From Detroit, This Year's Model

Detroit was the second American city I ever visited. It was fifty years ago, and it was then at the apogee of its prosperity. It never occurred to me—I don't suppose it ever occurred to anyone else either—that half a century later it would be an inhabited ruin, a dystopian novel come to life, a city that has taken a book by J.G. Ballard not as a warning but as a blueprint.

Not long ago I was invited to a conference in Dearborn, still the headquarters of the Ford Motor Company. I could see Detroit in the far distance from my hotel window, dominated by the dark round towers of the Renaissance Center. The Renaissance Center—I like that: it testifies to Man's permanent temptation to magical thinking. If one gives a thing a name, it will become or act like that name. In Britain, we give the vertical concrete prisons in which we incarcerate the young unemployed, the schizophrenic, the domestically-abused single mothers, the asylum-seekers, and the psychopathic drug dealers, the names of great writers—Addison House, Jane Austen Tower—in the hope that it will educate them and refine their behaviour.

My request that I should visit Detroit was greeted by the conference organisers much as if I had gone to the manager of the hotel and asked him for the keys to the rooftop so that I could throw myself off. In the event, I went straight back to Detroit airport without having visited the city, and have had to content myself since with the irresistibly titillating photojournalism (abandoned mansions, feral dogs roaming the deserted and crumbling streets) that appears from time to time in British and French newspapers and magazines. "See what America has come to!"—the *Schadenfreude* is unmistakable. The misfortunes of others, especially of the rich and powerful,

are the greatest balm known to the human soul.

Having some slight personal connection with Detroit, I bought a novel just published recently in France in which the city is the protagonist. The novel is called *Il était une ville* (There Was Once a City), by Thomas B. Reverdy. It was published during that curious and uniquely French phenomenon, *la rentrée littéraire*, the flurry of books, especially novels, published to coincide with the return of most of France from its summer holidays at the end of August, as if, refreshed by sun and sea, they were ready to resume reading.

Reverdy, born in 1974, has already published novels about the post-9/11 situation in America and the post-Fukushima situation in Japan. No doubt he feels, as most of us do unless we stop to think about it, that extreme situations tell us more about human nature than do everyday ones: we do not find out who we really are until we are put to the most stringent test. If we crack under stress, like an aeroplane wing after too much flying, does it mean that we are not really who and what we thought we were before we cracked, that it was all but a veneer? Mark Tapley, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, was a notably cheerful individual, but he thought there was no merit in his cheerfulness so long as the conditions in which he found himself were tolerable, and he deliberately sought to test himself by seeking out more and more discomfort to find out whether his cheerfulness survived, in other words whether his cheerfulness was a sham.

In *Il était une ville* a young French engineer, Eugène, who works for a giant globalised car company called only the Enterprise, is sent to Detroit to study the possibility of manufacturing there a kind of template for a car to suit, with necessary variations, all markets in the world, to be called the Integral. He falls in love (for the first time in his life) with a local barmaid, who herself has been associated in the past with a pimp and drug dealer. A parallel plot relates how this man organises a large group of adolescents who have

run away from home into a kind of criminal collective, living in an abandoned school in a deserted part of the city. He is the Fagin *de nos jours*