I was fifteen when I first saw Rome. One of my mother's sisters had invited me to stay with her; we lived in a little hotel near the Via Nomentana and we were on our feet from morning till evening because I wanted to see "everything." I came home convinced that I had actually seen "everything." It took a few more years before I began to realize that I would never be able to see "everything" in Rome, and would have to spend the rest of my life exploring it.

Having grown up in the western part of Germany after the war, in cities that had been destroyed and then drearily rebuilt, I arrived in Rome in 1966 to find a city that, it seemed, had yet to undergo the heartless
ravages of modernization. I saw Pope Paul VI carried through the streets on the gilded platform, the sedilia gestatoria that once bore the consuls of the Roman Republic; it swayed past me, aaloft by eight sediarii clothed in red damask. The accompanying cardinals wore ermine mozzettas about their shoulders, their long red satin trains buttoned high, clinging in folds on their backs. At that time, the radical decisions that would break with the liturgical tradition had already been taken, but the old forms were still being observed, just as, seen from Earth, certain stars still twinkle although their light has already been extinguished.

Rome was a somber place in those years. Churches and palaces were painted a deep russet, and sun and rain had given them a blotchy complexion: Every wall looked like a Tapiés painting. In this brown gloom, the city seemed to have survived into the present from an earlier time. The baroque palaces and ancient brick ruins were not sharply contrasted: Their colors blended in with each other. Rome during the reign of Mussolini—not so long ago—and even earlier, under the kings of Savoy, had endured a series of savage modernizations that can be compared to the demolition of medieval Paris under Napoleon III; but at that age I could not have known this. I experienced the city as a place where, after immense and violent depredations in past centuries, time now stood still.

"Still" certainly not in the sense of silence. Right up to the end of the 1980s, no one in Rome had any qualms about permitting the growth of traffic on all the streets and squares of the city. The narrow streets of the Campus Martius were blocked by tangles of cars that sometimes took hours to dissipate. Where traffic was at all possible, the motorbikes roared along while pedestrians pressed themselves against the house walls. Traffic noise was omnipresent; only from the roof-terraces on the seventh floor of a palazzo did it dwindle to something like the sound of the sea. For ages the most famous squares in Rome—the Piazza del Popolo, the Piazza Navona, and even St. Peter's Square—had been used primarily as car parks. It was not attractive, but it did not provoke dismay. The city was not seen from the point of view of tourism, of how it could be made pleasing to visitors. The ancient view was that a city should be a place of liberty, often to the point of anarchy—a place where many conflicting forces should be allowed to clash without restraint, and thereby achieve a non-managed cooperation that is different from state regulation. This conception of the city was impenetrable to the outsider; it was the idea of the city as a harmonious chaos, and was still to be found in Rome, even if the urbs aeterna, the Eternal City, was gliding toward self-destruction.

Even as late as 1986 when, in the old Roman Ghetto, I began writing my novel Westend, the cats went about scavenging, the pigeons were messing up the pavements, and the narrow, echoing streets amplified the whining of the traffic into a thunderous din. But out of this earthly filth, gigantic mottled pillars soared into a plum-colored night sky; the city groaned under the weight of its history—and for me it was a liberation from a Germany that was devastated by both war and reconstruction. Dwelling among those Roman walls, I was able to bridge the grievous historical discontinuity.

Often, to speak of past times is to engage in nostalgia. We must be rational: It could not continue in this way. Rome has changed, and many people would say that these changes have been beneficial. Everywhere in Europe the little shops and workshops have vanished from the inner city—why not in Rome, too? Everywhere the priceless historical "old city" is no longer the home of the indigenous folk who once inhabited it in their inimitable ways. If London has to do without its old Covent Garden market and Paris has to say goodbye to Les Halles, why should Rome hold on to its noisy Campo dei Fiori, smelling of vegetables? Shouldn't Romans long for the pedestrian precincts of the north that have turned our city centers into shopping malls? Shouldn't we be glad that the cacophonous din has been banished from the city? After all, the ancient stones are still in place. If you wander through the back streets and do not look too closely, everything is as it was a hundred years ago: The backdrop remains, even if the shops no longer sell salad and potatoes but jeans and tourist paraphernalia.

