

## IMPRESSIONS OF ROME

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It is surprising how many first impressions of the sight of Rome have been put on record. Some of these first impressions are unashamedly imaginary and come to us mediated by or through a persona. This is a common ploy in Augustan poetry, and it is worth remembering that none of the great Augustan poets was a Roman of Rome, so the impressions attributed to the persona may well reflect those of the writer on his first coming to the metropolis as a young man or boy. First impressions can be conveniently divided into two groups. Some are just that, first impressions, with no hint that the visitor might have had some expectations of what would be seen and experienced. A second group, perhaps the more interesting one, distinguishes itself by a shared anticipation: their actual impressions on visiting the city are not really 'first' impressions at all. Few have ever brought to Rome an innocent eye: even in antiquity many visitors always already seemed to know what they were going to see there. Considered chronologically, the very first impressions of Rome of this second group were formed in the imagination, by hearsay, by reading, or in modern times by seeing images of the city: theirs is a virtual Rome. When they finally visit the 'real' Rome there often occurs a disjunction or contrast; it might be of enhancement. As the German poet, Goethe, explained it in his published account of his Italian journey, in Rome he was seeing familiar objects in an unfamiliar world; everything was just as he imagined it, yet everything was new; it was as if Pygmalion's Galatea had come to life (the mythological allusion is loaded: Goethe discovered sex in Rome).<sup>1</sup> A common feature of my second class of first impressions however is disappointment, when the city's scale does not quite match the expectation of it; in the nineteenth century particularly, the modern city, owing to a change in artistic taste, left some visitors flat, though they were still happy to admire the ancient remains. In this paper I have collected and will briefly discuss some accounts of first sights and impressions of Rome, ancient and modern. As I mentioned above, some of our ancient snapshots are

<sup>1</sup> J. W. von Goethe, *Italian Journey (1786–1788)*, trans. W. H. Auden and E. Mayer (London, 1962), 115–16.

imaginary and make use of a persona. Let us start with Propertius, who presents us with a visitor who belongs in my first grouping of those whose prior expectations are not recorded.

The first elegy of Propertius' fourth (or possibly fifth) book begins with a guided tour of Rome for which the poet himself acts as cicerone:

*hoc, quodcumque uides, hospes, qua maxima Roma est,  
ante Phrygem Aenean collis et herba fuit;  
atque ubi Nauali stant sacra Palatia Phoebos,  
Euandri profugae concubuerunt boues.  
fictilibus creuere deis haec aurea templa,  
nec fuit opprobrium facta sine arte casa;  
Tarpeiusque pater nuda de rupe tonabat,  
et Tiberis nostris aduena murus erat.  
qua gradibus domus ista, Remi se sustulit olim:  
unus erat fratrum maxima regna focus.  
curia, praetexto quae nunc nitet alta senatu,  
pellitis habuit, rustica corda, Patres.  
bucina cogebat priscos ad uerba Quiritis:  
centum illi in prato saepe senatus erat.  
nec sinuosa cauo pendebant uela theatro,  
pulpita sollemnis non oluere crocos. 4.1.1–16*

All that you see here, stranger, where mighty Rome now stands, was grass and hill before the coming of Phrygian Aeneas; and where stands the Palatine consecrated to Apollo of the ships, the cattle of exiled Evander there lay down. These golden temples have grown up for gods of clay, who deemed it no shame that their huts were crudely built. Tarpeian Jupiter thundered from a bare rock, and the Tiber, though foreign, was our forbears' wall. Where upon a flight of steps yonder House rears itself, once did that of Remus: a single hearth was the total realm of the brothers. The Curia, which now stands high and resplendent with its hem-frocked senate, then housed a rustic company of fathers clad in skins. A horn summoned the old-time citizens to parley: a hundred of them in an enclosure of the meadow formed the senate. Nor did billowing drapes hang over the hollow Theatre or the stage reek of ceremonial saffron.<sup>2</sup>

The tour-guide puts into the mind of his first-time visitor a whole series of contrasted notions. First, and typically, comes sheer scale: contemporary Rome is 'very large' *maxima*, but her beginnings were small (line 10, which picks up *maxima*). Secondly, rustic origins (lines 2, 4, 12, 13) have yielded to metropolitan improvements (lines 3, 5, 9, 11, 15–16). Thirdly, the poverty of early Rome (lines 5, 12) has been succeeded by the sheen of recent wealth (lines 5, 11). What

<sup>2</sup> Loeb text and translation by G. P. Goold.

encapsulates this triad of contrasts is the basic temporal disjunction between ‘then’ *olim* (line 9) and ‘now’ *nunc* (line 12); this in fact echoes the account of Aeneas’ visit to Pallanteum, which I will discuss below. In the Rome of Augustus, ‘then’ was a rustic past, not disgraceful, but nothing to the gleaming ‘now’. There is, moreover, in this extract from Propertius a subtext focusing the reader’s impression of the city: many of the buildings referred to are owed to the scheme of Augustus to beautify the imperial capital. The Temple of Apollo on the Palatine (dedicated in 28 BC), the restored temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline, the Aedes Quirini (reconstructed and dedicated in 16 BC), the Curia Iulia (rededicated in 29 BC), and the Theatre of Pompey (probably) are all given prominence, because Augustus had either commissioned them or taken a hand in their completion or refurbishment. This imaginary first visit to Rome thus becomes a piece of patriotic flattery.

Ovid borrowed this Propertian strategy, along with the subtext of flattery, in the first poem of the third book of the *Tristia*. There his own book of poems, another persona, which has just arrived in Rome, asks for advice on where to lodge, but no-one will show it the way, because its author is the notorious exile. A further appeal is successful and a guide is found (*Tristia* 3.1.27), who points out the sights, chiefly in the area of the Sacra Via. He starts, ingratiatingly enough, with the new *fora* of Julius and of Augustus. Ovid’s flattery has greater point, since he is trying to get himself recalled from exile. This explains the amount of space given to the imperial dwelling on the Palatine (lines 34–9), and to the Temple of Apollo. The latter however has a still greater significance for the visitor, a book of poems, since a library was part of the complex. The book is aware that it will probably not be welcome there, or in Rome’s other libraries (those of Octavia and of Asinius Pollio), to which due reference is made (lines 63–72).

