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Tracking Down Ruins: Anita Desai and the Ethics of Postcolonial Writing

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Tracking Down Ruins: Anita Desai and the Ethics of Postcolonial Writing

“The Museum of Final Journeys” is the opening novella of Anita Desai’s collection of short fiction, *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011). The story is about an enigmatic art collection left in a state of ruin and dereliction in an unnamed province of postcolonial India. Yet, a profound meditation on the ethical role of the writer in transmitting the past lies behind the literary representation of ruins. Indeed, Desai’s text is an imaginative adaptation of the story of a nineteenth-century Italian aristocrat, Prince Bardi of Bourbon, and his legendary artistic collection, which today is kept in the Oriental Art Museum in Venice. By referring to Bardi’s story in transfigured form, Anita Desai addresses the potential of literary works to take care of the past, bringing it into the present and preserving it from destruction and forgetfulness. Desai’s imagery of ruins provides a suggestive exploration of the ethics of postcolonial writing as form of cultural transmission.

Keywords: Anita Desai, ruins, postcolonial India, nineteenth-century Italy, ethics of writing, Oriental Art Museum

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3 Ruins hold histories but are less than the sum of the sensibilities of people who live in
4 them. Instead we might turn to ruins as epicenters of renewed claims, as history in a
5 spirited voice, as sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected
6 political projects. (Stoler 2008, 198)
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13 In a passage of *Museum Memories* (1999), Didier Maleuvre proposes some important
14 reflections on the relationship between the museum and the ruin, drawing on a painting from
15 the eighteenth century, Hubert Robert's *Imaginary View of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre*
16 *in Ruins* (1796). The painting attracts Maleuvre's attention because it represents a
17 contradiction. At a time in which the museum as an institution was a novelty in Europe – the
18 Louvre opened as public museum in 1793 – Robert depicted the museum in ruins, as if the
19 extremely new had merged with the vanishing. Yet, the paradox is only apparent. Indeed, the
20 institution of the museum and the ruin are deeply linked, as Maleuvre remarks:
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25 The ruin is not solely an appearance in history. It is history sculpting its own appearance in
26 a concrete form. The ruin is carved by the historical distance through which the building
27 had to travel on its journey to the present. ... The painting *Imaginary View of the Grande*
28 *Galerie of the Louvre in Ruins* creates a historical disjunction between the present of the
29 Galerie and its ruined image. We feel art reaches us through great historical distances ...
30 The Louvre becomes a ruin as soon as it becomes a museum because all museums are
31 essentially tied to the dialectic of ruins. (85)
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35 Maleuvre's connection between the museum and "the dialectic of ruins" is very suggestive.
36 Museums and ruins are modes of preservation enabling the survival of the past within the
37 present. And yet, both the museum and the ruin bear the marks of the travels and the temporal
38 distances traversed by the objects that have reached the present. In the act of cultural
39 transmission, museums and ruins make remoteness visible in the traces of the past that they
40 bring into the present.
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43 In a later passage of his book, Maleuvre further explores the topic by stressing a
44 substantial difference between ruin and museum. Indeed, if it is true that ruins carry "the
45 image of the destruction that the past necessarily suffers on its way to the present" (273), they
46 also incorporate the continuity of history, keeping track of their own destruction "in a manner
47 consistent with the progress of time" (277). Ruins tend to reconcile history and nature by
48 merging with their setting. As Walter Benjamin famously remarked in his reflections on the
49 ruin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, "in this guise history does not assume the form
50 of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay" (Benjamin 1998, 178).
51 Irresistible decay is not just decline: it is also continuation, because the process of destruction
52 that ruins make visible is consistent with the natural passing of time. For this reason, in
53 bearing witness to the transient and the passing, ruins can also suggest permanence and
54 endurance. In contrast with the ruin, Maleuvre observes, the museum "marks an age of
55 dislocations" (Maleuvre 1999, 277). In the art collection, fragments do not merge in a natural
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3 setting determined by the course of time, but are detached from their location through the
4 space of the exhibition. Objects are placed in an absolute present that defies historical
5 continuity, so that “in the collection, history is pure destruction” (277). Maleuvre observes:
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8 Whereas the ruin merged with its setting, the fragments of a collection are not a testimony
9 of how things stood but, conversely, of how things have been ruthlessly distanced from
10 their natural setting. In the process of being translocated, the ruin loses its roots in nature.
11 (276)
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14 Unlike the ruin, the museum dislocates objects from their natural bedrock, placing them in
