

I MET A TRAVELLER FROM AN ANTIQUE LAND

There and back again

Of the making of books there is no end, and much study is a weariness to the flesh

If there is one quotation from Scripture most consistently beloved of the indolent student of theology, it must be the 12th Verse of the 12th Chapter of the Book Ecclesiastes. The Preacher (Qohelet) understood the endlessness of burrowing in pursuit of the treasure of knowledge and the gift of understanding.

According to *'Professor Google'*, the author of Ecclesiastes was likely to have been familiar with examples of Wisdom literature from both Egypt and Mesopotamia. He may also have been influenced by exposure to Greek philosophy. Arguments continue as to the date of composition of Ecclesiastes. The presence of Persian loanwords and 'Aramaisms' suggests a date no earlier than c450_{BCE} while the latest possible date for its composition is evidently 180_{BCE} based upon the fact that the Jewish writer ben Sira quotes from it. Scholars arguing for the origins of Ecclesiastes being within the Persian period (450-330_{BCE}) argue that there is a complete lack of Greek influence in the text. Those arguing for a Hellenistic date (330-180_{BCE}) argue that internal evidence of Greek thought and social setting can be adduced and that the influence of Greek philosophy, particularly Stoicism and Epicureanism, is evident.

But why raise the spectre of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet, Stoicism and Epicureanism? Because this is a journey steeped in literature, religion and antiquity.

I met a traveller from an antique land

As one slips inexorably beyond one's dotage into one's anecdotage, the company of a good book gently eases the passage towards burgeoning senility. I received just such a "good read" as a gift at Christmas in 2021. The book is a classic – a novel, yes, but a novel so well researched and so well written that I found it hard to put down. The writer, Marguerite Yourcenar, spent the best part of 40 years writing, rewriting and polishing her book.

Yourcenar, was a classical scholar of genuine renown. She was born Marguerite de Crayencour – her pen name is an inexact anagram of Crayencour. Her greatest work of 'fiction' - although it is so exquisitely detailed and researched that it might almost be considered non-fiction on account of its air of authenticity - is titled in English 'Memoirs of Hadrian'¹. The Hadrian of the title is the Emperor Hadrian, successor and adopted son of Trajan. The 'novel' is constructed as a 'Memoir' written, as it were, by Hadrian, to be read by his adopted son and heir Marcus Aurelius. It is, ostensibly, a personal reflection written by the emperor as he contemplates his approaching death, and it looks back over the course and motivations of his life.

Everything was proceeding seamlessly as I read my 'Christmas special', until I came to a particular passage, at which point a '**Hobbit Hole**' of seductive proportions yawned beneath me and swallowed me whole. Here on pages 192-3 was **my Bilbo Baggins moment**:

¹ First published as 'Memoires d'Hadrian' 1951, English editions 1954/55/59 Penguin Classics 1986, 2000

MARGUERITE YOURCENAR: *Memoirs of Hadrian* pp 192-3

*'... A new project long occupied me, and has not ceased to do so, namely, the construction of the Odeon, a model library provided with halls for courses and lectures to serve as a centre of Greek culture in Rome. I made it less splendid than the new library at Ephesus, built three or four years before, and gave it less grace and elegance than the library of Athens, but I intend to make this foundation, a close second to, if not the equal of the museum of Alexandria; its further development will rest upon you. **In working upon it I often think of the library established by Plotina in Trajan's Forum with that noble inscription placed by her order over its door: Dispensary to the Soul.'***

That last sentence stopped me in my tracks! I knew, of course, that Marguerite Yourcenar was an extremely learned classical scholar, so I had to take her information seriously. Surely, I thought, the inscription in Greek placed by Archbishop Robinson above the entrance of his library in Armagh – **ΨΥΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΕΙΟΝ – 'The Healing Place of the Soul'** - must be an iteration of the quotation invoked by Yourcenar and claimed as having been placed by Trajan's widow, the Empress Plotina, on the pediment or entablature of the Greek Library of the Bibliotheca Ulpia in Trajan's Forum.