Art historians have since discovered that the Roman russet that gave the city its monumental aspect—and that aged so splendidly—was not truly Baroque, but was introduced by the kings of Savoy. As a result, whenever a church or palazzo is ripe for restoration, it is painted white—a beautiful, crushed-bone white or ivory—that unfortunately robs the building of its mass and solidity. Wasn't it precisely this massive weight that gave the city its timeless, brooding splendor? The palazzi on the Piazza Navona, the Palazzo Farnese, the architecture around the Spanish Steps, the Galleria Borghese—these are all now white or at least cleaned; even St. Peter's was cleaned so thoroughly that the stone now looks like white expandable polystyrene.
In the warmer seasons, hosts of visitors, dressed in leisure wear, jostle along behind tour guides (holding aloft their little pennants) and reciprocally block one other’s views. Between March and November the large museums—the Vatican Museum most of all—are virtually inaccessible; in the Sistine Chapel, even the most democratic champions of the common man succumb to mass pressure and adopt the tone of a disgusted elite. Anyone who knows where the life of the Roman people can still be found—come una volta—keeps it to himself. And where have the cats gone, and the confused old ladies who fed them spaghetti and tomato sauce at street corners? It wasn’t a pretty sight, but it was a very Roman one, particularly if you could discern the curve of an ancient pillar protruding from the medieval wall. As for the flocks of pigeons, they have been decimated by the seagulls who long ago colonized the city and who, with their razor-sharp bills, slice open their prey like a can of sardines.

Rome long resisted modernization, but in the end it arrived all the same. There are advantages for the visitor: There are far fewer strikes than before. (A couple of strike days have been preserved, no doubt as a kind of folk tradition for the amusement of tourists.) There are more museums with longer opening times, and everywhere there are facilities for people in wheelchairs. The entire old city has become a single giant restaurant; around the Piazza Navona, it does not close until four in the morning. Is there perhaps no longer any room for the romanticism of Rome?

While the word “romantic” will always be associated with Rome, it is not identical with it. The miracle of Rome is less a matter of its many declines than of its resurrections. The “Roman symphony” is composed not in a minor, but in a major key—where “major” stands for that stamina that guarantees a long duration. If you are seeking the sentimentality—in a “minor” key!—of the Rome of the sixties in the twenty-first century, you will be disappointed. On the other hand, if you admire the endurance that can take succeeding times and movements in its stride, you will find it today in Rome.

Eternity is not merely a particularly long time but something qualitatively different from time; yet Rome was called “eternal” long before this genuinely incommensurable concept could have been put forward. In a poem (written during the reign of Augustus) that plumbs the deep recesses of the past, the elegiac Tibullus, a contemporary of Horace and Ovid, was the first to refer to Rome, the “urbs,” as “eternal.” He uses this appellation as a matter of course, as something universally acknowledged: “Not yet had Romulus formed the walls of the Eternal City.” If we accept 753 B.C. as the year of the city’s legendary founding, when Tibullus called it “eternal,” Rome was not even a thousand years old. When Romulus, in a land sparsely populated, circumscribed the first boundaries of his foundation, Babylon and Memphis had long existed without anyone thinking of calling them “eternal Babylon” and “eternal Memphis.”

In most cases, a craving for political renown is cruelly punished, but it was otherwise with the urbs aeterna, though a poet at the time of the Augustan re-foundation of state and empire—following the period of civil strife—was no doubt tempted to employ bold metaphors in praise of the former warlord who now wanted to be known as a prince of peace. The suicidal hundred years’ war had hardly been brought to an end when the republican constitution was hollowed out to become a mere facade that barely concealed a monarchy aimed at extending its power. For someone to envisage the supra-temporal nature of a long-shattered state that had only just been stabilized—Rome and the state were identical—shows either genuine visionary inspiration or a considerable audacity.