15 the artificial frame of the gallery display. The main difference between ruin and museum is
16 that the ruin links decay to survival – “by definition it survives,” Brian Dillon writes, “the
17 ruin is a fragment with a future; it will live on after us” (Dillon 2011, 11) – whereas the
18 museum is pure displacement: the display tears objects away from the living progression of
19 time. From this point of view, the representation of a museum in ruins does not reveal so
20 much the perishable nature of the collected items or the outdated status of the museum as an
21 institution. Rather, the image of a ruined museum can have the opposite effect: it returns the
22 displacement of the art gallery to the natural and unbroken course of time proper to the ruin.
23 The ruined museum places history and nature together again, ensuring the continuation of life
24 alongside the trace of decay.
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28 A novella published by Anglophone Indian writer Anita Desai as opening story of her
29 volume *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011) seems to connect very closely with the dialectics
30 of ruin analysed by Maleuvre. Indeed, Desai’s story deals with a ruined art collection set, not
31 in the European past, but in postcolonial India. The novella is titled “The Museum of Final
32 Journeys.” In this short text, Anita Desai adopts the figure of the ruined museum in order to
33 offer a profound meditation on the act of writing and the relationship between literature and
34 history. The ruin becomes the emblem of the power of literary expression as a form of
35 cultural and historical transmission. Indeed, the story has been inspired by a not widely
36 known episode of nineteenth-century history: the gathering of one of the biggest collections
37 of Oriental art in Europe, which has been partly preserved and is today exhibited in the
38 Museum of Oriental Art of Venice, now open to the public on the third floor of Ca’ Pesaro in
39 the borough of San Polo. The collection was put together at the end of the nineteenth century
40 by Prince Henri of Bourbon-Parma, Count of Bardi, an Italian aristocrat with a passion for
41 travelling and the Orient. Desai’s story adopts the image of a ruined collection to translate the
42 story of the Oriental Art Museum into a postcolonial context.
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45 The poetics of adaptation proposed by Anita Desai presents the image of the ruin as
46 central figurative element and reflection on the act of literary creation. Through the remaking
47 of a nineteenth-century art collection as a ruin, Desai seems to suggest a way of taking care of
48 the past that overcomes what Maleuvre calls the “dislocations” proper to the museum. In
49 Desai’s narrative the ruined museum elicits an ambivalent act of love and care, what John
50 Brinckerhoff Jackson called an “incentive for restoration” (Jackson 1980). Indeed, ruined
51 objects can “prompt desire for the recovery of something lost from a previous time” (Leoshko
52 and Kaimal 2011, 661). And yet, Leoshko and Kaimal note, “such acts of renewal can also be
53 troubling, as re-enactments and restorations may lessen the actual presence of the past and
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3 cloak important discontinuities with that past” (661). Retrieval and transmission should not
4 result in the erasure of difference or denial of historical change. The ethical aspect explored
5 in “The Museum of Final Journeys” has to do with the ability of literary creation to respond
6 to the ethical demand of conserving heritage and yet tracking down distances and differences.
7 The central question addressed by Anita Desai can be formulated with the following
8 question: how to recover something from the past but at the same time prevent it from
9 becoming spectacle or commodity, and disavowal of the passing of time? The figure of the
10 ruin is able to epitomise this ethical task by suggesting at the same time decay and survival,
11 distance and closeness, endurance and transience.

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14 In “The Museum of Final Journeys,” Anita Desai provides a literary exploration, not of
15 mere ruins, but of the process of ruination, which has been addressed by historian and
16 anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler. Instead of focusing on the static image of the ruin as
17 damaged building or monument – the ruin as dead relic from the past – the dialectic of ruins
18 allows Desai to examine what Stoler calls the “reappropriations and strategic and active
19 positioning within the politics of the present” (Stoler 2008, 196). Desai’s story engages with
20 the demand that ruins make upon the present and the potentialities that they suggest, the
21 “vital refiguration” of ruined sites instead of their “inert remains” (Stoler 2008, 194). For this
22 reason, Desai’s poetics of ruin can be understood in terms of reviving the experience of time
23 within the literary text rather than a melancholic, retrospective gaze on dead remains of a
24 vanished past. After introducing plot, landscapes and characters of Desai’s novella, my
25 reflections will make reference to nineteenth-century history, especially the life of Prince
26 Henri Bardi of Bourbon, the Italian aristocrat whose legendary undertaking has been the
27 inspiration of Desai’s work. In the conclusion, I will build on Desai’s narration in order to
28 raise the problem of the ethics of postcolonial writing that the novella and its historical
29 references can raise. In the figure of the ruined museum, Desai’s narrative seems to redefine
30 the ethical aspect of literature as act of preservation and meditation on time as the living
31 matter of literary writing.