Trajan's Forum – designed by the architect Apollodorus of Damascus and built with the help of sculptors and masons from the Greek speaking eastern parts of the Mediterranean was, perhaps, the greatest and most admired edifice in the imperial city in ancient times.

The Forum was divided into two parts by a great Basilica known as the Basilica Ulpia. To the south of the Basilica lay the huge, colonnaded open **Forum**. To the north, a smaller component, was the **Precinct and Temple of Trajan**, before which stands **Trajan's Column**, flanked to the east by the **'Latin Library'** and to the west by the **'Greek Library'**, jointly known as the **Bibliotheca Ulpia**. Ulpia was Emperor Trajan's family name.

Surely, I speculated, the pediment (or whatever is left of it) of the westerly 'Greek' Library of the Bibliotheca Ulpia must have borne the inscription 'Dispensary (or Healing Place) of the Soul'. Yet I could find no such reference in any of the more readily available sources devoted to descriptions of Trajan's Forum or, indeed, to any inscription at all, other than that placed there, allegedly, by Plotina.

Plotina's inscription, I rationalised, if it truly existed, could have been the source from which Richard Robinson chose the inscription for his library in Armagh. But, if so, how did he come by the information? Had he been on the grand tour? Did he see the inscription among ruins surviving into the second half of the C18th?

The years have not been kind to Trajan's Forum. After at least two earthquakes and 15 centuries of robbing and reusing the ancient masonry, together with a relentless process of urban redevelopment, much has been lost and much remains concealed. If fragments of this particular ancient inscription do survive, they must be housed anonymously elsewhere, in some museum or storage facility. My Hobbit Hole seemed to have reached a dead-end.

"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert."

Chastened, I resorted once more to the collective memory and benign algorithms of

Professor Google, this time not seeking an ancient inscription on stone but any reference I could find to 'The Healing Place of the Soul'. Inevitably, such is the nature of algorithms, the first set of results brought me straight back to the Armagh Public Library, now styled a museum! However, squirreled away on another page, I stumbled into a hitherto unobserved side passage of my burgeoning burrow which signposted me eventually, to **Hecataeus of Abdera** and **Diodorus Siculus**, but by an unlikely and circuitous route.

This new diversion took me first to the State of Rhode Island in the USA, and to the village of Kingston in the town of South Kingstown, Washington County, where the University of Rhode Island is located. I discovered that, in common with the Armagh Public Library, the **Library of the University of Rhode Island** bears the self-same inscription on the inner door of the library entrance as that to be seen in Armagh:



PSYCHES IATREION²

The library website disclosed that the phrase 'the Healing Place of the Soul' was mentioned first by **Hecataeus of Abdera**³, inscribed on the sacred library of the tomb complex of Ozymandias at Thebes in Egypt. The name Ozymandias is best known nowadays as the title of the sonnet of the same name written by Percy Bysshe Shelley and first published in AD1818. In fact, the name Ozymandias was the Greek name and Egyptian Prenomen of the Pharaoh Ramesses II (reigned 1279–1213_{BCE}), derived from a part of his 'throne name' displayed as a Cartouche, *User-maat-re*.

Hecataeus, in turn, is quoted more or less verbatim, by **Diodorus Siculus** (Diodorus of Sicily) in his great work entitled *Library of History*,⁴ By now, the penny was beginning to drop. Was not the young Richard Robinson educated at Westminster School and subsequently at Christ

² Subsequently I discovered that, doubtless among others, the same motto adorns the entrance to the Library of St Gallen in Switzerland, a UNESCO World Heritage site, as well as some of the earliest bookplates affixed to volumes in the Library of the Royal Palace in Stockholm

³ **Hecataeus** of Abdera (Ἑκαταῖος ὁ Ἀβδηρίτης), was a Greek historian and philosopher who flourished in the 4th century BC. According to Diogenes Laërtius he was a student of **Pyrrho**. **Diodorus Siculus** indicates that Hecataeus visited Thebes in the time of Ptolemy I Soter (c. 367_{BCE} – 282_{BCE}) and composed a history of Egypt – the **Aegyptiaca**. Diodorus commented that many Greeks went to and wrote about Egypt in the same period. No complete works of Hecataeus have survived; of the 14 fragments that do, the majority are preserved in the works of Diodorus. The single largest surviving fragment from *Aegyptiaca* is preserved by Diodorus and describes the Ramesseum, the tomb of Ozymandias (Bk i.47-50)

