

“Why Rome”?”

(from *Roman Ruminations*)

by Norman Weeks

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Why Rome? Why not somewhere else?

I came to live in Rome because of my conviction, emerged out of an intuition I had during my student days on a Roman campus, that the all of human experience can be found here. The all of human experience, and, especially, of culture, of which Rome is the richest depository in the West. If I myself lived in Rome, I thought, if I could learn the cultural contents of this city, if I could cultivate receptivity and appreciation, wouldn't I then become the educated man, the gentleman, and, ultimately, the creative artist?

I have taken to my self-assigned task with discipline, concentration, and devotion. I have discovered that I was right about what Rome is. It remains to be seen whether I am right about what I can become.

Almost manic in my zeal to acquire the experience of Rome, I venture forth every day to seek out another aspect of the whole. I will master Rome by a process of methodical accumulation. I will assimilate and incorporate, bit by bit, the all into myself.

Rome so inexhaustible, I have been succumbing to exhaustion. I am tired, as tired in body and senses and mind and soul as I have never been before. The cumulative weight of history is crushing me down. There has been a lot of suffering in the human experience, and here in Rome cultural insights become personal suffering. Rome, once understood, hurts deeply.

There is something horrible about the human.

Although I do much of my writing in physical drunkenness, I have never been more sober and sane, or more tender, in my entire life. I have come to understand much that is profound, out of the depths of the unconscious itself. Some of what I understand is ineffable. It is an intestinal understanding, a visceral realization, futile to attempt to write about or communicate.

If I do succeed in acquiring the all of human experience and culture, what then? Some nights after a daylong trek through the city, I lie on my narrow bed in the Pensione Aretusa, stare at the high ceiling, and wonder what it is that I am accumulating.

Is culture only desperate distraction from the terrible nothingness that we are and live? Is all culture, then, pathological? Would it be better if we knew nothing but simply lived, spontaneously, unadorned by culture? Does the enculturated human lose intimacy with organic life itself?

Gray days in Rome take on a grimness that disheartens and demoralizes the spirit. *Tedium Romae* is an insidious morbidity.

Rome today is a cultural backwater. I have also found it an emotional dead end. No one has been to Rome until he has found himself utterly reduced to nothing.

I make my way among the metropolitan masses, and my self shrinks to statistical insignificance. All roads lead to Rome; Rome leads to a void. I pursue my mission here, only to discover that culture is hollow.

I have taken up residence in nowhere in order to acquire nothing. And I myself am no one.

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Have I exhausted Rome? Or, more pointedly, has Rome exhausted me? One or the other of us seems these days to have been reduced to a sputter and a trickle.

Still, I am no naïve tourist; I was well imbued with Emerson's dicta on the futility of travel and Thoreau's witticism advising all to take the shortest way round and stay home. Considering such cautionary advice, I became one who, while buying the ticket, soberly anticipates disillusionment.

A spectacular continental leap proves only a round-trip to oneself. I should, therefore, make myself a better place in which to live. The most therapeutic change of scenery is a change-of-heart.

Today is my one-hundredth day in Rome, a century of days. I have arrived at a watershed in my Roman sojourn. After these months of stimulating daily doses of culture, I have already felt to the full the sacramentality of a Roman experience for my thirsty spirit.

I now feel a slipping lapse into routine. Every morning it's the same old Rome.

What Roman phenomenon should I explore next? What shall I think about and write about? Whither *Roman Ruminations* or any other *apologia pro vita sua*?

Rome wears thin, but Rome wears well. She is spectacular and glittering at first, but then surprises by the character and substance beneath her gaudy costume. To remain in Rome for an extended stay is to discover with pleased amazement that the prostitute you have married out of passion (but with much misgiving) has become a model wife.

Despite all the monumental colossalism and the masses of strangers, Rome is no lonelier than was my *sítio* in Penedo. Rome is the second-best place I have lived in.

Rome may have lost for me every trace of the foreign and fabulous, but she has become, in compensation, familiar, hospitable, accepting. I am no longer a foreigner. I am no longer a stranger. I am a Roman.

“Nearer and nearer *here!*”

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“What is *Roman Ruminations?*”, a friend asked me. “To tell you the truth, I don’t get it. It doesn’t seem to hold together. It just goes on and on, to nowhere, it seems to me. What’s the point of it?”

“You’ve described it as a mosaic, but we look at mosaics, we don’t read them. And what do art and music and Roman relics have to do with psychology, anyway? Can you explain *Roman Ruminations* in purely literary terms? Please explain yourself, Norman.”

I was pleased by my friend’s usual candor but taken aback by the apparent failure of my grand project.

“Well,” I began my explanation and defense, “if I wanted my ruminations to be truly Roman, I had to put them in a Roman literary form. So I chose the most characteristic Roman literary form of all, one they claimed to have invented, namely, *satira*, otherwise *satira*. We usually translate the Latin word as *satire*, but what it really meant was a medley, a mixed plate offered to the hungry, a tossed salad, a stew, something like that.

“Maybe you’re right,” I conceded to my friend, “at least about the mosaic analogy. The mosaic craftsman has some end in view from the start, a complete picture, but the practitioner of *satira* doesn’t.

“Instead of a mosaicist, perhaps it would be better to describe myself as an experimental cook, preparing my huge salad or pot of stew, adding ingredients and seasonings one by one, tasting frequently as I go along, choosing further ingredients according to my own taste, and stopping only when I feel I’m on the brink of going too far.

“When, at last, I put my salad or stew on the table in front of my guest, I’m not offended if he picks out and lays aside the black olives or pushes the pearl onions and garlic cloves to the edge of the plate.

“But surely when the cook labors to include every variety and nuance of flavor, he must have put in a little something for everybody, even if the whole doesn’t prove completely palatable. *Roman Ruminations* is a *satira*. *Buon appetito!*”

My friend pondered what I told him, then responded: “Well, of course, I liked some of it, a lot of it, in fact. If that’s all you expected, I suppose you succeeded in what you were trying to do. *De gustibus non est disputandum*, don’t they say in Latin?”

“A perfect Roman sentiment and apt to the issue!”, I answered. “Now you’ve got it. I wish I had included that motto somewhere in my book.”

“Feel free to toss it into your next batch,” my friend said. “I’m sure you’re cooking up your next batch already. You know that we readers wake up each day with a new literary hunger.”

“No, I’ve had it with being a cook,” I told him. “Too much hard work, and subsistence wages besides. Let other people take me out to dinner for a change.”

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