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1. Amazement and Abandonment: The Ruins of Writing

The narrator of “The Museum of Final Journeys” is a civil servant who muses over his first
job experience, many years before, in a remote province of postcolonial India. The place
where the story is set is not identified. Nor does the story provide any exact indication as
regards the time of the events narrated. The plot is wrapped in an atmosphere of uncertainty.
The geographical and historical coordinates are minimal: the reader knows that the story is
set in India, and that the time should be after Independence. Indeed, at the beginning the
narrator is surprised by a form of salute unheard since the times of the Raj. Vaguely set in
postcolonial India, the story seems to be minimal also as regards the plot or events that the
reader can expect: the place is described as marginal and uneventful, the duties of the civil
servant common and prosaic. The narrator tells the reader about the boredom and isolation of
the place, the disputes over properties that are cause of main argument and concern in an
otherwise quiet, provincial town. The story does not promise adventure or the extraordinary
and yet, an insistent descriptive element takes over the very unfolding of the plot. Indeed, the

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3 novella proposes, since the very start, an intense description of ruins. Decaying objects,
4 buildings and places pervade the text, gaining an increasingly powerful presence within the
5 narrative. Desai writes in a passage of her fiction:
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8 The whole town appeared a shambles. It must have had its days of prosperity in the past
9 when the jute that grew thick and strong in the surrounding fields gave rise to a flourishing
10 business, but that was now overtaken by chemical fibres, plastics and polyesters. Their
11 products – the bags, washing lines, buckets and basins that hung from shopfronts – littered
12 the dusty streets where their strident colours soon faded. (Desai 2011, 8)
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16 The urban landscape is filled by crumbling buildings “embarked on that inexorable process”
17 (8) of decay, collapse and ruination. Houses are inhabited till they fall apart. Desai describes
18 the setting as a remote, isolated place pervaded by a sense of abandonment. Past richness,
19 prosperity and an economy based on local products are now replaced by the poverty and
20 marginality induced by the power of a globalised economic system. The town “appeared a
21 shambles” and plastic objects litter the streets of the village with their fading colours.
22 Everything is in a state of deterioration. In spite of the local residents’ obsession with
23 property rights, no one seems to really care about renovating the buildings or even repairing
24 their collapsing structures.
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27 The feeling of neglect and impoverishment is soon displaced, in the reading of the story,
28 by the discovery of unusual objects, very unfitting in a desolated place of crumbling
29 buildings and streets littered with plastics and polyesters. The narrator’s attention is caught by
30 the appearance of an unfamiliar object in the house of a tea-estate manager in the district, a
31 small decorative object about which the owner is unable to provide information. The object
32 appears to be of Chinese provenance; it does not seem to be part of the local handicraft and
33 stands out of the poverty and anonymity of the place. The encounter with this item, a sort of
34 beautifully crafted ornament, elicits the curiosity of the narrator who, however, soon drops
35 his interest for the object and goes back to his uneventful routine. The appearance of this
36 ornament seems to find an explanation with the appearance of an old man at the narrator’s
37 residence, the aging custodian of the household of a local family of rich landowners, who
38 arranges a meeting with the narrator. The custodian eventually tells the story of the household
39 and the collection of rare and exotic objects preserved in the mansion of the family. After
40 meeting with the old man, the narrator undertakes a visit to the mysterious museum, upon
41 invitation of the custodian. Anita Desai describes the appearance of the palace in a very
42 striking way. The story continues:
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49 Having traversed the length of the field we came to what had to be “the palace” I had
50 come to see. What did I expect? There was a broad flight of stairs with grass growing
51 between the flagstones, and beyond it the mournful remains of what I had been assured
52 was once the most substantial house in the district. At first sight I could make out no
53 architectural features in the blackened, crumbling ruin. Only time, and dissolution. (24)
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57 The palace where the art collection is kept is presented as a ruin. The theme of ruination,
58 which was introduced as key descriptive character of the region, with its impoverished
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3 economy and decaying town, now captures the entire narrative with the concrete appearance
4 of the museum. The story can be read as the representation of the decay of a once rich and
5 flourishing culture. Anita Desai's story introduces the figure of ruination as abandoned
6 inheritance connecting the museum and the landscape, the art collection and the life-
7 conditions of the inhabitants of the region. The climax of the novella is reached with a very
8 poetic description of the collection, which is presented as an eerie but amazing accumulation
9 of objects from all over Asia. The collection includes artefacts of immense value, yet is kept
10 in a condition of neglect. Desai provides a clear description of the state of the display. The
11 items are very precious and yet "had not been touched in ages by hand" (29), and behind
12 splendid colours and decorations, the collection seems to be a ruin itself, a hoard of
13 crumbling objects on the verge of disintegration after years of abandonment. The objects
14 evoke a past world of aristocratic mundane life, a vanished reality enclosed in the damaged
15 articles, which provide a sheer contrast, as the narrative clarifies, with the poverty and
16 abandonment of the region.

