CHAPTER FIVE

❧

Idea of Rome, Idea of Europe

John Nicols, History and Classics

Yes, indeed I have finally reached the very capital of the world! Had I seen her fifteen years earlier and in good company, led by a truly well-versed companion, I would have counted myself happy. Should I however see and visit her with my own eyes alone, it is a good thing that this joy has been granted me so late. . . .

All the dreams of my youth I now see alive; the first etchings [of monuments] that I remember (my father placed views of Rome on our foyer), I now see in full reality; and everything that was known to me for so long from paintings, drawings, etchings, and woodcuts, in plaster and in cork, all now stand assembled before me wherever I go. In this new world I find a familiarity; it is everything that I imagined, and at the same time everything is new.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, November 1, 1786

The patent excitement in Goethe's description of his arrival in Rome is reflected again and again by writers not only of his generation but also of those who came before and arrived after he did—among them, Gibbon and Dickens, Chateaubriand and Madame de Staël. What was it about the city and the idea of Rome that made it so attractive to Europeans? Why did the Roman Empire persist in theory and in practice long after it ceased to be a viable political structure? What was it about Rome that inspired intellectuals and artists of the Renaissance and the early modern periods of European history? Why is it that intellectuals and intellectual "wannabes" traveled to Italy, Rome, and Pompeii?

Figure 5.1.   Roman Forum viewed from the Palatine hill, with the Curia, seat of the Roman Senate, in the center. *Source*: **Personal photograph by G. Sheridan, April 1984.**

Let me approach these questions somewhat indirectly.

Who does not long to live in an era of peace and prosperity? Who does not prefer to live under a regime that sponsors high cultural achievement but does not lose sight of the needs and interests of the vulnerable? The literature of early modern and modern Europe is saturated with perspectives on this subject. From Thomas More to Karl Marx, from Thomas Jefferson to John Kennedy, the *literati* and *glitterati* have expounded on just how such a state might be achieved. Our expectations of "things to come" are, however, very much tempered and defined by our collective memory of the past. Sometimes the "memory" is expressed in terms of hard lessons learned, but no less potent and perhaps even more pervasive is the sense of nostalgia for a past long since "lost" but nonetheless still full of grandeur—a past ever present, even if not consciously admitted.

Can anyone not be moved by the idea of three centuries of peace in Europe? By the massive public works projects that brought clean water (and removed waste water) from cities? By a plethora of theaters and civic rituals? By a legal system that posited many of the rights we consider to be "self-evident"? Who could not appreciate the achievements of such a well-ordered state? And who cannot stop and wonder about an age when Europeans could speak to one another in one or two languages?

The Roman Empire provided these blessings and, despite its undeniable defects and eventual collapse, it succeeded in constructing a transcendent idea of what a European civilization could be. It is true enough that Roman imperial civilization had its defects. We may not feel comfortable with the Roman notions of status or with its toleration of slavery, to name but a few. We may also recognize that the culture created was not as "original" as that of classical Athens or that the elite especially enjoyed the benefits. Even so, and in respect to these two items, we should bear in mind that ancient slavery was not "racial" and, as archaeologists have long recognized, the standards of elite culture permeated the social pyramid to a depth and breadth not found again until the nineteenth century. The focus of this chapter is not, therefore, a defense of Roman civilization but rather an examination of the enduring attraction of Rome as an idea or conceptual model. This chapter seeks to explain how that model has affected the formulation of "the idea of Europe."

Machiavelli noted that Italy is a merely geographical concept, an observation that is also true for Europe. What he meant, of course, was that Renaissance Italy did not have any "unity" beyond its contiguous geography. So, too, one might argue that Europe does not have historically any "unity" beyond its contiguous geography. Yet, if one seeks a model of a unified European entity, one with a distinct culture and one capable of transcending the limits of language, religion, and ethnicity, the most attractive model is that of Rome. Consider the alternatives. Does the achievement of Christianity in the early Middle Ages inspire confidence? Is the Holy Roman Empire more appealing? And what about Napoleonic Europe? Certainly each has its admirable qualities. In terms of culture, the Christian church of the Middle Ages played a central and supportive role, and the culture of Napoleonic Europe was dynamic and formative. Yet neither age can be described as "peaceful." Indeed, all three drew heavily on the Roman model in theory and in practice, in law and in the arts. The model remains powerful, as a relatively recent article from the *Economist* suggests:

> It is easy to see common elements in the Roman and the Carolingian empires that might appeal to modern-day builders of Europe. Most obvious is sheer territorial expanse. To that may be added the creation of a common legal code, the issuance of a common currency as a symbol of imperial rule, the building of roads linking the empire (or trans-European networks, as they are unsmilingly called in Brussels). And all this is based upon a new, and supposedly lasting, peace within the empire—for the Romans, the *Pax Romana . . . Unity, fraternity, creativity.* The notion that unity and peace in Europe are two sides of the same coin is an article of faith for modern pro-Europeans.[1]

What kind of a model does Rome offer?

