

The Rubble of Palmyra

Leon Wieseltier, *The Atlantic*, 5th September 2015



If the ruined ruins of Palmyra could speak, they would marvel at our shock. After all, they have been sacked before. In their mute and shattered eloquence, they spoke for centuries not only about the cultures that built them but also about the cultures that destroyed them—about the fragility of civilization itself, even when it is incarnated in stone. No designation of sanctity, by God or by UNESCO, suffices to protect the past. The past is helpless. Instead these ruins, all ruins, have had the effect of lifting the past out of history and into time. They carry the spectator away from facts and toward reveries.

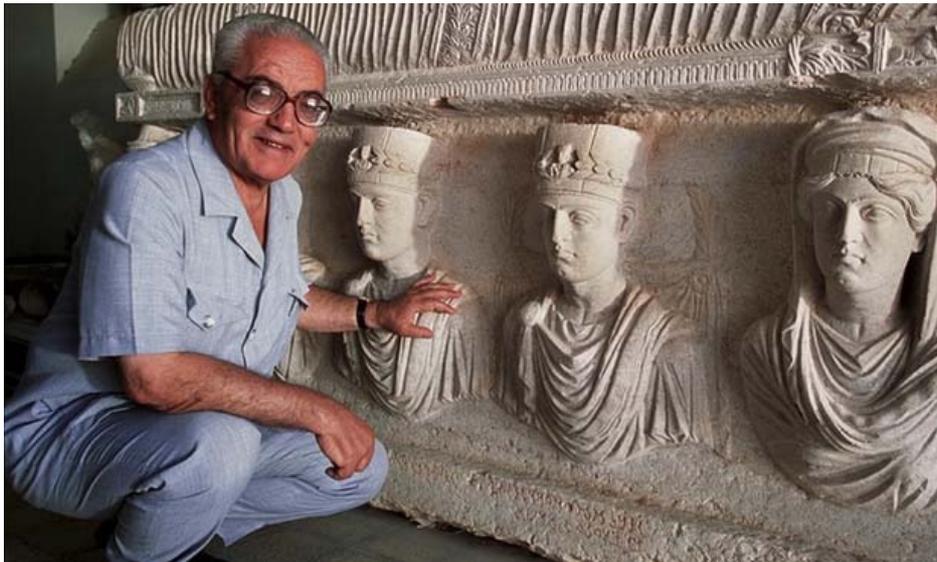
In the 18th century, after the publication in London of *The Ruins of Palmyra*, a pioneering volume of etchings by Robert Wood, who had traveled to the Syrian desert with the rather colorful James Dawkins, a fellow antiquarian and politician, the desolation of Palmyra became a recurring symbol for ephemerality and the vanity of all human endeavors. “It is the natural and common fate of cities,” Wood drily remarked in one of the essays in his book, “to have their memory longer preserved than their ruins.” Wood’s beautiful and meticulous prints served as inspirations for paintings, and it was in response to one of those paintings that Diderot wrote some famous pages in his great *Salons* of 1767: “The ideas ruins evoke in me are grand. Everything comes to nothing, everything perishes, everything passes, only the world remains, only time endures. ... Wherever I cast my glance, the objects surrounding me announce death and compel my resignation to what awaits me. What is my ephemeral existence in comparison with that of a rock being worn down, of a valley being formed, of a forest that’s dying, of these deteriorating masses suspended above my head? I see the marble of tombs crumble into powder and I don’t want to die!”

We call this the Ozymandian feeling, after Shelley’s stinging sonnet of 1818; but we might also call it the Palmyrene feeling, because it was articulated at greater length, and in inferior verse, by Shelley’s friend Thomas Love Peacock 12 years earlier, in a long poem called “Palmyra.” “Time asserts his empire over the ruins. ... This pomp of ruin presses on the heart...” Yet as the world contemplates the destruction of Palmyra, I mean its destruction in our day, on our watch, we must resist the customary romanticism. It induces an aesthetic passivity, which would go too nicely with the West’s political passivity.

Barbarism should provoke more than poetry. Enough spectatorship! There was nothing metaphysical or inevitable about the recent detonation of the Temple of Baalshamin and the Temple of Bel. ISIS was not acting as the agent of time. It was acting as the agent of its savage ambitions. What was done in Palmyra was a crime. The crime was committed in particular circumstances and for particular ideas—in geopolitical and ideological contexts. There is no escape from these contexts into lyrical speculations. This war on a parcel of a universal human patrimony—people still believe in such things, don’t they?—was part of a larger war, an actual war, over territory and power and the meaning of life.