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21 Desai's story is built, as it emerges from the passage, on the juxtaposition between past
22 splendour and contemporary misery, amazement and abandonment, vanished richness and
23 enduring poverty. The narrator continues his visit to the household, admiring endless
24 chambers filled with all sorts of riches and relics. The visit reaches an end with the discovery
25 of a last treasure preserved in the palace. After guiding the narrator through the chambers of
26 the palace, the clerk leads him into an external courtyard, where a surprise lies in waiting: the
27 last item of the collection is, indeed, a living elephant. The story ends with the plea of the
28 custodian, who asks the narrator to help him take care of the collection and, in particular, the
29 undernourished, dying elephant that survives in the backyard of the aristocratic household.
30 He reveals that he is not able to provide for it any longer and demands an intervention: the
31 narrator is faced with the demand of an abandoned inheritance whose legitimate owners have
32 disappeared. Yet, the narrator ends his story abruptly without letting the reader know what
33 happened eventually to the custodian, the household and the collection.

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38 "The Museum of Final Journeys" could be read, according to the paraphrase of the plot
39 provided so far, as a tale of ruination, loss and abandonment. The discovery of a neglected art
40 collection ends up being forgotten and the curator left alone in the difficult task of taking care
41 of it. The encounter with the ruined museum raises a problem that concerns the narrator, as
42 witness of the decay of the regional heritage, but also the reader, who is being told about the
43 story of the ruin. Anita Desai's ruins seem to reveal a plea, a demand: can the witnesses
44 prevent the destruction and abandonment of this ruined inheritance? Does the recipient of the
45 story have any responsibility in transmitting it and keeping it alive? Yet, Desai's novella
46 includes a second story within it, which is, crucially, the story of the collection itself. The
47 ruin is not just a material appearance of objects: stories may be ruins as well, and Desai's
48 story can be seen as a kind of poetic ruin, a meditation on the protective and destructive
49 power of time through the art of fiction.
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2. Returns and Recollections: The Ethics of Writing

“The Museum of Final Journeys” includes the story of the enigmatic collection. The objects hoarded in the fictional museum were gathered by the son of a wealthy aristocrat who, unwilling to pursue a career in his own country and animated by artistic sensibility and spirit of adventure, decided to spend his life travelling across Asia. During his travels, he kept sending home thousands of objects of inestimable value, rarity and uniqueness. The traveller passed away during his voyages, sending home his last gift, a living elephant. After realising the death of her son, the mother left for Benares, going there to spend the last years of her life. The collection remains, hence, in the hands of the aging custodian, an employee of the family, who has received no testament, indication or instruction whatsoever concerning the rights of inheritance of the collection. All the members of the family have passed away. The collection is left in abeyance, and the custodian is making a demand upon the narrator: he asks the narrator to take responsibility for it. The ethical dimension of Desai’s story rests with this demand: will the narrator be able to take care of this collection, to assume responsibility for the inheritance left by someone else without testament or instruction, without property rights or rules of transmission?