Tibullus, however, was not the only one among his poet contemporaries to risk making bold predictions. An air of the future wafted around Augustus. Horace claimed to know that in his poetry he had created a monument “aere perennius”—more lasting than bronze—and he was right, if we examine the condition of the few ancient bronzes that have come down to us. Virgil’s prediction of a great future for a peace-bringing Roman Empire was doubtless welcome to the ruler, but at the same time it was not entirely mistaken; its subsequent reinterpretation in a Christian sense gave it new life and further consequence when the western Roman Empire had faded away. But what was going on in Tibullus’s head when, around the year zero, he was already calling his Rome “eternal”? Like everyone else, of course, Tibullus knew that nothing on earth is “eternal.”

It would be pedantic to insist on a precise meaning for a word that has a certain intoxicating quality and seems to hint at the unimaginable. All the same, one might specify under what conditions the idea of eternity could meaningfully be linked with matters of transitory history. If human beings with their brief life span call something “eternal,” they are setting their sights on something far beyond this span. We have not experienced the end
of the world, but we have witnessed the collapse of particular worlds. Whenever a city or country is annihilated, whenever a civilization is extinguished—whether it is the Hittite Empire or a long-hidden Indian village in the Amazon jungle—when cultural continuity is violently broken, those who witness such catastrophes experience the end of a world. An impenetrable organism of religious, poetic, social, economic, and legal elements is torn apart—the world came to an end, in Carthage and Königsberg, Smyrna and Aquileia. Neither the western nor the eastern Roman Empire was spared this kind of annihilation of a world.

On the other hand, when a city has not only survived its own death—this does happen—but continues to exist, with values and aspirations intact, in the face of profound trauma, playing its recognizable role despite huge transformations, in a context that is markedly different from what it was, we can only be astonished at such a miracle, and call it “eternal.” So we acknowledge it to be a great exception, a unique shattering of what, according to the laws of history, might be expected. In calling Rome “eternal,” the Augustan poet may have been daring and presumptuous, but at the same time he may have been inspired. He said more, at that time, than he knew.

It must be said that the Roman Empire was much more than an imperium held together by brute force. Goethe, in his Zabme Xenien, puts the mystery of Rome’s continued existence into the briefest possible dialogue between Jesus and the city of Rome:

Jesus: And shall our pact endure, through ages all the same?
Rome: Roma now I’m called; Humanity, then, will be my name.

It was the state’s transformation into a civilized and religious ideal embracing entire nations that remained when the empire fell apart; it was this ideal that guaranteed the city’s global significance even as it lay in ruins. The ruler became the mother. The substance of the Roman Empire was trodden in a winepress, so to speak, and subjected to a process of fermentation—ultimately producing the priceless wine of the European nations. They all considered themselves to be Rome’s legitimate heirs; they jealously refused to acknowledge others’ claims to this inheritance and so kept the idea of Rome alive. Rome lived on in its many daughters. First of all, of course, came the Roman Church with the pope, who took the place of the Roman emperor, claiming universal jurisdiction. Then, with the translatio imperii, came Germany, and France, the Church’s “eldest daughter” (whose king enjoyed imperial dignity), Spain with its worldwide Catholic realm, England with its empire, and the United States with its fragile Pax Americana. But the Orthodox Byzantines, too, regard themselves to this day as Romaioi, and the Russians speak of Moscow as the “Third Rome.”

Rome, in comparison, seemed to be nothing more than a piece of history, turned to stone. The city never sank so low as at the end of the Papal States, when it became the capital of a newly united Italy. But just when it seemed doomed to be the capital of a mere province, the pope renewed his claim to worldwide authority and, when his European state was lost, created the basis for his influence in Asia, Africa, and the two Americas. The title “the eternal city” justified itself. Or do we really think that millions visit Rome every year just to view a corpse? No doubt many of them do not have much idea what they are looking for, but this only makes the incessant, ant-like flow of visitors even more mysterious. No place on earth, surely, could avoid being ruined by such an invasion, but we are inclined to believe that Rome is indestructible because it has such a dire history behind it.