Diodorus's book on Egypt, besides accounts of education, medicine, and animal worship, includes the inscription of Ozymandias (Ramesses II): "**King of Kings Ozymandias am I. If any want to know how great I am and where I lie, let him outdo me in my work.**" - which was Shelley's inspiration for his poem *Ozymandias* (pub. AD1818.

⁴ Diodorus Siculus (Loeb Library, Greek authors) Book I pages 172-3 paragraph 49, line 3

Church, Oxford? And was not an understanding of the Greek and Roman Classics the backbone of an 18th Century education?

Near them, on the sand, half sunk a shattered visage lies...

Diodorus was a Greek historian from Agyrium in Sicily who flourished from roughly 80–20_{BCE}. He wrote a forty-volume work that he called 'Library of History' arranged in three parts: mythical history of peoples, non-Greek and Greek up to the Trojan War; history from the fall of Troy to Alexander's death (323_{BCE}); and history in general up to 54_{BCE}.

Diodorus quotes extensively, and generally faithfully, from a variety of sources that would otherwise be lost to us. Furthermore, whilst Diodorus did himself make an extended visit to Egypt he also quotes extensively in Volume 1 from other sources including from the writings of Hecataeus. It is the record of Hecataeus that forms the substance of the particular passage relevant to us. It is here excerpted from the translation by C.H. Oldfather for the Loeb Classical Library.

Book I. 47

*Ten stades from the first tombs, he [Hecataeus] says, in which, according to tradition, are buried the concubines of Zeus, stands a monument of the king known as Osymandyas. At its entrance there is a pylon, constructed of variegated stone...; passing through this one enters a rectangular peristyle built of stone...; it is supported, in place of pillars, by monolithic figures sixteen cubits high, wrought in the ancient manner as to shape; ... and the entire ceiling ... consists of a single stone, which is highly decorated with stars on a blue field. Beyond this peristyle there is yet another entrance and pylon, in every respect like the one mentioned before, save that it is more richly wrought with every manner of relief; beside the entrance are three statues, each of a single block of black stone from Syene, of which one, that is seated is the largest of any in Egypt ... the inscription upon it runs: "**King of Kings am I, Osymandyas. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works.**" There is also another statue of his mother standing alone, a monolith twenty cubits high, and it has three diadems on its head, signifying that she was both daughter and wife, and mother of a king ... etc.*

Book I.49

*Next to these courts, he [Hecataeus] says, is an ambulatory crowded with buildings of every kind ... Here are to be found reliefs in which the king, adorned in colours, is represented as offering to the god the gold and silver which he received each year from the silver and gold mines of all Egypt; ... Next comes the sacred library, which bears the inscription "**Healing-place of the Soul,**" and contiguous to this building are statues of all the gods of Egypt, to each of whom the king in like manner makes the offering appropriate to him, as though he were submitting proof before Osiris and his assessors in the underworld that to the end of his days he had lived a life of piety and justice towards both men and gods. Next to the library and separated from it by a party wall is an exquisitely constructed hall, which contains a table with couches for twenty and statues of Zeus and Hera as well as of the king; here, it would seem, the body of the king is also buried; ... etc.*

Rameses II, a Pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty, died in 1213_{BCE}. He reigned for c76 years. It seems extremely unlikely that almost a thousand years later, when Hecataeus, who flourished in

the C4th_{BCE}, visited Ramesses' tomb complex, known as the 'House of a Million Years', he could have found there a contemporaneous inscription in Classical Greek. Without doubt, Diodorus was quoting Hecataeus faithfully in ascribing the text of the inscription ψυχῆς ἰατρείου to what Hecataeus believed to have been the 'sacred library' of the Ramasseum⁵. Only one explanation is plausible: the inscription Hecataeus saw he subsequently translated into Classical Greek from the original Egyptian script - hieroglyphic, hieratic or demotic⁶ - for the benefit of his readers.