We need to understand that "Rome" was not just one city on the Tiber but was also, by the end of the Principate in CE 190, a collection of cities with a remarkably homogenous culture. Indeed, one might describe the Roman Empire as an association of cities and not, as is often suggested in maps, a collection of provinces or "protonational states." This is an important observation, for it suggests that the Roman model is built around the notions of urbanization, civilization, and Romanization. In fact, if there was a common culture in the Roman Empire and if there is one in Europe today, it is essentially *urban*. This is not simply an elite culture equally enjoying the operas of Verdi, Wagner, and Bizet in traditional palaces of culture. It is also a common urban and "popular" culture that unites Europeans in distinctive ways—through music, soccer, academic exchanges, and travel, to name but a few. That is, despite differences in language and religion—the customary points of division in European politics—there is a broadly based and common European civic culture that is reminiscent of that of Rome.

Though contemporary European civic culture may not owe its unity to the Roman model directly, discussion of political unity builds dynamically on Roman tradition. Is it possible to create a central and effective European political authority, one that is capable of winning the consent of the governed, of generating an allegiance that transcends cultural and linguistic differences, and of putting to rest historical enmities? Rome offers an example of what could be done in these terms. Both the European Union and Rome strive to achieve unity through the guarantee of peace, the creation of a common body of law, the elevation of the standards of public life, and the development of a culture of tolerance.

Gibbon and his contemporaries had no doubt about where to find inspiration for a new order and the lessons to be learned from Rome's experience. In *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the historian speaks emphatically of the achievement of the Roman Empire:

> The two Antonines (for it is of them that we are now speaking) governed the Roman world forty-two years, with the same invariable spirit of wisdom and virtue. . . . Their united reigns are possibly *the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government.*[2]

And,

> If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the *condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous*, he would, without

hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus (AD 96–193).[3]

The same admiration is found in his discussion of the reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire:

> It was scarcely possible that the eyes of contemporaries should discover in the public *felicity* the latent causes of decay and corruption. This long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire.[4]

As did others of this generation, Gibbon finds the roots of this felicity in constitutionality and citizenship. He writes,

> A martial nobility and stubborn commons, possessed of arms, tenacious of property, and collected into constitutional assemblies, form the only balance capable of preserving a free constitution against enterprises of an aspiring prince.[5]

These perceptions of the Romans mutually reinforced the art, popular and elite, of the same generation of Europeans. Among many others who looked to Rome for inspiration, the French painters of the early nineteenth century, David and Poussin particularly, delight in representing this "free constitution," or a martial nobility and stubborn commons. Celebrated examples include Jacques-Louis David and Nicolas Poussin, on the rape of the Sabines; and David's *Brutus* (1789), *Oath of the Tennis Court*, and *Oath of the Horatii* (1784). As Goethe himself indicates, an array of artistic works—such as the engravings of Piranesi—decorated the homes of the educated classes, celebrating the Roman past in a highly romantic way.

In the culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe, the Roman model was all pervasive. John Keegan opens his book on World War I by noting the common culture and shared values of the educated classes of Europe:

> Europe's educated classes held much of its *culture* in common, particularly through an appreciation for the art of the Italian and Flemish renaissance, . . . for the architecture of the Middle Ages and the classical revival. Despite a growing resistance to the primacy of Greek and Latin in the high schools, Homer, Thucydides, Caesar and Livy were set-books in all of them [Central and Entente powers] and the study of the classics remained universal. . . . *The classical foundations stood, perhaps more securely than the Christian. . . . The commonality of outlook preserved something recognisable as a single European culture.*[6]