The story seems to address the theme of a “gap between past and future,” which has been explored by Hannah Arendt in the extraordinary preface to her book *Between Past and Future*. Arendt’s reflections are inspired by an issue that is also at the heart of Desai’s fiction. Arendt referred to the lost treasure of the European Resistance against fascism, reckoning with a renowned aphorism by poet René Char, who had joined the Resistance and yet pointed out that “our inheritance was left to us by no testament,” as Arendt indicates (3). The problem raised by Arendt concerns the transmission of the past in the absence of any “tradition,” that is, any recognisable frame of reference for handing the past down to future generations. This condition, in Arendt’s view, marked the very essence of modernity and especially post-War European culture. Arendt writes:

Without testament or, to resolve the metaphor, without tradition – which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is – there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future. (5)

In Desai’s story, the same problem is posed by the custodian, who tells the narrator about the passing on of the last members of the aristocratic family, mother and son, and the fact that no will was left. Desai narrates that the mother of the mysterious traveller did not leave any wish. The novella continues:

“Sir,” the unhappy man confessed, “she left us with no instructions.” ... I began to see only too well the tangle of legal problems ahead. Not at all what I had imagined, although I should have done so. I felt let down by the realisation that it all came down to practicalities, legal and administrative. ... while others dreamt dreams and lived lives of imagination and adventure, my role was only to take care of the mess left by them. (22)

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3 Interestingly, the “tangle of legal problems” concerning the property rights of the collection
4 discourages the narrator, who refuses to take care of it. The story seems to suggest that in the
5 absence of instructions, treasures surviving from the past are at risk of being simply forsaken.
6 The representation of the ruined collection in “The Museum of Final Journeys” can be
7 grasped as a reflection on the “gap between past and future” indicated by Arendt: a situation
8 of uncertain transmission and survival, whereby the recipient of past inheritances does not
9 have clear instructions about how to transmit them. In the gap between past and future, the
10 responsibility of the inheritor is endowed with an ethical imperative. A way must be found
11 for transmitting the past; responsibility has to be assumed, precisely because there is no
12 tradition, no instruction on how to pass it on. The problem addressed by Desai, however, is
13 not only a general ethical question. A precise historical reference can be found to explain the
14 point of the novella.
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18 In a recent interview, Anita Desai revealed that the inspiration for the novella has been
19 taken from a real story, suggested to her during a visit to Venice, where she had the
20 opportunity to visit the Museum of Oriental Art (Menozzi 2015). The ruins of Desai’s novella
21 suggest that her fiction is able to transmit a concrete historical reference. In an abysmal
22 movement, the story itself is doing what the fictional narrator would be required to do: the
23 story is being passed on. Anita Desai complements the narrative of an abandoned museum
24 with a meditation on the act of writing, its power of transmission and transfiguration, which
25 is epitomised by the image of the ruin.
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28 The ethical demand does not merely concern the narrator of the story and the fictional
29 museum represented in it. This ethical demand, this responsibility for transmitting
30 inheritances left without testament or rules of transmission, is what animates the ethical and
31 historical dimension of Desai’s novella. Indeed, Desai’s narrative has been inspired by the
32 real story of the objects included in the Museum of Oriental Art in Venice. This collection
33 can be visited today on the third floor of Ca’ Pesaro, one of the most important museums in
34 Venice. It was originally created through the travels of Henri of Bourbon, Prince of Bardi, a
35 nineteenth-century Italian aristocrat. Prince Henri is today remembered for the travel around
36 the world that he commenced in 1887 from North Italy, through the Mediterranean, the Red
37 Sea, Asia, the Pacific and North America before returning to Venice in 1889.
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40 Henri’s voyages testify, as Cecilia Vascotto and Fiorella Spadavecchia (2000) have
41 shown, to a new era in which East and West increasingly became part of a global system of
42 communication, transport, commerce and exchange. Henri’s travels can be located within the
43 sphere of exhibition and circulation across Asia and Europe underlying the formation of a
44 peripheral Orientalism in Italy (Vicente 2012). Henri undertook his travels with a few people,
45 among them his second wife Adelgonda di Braganza, Duchess of Guimaraes, and his friend,
46 count Zileri dal Verme, who kept a log of the journey. Prince Henri was especially attracted
47 by objects concerning the life of the nobles and courts of Asia, such as armours, weapons,
48 carpets, scrolls, pottery and ceramics, which he purchased in great quantity. Throughout his
49 travels he kept acquiring volumes of such objects, which were eventually sent back home and
50 stored in the rooms of Henri’s Venetian residence, Palace Vendramin Calergi, which hosted
51 Richard Wagner during the last period of his life and is today a casino (Luxoro 1957).
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55 Since Henri’s death, the collection has experienced a turbulent history: after the refusal of
56 the council of Venice to take care of it, the collection was seized as enemy property during
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3 the first World War, a large amount of items sold or lost, and then placed in another location
4 in Italy before being returned to Venice in the 1920s, when the Museum of Oriental Art was
5 inaugurated in the Ca' Pesaro palace. Since then, the collection has not received great
6 attention. Some of the objects have remained in a state of neglect for decades and have been
7 irreparably damaged. More recently, projects have been funded for the restoration of the
8 items, though the museum still seems to occupy a somehow marginal place in Venice and,
9 still in September 2014, the exhibition was introduced by an explanatory panel significantly
10 titled "Display and Decay." One of the rooms of the museum has not been refurbished since
11 its first arrangement by Nino Barbantini in 1925 and there only exists one book devoted to
12 the collection, Fiorella Spadavecchia's *Il Museo d'Arte Orientale di Venezia*, published in
13 2007, which can be found in some Italian libraries but is irremediably out-of-print.