Flattery continues to be a motive in the description of another imaginary first visit to Rome in Calpurnius Siculus, a pastoral poet of the mid-first century AD (though that date is debated). In his seventh and final eclogue a shepherd, Corydon, describes the amazing wooden amphitheatre, constructed by Nero in AD 57,<sup>3</sup> which he saw on his first visit to Rome. This presents us with a variant on one of the contrasts in our Propertian extract: the rustic is awestruck by the scale of urban structures. As in Ovid, the imagined visit and the flattering

<sup>3</sup> Text and translation will be found in J. W. Duff and A. M. Duff, *Minor Latin Poets* (Loeb Classical Library; London, 1935), 278–85.

description of a building serve the poet's personal interest: Calpurnius is looking for imperial patronage. What is especially remarkable about this poem is that the shepherd wants to leave the countryside (as the poet wants to raise himself socially), so excited was he by the marvels that Rome contained. This in fact is the keynote of visits in and after the time of Augustus: Rome eclipses all other cities, not just in size, but in the scale and beauty of her buildings.

For my final imaginary first-time visitor to Rome in antiquity I want to scroll back chronologically to the Augustan age for yet another guided tour, not of Rome exactly, but of the site of Rome. I am referring of course to Aeneas' tour of Evander's settlement Pallanteum in the eighth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Here is the account of his visit:

*uix ea dicta, dehinc progressus monstrat et aram  
et Carmentalem Romani nomine portam  
quam memorant, nymphae priscum Carmentis honorem,  
uatis fatidicae, cecinit quae prima futuros  
Aeneadas magnos et nobile Pallanteum.  
hinc lucum ingentem, quem Romulus acer asylum  
rettulit, et gelida monstrat sub rupe Lupercal  
Parrhasio dictum Panos de more Lycaei.  
nec non et sacri monstrat nemus Argileti  
testaturque locum et letum docet hospitis Argi.  
hinc ad Tarpeiam sedem et Capitolia ducit  
aurea nunc, olim siluestribus horrida dumis.  
iam tum religio pauidos terrebat agrestis  
dira loci, iam tum siluam saxumque tremebant.  
'hoc nemus, hunc' inquit 'frondoso uertice collem  
(quis deus incertum est) habitat deus; Arcades ipsum  
credunt se uidisse Iouem, cum saepe nigrantem  
aegida concuteret dextra nimbosque cieret.  
haec duo praeterea disiectis oppida muris,  
reliquias ueterumque uides monimenta uirorum.  
hanc Ianus pater, hanc Saturnus condidit arcem;  
Ianiculum huic, illi fuerat Saturnia nomen.'  
talibus inter se dictis ad tecta subibant  
pauperis Euandri, passimque armenta uidebant  
Romanoque foro et lautis mugire Carinis. Aeneid 8.337–61*

Scarce had he finished when he advances and points out the altar and the Carmental Gate, as the Romans call it, ancient tribute to the Nymph Carmentis, soothsaying prophetess, who first foretold the greatness of Aeneas' sons, and the glory of Pallanteum. Next he shows him a vast grove, where valiant Romulus restored an Asylum, and, beneath a chill rock, the Lupercal, bearing in Arcadian fashion the name of Lycaean Pan. He shows too the wood of holy Argiletum, and calls the place

to witness, and tells of the death of Argus his guest. From here he leads him to the Tarpeian house, and the Capitol – golden now, then bristling with woodland thickets. Even then the dread sanctity of the region awed the trembling rustics; even then they shuddered at the forest and the rock. ‘This grove,’ he cries, ‘this hill with its leafy crown – though we know not what god it is – is yet a god’s home; my Arcadians believe they have looked on Jove himself, when as often happens, his right hand has shaken the darkening aegis and summoned the storm clouds. Moreover, in these two towns with their walls overthrown you see the relics and memorials of men of old. This fort father Janus built, that Saturn. Janiculum was this called, that Saturnia.’ So talking to each other, they came to the house of humble Evander, and saw cattle all about, lowing in the Roman Forum and in the fashionable Carinae.<sup>4</sup>

The visit of Aeneas allows Virgil in his own persona as poet to comment proleptically (as the guide Evander cannot) on the sights. Virgil anticipated Propertius in noting the remarkable difference between Rome then and now (*nunc/olim*, line 348). The Romans among others were amazed at their city’s rapid rise to world dominion, encapsulated in those contrasting adverbs, ‘then’ and ‘now’. More pictorially, Evander’s ‘then’ is imagined, as we have seen already, as largely rustic (groves in lines 342, 345, 350, 351; bushes 348; cattle 360–1), and this is in marked contrast to Virgil’s contemporary ‘now’ with its gilded Capitol (lines 347–8) and the ‘smart’ *lautis* residential neighbourhood, the *Carinae* (line 361).

But the most unexpected feature of Aeneas’ first sight of Rome is found in lines 355–6, where Evander draws attention to the ruins of two earlier settlements (*disiectis oppida muris*), remains that serve to remind one of the men of former times (*reliquias, ueterum monumenta uirorum*).<sup>5</sup> So even at this stage, long before Rome herself was founded and nothing like the undiminished Rome of his own day, Virgil imagined her as being already ruinous, an extraordinary concept. We owe to Virgil that most fundamental and enduring of Rome’s many contrasts, ruination as against wholeness. His remarkable vision is embodied in a painting by the eighteenth-century artist Giovanni Pannini, which deserves brief notice here as a sort of illustration of Virgil’s prevision of Rome as a locus of ruination.

In 1730, Pannini painted a view of the legendary Marcus Curtius riding into the abyss that had opened in the forum (a version is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK).<sup>6</sup> It has all the usual

<sup>4</sup> Loeb text and translation by H. R. Fairclough.

<sup>5</sup> Catharine Edwards, *Writing Rome. Textual Approaches to the City* (Cambridge, 1996), 11 (‘ruins had always been part of the city’), and 31–2.

<sup>6</sup> It can be conveniently accessed in colour at <<http://www-img.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/img/pdp/pdp3/207.jpg>>, accessed 23 May 2007.

