

Reading Ruins

Ruined by Design: Shaping Novels and Gardens in the Culture of Sensibility

By Inger Sigrun Brodey.
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Reviewed by Susan Ford.

This extraordinary book by Inger Sigrun Brodey begins in paradox—the image of the eighteenth-century “man of feeling,” the hero of the culture of sensibility, whose unusual virtue is based not on reason but on the depth of feeling, who resists the authority of convention (and indeed is skeptical of the ability of language to convey his feelings), but who simultaneously needs narrative convention to author his story. This paradox—the rejection of narrative convention and the reliance on its authority—is matched by others. Sensibility, Brodey demonstrates, “provided a way of justifying the individual’s independence from the authority of reason and lack of need for centralized political power, as well as justifying a liberation from social and ethical norms. Yet the concept of sensibility grew to entail precise norms . . . as well as a moral and aesthetic, if not political, authority.”

Central to the aesthetic of sensibility is the idea of ruin, a concept Brodey charts in terms of architectural follies (or fake ruins) that dotted the landscape of the “English” garden and narrative experiments with fragmentation in the novels of England, Germany, and France. The “redemption” of the ruination that mountains had seemed to represent, the fashion of importing classical fragments, and the construction of authentically artificial ruins all became integral to the picturesque landscape. In the novel of sensibility, a distrust of language resulted in attempts to convey an authentic self through visual gesture, through the gaps between words, through silence, leading to novels like Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling*, in which the text itself is delivered as fragmented, ruined.

The “twin goals” of this aesthetic of ruination—“to create a ‘publishable,’ coherent monument or volume and also to fragment [that] creation,” to “both mask the creator’s role and evoke greater emotional participation in the reader or viewer”—reflect a “simultaneous optimism and pessimism regarding human possibilities.”

Inger Brodey, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina and frequent JASNA speaker, synthesizes a truly interdisciplinary wealth of materials for this entry in *Routledge’s Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory* series: a range of eighteenth-century novels, theories of language, works on garden design (practical and theoretical), moral philosophy, texts on rhetoric, elocution, and acting—not only in English but also French and German. *Ruined by Design*, winner of the 2009 SAMLA Studies Award, is remarkable for the breadth and depth of its analysis as well as for the clarity and precision of its language.

The argumentative trajectory of *Ruined by Design* enacts the philosophical goals of the culture of sensibility and the failures consequent on its philosophical insecurities. Chapter One, “Redeeming Ruin,” ties the mania for ruin to an anti-Hobbesian attempt to revise *Genesis*, celebrating innate goodness and natural and human irregularities (mountains, the passions). “The Anatomy of Follies,” the second chapter, focuses on the similar strategies of follies and novels: architects disguised their creations as discoveries, their artistry with apparent ruination by time; novelists (here exemplified through Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* and Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*) masked narrative ordering with the appearance of spontaneity and a narrative method designed to conceal authorship. Chapter Three, “Reading Ruin,” examines the “disguise and evasion of authority” by the authors of fake ruins and novels as they apparently (even hypocritically) deny the inauthenticities on which their artistry depends; architects thus pose as archeologists who have

discovered ruins, while invented editors, whose discoveries are supposedly accidental, frame the language of the suffering protagonists. The focus shifts in this chapter

to the spectator or reader of ruin, whose emotional response is the didactic goal; but, as Brodey points out, “the authors’ inability to trust” the reader undermines the democratic urges of sensibility, resulting in “a masked tyranny.”

Though it’s too limiting to define *Ruined by Design* as a book that focuses on or even culminates in a discussion of Jane Austen, certainly its language is evocative, a function both of Austen’s inheritance of the traditions of sensibility and of the perfectly calibrated language Inger Brodey employs. The book’s final chapter, “Constructing Human Ruin,” offers an inspired reading of *Sense and Sensibility*, focusing on “the picturesque, ironic element to the structure of the novel” and the multiple layers of representation, clearly placing both Marianne and Elinor within the tradition of sensibility’s rhetoric of ruin, suggesting Austen’s “chastening” of sensibility through “the new heroism of daily life.”

In her Afterword, “Luxuries of Distress,” Inger Sigrun Brodey reminds us of our contemporary fabrication of ruin (e.g., shabby chic) in pursuit of authenticity. This book poses a challenge to readers: to recognize “our own complicit artifice” and find authenticity as “a by-product of daily living,” a challenge Jane Austen, of course, anticipates.

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