

Footprints in Stone: A Psychogeography of Rome

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“Equal, always equal, to the inexpressible at the very source of what I am.”

— Pier Paolo Pasolini

The Mystery of Origins

A crescent of seven sacred hills, the city of Rome is carved by the drunken Tiber. The lifetime of this poisoned river god overflows from a drowsy channel to Rome's glorious and infamous past. From two of Rome's distended mounds — Palatine and Aventine respectively — Romulus and Remus watched for signs from the other world of where the city was to lie. At that time, the Roman landscape dreamed in flights of vultures, and revealed its will through the divinities of nature.

Through history this river sloughed its banks like snakeskin at every curve, banks strained by swallowing the Tiber Island, and laid naked by the cavernous orifice of the *cloaca maxima*, sacred to the goddess Venus. This once drained the Velabrum, a stagnant marsh between the Palatine and the Tiber, the river's alluvium where, as infants, Romulus and Remus were exposed to its mercy.

Out of long-forgotten depths flows the water, from springs so deep underground that they are still part of prehistory. There, the water's substantial motion bears up liminal forms and suggests remembrance by obscure odours. In its artless, recurrent flow, the Tiber offers a pattern for the pedestrian experience of Rome, a simple act of recollection and reconstruction: walking.

Only on foot do you sense the vast living swell in which Rome's monuments float, desert islands among the fountains and scallop shells, to encounter the flotsam of this city's history impregnated with your own imagination. Here you encounter Rome's sympathetic personae, forces of culture and nature eternally manifest: gushing, effusive storytellers with prodigious imaginations and riotous memories.

In the Forum lies Rome's oldest relic, the Lapis Niger, a sacred pavement of black marble laid to mark the tomb of Romulus, the founder. At the foot of a flight of iron steps, Etruscan lions guard a quadrangular shrine. Inscriptions on all four sides of a square stela, furnish the most ancient example of the Latin language, in a *lex sacra*, warning against profaning a sacred place.

Rome as the Human Mind

It was in the architecture of Rome that Freud found the antitype of the human mind in all its complexity. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud makes Rome a metaphor for the mind, while her history represents the history of individual psychic life. An emotional experience in memory from early life builds up and inhabits new psychic structures, just as the Eternal City builds new buildings in place of older ones.

“Let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is ... a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past — an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one.

“This would mean that in Rome the palaces of the Caesars and the Septizonium of Septimius Severus would still be rising to their old height on the Palatine and that the castle of S. Angelo would still be carrying on its battlements the beautiful statues which graced it until the siege by the Goths, and so on. But more than this. In the place occupied by the Palazzo Caffarelli would once more stand — without the palazzo having to be removed — the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus; and this not only in its latest shape, as the Romans of the Empire saw it, but also in its earliest one, when it still showed Etruscan forms and was ornamented with terra-cotta antefixes. Where the Coliseum now stands we could at the same time admire Nero’s vanished Golden House. On the Piazza of the Pantheon we should find not only the Pantheon of today, as it was bequeathed to us by Hadrian, but, on the same site, the original edifice erected by Agrippa; indeed, the same piece of ground would be supporting the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva and the ancient temple over which it was built. And the observer would perhaps only have to change the direction of his glance or his position in order to call up the one view or the other”

Further, in describing how hysterical patients suffer from reminiscences, Freud again illuminates the mysterious functions of the human mind through the architectural monuments of an historic city. Like “the monuments and memorials with which cities are adorned,” hysterical symptoms are also “residues and mnemonic symbols of particular traumatic experiences.” Thus, “every single hysteric and neurotic ... remember[s] painful experiences from the remote past, [and] still cling[s] to them emotionally....”

Freud’s metaphor reverses to inspire a new language: that, in this city of the mind, you may stroll about like the very image of thought. Rome being a total mnemonic symbol, your *emotional* responses to the urban monuments unlock the reality of her formative events, and the discharge of emotions corresponds to a descent into the underground of her history, a conciliatory & integrative submersion into her very foundations.