Stamped on these lifeless things

One additional conjecture demands exploration. It concerns the almost universal assumption (until recently) that an inscription referring to 'the Healing Place of the Soul' is in some fashion associated with the concept of a "library" as we understand the term. An alternative and compelling corrective is offered by Professor Luciano Canfora and quoted by Professor Antonio Marco Martinez⁷.

Canfora and Martínez point out that hidden within the great complex described by Hecataeus would once have been the mummified body of Rameses II, attended day and night by guards and priests, and concealed so as to remain safe from tomb robbers. In Egyptian religion, the Pharaoh's (earthly) **body** ('flesh') is animated by the **Ka** – the spirit or life force. Just as the **body** of the deceased must be served and preserved, so must be its **Ka**, and this is where Canfora takes issue with the traditional application and interpretations of the phrase ψυχῆς ἰατρείου. He offers instead a subtly different interpretation.

ψυχῆς – '**psyche**' or '**soul**' - is followed by the word ἰατρείου which may, quite properly, be interpreted '**care**' or '**medical care**', as Marguerite Yourcenar chose to do in translating the word ἰατρείου as '**dispensary**'. Canfora suggests, therefore, that the phrase ψυχῆς ἰατρείου does not refer to the room as a **library**, a library, indeed, that did not exist, but as a '**care room**', for sustaining the Ka of the dead Ramesses by the observance of the appropriate rites.

A **Pharaoh** was seen in life as an embodiment of one of the gods of the Egyptian pantheon. In Egyptian religious thought, the task of the Ka was to preserve the Pharaoh (his divine 'spirit/soul' and, therefore his very essence) alive after his death⁸. Therefore, Egyptian funerary mausolea, which were themselves Temples - holy places requiring the maintenance in perpetuity of religious rituals - specifically incorporated dedicated spaces

⁵ Ramasseum is the name coined by the French archaeologist Champollion to describe the complex which includes the House of a Million Years and Temple of Rameses II

⁶ Hieratic is the name given to the cursive writing system derived from Hieroglyphics and used in ancient Egypt. It was the principal form used to write the language from the 3rd millennium BC until the middle of the 1st millennium BC when it was gradually replaced by its derivative known as Demotic. Hieratic was used in the Hellenistic period, Demotic rose in northern Egypt around 660 BC. Whereas Hieroglyphics are commonly associated with inscriptions, hieratic and demotic texts were generally written rather than monumentally inscribed.

⁷ Luciano Canfora, currently Professor of Classics, University of Bari quoted by Professor Antonio Marco Martinez, sometime Professor in Latin, Universities of Seville, Ciudad Royal and Guadalajara on his blog 'Antiquitatem: History of Greece and Rome'

⁸ See P. Kaplony under Ka in *Lexicon der Aegyptologie* III, 1980, column 276

for the appropriate rituals to be enacted, adjacent to and closely connected with the place of burial.

Diodorus describes precisely such a close association in the case of the room designated by Hecataeus as ‘the library’ and which is separated by a mere party wall from ‘*an exquisitely constructed hall, which contains a table with couches for twenty and statues of Zeus and Hera as well as the king; here it would seem, the body of the king is also buried.*’

If, it is argued, the space provided with bookshelves in the Ramesseum opened into the elaborately decorated room with the triclinia (the room with a table and couches on three sides), then the inscription should be interpreted not as indicating that the shelved space is a library, but as pointing and applying to the room that the visitor was about to enter – the magnificently decorated room with the triclinia. This room was set aside for priestly rites and service (including the consumption of food) appropriate to sustaining the Ka of Ramesses II; a room, moreover, in which the divinely endowed Ramesses is shown flanked by two other effigies to which Hecataeus ascribes the names of the chief gods of the Olympian pantheon: Zeus and Hera.