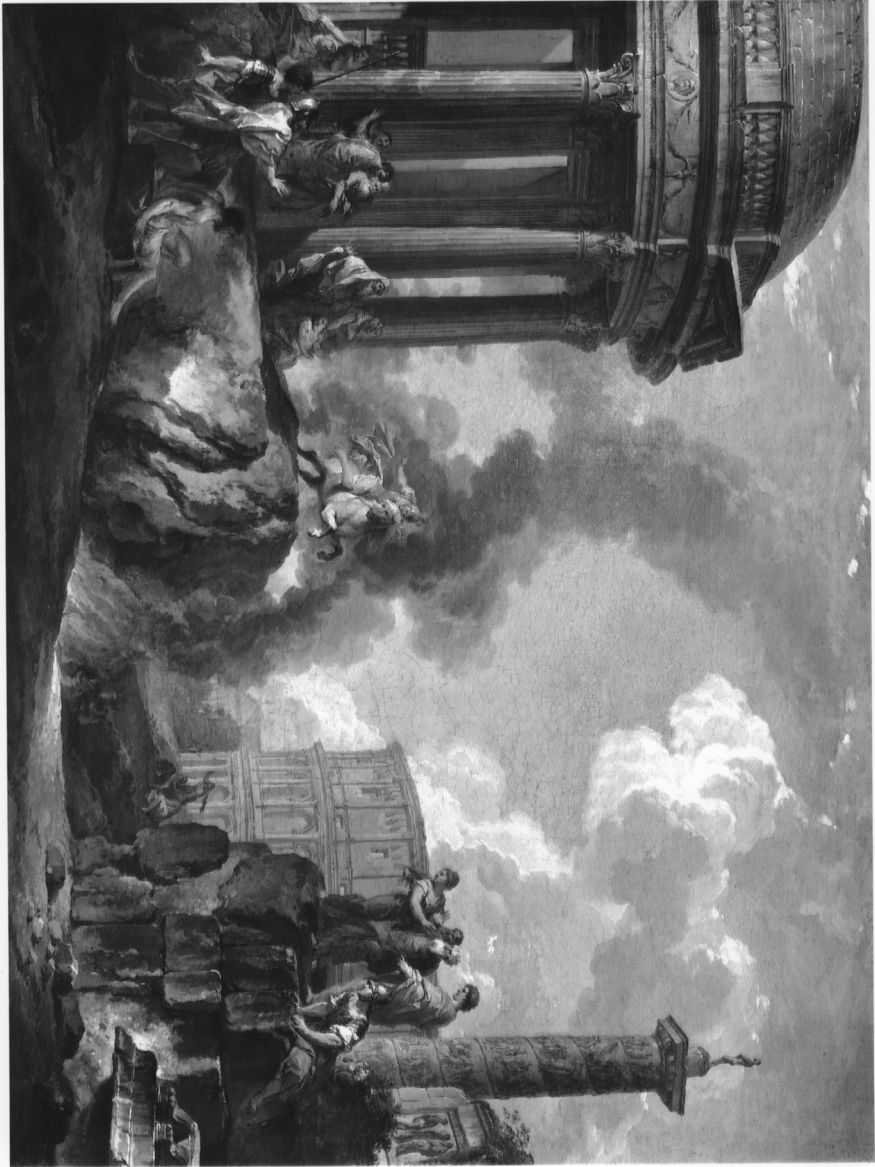


Figure 1. Giovanni Paolo Pannini, *Marcus Curtius Leaping into the Abyss*, oil on canvas, 1730, © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK.

anachronistic staffage of buildings that appealed to the tourist market. We see to the right in the middle distance the flank of the Coliseum and Trajan's column. So far, so commonplace. But in the lower

right-hand corner there is a pile of ruins which horrified spectators have mounted to watch the heroic plunge of Curtius into the pit. Pannini thus provides a synoptic view Rome. The central event is legendary, the background is built up out of monumental structures of a much later period, but the foreground contains what Rome meant to the Grand Tourist: ruins. Yet it must seem strange that Virgil, in vatic mode perhaps, proleptically described the presence of ruins in a legendary Rome. We might, however, recall that at the close of the second book of the *Georgics*, where Virgil praised the happy life of the farmer, he listed the many things that do not trouble those who dwell and work in the country, among them *res Romanae perituraeque regna* 'Rome's affairs and kingdoms which will perish' (*G.* 2.498). As Mynors says in his commentary, 'it may be that the supremacy of Rome is at risk', and he notes that such an interpretation was made by St. Augustine in a sermon delivered probably at Carthage not long after Alaric's sack of Rome in AD 410.<sup>7</sup> Virgil, aware of the transience of things, was capable of imagining a time when even Rome's empire (*regna*) would pass, and it may be that the ruins of those legendary communities of Janus and of Saturn in the *Aeneid* anticipate the ruination to come.

I turn now to my second, more complex, group of first-time visitors to Rome, those who present us with two sets of first impressions (rather like two sides of a single coin), the virtual (founded on hearsay, reading, or images) and the real, which sometimes produces a disjunction. My first such visitor is once again imaginary, a persona, and he is found in Virgil's first eclogue, written between 40 and 38 BC. Tityrus, a former slave, went to Rome to secure his manumission. Quite why he had to go about it in this way is not made clear in the poem. He does not seem to have had an owner, or to have known who his owner was, and so to Rome he went to gain *libertas*. Here he records his first impressions:

*urbem quam dicunt Romam, Meliboeae, putavi  
stultus ego huic nostrae similem, cui saepe solemus  
pastores ouium teneros depellere fetus.  
sic canibus catulos similes, sic matribus haedos  
noram, sic paruis componere magna solebam.  
uerum haec tantum alias inter caput extulit urbes  
quantum lenta solent inter uiburna cupressi. Eclogue 1.19–25*

<sup>7</sup> *Serm.* 105.7.10 = *PL* 38.623; this is conveniently available in J. E. Rotelle (ed.), *The Works of St Augustine for the 21st Century: Sermons* III/4, trans. E. Hill (Brooklyn, 1992), 93.

The city which they call Rome, Meliboeus, I, foolish one! thought was like this of ours, whither we shepherds are wont to drive the tender younglings of our flocks. Thus I knew puppies were like dogs, and kids like their dams; thus I used to compare great things with small. But this one has reared her head as high among all other cities as cypresses oft do among the bending osiers.<sup>8</sup>

Tityrus clearly did not bring an innocent eye to Rome; *putaui* in line 19 shows that he had a notion of what he would find. That notion however fell far short of the reality, and Rome proved to be bigger than any town he had ever seen or could have imagined. The disjunction is between the provincial centre and the metropolis (line 20). Rome's sheer scale, as we saw in Propertius, is a recurring impression, and rightly so, for Rome was always huge compared to other Italian towns.