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17 Despite neglect and decay, the Museum of Oriental Art is an extremely valuable testimony
18 to Italian Orientalism in the nineteenth century. The collection includes about 20.000 items
19 from the Asian locations visited by Prince Henri during his travels: China, Japan, Indonesia,
20 Malaysia, Hong Kong and Myanmar. The focus of the collection is the display of objects
21 from the Edo period in Japan, a place which deeply fascinated Prince Henri and where he
22 purchased with great eagerness all sorts of artisanal items. Isao Kumakura and Josef Kreiner
23 provide a useful overview of the Japanese items, listing various kinds of objects and the
24 vicissitudes of Bardi's legacy, including the different attempts at cataloguing made
25 throughout the twentieth century. They list the kinds of objects included in the collection,
26 which comprises lacquer ware, porcelains, Satsuma ware, objects of bronze, iron, silver,
27 ivory, textiles, armours, religious objects, screens, kimonos, watercolours, illustrated books
28 and woodblock prints. As Kumakura and Kreiner point out, the collection items "represent
29 the taste and imagination of Count Bourbon Bardi as a member of the European high
30 aristocracy" (657). They reveal Prince Henri's specific interest in the life of the Asian
31 aristocracy rather than a general ethnographic impulse to document everyday life in Asia. The
32 rooms of the museum include a video-installation explaining the methods adopted for the
33 conservation of the objects, some of which are made with highly perishable materials. The
34 collection testifies to the curiosity of a nineteenth-century traveller, a link connecting Asia
35 and Europe through an exchange of objects within an aristocratic global culture of fashion.