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away

One final reflection: whatever form the rites of the Ramessid priesthood might have taken, it is not unlikely that sacred texts associated with such rites might have been shelved nearby – something of a ‘liturgical library’, an anteroom containing a source, in the form of papyri, for sustaining the offering of prayer that, once, had been deemed valid⁹. Such an anteroom (whether or not a liturgical library) would have signposted the way into the magnificent space which was designated ψυχῆς ἰατρείον. This final conjecture is supported by research in the modern era¹⁰. Lecuvot provides a summary account of the surviving structures which includes the following:

HYPOSTYLE HALLS

The hypostyle hall (39,60 x 29,65 m) is a model of the genre with its 48 papyriform columns laid out in six rows. The high columns (10 m) of the central row have open blossom capitals and the side columns have closed blossom capitals.

Lighting was assured in the room by means of windows which were built in the area between two levels: between the central row and the side rows. The walls and columns of the hypostyle hall are decorated with scenes of rituals and offerings.

On the main axis of the temple, two other small hypostyle halls each with 8 columns complete the inventory of the temple's architectural remains.

The first room (9.17 x 16,50 m), which is called the "Boats Room" on account of the drawings of royal and divine boats that figure on the walls (8 boats: Khonsu, Mut, Ahmes Nefertari,

⁹ Papyri from this period have survived. The so called ‘Turin Strike Papyri’ detailing a literal strike of workmen at Thebes in 1157_{BC} during the reign of Rameses III are housed in the Museo Egizio, Turin (Cat. 1880)

¹⁰ See Guy Lecuvot (CNRS Paris UMR 8546), ‘The Ramesseum, (Egypt): Recent Archaeological Research

Amunet, and Ramesses II twice), is also called "the Astronomy Room" because of the drawings on the central part of the roof. The roof served as a liturgical calendar. On the roof, laid out in three registers, we can see: the list of the decans (36 decans to cover the year) and the planets, the constellations of the northern hemisphere, and a lunar calendar. In the centre, Sothis (Sirius) and Orion are represented on boats. Their appearance marks the beginning of the year; the 19th of July using the Julian calendar.

The second room is called "the Litanies Room" on account of the long list of offerings that are inscribed on the eastern wall. This room was considered by Champollion as the "library" that had been mentioned by Diodorus. In fact, it is a bipartite place of offerings, with both solar and chthonian¹¹ functions. To the south, libations were offered to Ra-Horakhty and, to the north, incense were burned in honour of Ptah.

All of the back of the temple, where the sanctuary proper was located along with the chapels dedicated to the Theban triad, has disappeared. So too have the chapels and the side rooms of which only the rubble and foundations remain. By analogy with the temple of Sety at Gurna or with the temple of Deir el Bahari, we can identify two sub-cult complexes: the complex dedicated to the father of Ramesses, Sety I, which is accessible by the hypostyle to the south-west, and, the complex dedicated to the god Ra-Horakhty in the north-western corner of the temple which has an open-air courtyard and a chapel with 8 square pillars.