But apart from the physical aspect of Rome, Tityrus also had what might be called a conceptual view of her before he made his visit. This can only be appreciated from the context of the extract quoted above. We must remember that his interlocutor, Meliboeus, asked him how he came to be at his ease when everywhere else the countryside was in confusion. A god gave him his leisure, he replied. The obvious question follows, 'what god?', and its less than obvious answer, the extract above: Rome seems at first sight to be the god. Meliboeus then asks why Tityrus went to Rome, and we finally hear about his suit for freedom, which an unidentified young man granted him (again, the legal details are obscure). Commentators sometimes reckon that the seemingly irrelevant answer to Meliboeus' question, 'what god?', indicates old Tityrus' rambling way of telling his tale; the 'god' must be the young man. Up to a point that makes sense, but that is not how Virgil has ordered Tityrus' tale, and there might be something in taking it as it comes. After all, Meliboeus is not non-plussed by the answer, so perhaps neither should we be. The place to which Tityrus had to go is named, and the young man is not. Rome is only ever named in the *Eclogues* here (indeed, it is the only Italian city named in the collection), and she is arguably more important to Tityrus than the young man, who simply provides her with a human face. In the first eclogue, Rome appears in Tityrus' eyes in the role of benefactor, one of Virgil's leading concepts. The young man is Rome's agent, and so not named; his identity, despite the efforts of commentators ancient and modern to pin it down, is deliberately unspecified (though readers who believe he is Octavian may detect the sort of

<sup>8</sup> Loeb text and translation by H. R. Fairclough.



flattery here that we have seen elsewhere in imagined first impressions of Rome). What *is* specific is the place Tityrus had to go to gain his freedom: Rome is what matters. So this first-time visitor to Rome provides us with a sense not just of Rome's scale, but also of her social function as helper of the weak: here there is no disjunction because Rome does for Tityrus exactly what he expected of her. For this reason perhaps it is appropriate that Tityrus should answer the question, 'what god?', with her name. So, once again, we might fancy that Virgil anticipated events. In due course Rome would indeed be accepted as a divinity, and the largest temple in the city was that dedicated by Hadrian to Venus and Dea Roma. Virgil's Tityrus seems already to have an inkling of this view of Rome as a divinity.

A long time elapses before a real visitor gives us an account of his first sight of Rome. He is Magister Gregorius, perhaps an Englishman, living about the beginning of the thirteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

*uehementius igitur admirandam censeo totius urbis inspectionem. ubi tanta seges turrium, tot aedificia palatiorum, quot nulli hominum contigit enumerare. quam cum a primo latere montis a longe uidissem, stupefactam mentem meam illud Caesarianum subiit* [he then quotes from Lucan, *De Bello Ciuili* 3.90ff.].

So I reckon the panorama of the whole city is exceptionally wonderful. There is such a crop of towers, so many palatial buildings that no man can count them. As soon as I saw it from the first slope of the hill from afar, my amazed mind recalled that speech of Caesar's....

The hill he refers to is presumably Monte Mario, around which travellers came along the old Viterbo road and entered the Vatican by the Porta San Peregrini (perhaps the modern Porta Angelica). This is in fact the earliest account I know which records a first impression from afar; later visitors will make a point of stopping the carriage some way off so as to catch a distant prospect of the city. From Monte Mario, Gregorius saw, of course, mediaeval Rome: a city of towers (few remain), like San Gimignano's to this day.<sup>10</sup> He had a preconception of what the sight of Rome would be like and how he would react, thanks to his reading of Lucan, for the passage he quotes is Caesar's speech on first seeing the city after his ten-years' absence in Gaul. Lucan provided the key word, *miratus* 'marvelled', and he had Caesar address Rome as *deum sedes* 'home of the gods', both sentiments

<sup>9</sup> Master Gregorius, *The Marvels of Rome*, trans. J. Osborne (Toronto, 1987), 18.

<sup>10</sup> For mediaeval Rome as a city of towers, see P. Partner, *Renaissance Rome 1500–1559. A Portrait of a Society* (Berkeley, CA, 1976), 3.

which the Christian Gregorius could, *mutatis mutandis*, share. His reaction of amazement at the sheer scale of it all created no disjunction. His account of his visit is fascinating, but since we are here concerned with first impressions, it is not appropriate to go into detail. Suffice it to say that the ruins of pagan Rome appealed strongly to Gregorius; he quoted the opening lines of Hildebert of Lavardin's famous poem, 'Par tibi, Roma, nihil'.<sup>11</sup> Gregorius did not, however, publish his account, so his fascinated response to the ruination of Rome bore no fruit.

The response to the ruins that mattered came a good century later. Petrarch brought to the city the least unprepared eye of any, and his enthusiasm transformed later attitudes to what was left of ancient Rome. Here is his first impression:<sup>12</sup>

*Ab urbe Roma quid expectet, qui tam multa de montibus acceperit? Putabas me grande aliquid scripturum cum Romam pervenissem, ingens mihi forsitan in posterum scribendi materia oblata est, in praesens nihil est, quod inchoare ausim, miraculo rerum tantarum et stuporis mole obrutus. Unum hoc tacitum noluerim, contra ac tu suspicabar is accidit. Solebas enim, memini, me veniendo dehortari hoc maxime praetextu, ne ruinosae urbis aspectu famae non respondente atque opinioni meae, ex libris conceptae ardor meus ille lentesceret...illa vero, mirum dictu, nihil imminuit sed auxit omnia, vere maior fuit Roma maioresque sunt reliquiae quam rebar. Iam non orbem ab hac urbe domitum, sed tam sero domitum miror. Epistulae de Rebus Familiaribus 2.14*

What is one who has heard so much of its hills to expect of the city of Rome? You supposed I'd write something impressive on my arrival in Rome; perhaps an important theme for future treatment has come my way, but for the present I venture to start on nothing, overwhelmed as I am by the wonder of such things and the astounding mass. One thing I mustn't leave unsaid, since it turns out to be the opposite of what you thought. I recall you used to discourage me from coming on the grounds that the ruinous appearance of the city would not correspond with its renown and my own expectation, which was founded on reading, and so my well-known enthusiasm would cool...Rome however has wonderfully lost nothing, but enhanced everything: she is larger, her remains more numerous than I thought. Now I'm not so much surprised that this city conquered the world, but that she did so so late.

Of course there is the by now usual amazement at the sheer scale of the place, but it is no longer prompted by the contemporary city, but rather by the ruins of the ancient one. As in so many other things, Petrarch brings a novel sensibility to his experiences, and the disjunction we first saw in Virgil between ruins and wholeness works

<sup>11</sup> This fine poem is most accessible in F. J. E. Raby (ed.), *Oxford Book of Mediaeval Latin Verse* (Oxford, 1959), 220–1.

<sup>12</sup> Petrarch, *Epistulae de Rebus Familiaribus* 2.14 (January/February ad 1337).

for him in favour of the ruins. The standard view of the ruins of Rome is clearly that of his friend, Cardinal Columna, who dissuaded him from the visit, on the grounds that his expectations, fed on literature, would be disappointed. So this first-time visitor, like Tityrus, thinks he knows what he is going to see. But he too was in for a surprise: it proved much grander than he expected. But the grandeur was paradoxical, not something his correspondent was prepared to see, because to him ruins were so much rubble. Petrarch, however, is truly ruin-minded, and he shows the way for all those subsequent travellers who expected, and required, that Rome should be ruinous.