Rome’s imposing architecture dominates the history of art with buildings designed for a race of giants. In the courtyard of the Capitoline Museum stands a colossal marble head of the emperor Constantine; his hands and feet, once attached to a wooden, gilded-bronze torso—long since turned to dust—are as big as grown men. In the Caracalla Baths there were once statues of elephantine proportions. Nowadays they can be seen in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, but when they were discovered and exhumed, the Palazzo Farnese was designed to house them—only creatures of such bulk could really feel at home in its halls. Proportions were set by the Pantheon and the Colosseum; in St. Peter’s, the holy water fonts are watched over by putti as big as calves and as heavy as breeding sows. It seems to be a Roman speciality to make plans on a huge scale, requiring the use of frightening masses of material to carry them out. Moving and re-erecting the Egyptian obelisks without damaging these fragile giants called for resources as vast as those required for military campaigns. Unlike in Paris or Washington—these daughters and inheritors of Rome—the pillars and cupolas are always to be found situated very close to ruins that seem to say to the proud travertine houses what used to be written over the rows of skulls in the ancient ossuaries: “We were what you are—and you will become what we are.”
Shards, fragments, and split stones determine Rome’s atmosphere. Even more than the lofty cupolas, the spoils of the defunct—and yet undying—empire cause the name “Roman” to become attached to a square, a house, or a garden. The Renaissance and Baroque mastercraftsmen planned and designed like men possessed—but what is really Roman came unplanned into being, in a second existence remote from the wide fields of antique ruins. To be really Roman, the nave of a church must have ten different kinds of pillars from long-forgotten pagan temples. Its altar, which is also the sarcophagus of a martyr, was once a bathtub of red porphyry that stood in the thermal baths of a palace. A pillar’s capital will bear the image of Osiris, and the precious floor will be covered with circular marble plates that are nothing other than ancient pillars sawn into disks. The front steps of old houses contain pieces of stone found in the grounds and given a second home: stone tablets with a couple of letters from an inscription; a fragment of a carved fruit garland; a marble head; a portion of a finely profiled ledge—the most beautiful wall-embellishment imaginable. No fresco is as exciting as these collections of spolia.

In the walls of many houses, one finds a pillar beside the butchery or the Internet café, baked into the masonry like a token in the German “Three Kings’ cake.” In the gardens, capitals and broken lintels lie about without apparent purpose, as if thrown there by giant hands; they have become part of the undergrowth. Sometimes they have become playthings: A trimmed capital is placed on a pillar much too short for it, and the pillar itself now stands on a nonmatching pedestal. In corners of the garden of the Palazzo Farnese, Piranesi constructed huge three-dimensional structures that may have served as inspiration for the painter Giorgio de Chirico’s collages in the arcaded courtyards of arte metafisica. Collage, as an intellectual medium of twentieth-century art, therefore has its incomparable precedent in Rome, the difference being that here the composition of the spolia took place by itself, so to speak. This can produce dangerous consequences: A person who has become vividly aware of this unreflective incorporation of ancient ruins into the creation of later architecture can no longer take seriously any house that does not have such stone fragments in its walls, or any church that lacks a pillar or two from a pagan temple.

It is true that, over many centuries of decline, the buildings of antiquity served only as habitable ruins and quarries for an indigent people who had forgotten their own crafts and were too poor to have stone transported to them from any distance for new construction. A general poverty went hand in hand with aesthetic neglect. Yet the stones that were utilized here and there, for this or that purpose, were wonderfully cut ashlar, choice chiselled beams, monolithic pillars of red and green porphyry and African marble, remains of sarcophagi in high relief, and capitals that, separated from their pillars, became independent sculptures. So it came to pass that their unthinking, day-to-day familiarity with these wrecked remains gave to the fragments a precious quality totally inaccessible to those who created them in the first place.

In Rome, once you have acquired the habit of keeping an eye open for spolia, you will find them farther and farther afield, in the floors and pillars of churches, at street corners, in walls and windowills. These items culled from temples and palaces become, in their new setting, meteorites or even precious stones, and acquire an individuality they did not originally possess. At first sight one wants to touch them: They seem more real than the walls—now old in their turn—into which they have been incorporated. A shoe shop where the ceiling is supported by an ancient pillar topped by a Corinthian capital is a magical place. The nave of a medieval church, in virtue of the ancient pillars (of different dimensions and hues) that support its timbers, breathes a particular air, as if living creatures—caryatids—used to gather here. The thoughtless utilization of ancient remains (often resulting from acute poverty) imparts to the new context a certain legitimacy unattainable in an architecture that, while brilliantly planned, as it can be in Rome, lacks the element of “spoils.” Spolia are for buildings what salt is for food: the only thing that can unlock their taste.