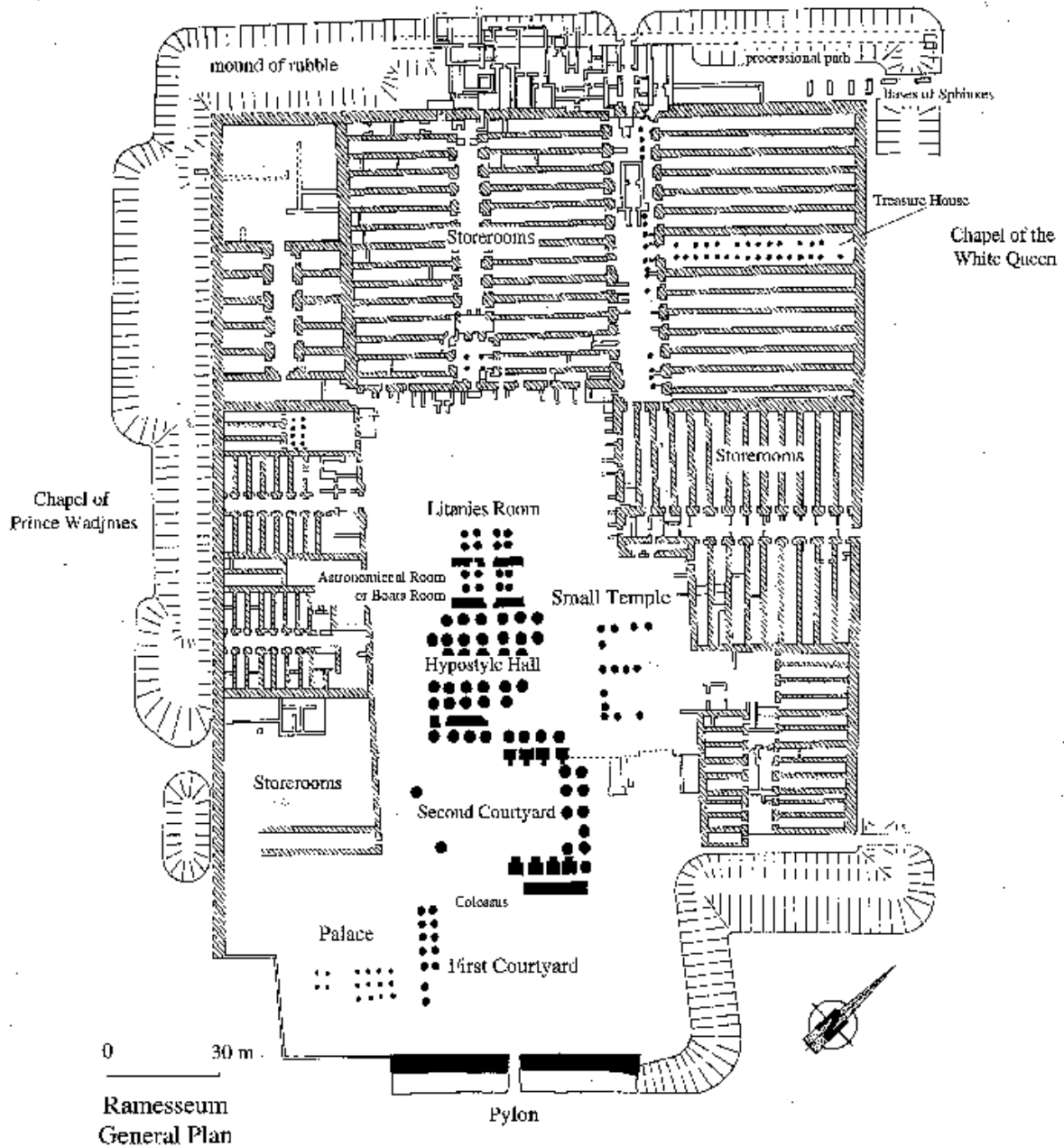
**On the pedestal, these words appear: My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my works, ye mighty and despair. Nothing beside remains.
Round the decay Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away**

Ozymandias: Greek version of Ramesses' Throne Name and Cartouche
User-maat-re Setep-en-re or "Chosen of Ra"),



¹¹ Chthonian – relating to or inhabiting the underworld

Behold, the House of a Million Years and the Temple of Rameses II



At the heart of the Ramesseum an inscription on stone once marked not a 'library room' but perhaps a 'litanies room': a chamber central to the rites offered for the preservation of the Ka of the Pharaoh Rameses II. The inscription referred not to a place of books but to a place for acts of worship; a place for sustaining the perpetual nourishment of the immortal soul and the perpetual vibrancy of the restless mind.

Surviving in stone a thousand years after its inscription, it subsequently survived in excess of two millennia more through the scholarship of Heactaeus and his meticulous copyist Diodorus. Despite the paper-thin frailty of the medium of transmission the mortality of Rameses was memorialised through the immortality of the expressive word.

Robinson inscribed it, Shelley celebrated it and T.S. Eliot reminded us that masonry falls but words shrug off mortality and live in the sonorities of the voices and languages of humanity ¹²:

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.
Houses live and die: there is a time for building
And a time for living and for generation
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

ψυχῆς ἰατρείον

¹² T.S.Eliot, The Four Quartets – East Coker