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41 A salient feature of the story of the Bardi's collection is the turbulent vicissitudes that
42 characterised it after Prince Henri's death. The collection seems to have suffered from a lack
43 of interest and custodianship, to the extent that still today it occupies a floor of what is mainly
44 renowned for being a museum of Modern Art, Ca' Pesaro. Since the 1980s plans have been
45 made, but never realised, for the relocation of the collection in a more appropriate location.
46 The story of Henri Bardi's collection is not only the tale of an aristocrat hoarding objects
47 during his travels to Asia, inspired by the European imagination of the Orient. The story is
48 also about the vicissitudes of heritage left to its own destiny, entangled in contested property
49 rights, the looting of wars, the splitting and selling of properties left without instructions or
50 testaments. The remaking of the history of the collection through the image of a ruined
51 museum in Desai's story could point to the demise of the museum as an institution. As Mieke
52 Bal remarks, in an essay on the American Museum of Natural History in New York:
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3 Any museum of this size and ambition is today saddled with a double status; it is
4 necessarily also a museum of the museum, a preserve not for endangered species but for
5 an endangered self, a “metamuseum”: the museal preservation of a project ruthlessly dated
6 and belonging to an age long gone whose ideological goals have been subjected to
7 extensive critique. (Bal 1992, 560)
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10 Thus, Bal mentions a double function of the museum: on the one hand, the museum is
11 endowed with an “enduring cognitive educational vocation (its object-function),” on the other
12 hand, the museum is a “display of its own status and history (its meta-function)” (Bal 562).
13 Any kind of engagement with the double function of the museum in postcolonial contexts
14 should account for its origins in the “international arena of colonial visual forms and their
15 cosmopolitan circuits of exhibition and display” (Mathur 2007, 9). Museums have been
16 crucial to the establishment of colonial and postcolonial national authorities through the
17 construction of imagined pasts (Guha-Thakurta 2004). Yet, the literary representation of the
18 ruined museum in “The Museum of Final Journeys” goes beyond a simple critique of the
19 museum as historical document of colonial and postcolonial cultural hegemony. Anita
20 Desai’s ruined museum has more to do with transforming the preservation of the past into
21 forms of adaptation and reviving that point to life in the present. Desai’s story is greatly
22 concerned with the interplay between the conservation of material heritage – or the object-
23 function of the museum – and the problem of how heritage should be transmitted, who should
24 be entitled to transmit it, and the implications of being appointed as curator. The function of
25 transmission, however, is not just about the museum and the tangible objects that need to be
26 preserved. Transmitting has also to do with the ethical quest of contemporary generations,
27 our relation to the past and the ability of literature to mediate between past and present. The
28 fictional retelling of Prince Henri’s story inspires a profound meditation on literature in
29 relation the possibility of preserving past inheritances left without testament or instructions.
30 Indeed, the very conclusion of the novella includes a brief monologue of the narrator, who
31 takes his readers back to the present moment of storytelling, moving from narrated time to the
32 time of the narration.
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40 The story concludes with a self-questioning of the narrator that deeply affects the meaning
41 of the story by introducing a reference to literature itself. The narrator of Desai’s story
42 concludes:
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45 In fact, by now I am not even sure the museum existed, or the man who created it or his
46 mother who received it or the keeper who kept it. Or if it was a mirage I saw or a book I
47 once read and only vaguely remembered, with none of the solidity, the actuality of objects
48 and men and beasts. (40)
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51 This meditation addresses the crucial transition from the world of solid objects to the less
52 solid world of the imagination, of mirages and books. It is in this passage that the ruin
53 assumes an ethical dimension. Through this last passage, the re-narration of a nineteenth-
54 century traveller’s collection becomes a reflection on the role of literature in relation to
55 history. The ending of the novella makes clear that Anita Desai is not aiming at simply re-
56 telling the story of Prince Henri. The conclusion places the very existence of the museum into
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3 question, in a movement that has strong repercussions on the relation between the ruins
4 represented in the story and the text itself. There is a shift from the act of literary adaptation
5 to a poetic *mise-en-abyme* of the ethical role of the writer and the reader. In an intriguing act
6 of mirroring, the conclusion presents the story itself as heritage that is making a request upon
7 the reader: how should the reader approach and transmit the story? Can fiction be
8 reconnected to living history, to the “actuality of objects and men and beasts,” as Anita Desai
9 writes in her prose? The literary representation of the ruin formulates an ethical imperative.
10 The conclusion of the novella mentions a “book I once read and only vaguely remembered,”
11 which can be understood as the text itself, “The Museum of Final Journeys.”

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14 The conclusion of Desai’s narrative places the narrator in the position of the reader, the
15 one who receives the story from Anita Desai. Through the passage from ruin to narrative,
16 from the literal description of the museum to the figurative exploration of the act of writing,
17 Anita Desai reframes the ethical question as a concern with the status of literature in its
18 fragile and transient relation to living history. The passage from ruin to text seems to
19 transform literature into the site of an ethics of cultural transmission. Literary creation
20 addresses those situations in which the gap between past and future seems to prevent passing
21 on inheritances. Yet, the figure of the ruin suggests that, through literature, continuity and
22 preservation are possible. The story shows that the ethical dimension of literature should be
23 aimed at constructing relationships of love and care precisely where these relationships are
24 more difficult, where the past is in ruins, differences seem insuperable, and no instructions
25 are left to ensure continuity. Desai’s representation of a ruined museum, indeed, does not
26 point to a melancholic scene of vanishing and disappearance. Through the imagery of
27 ruination, the real point of the story is the ability to survive, adapt and recuperate: ruins show
28 the continuity of time through decay and dereliction.
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36 **3. Conclusion: Caring for Ruins**