This ruinous condition of contemporary Rome provided the platform for an extraordinarily widespread conceit in Renaissance poetry. The conceit was enunciated by Janus Vitalis, in his *Elogia* of 1553, who borrowed from ancient poets the imaginary first-time visitor to Rome, but the tables were now turned. Whereas the ancient poets had emphasized the contrast between the poverty-stricken past and the dazzling present, Vitalis' visitor is dismayed at not being able to see Rome at Rome. The opening of his poem runs thus (in one version):

*Qui Romam in media quaeris novus advena Roma,  
Et Romae in Roma nil reperis media,  
Aspice murorum moles, praeruptaque saxa,  
Obrutaque horrenti vasta theatra situ:  
Haec sunt Roma. Viden velut ipsa cadavera tantae  
Vrbis adhuc spirent imperiosa minas? Elogia 1–6*

A new arrival, you look for Rome in the midst of Rome, and in the midst of Rome you find nothing of Rome. Gaze on the massive walls, the broken stone, the huge theatres buried in awful decay: these are Rome. Do you see how the very corpse, domineering, of so great a city still breathes out threats?

The new arrival (*novus advena*) cannot find the Rome he expects to see in the midst of modern Rome. All he sees are ruins, though vast ones (lines 3–4). Vitalis says that this really is Rome, and the very corpse of the imperial city still breathes defiance. But this opening poem is deceptive: the rest of the collection focuses upon Rome renewed, *Roma instaurata*. The first poem is just foil, providing the 'then' element of the 'then/now' contrast. Vitalis's programme was, however, subverted by Joachim du Bellay in his collection, *Antiquités de Rome*. Du Bellay appropriated Vitalis' first poem in his third:<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The whole of Du Bellay's cycle was Englished by Edmund Spencer, from whom the translation below is taken.

*Nouveau venu, qui cherches Rome en Rome  
Et rien de Rome en Rome n'aperçois,  
Ces vieux palais, ces vieux arcs que tu vois  
Et ces vieux murs, c'est ce que Rome on nomme.  
Voy quel orgueil, quelle ruine;*

Thou stranger, which for Rome in Rome here seekest,  
And nought of Rome in Rome perceiv'st at all,  
These same old walls, old arches, which thou seest,  
Old Palaces, is that which Rome men call.  
Behold what wreak, what ruin, and what waste.

But his collection does not go on to express marvel at the restoration of the city's grandeur.<sup>14</sup> Du Bellay's first-time visitor remains nonplussed at the discontinuity of ancient and modern Rome; his expectation is balked, but the ruins have lessons to teach about the destruction that attends over-greatness.

Two English Grand Tourists take the ruins rather less didactically in their stride. Time has moved on, so their expectation of Rome is different. Thomas Gray wrote to his Mother, from Rome on 2 April NS 1740:

Next morning, in descending Mount Viterbo, we first discovered (though at near thirty miles distance) the cupola of St. Peter's, and a little after began to enter on an old Roman pavement, with now and then a ruined tower, or a sepulchre on each hand. We now had a clear view of the city, though not to the best advantage, as coming along a plain quite upon a level with it; however it appeared very vast, and surrounded with magnificent villas and gardens. We soon after crossed the Tiber, a river that ancient Rome made more considerable than any merit of its own could have done; however, it is not contemptibly small, but a good handsome stream; very deep yet somewhat of a muddy complexion. The first entrance of Rome is prodigiously striking. It is by a noble gate [the Porta del Popolo], designed by Michael Angelo and adorned with statues; this brings you into a large square, in the midst of which is a vast obelisk of granite...as high as my expectation was raised, I confess, the magnificence of this city infinitely surpasses it.<sup>15</sup>

Here there is no serious disjunction between expectation and realization, the scale of the river Tiber excepted. Like Magister Gregorius, Gray glimpses Rome from afar, but the city he sees now contains architectural works, which he admires, by the masters of the sixteenth

<sup>14</sup> For this nexus see M. Ferguson, "'The Afflatus of Ruin': Meditations on Rome by Du Bellay, Spencer and Stevens' in Annabel Paterson (ed.), *Roman Images* (Baltimore, 1984), 23–50, and G. H. Tucker, *The Poet's Odyssey. Joachim Du Bellay and the Antiquitez de Rome* (Oxford, 1990), 107–11, 131–47.

<sup>15</sup> The text is in P. Toynbee and L. Whibley (eds.), *The Correspondence of Thomas Gray* (Oxford, 1935), i.145–6.

and seventeenth centuries. This provides us with a renewed contrast between Rome then and now, but the terms are rather different in application: 'then', of course, is ancient Rome, and 'now' is modern Rome, the birthplace of baroque architecture.

The banker Samuel Rogers left a record in his diary of his first sight of the city, on 24 November 1814, which now traditionally is viewed from afar:

Break of day. Soon came on the Appian Way [he meant 'Cassian'], a good pavement...went up a hill & were told between the 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> milestone to prepare for a sight of Rome. Left the carriage, & ascending, in less than a hundred yards, thro' the haze of the morning & across a dreary & uncultivated plain saw in the horizon what we had longed so much to see! The dome of St Peters, the castle of St Angelo, the *thousand* churches, & the smoke like a light over the rest of the line, tho' the houses were undistinguishable. Rome herself lay before us with all her nameless associations...drove rapidly down to Rome! Entering it by M'Angelo's Gate. Passed an ancient sarcophagus on the right, commonly called Nero's tomb [actually that of P. Vibius, and it comes before, not after, the Gate].<sup>16</sup>

Two features of this snapshot call for comment. First, the desolation that surrounded Rome. Rogers is the first of our travellers to call attention to the sorry state of the Campagna Romana. This is a kind of variant on the rustic/urban contrast that we have already encountered: the sumptuous metropolis is surrounded by a desert. His second observation of note is the 'smoke like light over the rest of the line'. The quality of the light of Rome often attracted attention (the painter Claude Lorraine's for instance); it owed something to the vast quantities of wood burned in the city for fuel, but it was never regarded as detrimental. The Roman sky shone like no other.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, for Gray and Rogers, Rome as a totality had become a goal: modern and ancient were in equipoise. The architects of the Renaissance and baroque periods had created the handsomest city in Europe, on a scale (as usual) that left the rest standing. Still, the expectation of ruins or antiquities is strong in these first approaches to the city. We may compare Goethe's first day in Rome, 30 October 1786: he spent the morning among ruins, and visited St Peter's in the evening; ancient and modern are given equal time, but ancient comes

<sup>16</sup> The text is in J. R. Hale (ed.), *The Italian Journal of Samuel Rogers* (London, 1956), 207. For another visitor who made a point of catching the distant prospect, see George Otto Trevelyan, *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (London, 1876) ii.28–9.