The Story in the Matrix

Here, any reverie may be the unrecognized bearer of reality. The way into the dreaming psyche leads via the path of *fictive* logic, and so, *within* the city of the mind acts a truly pedestrian agent: the detective. His world is flanked with deep-plunging, hoary foundations, inhabited windows, huge blank staircases, heavy brick buttresses, disfeatured statues. A battered temple floor with felines slinking and yawning in every crevice, worn curbstones and obelisks that once measured the path of the sun, these are the oneiric elements which flights of fancy string together into true tales of the city’s origins and ends. Only in the motional imagination do elements of the city rise into human order, acquiring meaning and sense.

Realizing the ancient vision of the labyrinth; Rome crystallizes out of the earth in a landscape. O, Daedalus. The celestial eye that engraved the monumental city never entered Rome's narrow medieval *vicoli*, in which the dreamer flounders toward an indeterminate future, through opaque pasts in which strange images churn, just beneath the surface of the familiar, in spaces that cannot be seen except through day-dreaming eyes. Swarming towards bliss, tourists & pilgrims penetrate the Capuchin ossuary on Via Veneto, only to find small grotesque rooms with baroque surfaces wrought from the whitish bones of the dead. In Rome, *ab urbe condita*, foundations are consecrated with blood.

Pedestrian as Storyteller

Each piazza unfurls only to swallow you up like a room. Whoever needs to understand the city as a whole is compelled endlessly to piece it together from fragments, though these are superabundant. But what you want to see is the everlasting Rome, not the Rome which is replaced by another every decade.

But which is the 'real' Rome? In Europe, over the past hundred years, the visceral phenomenology of the pedestrian experience has attracted artists and thinkers to reclaim urban wandering as a modern mode of direct knowledge and inspiration, demanding meaning from the montage itself.

Dada's deambulations sought an apocalypse in urban decadence. In streets and vacant lots, their pedimental soles scrawled the *volgare* equivalent of automatic writing in real space. Scions of the Surrealists, who navigated Paris using a map of Copenhagen, included Lettrists, Situationists, & Rome's contemporary Stalker.

Their Rome is a liquid city in which 'the spaces of the elsewhere take spontaneous form,' opening up under the gaze of the walker. Like a ghost, the drifter reveals unconscious zones of space and marginalized territories of knowledge.

Stepping Back in Time

Psychogeography characterizes the effects of urban topography on the affective behaviour of individuals. When walking acquires gesture and spatiality, it becomes a choreography, a dance that tells a tale. Trails bifurcate into sacred paths, ritual & narrative, catacombs & erotic dances, hikes, treks, rambles, & strolls, lovers' promenades & military marches, cultural walking tours and political demonstrations, religious processions, & nocturnal cruising on invisible footpaths, at every turn disclosing a symbolic transformation of space.

Rome's devious streets displace your beacons: the Pantheon particularly seems to migrate rapidly through the city, repeatedly confronting you anew with a kind of spatial persecution, mocking your prospects of navigating by choice. By a continuous renewal of strangeness, meaning erupts in a quotidian turbulence which is not banal, but idiomatic & splendid.

In the urban ecology, Rome's found cityscapes are Rorschach stains corporealized to extort your desires. These are the "wanderers whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read it." Archaeology denudes subterranean passages and abandoned

entrances; street names suggest obscene behaviour, deviations in space reflect the hallucinating mind, & nightmares grow from the shadows. In this churning pit you can find what the city has repressed, what returns in the symptoms irrupting mysteriously, forging the unknown from the midst of the familiar.

Urban Reverie

In this landscape, Remus, the detective, seeks out his assassin. On the heels of Romulus, he arrives at Termini Station in the seediest area of Rome. As he takes a *caffè macchiato* at the bar, a lady of the night flirts with him. “Looking for any body in particular, Detective?” she asks. The lynx emblem glitters on Remus’ badge — he’s a Private Eye. Lupa, the she-wolf, examines the photo and murmurs: “He’s here.” But Remus is already gone. The space at the brink of his mind is the urban periphery he once leapt over, but now the borders run *through* the city, not *outside* its walls.

Remus does not know his way around a city built after his death. For him, Rome is still an infinity of possible cities, the uncharted territories of the subconscious that elude control, a gigantic dormant mass of architecture, its articulations fusing and melting into a dense magma of churning limestone. Yet in every ashlar, every brick, every stone tier he sees the hand of his brother.

Solve et Coagula

Romulus called her *Roma Quadrata*, the Square Rome, but Remus’ gaze falls on rampant organic forms: hills, mounds, domes in silhouette, an ancient brick apse, vaults & archways, biomorphic ornaments, coffered barrel vaults, shards of pottery and broken earthenware urns, oriental plane trees with their mottled trunks. Streets that wind inwards and spiral out.