Where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people, Heine rightly warned in one of his plays. At Palmyra the sequence was reversed but the logic was the same. They began by killing people. Khaled al-Assad was not only an expert on Palmyra's antiquities, he was also their protector. For 50 years he served as the city's director of antiquities, presiding over excavations and restorations, assisting scholars from around the world in their study of the rich history of the ancient metropolis. When ISIS captured Palmyra last spring, many of its statues and its smaller objects were taken into hiding to protect them from the marauders. ISIS held Assad for a month and tortured him, in the hope that he would reveal the location of the hidden treasures, which they abhorred for religious reasons but coveted for economic reasons. The holy warriors were also plunderers; they financed their depredations in part by the sale of the idols they despised.

It appears that this hero of archaeology and the history of art told the caliphate's thugs nothing, and in late August they butchered him publicly. A masked swordsman beheaded him. His bleeding body was hung on a traffic light, with a placard calling him an "apostate" and denouncing him for attending "infidel conferences." His severed, still-bespectacled head was displayed on the ground beneath his corpse. He was 82. By all accounts Khaled al-Assad was a good Muslim, and also a supporter of Bashar al-Assad. But in the practice of his calling he was an exemplary humanist, in a terrifying land where humanism is apostasy and apostasy is death. He did not perish for a political ideal; he perished for a cultural ideal. He was a martyr for the ideal of civilization.



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The religious zealots who blew up Palmyra no doubt knew little or nothing of its past, so they could not have recognized the irony of their vandalism; and anyway irony has no place in their hideously absolutist worldview. The irony is that they destroyed the remains of a city that was, in its extraordinary social and cultural diversity, truly the antithesis of everything they believe.

Palmyra, in its heyday during the first three centuries of the Common Era, was one of the ancient capitals of what scholars call syncretism and the rest of us call pluralism. It was a Middle Eastern destination on the Silk Road, a caravan city raised on an oasis in the Tadmurean desert that was situated on an important trade route. Its architectural and epigraphic remains portray a motley city formed in its character by Rome to the west and Persia to the east; Hellenistic and Central Asian influences mingled with Amorite, Aramaean, and Arab elements. In Palmyra one could find Greek sculpture and Chinese silk.

A recent study describes the extraordinary variety of the "deities of the Palmyrene pantheon": "Bel, Belti, Nebu, Nergal, and Nanai are of Babylonian origin; Balshammin and Belhammon seem to be from Phoenicia; Ishtar and Atargatis are Aramaean; Shadrafa and Elqonera are probably Canaanite; and Arab deities include Shamash, Allat, Abgal, Manawat, and a host of others." The oasis was an oasis of differences. When one reads this catalog of coexisting divinities, one is reminded of the old Enlightenment argument, made against the exclusivist and bellicose tendencies of the monotheistic faiths, about the innate tolerance of a polytheistic universe. Where there is one God, there is one way. Where there are many gods, there are many ways. In Palmyra there were many gods and many ways. The Palmyrene spirit is precisely what theocrats seek to extirpate. In the West, we are all, perfectly or imperfectly, Palmyrenes.

The sign that was affixed to Khaled al-Assad's mutilated body laconically accused him of being "the director of idolatry" at Palmyra. The motivation for his murder, as for all of ISIS's murders, could not be clearer. ISIS is the most recent reminder of what can occur when power falls into the hands of a certain kind of religious believer and a certain kind of religious belief. It is an extreme example, to be sure; but it is not a lone example. There are many forms of religious thought and religious practice for which the atrocities of ISIS are anathema, but there is nothing anachronistic, alas, about the religious wars of this era. Anachronism is a consoling illusion: All our moral and technological progress does not make the persisting evils of our time any less real, and religious violence is sickeningly prominent among those evils. Indeed, the progress is what provokes them. ISIS

is not an eighth-century caliphate, it is a 21st-century caliphate—more evidence against the inclination to regard the 21st century as a millennium.