<sup>17</sup> The special light over the seven hills as seen from the port of Ostia is touchingly described by Rutilius Namatianus, who has taken his last leave of the city, *De Reditu* 1.193–200.

first.<sup>18</sup> This equipoise was about to turn, for British visitors at any rate. The author of a popular travel book, Charlotte Anne Eaton, was very severe about the defective taste of the baroque style. In her *Rome in the Nineteenth Century*, she vilified the city's architecture: 'Not only has Rome no Gothic buildings, but it possesses, in my humble opinion, no building of the middle ages, nor even of modern times, the architecture of which merits praise'.<sup>19</sup> According to the article on Mrs Eaton in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, hers was the definitive guide to the city until she died in 1859, and it presumably reflected, if it did not influence, current opinion. Thus, for early Victorian travellers, ancient ruins became the chief attraction, because the baroque had been belittled as an architectural style, nor had Rome any longer a substantial mediaeval appearance to compensate. Before turning to the first impressions of Dickens and George Eliot, however, we may stay briefly with the engagingly opinionated Mrs Eaton.

Her book first appeared in 1820, and it reached a fifth edition some thirty-five years later. It is presented as a series of letters, and it is the sixth, dated 10 December 1816, which records her first impressions of the city. It is too long to quote in full, but here are some salient extracts. At the top of a hill, her *vetturino* stops, because Rome is at last in view:

springing out of the carriage, and up a bank by the road side, we beheld from its summit, Rome! It stood in the wide waste of the Campagna.... Its indistinct buildings formed a sort of long line, in which the lofty dome of St. Peter's and the Castle of St. Angelo, once the proud Mausoleum of Hadrian, were alone prominent [here she makes the 'then/now' contrast in terms of Christian versus pagan].

She confesses that her eyes dim with tears as she recollects all that is bound up in the name of Rome: patriots, poets, heroes (but not, we note, saints). She then writes a few paragraphs expatiating upon the associations naturally evoked in an educated person by such a sight, and she gives a *tour d'horizon* of the setting of the city amid its hills to south and east. Then she dwells upon the wasted look of the Campagna, something observed by Rogers too. She crosses the Tiber, and, like Gray before her, she notes a disjunction: the river no longer

<sup>18</sup> See his diary, *Tagebücher*, and compare the published account in the *Italiensche Reise* for 1 November 1786 (n. 1 above).

<sup>19</sup> Fifth edition, London, 1855, i.451. A similar sentiment is found as late as 1897 in Baedeker's thirteenth edition of the guide to Central Italy, p. lxxii: 'the reader will, however, scarcely dwell on these works [i.e. "of the degenerated Renaissance known as Baroque"] longer than will suffice to give him a clear impression of their character.'

flows ‘*arua inter opima uirum*’ (she quotes from Virgil’s *Aeneid* 2.781–2), it is ‘ungraced by cultivation’. On the other hand, it is yellow, as the ancients described it. The Porta del Popolo soon comes into view, and she is not impressed, sure indeed that it cannot be by Michael Angelo (she was right!). The obelisk in the Piazza del Popolo gets full marks, as the memorial of an older world, which reminds the stranger of the fallen greatness of imperial Rome. Now she reveals her cloven hoof: also in the piazza is a convent, just beginning to be rebuilt; it ‘speaks...equally intelligibly of the existing debasement of Papal Rome’. Here the disjunction between Christian and pagan is expressly enunciated. Mrs Eaton, born in Roxburghshire, is a Protestant Briton, and convents and popes are to her anathema. Worse is to come: ‘on the right are some barracks, which, as they are for Papal, not Praetorian guards, and, moreover, are the work of the modern French, not the ancient Romans, we looked at, you may be sure, with sovereign contempt’. The disjunctions referred to need no comment, but her contempt of the French must be contextualized: before the Italian journey, Mrs Eaton had visited the battlefield of Waterloo, and had written an eye-witness account of the aftermath of the famous battle, an account often revised and reprinted. Her contempt for the French was therefore understandable. Her party was then conveyed down the Corso to the customs house, *Dogana*, housed in what she calls the Temple of Marcus Aurelius, near his column. (The ancient building is actually the Hadrianeum, and is now Rome’s stock exchange, *borsa*.) In due course, she managed to find an hotel, and with that we may leave her lively account, and turn to her spiritual heirs, Dickens and George Eliot.

Charles Dickens recorded his first sight of Rome in *Pictures from Italy*, Ch. 9, ‘To Rome by Pisa and Siena’, on 30 January 1846:

When we were fairly going off again, we began, in a perfect fever, to strain our eyes for Rome; and when, after another mile or two, the Eternal City appeared, at length, in the distance; it looked like – I am half afraid to write the word – like LONDON!!! There it lay, under a thick cloud, with innumerable towers, and steeples, and roofs of houses, rising up into the sky, and high above them all, one Dome. I swear, that keenly as I felt the seeming absurdity of the comparison, it was so like London, at that distance, that if you could have shown it me, in a glass, I should have taken it for nothing else.

Then in Ch. 10, ‘Rome’, he arrives by the Porta del Popolo, to find the Carnival in progress, a blow to his expectations of ‘desolation and ruin’:

There were no great ruins, no solemn tokens of antiquity to be seen...It was no more *my* Rome: the Rome of anybody's fancy, man or boy; degraded and fallen and lying asleep in the sun among a heap of ruins.

The disappointment is palpable, and it is all founded on the disjunction between '*my* Rome', the virtual Rome of Dickens's fancy, and the actuality. (Though why a modern city should be desolated and degraded, why its inhabitants shouldn't be enjoying themselves is something of a mystery.) What Dickens wanted was ruination, and he later describes his fleeing St Peter's for the Coliseum:

Never, in its bloodiest prime, can the sight of the gigantic Coliseum, full and running over with the lustiest life, have moved one's heart, as it must move all who look upon it now, a ruin. GOD be thanked: a ruin!

Ruin-mindedness could hardly go further, when a ruin is to be preferred to a pristine structure. So Rome, for Dickens at least, was defined purely and simply by her ruinous state; nothing else mattered.