Remus finds Rome full of strange gaps which fragment the city, abrupt denouements of archaeology, rifts & fissures, entrances to subterranean vaults beneath the foundations of great urban palaces. Tracing aqueducts & sewers, he observes cleavage & orifices in vulgar zones, implausible juxtapositions of signs and inappropriate referents.

On a fallen colossal head of Juno he rests and looks around. Hades is entered through a rupture in the surface of the ancient world, where every cleft furnishes an oracle. His involuntary memory renders elements indiscriminately: the flooded banks of the Tiber, then the dugs of the she-wolf, a woodpecker and a wild fig tree, a wing over the Aventine hill, a sacrifice of first fruits, a clod of earth cast into the round trench of the *mundus*, a bull and cow yoked, a deep ploughed furrow, a shallow foundation wall, a rain of blood.

Cherchez la femme! As Roma spins, Remus interprets the story of her dreams in space. Tuned to the pitched glossolalia of the street, Remus cannot make out certain phrases or words murmured like revelations. Taxonomies unwind in glittering windows displaying travelling exorcism kits, distilled balsamic vinegars tintured with rosemary, a clutch of six vulture carcasses, blown-glass flasks of *aqua vitae*, baskets of wild purple figs.

Remus recognizes incomprehensible morphologies, those unspeakable elements left unexpressed in descriptions of Rome. In his polyglot translation, jokes become surrealistic vistas, grotesque

twists of architecture, monstrous parodies of the classical orders. Slips of the tongue are expressed as short cuts, passions formulated as gaping doorways, violent openings. Niches & corridors resemble deep scars & wounds. Has he been here before? Or only in his fantasies?

Incorporation & Individuation

In Piazza Navona, Bernini's dragon emerges to take flight from a geological morass of travertine marble. Gradually differentiating from bedrock, Rome rises, layered over centuries, evolving her forbidden zones and renunciations.

Wherever Remus walks, he comes upon familiar objects in an unfamiliar world; everything just as he imagined it, and yet everything is new. Since he cannot remember anything without finding a name for it, he bestows names on the architectural elements which stage civic life. The great masonry block of the Farnese Palace is a noun, the orders of classical ornament seem to be adjectival, conjunctions are symbolized by the ivy hanging over Via Giulia like shaggy hair, or the water flowing from the mouth of the Fountain of the Giant Mask.

He strolls *allegro* through the narrow streets of the Ghetto, deciding which way to turn, while the tropes of Ciceronian rhetoric burst upon his consciousness: For Remus, all statues in the city are now figures of speech. In euphemisms and malapropisms they whisper the stories of Roma's erotic dreams, building his reality from her reveries.

Sacred Thresholds

Gathering on a parapet in anticipation of a death perch a dozen large birds of prey, carrion-feeders. Ever since the murder, Remus has been wary of all liminal elements: thresholds, bridges, passages, even flights of stairs. These are the traces of the artificer, Romulus, his brother, his murderer. Yet he's compelled to return to them, to find his double and return to himself by way of them, back down to the deeper levels, in violation of history. Retracing Aeneas' descent into the underworld, an archaic empire of vast emotions & imperfect thoughts, he discovers the remnants of the once predominant realm of the supernatural. Roma's dream is of demonic origin, for nature is really demonic, not divine.

In indeterminate and erogenous zones, Rome sprawls over the topography, riddled with secret places only the initiated can locate. Where in 1748 the great cartographer Nolli and his team of surveyors blackened in all footprints accessible to the touring public, Detective Quirinis searches the city of Rome for the seemingly irrelevant. From an insignificant detail he can extrapolate a world, surveying the very stuff that vanishes into the texture of the city.

Turning his back on Rome's monuments — great formative events like the Colosseum and the Theatre of Marcellus — Remus plummets towards the raw powers of imagination, and finds himself once again on the *Lungotevere*, vertigo at the steep descent to the banks of the river. Opposite, the Bocca della Verità, the monstrous stone Mouth of Truth, gapes in a howl of laughter which disrupts his reasoning. Distracted, he sidles down the stairs in *terza rima*, and is struck on the back of his head with a heavy chunk of masonry, a baroque cornice.