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39 “The Museum of Final Journeys” proposes a pervasive representation of ruins as a way to
40 address the ethical entanglement between literature and history. Instead of reiterating or
41 merely adapting the history of a nineteenth-century traveller, Anita Desai’s narrative
42 meditates upon the ethical demand that history makes on literature. Historical references
43 inhabit fiction as ruins, images of decay and abandonment that the narrator and the reader
44 have to preserve and transmit. The figure of the ruin enables Anita Desai to raise an
45 important question in the study of literature. Instead of treating history as a simple
46 background or a frame of reference, fictional allusions to the history of the Oriental Art
47 Museum in Venice become a discourse on survival and responsibility. Ruins become in
48 Desai’s writing an antidote to the process of “administration of forgetting” described by Anne
49 McClintock as key feature of the contemporary, in its “calculated and often brutal amnesias”
50 by which the present “contrives to erase its own atrocities” (820). To engage with an
51 adaptation of the past through the time of ruins is to emphasise that ruins are not sites of
52 “melancholy or mourning but of radical potential,” as Brian Dillon suggests: “its
53 fragmentary, unfinished nature is an invitation to fulfil the as yet unexplored temporality that
54 it contains” (Dillon 2011, 18).
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3 In the story, the ruin is not simply an object of contemplation or nostalgic feeling, but the
4 site of a deeper involvement, a reflection on the ethical aspect of postcolonial writing. The
5 ruin elicits a response into the reader who, in the ending of the novella, is placed in the same
6 position as the narrator and faced with the responsibility to transmit something that is in
7 danger of being destroyed. History and narrative, in other words, are connected by an ethical
8 quest whereby literature revisits the past in order to reopen its possibilities. The poetics of
9 ruination indicates that the past is in need of being revived through the present, yet the
10 undertaking might be difficult because there are no instructions for transmission, and no
11 legitimate heir who can claim ownership of the past. The past is not a commodity that can be
12 simply sold or purchased. Remembering is a way of acknowledging entanglement in the past
13 so that this entanglement can transform the present; it is the opening up of the present in
14 order that the demands of history are not neglected. For this reason, Desai's ruins can be
15 affiliated to the concept of "authentic ruin" proposed by Andreas Huyssen in opposition to
16 the culture of late capitalism, which is marked by a constant erasure of the traces of temporal
17 difference. Indeed, Desai explores the ethics of the ruin as alternative both to destruction and
18 appropriation, in contrast with both neglect and commodification. As Huyssen writes in his
19 essay on ruins:
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26 Authentic ruins, at least as they existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seem to
27 have no place in late capitalism's culture of commodity and memory. Commodities in
28 general do not age well. They become obsolete and are thrown out or recycled. Buildings
29 are torn down or restored ... The ruin of the twenty-first century is either detritus or
30 restored age. In the latter case, real age has been eliminated by a reverse face lifting,
31 whereby the new is made to look old. (19)
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35 In a contemporary world defined by the culture of "commodity and memory" proper to late
36 capitalism, an ethics of the authentic ruin testifies to the possibility of a way out of the
37 impasse between obsolescence and commodification. The ruin indicates a different mode of
38 dealing with the past, which in Anita Desai's story becomes the ethical work of the literary
39 imagination: a literary history able to avoid becoming commodity or forgetfulness. Beyond
40 "detritus or restored age," as Huyssen remarks, the authentic ruin implies a subtle work of
41 transmission and preservation that does not collapse distances and, at the same time, does not
42 erase the traces of time in a fiction of absolute present. The ruin suggests a way of
43 appreciating the past that is aimed at constructing relationships with histories with which the
44 reader at the beginning felt no attachment or proximity. In spite of the troubled vicissitudes of
45 the collection of Prince Henri, his story has been passed on, eventually, by a narrative that
46 demands that readers do not limit themselves to reading the text. Though there can be no
47 certainty that the museum of Desai's novella really existed, readers are encouraged to make a
48 step further and take responsibility for it, tracking down ruins in their last message of love
49 and survival.
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