Rome, once it had become Christian, was long marked by a seemingly irreconcilable struggle between the ancient pagan culture and Christianity. The consciousness of a break was stark. Evidence of pagan religion was destroyed. Once John’s Secret Book of Revelation had depicted Rome as the Whore of Babylon, it was not only the political and economic collapse that made any connection with the art of antiquity impossible: There was simply no longer any desire for such continuity. Finally it was the popes themselves who re-established this continuity in a display of magnificence without which Rome could never have been referred to as “eternal.” As we know, Rome was not the capital of the Renaissance; this was Florence. But the fact that it was in Rome that a reconciliation was achieved
with Christianity's former persecutors makes it all the more striking.

The emperor Nero, one of the great monsters of world history—about whose moral depravity there is such universal agreement that people of independent intelligence sometimes feel challenged to try to discover mitigating circumstances, or at least shades of gray, in his biography—built himself a residence that survives in the memory of peoples and nations as a legend of unimaginable, unsurpassed luxury, like the Xanadu of Kubla Khan or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon’s Queen Semiramis. The Domus Aurea, Nero’s “golden house,” was not a palace in the modern, Western sense. It was not an integral complex of buildings like Versailles. Rather, it was more like an imperial Chinese palace or the palaces of the Indian moghuls: a huge garden with large and small pavilions linked by paths, and many courtyards; a constant alternation of inside and outside, with structures mostly of a single story, from above resembling a settlement of many scattered houses. The property of the Domus Aurea was actually larger than today’s Vatican City; from within, it was easy to forget that it was situated in a city of a million inhabitants. Its woodland was planted after the pattern of a Homeric locus amoenus (a “pleasant spot”); sacred shrines, thermal baths, a theater, libraries, and ceremonial rooms formed an ensemble that was embellished throughout with statues. In Nero’s words, it was “a domicile worthy of a human being.” This has gone down in history as one of the tyrant’s most insolent pronouncements—though it does not express any degree of scorn for mankind. What is worthy of a human being is indeed the great and the beautiful. The fact that such things are only attainable by the very few is a different story.

After Nero’s demise, his infinitely precious palace, embracing all the arts, became a symbol of his reign, seen in retrospect as a time of trouble. None of his successors as head of state would have dared to live there. The huge lake was filled in, and the Colosseum was built on the reclaimed land. Its name reminds us that a colossal gilded statue of the execrated tyrant once stood there. Similarly, on Monte Oppio opposite, the palace buildings were buried under dirt mounds. On the land thus gained, the emperor Trajan built thermal baths for the people. Now the luxury of the Domus Aurea could become the stuff of legend. Suetonius, the chronicler of the imperial scandal, wrote that it had included a circular hall with cupola and a revolving ceiling, from which rose petals were showered upon those dining below. Now the Domus Aurea was supposed to have been a “forbidden city,” the vanished realm of a wicked magician.

Descriptions of the ancient world are full of contempt for Nero; the writers are appalled at the extravagance and vulgarity, much as, nowadays, people are outraged at Saddam Hussein’s private cinema or Imelda Marcos’s one thousand pairs of shoes. In the meantime the vaulted roof of the palace on Monte Oppio, entirely filled with dirt and debris, slept a long sleep. The western Roman Empire collapsed, the Goths arrived, and then the Byzantines and the Lombards. The imperial city became the papal city, and sunk into ruin. We must imagine a city that had been full of impressive public buildings, crammed with temples and palaces, now degraded and largely desolate, with its great ancient buildings ruined and turned into command centers of the parties of civil war—a city that had nothing to recommend it but its name. For the name “Rome” was more than any particular form of the city. Rome continued to live in virtue of its name, and from this name came the impulse to rebuild it.