First he seems to be sliding through a labyrinth of ruins, then in a rank grotto, falling at the foot of the missing Pallas Athena, and finally crawling through shallow ooze into Pluto's realm of darkness. Remus drags himself to the water's edge, and drinks from its turbid flux. There, he glimpses Romulus — or is it only his own reflection?

A water-boatman with glowing eyes ferries him across to Trastevere where a troll living under Garibaldi bridge asks him a riddle: What is the secret name of the city? Remus doesn't know or can't remember. Only that Roma is a goddess loved by his brother. Was the whorish Lupa *his* she-wolf? The troll warns him not to trust her: like the city, she is a shape-shifter who preys on schizophrenic visitors, romantics, and narcoleptic visionaries.

Rising upright, his vision in shards, Remus notices only the ground beneath his feet; with each leaden step basalt cobblestones rise up to receive his soles.

Crossing Back

Remus returns on the 753 bus, hurtling through the Aurelian wall's blood-stained shadow. Parapets and roof overhangs become cornice lines framing a giant frescoed ceiling: the sky. He has a view of numerous inner courtyards and back balconies, terraces, pavilions, and loggias. The city is an anagram whose rearrangement would reveal the true meaning of history.

He sees himself and Romulus under the sign of SPQR on garbage cans and sewage drains. Attempts to draw a map fail under his shaking fingers; his frenzy for each space reverts to a hieroglyph writhing under the capitals ROMA.

Clues and Traces

The whole street system unfolds before him like one enormous basalt mosaic, a figure too large to understand. Wherever he looks, something's *missing*, or there's something *extra*, not mentioned in the Blue Guide. Lurking recesses, back ways, wanton projections, inexplicable windows.

Suddenly it all seems to mean something: that the architectural elements in Rome have always been in movement: re-interpreted, adapted, & *recirculated*. At the same time, every aporia which opens in the horizon of meaning is a space in which infinite possible cities may unfold. He scopes out passages, detours, dead ends, vacant lots, voids, and one-way streets. Overflowing with possibilities, space is plastic.

The Sacrifice

"Where it was, I will be." Remus hears his own thoughts expressed by strange voices, noisy with obscene expressions.

Giddy with disorientation & self-abandon, Remus trails Romulus to the Roman forum, an idiom of soils & surfaces. A gatekeeper ushers him up to the Palatine plateau. Once home to Patrician tribes, the untended parterre is rife with wild aphrodisiacs. His heavy strides over fields of banked-up artichokes and violet satyrion, release the pungent scent of flowering arugula. By the roofless ruins of Augustus' palace he can't resist the temptation to fill his pockets with segments

of granite, porphyry and marble which lie about in thousands. He stares across the Circus Maximus to the Aventine hill, a space forgotten by its own inhabitants: pickpockets, petty thieves, beggars, and prostitutes, neglectful that their true history is fictive and symbolic, and that the base tribes, 'sprung from the earth,' were the builders of this unintelligible Rome.

An artefact of a curious kind, Rome, at once willed & random, imperfectly controlled, a dream. North of him, the forum drops away: a raw organism, a riotous flare of baroque Nature. Huge rock boulders, rolled down from above, form natural tribunes, stratified tabernacles with ledges and classical mouldings. Like his brother before him, Remus locates the *umbilicus urbis*, sights his *cardo* and *decumanus*, establishes the Etruscan rite's sixteen divisions of the sky.

How can he put order to this monstrous mixture of treasury and curiosity-shop? The proper thing for a solitary man to do is seek out the hermits. Using the piazzas of the Campo Marzio as a game board, he plays chess with a dwarf necromancer who tells him: "There's a she-god with her mouth gagged so that she won't reveal the secret name of the city. But the goddess can be recognized by her step." Now the whole city seems to be nothing but one long shifting threshold of walkers — will he ever reach the other side? The crowds always seem to be moving in the opposite direction, blocking his view.

Nomads, vagrants, policemen: a quicksand of coming and going, the piazzas, the paths, the alleys, the very curbstones and cobblestones. In the wall of the monastery Remus sees half a dozen casts of the most beautiful antique feet. Through the gateway he observes the Washing of the Feet, and the Feeding of the Pilgrims, and imagines the unshod filing down staircases built in trochaic metre, or the Spanish Steps, based on the Polonaise.