George Eliot in her 'Recollections of Italy 1860' told a similar story of disenchantment:

At last we came in sight of Rome, but there was nothing imposing to be seen. The chief object was what I afterwards knew to be one of the aqueducts, but which I then in the vagueness of my conceptions guessed to be the ruins of baths. The railway station where we alighted looked remote and countrified: only three omnibuses and one family carriage were waiting, so that we were obliged to take our chance in one of the omnibuses...we walked out to look at Rome – not without a rather heavy load of disappointment on our minds from the vision we had had of it from the omnibus windows. A weary length of dirty streets had brought us within sight of the dome of St. Peter's which was not impressive...and the Castel of St. Angelo seemed but a shabby likeness of the engravings. Not one iota had I seen that corresponded with my preconceptions.<sup>20</sup>

Preconceptions, yet again, are baulked by the reality. Ruins are what Eliot expected to see, and the lack of ruins on her first arrival is a sad disillusion. Eliot, to be sure, had only herself to blame for arriving by train: what great city is attractive from its goods yards? The railway indeed passes under the arcade of the Aqua Claudia, and on the left can be glimpsed the forlorn Temple of Minerva Medica. But that was hardly enough. What strikes us again, as in Dickens's case, is the frank avowal of an expectation betrayed. Dickens had 'his' Rome, an imagined city, which must not simply be London all over again; Eliot had

<sup>20</sup> The text is in M. Harris and J. Johnston (eds.), *The Journals of George Eliot* (Cambridge, 1998), 342. I owe the reference to my undergraduate student, Dorothea Martens.



her preconceptions, and it is significant that they were formed, like Goethe's, by engravings, presumably Piranesi's. For Piranesi had done more than any other artist to create a vision of Rome in the imagination of educated Europe. It was a heroic image, which the reality too often did not match; Goethe had been fortunate that his father's hall was decorated with engravings by some of Piranesi's less theatrical predecessors, so he did not feel at all let down when he finally saw Rome, which fully measured up to his expectations. But the eyes of all three, Goethe and Dickens and Eliot, were never innocent. They always already knew what they were going to see. Goethe was lucky, Dickens unreasonable, and Eliot culpable for arriving by train.

We encounter a more balanced first impression of the city from a third novelist, the young Henry James, who wrote home to his brother, William, an account of his first hours in the city on 30 October 1869:

I started last night, and at 10 1/2 o'clock and after a bleak and fatiguing journey of twelve hours found myself here with the morning light. There are several places on the *route* I should have been glad to see; but the weather and my own condition made a direct journey imperative. I rushed to this hotel (a very slow and obstructed rush it was, I confess, thanks to the *longueurs* and *lenteurs* of the Papal dispensation) and after a wash and a breakfast let myself loose on the city. From midday to dusk I have been roaming the streets. *Que vous en dirai-je?* At last – for the first time – I live! It beats everything: it leaves the Rome of your fancy – your education – nowhere. It makes Venice – Florence – Oxford – London – seem like little cities of pasteboard. I went reeling and moaning thro' the streets, in a fever of enjoyment. In the course of four or five hours I traversed the whole of Rome and got a glimpse of everything – the Forum, the Coliseum (stupendissimo!), the Pantheon, the Capitol, St. Peter's, the Column of Trajan, the Castle of St. Angelo – all the Piazzas and ruins and monuments. The effect is something indescribable. For the first time I know what the picturesque is.<sup>21</sup>

The first impression is the exact opposite of Dickens's, yet fancy figures in both. James's virtual Rome was surpassed by the reality, which still retained a good deal of what James identifies as 'the picturesque'. He thus harks back to that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sensibility, which originated in England. At first it was a movement centred upon landscape and gardens, but in the later eighteenth century Robert Adam defined the architectural picturesque: soaring, irregular masses, crumbling surfaces, masses of shadow, and prodigious 'movement', all of which he found illustrated

<sup>21</sup> The text is in Leon Edel (ed.), *Henry James Letters 1843–1875* (Cambridge, MA, 1974), i.160.

in Piranesi's engravings of Rome (one collection of which was in fact dedicated to him).<sup>22</sup> James, perhaps unconsciously, agreed with Adam in finding Rome the standard of the urban picturesque. He later realized how lucky he had been,<sup>23</sup> for soon the picturesque was to be swept away. In the very next year, those longueurs and lenteurs of the Papal dispensation came to an end, and Rome joined the bustling new Kingdom of Italy. Very soon the ancient monuments were put into the hands of the archaeologists. The gain to science was a loss to aesthetic enjoyment of the picturesque overgrown ruins, as Christopher Woodward has stressed in his charming recent memoir, *In Ruins* (London, 2001).

To conclude my survey I want to bring together three imperial first-timers in Rome, whose visits span the ages from late antiquity to the twentieth century via the Renaissance.

After the transfer of government by Constantine to his new Rome on the Bosphorus, old Rome became something of a backwater. It is not therefore wholly surprising that his second son, the emperor Constantius, had never seen the ancient capital of the empire until he paid it a visit in AD 356. Fortunately for us, the visit is described extensively by Ammianus Marcellinus (16.10.13–17). The passage is too long to quote here in full, but its keynote is clear from the start: as soon as Constantius arrived in the old forum 'he stood amazed; and on every side on which his eyes rested he was dazzled by the array of marvelous sights'. Rome as usual stuns the first-time visitor. It is above all the scale of the buildings that leaves one breathless:

the baths built up in the manner of provinces; the huge bulk of the Amphitheatre [= Coliseum], strengthened by its framework of Tiburtine stone, to whose top human eyesight barely ascends; the Pantheon [as rebuilt by Hadrian *c.* AD 126] like a rounded city-district, vaulted over in lofty beauty; and the exalted columns which rise with platforms to which one may mount.

But even these marvels are eclipsed by the Forum of Trajan:

a construction unique under the heavens, as we believe, and admirable even in the unanimous opinion of the gods; he stood fast in amazement, turning his attention to the gigantic complex about him, begging description and never again to be imitated by mortal men.

<sup>22</sup> Here I draw on Christopher Hussey's book, *The Picturesque* (London, 1927), 188–9.

<sup>23</sup> See his *William Wetmore Story and his Friends* (Boston, 1903), i.93–5.

In that final sentence Ammianus devises a fresh twist in the old 'then/now' contrast: his contrast is between now and the future, because the future, he believes, will prove incapable of adding to the magnificence of the city. Rome is an achieved work of human art, and nothing Ammianus' contemporaries can do will enhance the spectacle. Constantius contented himself therefore with adding an obelisk to the Circus Maximus.

