitous form of the sublime corresponds, for Ruskin, to a certain sense of the picturesque. He finds it in the accessory details of a painting by Tintoretto or Rubens,

in the clefts and folds of shaggy hair, or in the chasms and rents of rocks, or in the hanging of thickets or hill sides, or in the alternations of gaiety and gloom in the variegation of the shell, the plume, or the cloud. (8:240)

Here there is an echo of the baroque poetics of a seventeenth-century poet such as William D’Avenant. Defending the style of his epic poem Gondibert (1651), D’Avenant calls attention precisely to its ephemeral, aleatory, and indistinct qualities, “the shadowings, happy strokes, secret graces, and even the drapery, which together make the second beauty” (16–17). Similarly for Ruskin, his sense of the sublime is independent of the main lines and principal substance of the object as such. In architecture in particular this fortuitous beauty, this sublime of the supplement, takes the form of the ruin. There is, then, a sublime that resides in ruptures, fissures, stains, and moss—in everything that marks the effects of nature and of time on the architectural work.

The striking quality of such effects had been appreciated by Hugo in Notre-Dame de Paris (1831), where, in condemning the various attempts at architectural restoration of that cathedral—attempts to be once more taken up by Viollet-le-Duc in 1845—he notes that “le temps a rendu à l’église plus peut-être qu’il ne lui a ôté, car c’est le temps qui a répandu sur la façade cette sombre couleur des siècles qui fait de la vieillesse des monuments l’âge de leur beauté” (time has perhaps given the church more than it has taken away, as it is time that has spread over the facade that dark color of the centuries that makes the old age of monuments the age of their beauty) (191). Similarly, Ruskin holds that “it is in the golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, and colour, and preciousness of architecture” (8:234).
Ruskin’s own rendering of Kenilworth Castle, done in 1847 (fig. 8), shows the Great Hall shorn of its roof, the crumbling masonry overgrown with ivy. Stone and vegetation alike are subject to the variegated effects of light and shadow. The picture retains the strong sense of verticality belonging to the Gothic elements of the building, but these are set in stark contrast to a gray and empty sky. Just enough of Gothic tracery remains in one of the windows to recall the splendor of this edifice in the days of John of Gaunt, in the fourteenth century. From reading Walter Scott’s novel Kenilworth (1821), Ruskin would have known the rich descriptions of this castle as it stood in Elizabethan days. His sense of the ruin’s sublimity, however, would have come from the visible effects of time’s ravages in the margins and interstices of the weakening stone.

According to Ruskin, Gothic architecture creates conditions that are particularly advantageous to this external or parasitical sublime, because the effects of the Gothic that depend on the play of shadow and light are enhanced by the partial wearing away of sculptural detail. Ruskin denounces architectural restoration, then, because it effaces the sublime effects of time. If Hugo attacks specific projects of restoration on the grounds of their incompetence or lack of architectural understanding, Ruskin’s condemnation is more categorical and even more impassioned.

Restoration, so called, is the worst manner of Destruction. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered. . . . It is impossible, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture. (8:242)

The dominant figure in this discourse is that of death. Ruskin declares the impossibility of summoning back to life the spirit of the dead artisan and commanding him to direct other hands and other thoughts. The very concept of restoration is “a lie from beginning to end.”

You may make a model of a building as you would of a corpse, and your model may have the shell of the old walls within it as your cast might have the skeleton, with what advantage I neither see nor care. (8:244)

As for those monuments that fall into ruin:

We have no right to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead still have their right in them. (8:245)
It is as if ruins were still the dwelling places of the dead and that to restore them would be to destroy the eloquent means by which the dead, or death itself, make themselves understood. To declare “we have no right to touch them” implies the kind of veneration for architectural ruins that is felt for mortal human remains, which, for profoundly emotional and cultural reasons, cannot be disinterred or displaced. This insistence on the presence of death in ruins recalls Benjamin’s notion that the emblem of allegory is the
facies hippocratica, the pale and shrunken aspect of the human face just before the moment of death.

Ruskin’s ideas on death and ruins force us to revise the common understanding that for him the Gothic is a primarily organic art, in both its structural principles and its resemblance to vegetation. In fact, his essay “The Lamp of Power” finds that one of the elements of sublime architecture is precisely its inorganic character, found in the geometric form of the wall and other “wide, bold, and unbroken” surfaces (8:109). Both the organic and the inorganic principles are found in nature, “the one in her woods and thickets, the other in her plains and cliffs and waters” (8:109). If the former “gives grace to every pulse that agitates animal organisation,” the latter “reproves the pillars of the earth, and builds up her barren precipices into the coldness of the clouds” (8:102).

As Andrea Pinotti suggests, Ruskin expresses a nostalgia for death and mineral stillness. The language of melancholy, solitude, and mortality with which he contemplates the mountains and cliffs belongs also to the discourse of ruins. In the ruin, where climbing vegetation meets the resistance of ancient stone, we witness the same eternal struggle between the organic and the inorganic principles of nature. The stone, in its hardness and coldness, but also in its marred and worn condition, has the awesome aspect of death itself. It evokes the melancholy, “dead” relation of the allegorical sign to its object, in contrast to the living, organic nature of the symbol.