With a feeling of imminence, Remus starts to concern himself more seriously with architecture. Now he realizes that nothing was created by chance; chance only *destroyed*. Even in the ruins he perceives land which is inscribed with complex geometries, ancient symmetries and motifs resurrected in later open plans and erections. Each stone bears traces of its origins: fossilized kinetic energy forging a historical hypertext in each generation of building.

Matter Dreaming

Death by misadventure. Now clues blossom and sprout everywhere: the secret garden is planted with dwarf orange trees, vulgar hybrids called 'digitata' whose dangling, tentacled fingers seem to indicate his guilt; there are deviated paths, disoriented signposts, the Ponte Rotto, a prurient structure whose single arch sustains a weight of historic tradition, broken telephone wires plunging into the ground, indecent stains spreading over stuccoed walls, roofs overgrown with weeds, concrete abominations, accretions in the wrong place: in short, *spontaneous generation*.

Directly, Remus tries to find Romulus by reading divine signs in the city. Sunken windows hooded with massive iron cages, cavernous black archways. The seven life size statues of the god of love have a hypnostyle spacing, delta waves organize the colonnades. Livy says that when Romulus vanished, no part of his body remained, nor any remnant of clothes. His skeletal remains were the bricks, marble & pozzolana of the Eternal City.

A case of mistaken identity? Nobody seemed to have seen the body or remembered it being there. Remus strives to attain the terrifying truth about himself. Had the scene been staged by the murderer? The first *mise-en-scène*, a primordial crime to be explained, false mementos left to efface traces of his presence. Could the whole city be nothing but a red herring?

How to read what really happened? Images appear in his mind's eye like pictorial script, the street seems to be a rebus of obtrusive items, with a meaning he can not quite grasp. All the cobblestones, for example, seem to convey separate messages, and the thresholds of buildings spell out Parkinson's Law. Remus understands that he is the Wolf-Man, and that *his* dreams alone are true.

The Mirror in the Stones

Among the beggars, the soldiers, the monks, and the tourists, his path folds the universal encrustation of marble into the erotic subtext of the city, blossoming with ribald ornaments, convulsing the foundations of the gods in seismic amnesia. But Remus: his body must be there, but where? The only witness to that crime is the all-seeing Eternal city herself.

Remus walks along the river to the Farnesina where the paintings of the Psyche legend are. A hundred brooding secrets lurk inside this inexpressive mask with its earth-scented foundations. There he remembers the second of Rome's three aliases, her festal name: Flora.

At the market in Campo dei Fiori, in the shadow of Giordano Bruno who prophesied infinite worlds, Remus purchases ripened fruits. Passing the great facade of the Palazzo Spada, incrustated with images and arabesques, he recognizes his brother's figure above the portal. He shadows his quarry to Piazza del Popolo where the twin churches seem to be a life size portrait of himself and his brother. It feels like he is living in a room full of mirrors, where he keeps seeing himself & Romulus over and over again.

He heads back towards where it all started. Flanking the *cordonata* which rise up the Capitoline hill, the gargantuan gemini, Castor and Pollux, twin demigods of memory, frame stately Roma, once empress of the world, who sits now with her back to the Forum, enthroned and sedentary between giant river gods, the splay-footed Nile — and the shambling Tiber, Remus' old guardian. "I am now so remote from the world," he tells the goddess, "that it gives me a curious feeling to read a newspaper."

Her mocking gaze fixes his: "Are you investigating your *own* death? Or the death of your *brother*?" Remus realizes that he, too, has always been in love with Roma. "What is your secret name?" he asks. But she only gestures behind her, below.

In a sprouting sea of broken rock, on a black stone floor, a brown paper bag spills out bursting pomegranates and ripe figs, a *nature morte*, his first fruits sacrifice. Remus hovers at the navel of the world, where Roman history has sunk through a trap-door, then takes out a skeleton key.

When he opens the tomb, he finds no body, only a bronze Etruscan mirror on the altar. He holds the word ROMA up to the mirror, and the secret name of the city appears: AMOR, but with the 'R' backwards. Then, he understands: Remus is Romulus in reverse. He looks into the surface,

and recognizes the face of his brother, his own face reversed. His rival, his double, his *victim*. “This, then, is the mystery of Rome,” he says, “In it we find our true selves.”

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