This common elite culture had undeniable downsides. As Keegan intimates, the most glaring was that it did little to prevent a cataclysmic war or even to ameliorate war's horrors. Nor did fluency in Latin, imitation of Livian and Ciceronian style, and study of the Roman constitution and law provide guidance on means to avoid the conflagration in the first place. The celebration of Roman republican virtue had served the interests of those seeking to put an end to absolutism but lent itself equally well to the new sense of intense nationalism and military ardor that burst forth in August 1914. Indeed, this situation represents the great European paradox: Why did the common culture of Europe, both high and low, fail in World War I? Why did the cultivated concern for rationality and diplomacy give way to narrow and nationalistic goals? And, more poignant, how did it come about that twentieth-century Germany—that self-proclaimed paragon of philosophy, education, reason, and law—perpetrated the Shoah? Here we are at the core of our dilemma: Europeans have an almost mystic faith that the pursuit of high culture, secular culture, is the path to human fulfillment, yet the very success of high culture has regularly been turned on its head and has produced disasters.

Before we venture too far down this depressing path, let us consider more fully what it was that nineteenth-century Europeans found attractive about Rome. It was during this century that European cities shed their medieval features and began to take on the form of the modern urban center. The example of Rome, not the city itself as much as the many Roman cities throughout the Mediterranean, offered examples of effective planning: regular streets, a clear water supply, an admirable level of public sanitation in a secular context. Here again Gibbon is the guide:

> Among the innumerable monuments of architecture constructed by the Romans, how many have escaped the notice of history, how few have resisted the ravages of time and barbarism! And yet even the majestic ruins that are still scattered over Italy and the provinces, would be sufficient to prove that those countries were once the seat of a polite and powerful empire. Their greatness alone, or their beauty, might deserve our attention; but they are rendered more interesting by two important circumstances, which connect the agreeable history of the arts with the more useful history of human matters. Many of these works were erected at private expense, and almost all were intended for public benefit.[7]

Surely the ruins invoked a feeling of nostalgia in nineteenth-century Europeans, a yearning to acquire again the elements of a past that, though in ruins, could nonetheless evoke standards higher than those witnessed by

their own generation. That this nostalgia was focused on architecture is immediately apparent in the wildly popular reprinting of Piranesi's engravings, such as those mentioned by Goethe in the opening quotation (figure 5.2).

These and other buildings provided inspiration for a set of important European national monuments, including the *Arc de Triomphe* as well as the classical façades of a range of public buildings, opera houses, and museums in Europe and in the United States. At the same time, the discovery and excavation of Pompeii introduced to Europeans a new set of models that inspired a dramatically different sense of sculpture, painting, and interior design. My personal favorite—and everyone will have his or her choice—is David's splendid portrait of Madame de Recamier. Her dress, pose, and hair; the chaise lounge, the oil lamp, and the austere background capture splendidly the nostalgia for the Roman past as well as the aspirations of the "revolutionary" present.