Ammianus' authorial view of Rome, mediated through the first impression of his persona, Constantius, is no more innocent than were those of Propertius, Ovid, and Calpurnius Siculus. Everything that Constantius looked upon in what the historian regularly calls the Eternal City evokes her pagan past, and only that. Ammianus ignored Constantius' own religion. He was a Christian, however, and he might have been expected to visit, and marvel at, the great church his father commissioned over the site of the presumed burial place of the apostle Peter.<sup>24</sup> Christian Rome is the present absence in this description, and the marvels that were being erected in honour of the new divinity might as well not have existed, so far as Ammianus was concerned. As the continuator of Tacitus he focused on a traditional Rome, and so he had no eye for the new additions to Rome that would in due course prove as marvellous to visitors as did the remains of the pagan city. Ammianus' account of Constantius' first impression thus implicitly provides us with a contrast, the pagan past set within or against the Christian present. Ammianus shows how no-one brought an innocent eye to viewing Rome: we see just what we want to see, or rather, what others want us to see, as was the case with the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.

Charles V made his sole visit to Rome for Easter in April 1536.<sup>25</sup> The occasion was hardly one for rejoicing, since his Lutheran troops had brutally sacked the city in 1527. Thanks to the papal authorities, Charles's first impression was carefully stage-managed, with the propaganda aim of showing that the city had for practical purposes recovered from the blow. Archaeological tourism was to be the

<sup>24</sup> The omission is noted but not explained by John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court AD 365–425* (Oxford, 1975), 228. E. D. Hunt also notes the omission, and observes that it is the more striking since Ammianus does not neglect the existence of Christianity in his history, unlike some of his contemporaries ('Christians and Christianity in Ammianus Marcellinus', *CQ* 35 [1985], 186–200, esp. 186 and 190).

<sup>25</sup> For a brief account of that see Partner (n. 10), pp. 35–6, and 197–9, or K. Brandi, *The Emperor Charles V* (London, 1939), 370. There was a contemporary account of the visit by C. Scheuerl.

keynote,<sup>26</sup> and this was helped by the unusual point of Charles's entry to the city. He had come up from Naples, so entered Rome on the via Appia. This allowed him to pass under the three triumphal arches of Constantine, Titus, and Septimius Severus, a powerful reminder of his imperial heritage, and flattery of his own military success. To provide passage between the latter two arches, the site of the Roman Forum had had to be cleared of houses and towers, and along the route civic dignitaries stood garbed as ancient Romans. As Partner interprets the decorations and overall arrangements, the lack of any dominant religious element is noteworthy (shades of Ammianus). The emphasis was on the humanist reconstruction of the Rome of the Caesars, which would integrate the imperial 'then' with the Hapsburg 'now'. The Rome Charles was being invited to admire was both archaeological and up to date (with the new squares and palaces), but nothing of the older religious Rome of shrines and relics intruded itself. This same combination of archaeology and modernity, minus religion, was repeated four hundred years later, to great effect, by Mussolini for another imperial German visitor.

'Rom hat mich richtig ergriffen!' ('Rome bowled me over!') recalled Adolf Hitler enthusiastically of his visit in early May 1938, when the Führer, never much of a traveller, saw Rome for the only time in his life.<sup>27</sup> The visit was planned to take maximum advantage of the new road schemes and the refurbished monuments, newly released from later accretions. The propaganda aim this time was to demonstrate that Italy was a fit partner for Germany. Hitler arrived, unusually, by night at the Porta Ostiense railway station and so the first monument he could have seen ought to have been the Pyramid of Cestius. But that was just the beginning. The whole route, which again passed under the arch of Constantine, was brightly illuminated by 45,000 lamps, and the Coliseum was made to glow with a phantasmagoric light display, chiefly in red to suggest the German flag. During the subsequent days of his visit, the great remains of Roman imperial power continued to move Hitler considerably, to a degree that even the beauty of Paris was unable to do in 1940. His experience was not, however, just that of a high-maintenance tourist. Hitler came to a

<sup>26</sup> This was not the first such archaeological visit: Cyriac of Ancona had guided the emperor Sigismund III round the ruins in 1433.

<sup>27</sup> What follows is entirely owed to Alex Scobie's definitive book, *Hitler's State Architecture. The Impact of Classical Antiquity* (University Park and London, 1990), 23–32 and 93–6. The visit and its impact are also discussed by C. Woodward, *In Ruins* (London, 2001), 27–30, and F. Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (London and Woodstock, 2002), 322–5.

sense of the evocative value of ruins, which one of his architects Albert Speer developed into a 'Theorie vom Ruinenwert' (theory of the value of ruins) with a 'Ruinengesetz' (law of ruins). Rome's magnificent remains had some influence upon his own architectural schemes, which were to look grand even in a decayed state. Just as Rome's ruination declared the extent of her vanished power, so henceforth the official buildings of the thousand-year Reich must evince, even as ruins, a sense of the scale of its conquests. Thus, modern building materials – glass, ferro-concrete, steel – were to be repudiated in favour of good old-fashioned ashlar. (Speer conveniently forgot the Romans' successful exploitation of concrete.) Scobie's study (cited in n. 27) amply illustrates the practical influence of Rome's ruins on the Führer's schemes; one notable instance is the round, domed mausoleum, sited near the Danube at Linz, which was to contain the remains of his parents, a clear evocation of the mausoleum of Augustus near the Tiber, recently released from accretions and isolated in a new piazza under Mussolini.

First impressions of Rome thus turn out after all to be fairly complex in their diversity and effect, and the present essay has aimed to provide what its astute referee identified as a 'grammar' with which to read them. A common element to them all is the juxtaposition of opposites: for instance, small and large, rustic and urban, wild and tame, pagan and Christian, ruin and whole. What complicates these fairly simple opposites is the double nature of first impressions of Rome, as analysed in the opening paragraph: because Rome is rarely viewed by an innocent eye, there is sometimes a disjunction between the virtual image (Dickens's '*my Rome*') and the reality of a railway station in the rain. It is that which produces either George Eliot's disappointment, or the amazement of Tityrus and Petrarch, or the sheer delight of Henry James. But the chief of these opposed concepts, which subsumes many of the ones just mentioned, is the temporal disjunction between 'then' (*olim*) and 'now' (*nunc*). What surprises us about this particular contrast is that the actual features of the city can move from one to the other category and that the categories themselves are differently valued. For Propertius, 'now' is better than 'then', but for Mrs Eaton the papal 'now' is debased, only the praetorian 'then' is of interest. Augustan Rome was the 'now' of Virgil, but it had turned into a ruined 'then' for Petrarch; Virgil's contemporary Rome was whole and undiminished, Petrarch had only its ruins (more of them than we have today, it should be recalled) to awaken his fantasy. Rome is the first of a

tiny handful of ‘world cities’, and the first impressions of her visitors over the millennia show why her place among them remains unique.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> As has just been hinted, the journal’s referee of this essay offered much astute and helpful guidance for its revision. I should like to dedicate this piece with affection and admiration to my colleague, Carlotta Dionisotti, in this fortieth year of her teaching and research in the Classics Department of King’s College London.