This identification of Ruskin with the aesthetics of allegory is bound to surprise those who read too literally his insistence on “naturalism” in architectural representation. There is, for example, the passage in “The Nature of the Gothic” where Ruskin contrasts the representations of purgatorial fire in two different churches. The first is in the twelfth-century mosaic of the Last Judgment in the Romanesque cathedral of Torcello, in the Venetian lagoon. Here, the fire is purely allegorical. It takes the form of a red stream that descends from the throne of Christ and extends itself to envelop the wicked. The other, in the Gothic porch of Saint-Maclou in Rouen, is strongly naturalistic: “The sculptured flames burst out of the Hades gate, and flicker up, in writhing tongues of stone, through the in-
terstices of the niches, as if the church itself were on fire” (10:233). Ruskin offers this as a demonstration of the “love of veracity” reflected in Gothic design, by which he means a faithful imitation of natural form. As always in Ruskin, however, there is a difference between factual representation and truth. He goes on to say that, on reflection, one will perhaps find more truth in the allegorical figure, “in that blood-red stream, flowing between definite shores, and out of God’s throne, and expanding, as if fed by a perpetual current, into the lake wherein the wicked are cast,” than in the “torch-flickerings” of the Gothic, naturalistic figure (10:233). The point is that for Ruskin allegory represents a deeper truth than naturalistic imitation. A similar point has been made by Gary Wihl, who writes that for Ruskin, “sincerity is increasingly figured as allegory, as a writer’s or sculptor’s self-consciousness about the fictiveness . . . of his idealizations” (113). The allegorical figure acknowledges the gap between signifier and signified, and this implicit acknowledgment of the inadequacy of signification is itself the sign of a truth.

In general, we could say that Viollet-le-Duc’s aesthetic is to Ruskin’s what symbol is to allegory: on one hand, the timeless unity of the object with its ideal essence; on the other hand, rupture, disunity, and the pathos evoked by the material remains of an irrecoverable past. Here it might be useful to point out the affinity between the aesthetic of ruins and that of the monument. The monument does not claim to evoke the totality of what it commemorates. It signifies its object only allegorically, and by convention; it presents itself as the dead letter of a departed spirit, and its affective power resides precisely in this irreconcilable ontological difference.

Ruskin’s implacable rejection of modern architecture for a long time caused him to be seen as an incurable nostalgic, devoted to a regressive pastoralism in the face of modernity. But there is in Ruskin’s particular form of nostalgia a certain resistance to nostalgia, just as, conversely, there is nostalgia in Viollet-le-Duc’s particular form of modernism. To the extent that the work of each of these figures resonates in the twentieth century, Viollet-le-Duc’s impact is on architectural modernism, whereas Ruskin’s is on literary modernism. It is on this latter point that I would like to conclude.

The aesthetic of the ruin and the fragment will be taken up, if transformed, by poets such as T. S. Eliot and René Char in their fragmentation of the word and literary form. This textual fragmentation will be justified in terms identical to those that Benjamin uses to justify the allegorical fragment, that is, in a discourse that privileges rupture and exteriority. Thus
Maurice Blanchot writes that what he calls the _parole du fragment_ (fragment word) in Char is

> un arrangement d’une sorte nouvelle, qui ne sera pas celui d’une harmonie, d’une concorde ou d’une conciliation, mais qui acceptera la disjonction ou la divergence comme le centre infini à partir duquel, par la parole, un rapport doit s’établir.

> a new kind of arrangement, not of harmony, concord, or reconciliation, but one that accepts disjunction or divergence as the infinite center from out of which, through the word, relation is to be created. (L’Entretien 453)

Other elements of Ruskin’s work can be seen as a renewal of the baroque spirit in the modern context. There is, for example, the idea of perpetual movement that Benjamin sees as a constituent element of baroque allegory. In contrast to the romantic symbol, which remains “persistently the same,” allegory, “if it is to hold its own against the tendency to absorption (Versenkung), must constantly unfold in new and surprising ways” (Ursprung 359; Origin 183). One can compare this remark to Ruskin’s insistence on “changefulness” as one of the essential qualities of the Gothic, as well as on its “disquietude.”

> It is that strange _disquietude_ of the Gothic spirit that is its greatness; that restlessness of the dreaming mind, that wanders hither and thither among the niches, and flickers feverishly around the pinnacles, and frets and fades in labyrinthine knots and shadows along wall and roof, and yet is not satisfied, nor shall be satisfied. (10:214)

That is, the Gothic spirit is not satisfied in its ceaseless search for a reconciliation of body and spirit, of temporal and eternal, of signifier and signified. This dissatisfaction corresponds to the allegory rather than the symbol, the architectural ruin rather than its restoration, the fragment rather than the whole. The paradox of Ruskin is that his baroque definition of the Gothic gives rise to a certain modernism; in recovering a neglected aesthetic of the past, he looks forward to the new forms of art announced by Eliot’s _The Waste Land_ (1922): “These fragments I have shored against my ruin” (Collected 69).