This fascination with the past was not restricted to the visual arts. Cicero's *De officiis* (On moral obligation), emphasizing ethics with a minimal amount of religion, was one of the most widely printed books in all countries of Europe during the nineteenth century. It was read precisely because it provided a secular basis for morality in a society that was eager to find an alternative to the ecclesiastical. Roman law was studied intensively, with its value widely acknowledged in the new *Code Civil*. The power of this legacy is reflected in *Napoleon, Crowned by Time, Writes the Civil Code*, painted by Jean Baptiste Mauzaisse and exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1833 (figure 5.3). In an allusion to Moses and the Ten Commandments, Napoleon receives a laurel crown from Jupiter as he puts the final touches on the *Code*. The attraction of Roman civil law lay in its emphasis on rationality and in its support for the pillars of the new order—the defense of property, rationalism, and citizenship. The adoption of the *Code* throughout continental Europe represented not only a rejection of the "feudal" past but also the creation of a common legal framework for the further development of commerce and trade. Moreover, Roman constitutional law was not only congenial to intellectuals of republican persuasion but could easily be adapted to a new imperial order, offering a model for imperial government. Hence, Napoleon, unwilling to draw on the French royal tradition, represented his own sense of destiny with Roman imperial insignia, such as the laurel wreath crown, chosen for his own coronation. Even Napoleon III encouraged French cities "to liberate" their Roman ruins from the detritus of the Middle Ages, as is suggested, for instance, by the "excavations" of the theater at Orange. He himself set the model by writing a lengthy treatise on Caesar's *Gallic Wars*.
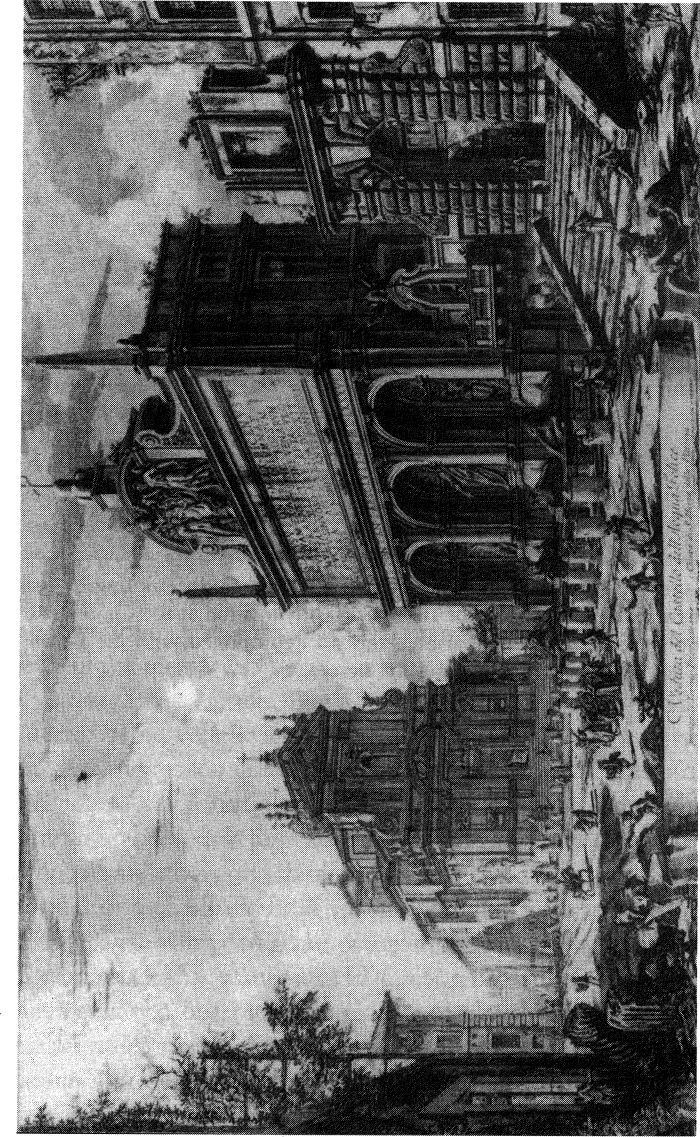

Figure 5.2. Print by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, from the *Vedute di Roma* (Views of Rome) series, depicting the *Acqua Felice* fountain, also known as the *Acqua del Mosè* (1760–1761). Originally built to celebrate the papacy of Sixtus V, the monument includes large sculptures dominated by Old Testament themes: the central figure of Moses and, on the two side bays, Aaron and Joshua. Reproduced from the collection of the Arthur Ross Foundation in *Piranesi: Rome Recorded* (1989), plate 56.

Figure 5.3. *Napoleon, Crowned by Time, Writes the Civil Code.* Painting by Jean Baptiste Mauzaisse exhibited at Salon of 1833. Currently located at the Châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau (Rueil-Malmaison, France). Reproduced with the permission of Réunion des Musées Nationaux and Art Resource (New York).

On a more hopeful note, the possibility of enduring peace, progress, and prosperity clearly appealed to nineteenth-century Europeans as much as it does to our contemporaries. The revolutionary and Napoleonic wars had been costly to both the victor and the vanquished. Diplomats sought a better model. They thought they found one in the kind of rule described by the Roman historian Tacitus, who was popular among nineteenth-century intellectuals. Tacitus was, of course, skeptical of absolutists; yet, like the new European elite, he was clearly ready to cooperate when the commonwealth stood to gain. Interest in Tacitus focused not only on his historical work (*annales* and *historiae*), both of which gave considerable attention to Gaul and the Rhine frontier, but also on the essays he composed on Germania and Britain, the *Vita Agricolae*. Most important for this study is the argument he presents linking peace, empire, and army. The setting is the theater/assembly at Trier in Germany. The Treviri, now long Romanized, are debating whether to remain in the Roman Empire or to join the Germanic invasion of the empire. In a speech put into the mouth of Petillius Cerialis, a Roman general, Tacitus explains why the Treviri should remain loyal to Rome:

> Gaul always had its petty kingdoms and intestine wars, till you submitted to our authority. We, though so often provoked, have used the right of conquest to burden you only with the cost of maintaining peace. For the tranquility of nations cannot be preserved without armies; armies cannot exist without pay; pay cannot be furnished without tribute; all else is common between us. You often command our legions. You rule these and other provinces. There is no privilege, no exclusion (*nihil separatum clausumve*).[8]

It is a remarkable insight. Rome had ceased to stand for the city in a narrow sense but had come to include as equals all those once conquered. "No privilege, no exclusion" were words that could be appropriately inscribed on the portal of the European Parliament.