The Temple of Bel in 2010, before its destruction at the hands of ISIS (Sandra Auger / Reuters)

In recent years attempts have been made, by Karen Armstrong and others, to absolve religion of its association with violence, or to extenuate it. It would be preferable, not least for religion, if those darker dimensions of faith were more honestly faced. The certainty that God is on your side sometimes makes misdeeds easier, and not harder, to commit. I have been thinking such discomfiting thoughts in synagogue in recent months, where we have been reading Moses's long valedictory address to the Israelites on the banks of the Jordan, in which he enjoins them again and again, with tedious and panicked regularity, to destroy all the idols of Canaan when they enter the land. The commandment to destroy the idols was accompanied by the commandment to destroy the idolaters. This is holy and revolting stuff.

In Palmyra the world saw what the smashing of the idols looks like, as it did years ago at Bamiyan, where the Taliban smashed the great Buddhas. It is not an edifying sight, at least not for people who believe in freedom and the benedictions of diversity. It is the duty of such people to defend idolatry, not theologically but politically. Idols, after all, are just other peoples' gods. And why fear a false god, especially if practices ordained by a false god do not differ from practices ordained by a true god? The Israelites were so aghast at the sacrifice of children in the cults of Canaan that they set out to kill Canaanite children. The catastrophe at Palmyra makes one want to fall to one's knees and thank God, if one has God, for the miracle of secularization. It is a man-made miracle, and one of the greatest services ever rendered to religion.

Is there an obligation to the future to protect the past? Surely this is one of the essential concepts of civilization. There have been religious formulations of this concept: A learned friend has pointed out to me that the Koran instructs its readers to contemplate the ruins of ancient cities, whose fate it attributes to their corrupt refusal to recognize God. The fall of pre-Islamic cultures is adduced to vouch for the truth of Islam. (Christianity made a similar triumphalist claim about the lowly condition of the Jews in exile.)

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But there are different reasons for admiring ruins. We need not dwell on them only to vindicate ourselves. We can dwell on them also to vindicate a notion of humanity. We preserve them to illustrate not divine purposes but human purposes. They are proof of the astonishing multiplicity of answers to life's questions that have been created by our tirelessly self-interpreting kind. We restore them and we display them as a cosmopolitan way of regarding particularities, as an expression of our humane respect for the resourcefulness of the spirit over time. We imbue them with meanings that their makers could not have grasped, except perhaps in places such as Palmyra. Where others saw truth, we see beauty—but the beauty is not merely formal. What a spiritual accomplishment it is, to cherish—and in the case of Khaled al-Assad, to die for—the vestiges of a faith in which one does not believe.

But whose responsibility is it to protect this common heritage? Is it America's? Not ours; no, sir. America is not the keeper of other people's antiquities. America is not the keeper of other people's liberties. America is not the keeper of other people's rights. America is not the keeper of other people's borders. Not after that last war; no, sir. We are the keepers only of ourselves, and of our president's "legacy." We practice a doctrine of strategic detachment and wrap ourselves in rectitude about it. To the persecuted of the world, to the dissidents, to the refugees, to the raped and the enslaved, to the victims of chemical weapons in a country where the United States was supposed to have confiscated all the chemical weapons, America says *saue qui peut*.



An image distributed by ISIS on social media with the caption, "The moment of the explosion of the Baal Shamin pagan temple in the city of Tadmur." (Reuters)

America is no longer moved by the moral imperative of support and rescue, even when, as in Syria, it is plainly in its strategic interest. (I know, we rescued the Yazidis.) The 71 immigrants who were found dead in a truck on a Hungarian road, the corpse of a little boy that washed up on a Turkish beach, the hundreds of thousands of desperate people (out of 4 million) now making their way to Europe—these friendless people were killed or exiled in part by the Western refusal to face the horrors of Syria four years ago. All this was predicted. What did we think would happen if we did nothing?

Hold on. Indignation is getting the better of me. America did do something. We trained 54 Syrian soldiers for the "New Syrian Force," nearly half of whom were killed or captured as soon as they went to work. We are running more than 350 Twitter accounts at the Department of State, which, according to the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, are "aggregating, curating, and amplifying existing content." We are flying drones to assassinate villains who are immediately replaced. In sum, it is springtime for ISIS. We present no serious obstacles and offer no significant impediments. We deplore and we respond trivially. We act, but not decisively. This is what the world looks like when the United States has abandoned its faith in its power and its duty to do good. For whom are we any longer a source of hope? The rubble of Palmyra is a melancholy emblem of the rubble of American foreign policy.

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