



## Preface

A ruin is a curious thing. Imagine the Acropolis or Borobudur, Ephesus or the Great Wall of China. Magnificent structures erected on the foundation of a society's most advanced technologies and its most sophisticated sciences. Constructed from raw materials—wood, metals, stone, lime mortar, marble, glass, turf and soil—quarried, excavated, transported, and formed by the labor—the debilitating, depleting sweat and toil—of flesh and blood men, women, and children. But a ruin is more than the material out of which it is fashioned. It is infused with the longing of a people. Longing for meaning and order. Longing for fellowship and community. Longing for the reign of beauty on earth. More than mere material, a ruin is saturated with culture. It is a culture's loftiest aesthetic imagination

manifest in the light of day in all of its sensuousness. But a ruin is more than the designs and desires of a people. A ruin is nature. Its very matter is fired in the furnace of the elements. And once in place, the edifice is eternally embraced by earth, fire, wind, and water. As Georg Simmel wrote in 1907, “a ruin is fused into the surrounding landscape and, like tree and stone, grows into and is integrated in that landscape.” As much as it tries, a thriving cathedral or a bustling office building cannot achieve this integration: its relationship to its natural surroundings is one of artificiality at best, domination at worst. Its atmosphere is charged by an ordering of its own making. By contrast, “an atmosphere of peace emanates from the ruin; for, in the ruin the contrary aspirations of both world potencies [the energies of nature and the conceptions of society] appears as a calm image of purely natural being.” What has wrought this change in the charge of the structure’s atmosphere is *time*. A ruin, finally, is time. It is transhistorical time, “ruin time,” the steady chronicler of past glory and decay, present cause and effect, and future promise and peril. “Ruin time unites,” says Florence Hetzler. It suffuses the “biological time of birds and moss” with the immemorial “synergy” of all of living beings—human, animal, bacterial, microbial—whose bodies have touched, however fleetingly, however gently, the ruin.<sup>1</sup>

Western Buddhism is not a ruin. It is a sprawling estate, operating daily at peak capacity. Western Buddhism is a prodigious ancillary of an ancient edifice that, as Simmel says of palaces, villas, and farmhouses, “even where it would be best to fuse with the atmosphere of its surroundings, always originates another order of things, and unites with the order of nature only in retrospect.” Why should it “be best” to do so? Western Buddhism itself provides the answer: because there is no real division between culture, society, person and “nature.”

The Buddha has taught us that it is nature all the way through. He also taught us that the very nature of nature inexorably impels our—the world’s—very ruination. Ruin is ruin because our desires and actions, however exalted, cannot withstand the non-negotiable consequences of impermanence, dissolution, and emptiness. And yet, somehow, the edifice that is Western Buddhism does not merely remain in place: it stands fortified against the consequences of its own self-acknowledged insights into our “natural” condition. In doing so, it originates an order, both for itself and for its practitioner, that is at odds with these very insights. For, “to fuse with the order of nature only in retrospect” is to create the illusion that it does not fuse with nature at all. It creates the illusion that the object of Western Buddhism’s fusion—the object of its most abiding desire—is of an altogether different order from nature’s ruin. It is, rather, of a higher order that somehow enables escape from the raw contingencies of nature—the very ones that Buddhism itself articulates—leaving the subject ultimately unscathed.

The term for “nature” that I use in the subtitle and throughout the book is “the Real.” Like Western Buddhism’s “emptiness” or “no-self,” in the history of western thought “the Real” names some profoundly productive *a priori*, awareness of which is a *sine qua non* of human awakening and of the liberation that such awakening is said to entail (however variously those consequences might be understood). Paradoxically, the Real is as evasive as it is productive, eluding capture by our strategies of linguistic and symbolic communication. Of course, it is we creaturely humans who enable this evasion by constructing obfuscating, at best, symbolization around the nonetheless fecund Real. In his twentieth-century masterpiece of literary criticism, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin wrote that “in

the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, no matter how well preserved they are.”<sup>2</sup> For Benjamin, it is precisely the ruin’s proximity to “creaturely nature” that infuses it with its “uncontrollable productivity.”<sup>3</sup>Of what then, does the well-preserved building speak? Of what is it productive if not of the very idea that saw it rise from the dust in the first place? In proximity to what would this construction be, if not to the passion and pain coursing through the veins of earthly creatures? Such questions merely postpone my conclusion: Western Buddhism must be ruined.