To those responsible for the construction of nineteenth-century European cities, two elements of Roman culture were particularly attractive. Fundamental to urban prosperity was the control of water. It was not just that cities needed a supply of clean water, but to promote the health of city dwellers, one also had to remove waste water. Let us be clear on this point. There were very few medieval contributions in these areas but an abundance of Roman ones. Wherever one traveled in southern France, Spain, or Italy, one found the remains of the magnificent aqueducts that had once brought salubrious water to the cities of the empire. But it was not only these dramatic structures that mattered. Roman cities were blessed with a well-developed, though not so visible, sewer system and comfort stations. The construction of such systems in postrevolutionary Paris was a cause for wonderment and a sign of modernity.

In conclusion, intellectuals of the Enlightenment and Romantic eras in Europe found Rome an attractive "idea."[9] Cosmopolitan and secular, rational and inclusive, a tradition of grandeur but also one that evoked nostalgia and pathos, Rome offered a model of what could be achieved as well as lessons for what to avoid. In terms of material culture, the ruins of temples and theaters, aqueducts and sewers served as reminders of Rome's vibrant urban achievement. The discovery of Herculaneum and Pompeii and the dissemination of artifacts and illustrations had a profound effect on the domestic arts, on painting, and on architecture. To see the monuments and to reflect on the vicissitudes of the human condition engaged the interest of educated classes and encouraged them in large numbers to not only travel to Rome and Pompeii but to also decorate their own establishments to reflect this engagement.[10]

Hand in hand with this interest in the material culture of Rome was the continued study of Roman literature and law. The classical tradition as it was finalized in the Roman period offered an ethical and legal system that was secular and rational—qualities that were highly attractive to constitutional thinkers of the modern period. The debt continues to be acknowledged in the law faculties of continental universities. Moreover, the idea of Rome offered a vision of enduring peace and material prosperity. The 250 years of peace from the battle of Actium (31 BCE) until the crisis of the third century (CE 235) represents a unique era in the history of Europe.

The achievements of ancient Rome and the achievements of Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offered a vision of a prosperous, tolerant, and humane future. There was a deeply rooted belief that high culture and the formal study of its roots could provide the structure for great advances. The failure of this vision—first in the trenches of World War I and then in the gas chambers of Auschwitz—has served as a valuable corrective. The study of the past is, as Thucydides notes, useful, but each generation must internalize for itself its lessons or be condemned to repeat its failures (see "Europe in the Wake of the Shoah," chap. 8). High culture may not be a secure defense against the worst instincts of human nature; nonetheless, despite its limitations, it may be the only one.

Notes

I much appreciate the comments and improvements made by the editors of this volume. By way of a brief *apologia* at the beginning, let me acknowledge that I am well aware of the many profound and subtle differences in outlook, among intellectuals, across the different periods during which the impact of Rome was felt. My focus is on the persistence of several ideas about Rome as a model.

1. "The History of an Idea," *Economist*, January 3, 2004, 38.
2. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, abr. ed., ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 82. Italics added.
3. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 83. Italics added.
4. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 62. Italics added.
5. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 65.
6. John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 15. Italics added. Chap. 1 of this book lays out the problem in detail.
7. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 50.
8. Cornelius Tacitus, *Complete Works of Tacitus*, ed. Moses Hadas and trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Modern Library, 1942), *hist.* 4.74.

9. As European intellectuals moved from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, their ideas about Rome changed accordingly. Nonetheless, certain ideas about Rome as a model persisted.
10. The most interesting short book on this subject is by Wolf Leppmann, *Pompeii in Fact and Fiction* (London: Elek Books, 1968). Leppmann analyzes the "travel literature" of European intellectuals from the discovery of Herculaneum through the nineteenth century, focusing on changing attitudes of leading Enlightenment and Romantic figures.