This, at least, is the belief animating this book. I have come to this belief after forty-some years of actively surveying the Western Buddhist landscape. At turns figuratively and literally, my exploration has taken me from the tropical forests of the *achans* to the austere rusticality of the *roshis* to the stark mountainous terrain of the *rinpoches*. It has taken me from the temple to the practice center to the university classroom. It has enveloped me in the exertion of several practices, each of which is deeply contemplative in the degree of steady concentration involved: still, silent meditation; laborious reading of Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan texts; and, the most difficult of all, sustained and unflinching critical thinking. Why is critique so difficult? Well, it is not only philosophers who fall in love with their subject. That love will ensure that the critique that follows does not obliterate, does not grind back to dust, the finely-wrought edifice of Western Buddhism. And if I do succeed in my plan, it is only to view the ensuing ruin in the glow of a stranger, more creaturely, light.

I have learned a lot about ruin from the people I mentioned above. Another teacher not mentioned is the Persian Muslim poet Jalāl

ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (1207-1273). Rūmī employed the conceit of ruin as an image of the catalyzing loss required to come in possession of our most potent human quality: love. He doesn't mean love as a commonplace affection. He means love as a ferocious force of ruination: "What care I though ruin be wrought?/Under the ruin there is royal treasure." One collection of his poetry is titled *The Ruins of the Heart*.<sup>4</sup> I have also learned a great deal about ruin from Canadian poet, novelist, and singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen (1934-2016). A line from his 1992 song "Anthem" has become a kind of cultural cliché, like that Vincent van Gogh painting "Starry Night" that can be had on a tee shirt or coffee mug, but it nonetheless captures his notion of ruin: "There is a crack in everything/that's how the light gets in."<sup>5</sup> For Cohen as for Rumi, ruin is a question of igniting the "furnace of the spirit," whose ardent issue, always, is love.<sup>6</sup>

I first heard Leonard Cohen in my friend Thomas Adams's room in 1975. He borrowed the album *Songs of Love and Hate* from the local library. At that point in our lives, Thomas and I were drinking from the trough of Alice Cooper, the New York Dolls, and Black Sabbath. Yet, we sat in rapt silence as the black vinyl turned, slowly secreting the passionate, melancholy ambience that is Leonard Cohen—his voice, his guitar, his verse. One of those verses, from the first song on the record, "Avalanche," could be the Universal Beloved inciting Rūmī to ecstatic embrace. Or is it Shams, the mysterious dervish perpetually wandering in search of a beloved friend, someone with whom he could speak of secret things? It's impossible to say. Both masters wield double entendre as a weapon of ruination. After admonishing his wavering lover not to feign such passion in the face of doubt, the singer intones (or cautions?): "It is your turn, beloved/It is your flesh that I wear."<sup>7</sup> It is a disturbing, almost ghastly, line. But can you

conceive of a more direct and unadorned image of union born of annihilation? Imagining that ruined building once again, I picture it obliterated as an edifice for narrow worldly concerns (commerce, service, bureaucracy) because it has become clothed in the flesh of nature.

Thom and I intravenously ingested Leonard Cohen's intoxicant. At the same time, together with my brother Damon, we began imbibing the violent metallic hootch of the Stooges' Vietnam War-contaminated *Raw Power*: "I am the world's forgotten boy/The one who searches and destroys."<sup>8</sup> The three of us began imperceptibly to mix the dark elixir of Leonard Cohen and the volatile firewater of the Stooges with a form of music that would come to define our lives: punk rock. Like so many young people in search of an expression for their still nascent superpowers, we formed a band. Joined by like-minded insurgents of the moribund American middle class, we unleashed our Dionysian energy, power, passion, and heat on the Philadelphia (and beyond) underground from 1981 to 1987. The name of our band is Ruin. (Present tense: like an alcoholic, you are never cured of your band.)

With love, and with inexpressible gratitude, I dedicate this book to the members of Ruin: Damon Wallis, Thomas Adams, Cordy Swope, Richard Hutchins, and Paul Della Pelle.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Georg Simmel, "Die Ruine: Eine Ästhetische Versuch," *Georg Simmel Online* (website), accessed October 3, 2017, <http://socio.ch/sim/verschiedenes/1907/ruine.htm>. All translations

in the book are mine unless otherwise indicated; Florence M. Hetzler, “Ruin Time and Ruins,” *Leonardo*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1988): 54.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 235.

<sup>3</sup> Max Pensky, “Three Kinds of Ruin: Heidegger, Benjamin, Sebald,” *Poligrafi*, vol. 16, no. 61/62 (2011): 84.

<sup>4</sup> See Afzal Iqbal, *The Life and Work of Jalal-Ud-Din Rumi* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2014), 240.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Cohen, “Anthem,” *The Future*, Columbia Records, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> For the “furnace of the spirit” quote, see Jeff Burger, *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 81.

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Cohen, “Avalanche,” *Songs of Love and Hate*, Columbia Records, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> The Stooges, “Search and Destroy,” *Raw Power*, Columbia Records, 1973.