Everything that had been built in Rome since the Middle Ages was inspired by the idea of reconstructing a city that had almost sunk into oblivion. Every artistic and architectural innovation in subsequent centuries took its bearings from the Rome of antiquity. The greater part of the old buildings had been destroyed, but we can get a concept of its former wealth from what survived the centuries of decline, plundering, and neglect. The early Renaissance architects still had recourse to large parts of the Colosseum, Trajan’s markets, the Pantheon, the Caracalla Baths, and a vast store of statues, reliefs, vases, and sarcophagi; from these they could learn. This avant-garde had one ambition: to be as good as the ancients.” To seek is to find: Desiring to know, they constantly discovered new evidence of the ancient art from Rome’s very dirt. Street level had risen because of the volume of detritus. What had been at ground level now seemed to the medieval inhabitants to be subterranean caves and grottoes that they encountered, unsuspectingly, in the course of building. The halls of the Domus Aurea had imploded and sunk: Anyone looking down through a hole in its roof would be met with an echoing blackness.

I t must have been around the year 1500, Pope Julius II, the warmongering builder and patron of the arts, was urging Italy’s artists to undertake extraordinary projects. It is difficult for us to imagine how people in these decades approached the ancient world: The “old” was the “new” and the very newest. It was not covered by a layer of scholarly dust. As yet, no academic discipline had tamed antiquity. It was at that moment a
demanding mistress. We are told that when, in a cave near the Domus Aurea, the sculpture of the Laocoon group was discovered, all the church bells of Rome were rung. The Laocoon sculpture was of white stone—and now other, entirely different discoveries were about to be made.

When Rome’s painters, holding torches in their hands, let themselves down on ropes into the grotto of the Domus Aurea, they found themselves encircled by vivid colors. The walls were covered with paintings. It was known from old descriptions that Nero had employed a certain Fabulus as a painter, but now one could see the work of this man and, no doubt, of his huge workshop of anonymous slaves. The corridors and halls, the sala ottagonale, and the ingenious cupola chamber that were entered again (now below ground level) after almost fifteen hundred years were covered from top to bottom with stucco and painting. This called for a revision of the malicious slander as to Nero’s taste in art. While the dimensions of these underground rooms were indeed majestic, the artistic decoration was such as to dissipate all sense of intimidation. The high walls were covered with miniatures. The lofty surfaces were filled with a huge network of delicately framed small still lifes, arabesques, and mock architecture as used in theater backdrops, with masks and trompe l’oeil. Ceiling and walls were divided up with fine stucco frames; stucco relief alternated with painting, but this stucco was executed as precisely as cameo. The rooms of this notorious persecutor of Christians were so elegant and tasteful that even popes could not resist the temptation to adopt and adapt, for their own palaces, the style of the man who crucified St. Peter.

Raphael must have been utterly enchanted by the magnificent paintwork of the Domus Aurea. He seems to have visited it again and again, though his name does not occur among those painters who descended into the grottoes, leaving behind their signatures (often written in soot from the torches). He understood correctly the disposition of the buildings. Formerly it was possible to see from them the huge artificial lake; they were flooded with light and, like loggias, open to the landscape. The massive impression of the brick walls was artistically broken up by a thousand inventive solutions—this was no state-sponsored art, but rather a Sanssouci, though amplified many times. The wealth of motifs, drawing the eye of the beholder to wander all over the surfaces, also made it a literary art: The walls became pages of a book, with poems written in images. What was necessary to appreciate this art? Education, childlike naiveté, humor, delight in detail—that is to say, not at all qualities one associates with a thick-witted show-off. What an ironic pleasure must Raphael have felt when he hit the idea of situating this kind of painting from Nero’s grotto next to Michelangelo’s bellowing titans on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel!

My first Roman apartment, rented almost thirty years ago, was in the Ghetto. At that time Rome had no pedestrian zones; it was still noisy and dirty. Each generation fashions its own picture of Rome. Mine is still what it was then: a gloomy, cracked, neglected Rome; a Rome resembling an old actress, once a famous beauty, whose noble profile one can still sense, but who has become a chain-smoking wreck. My room was in a large, twelve-windowed palace. To get to my room, I had to walk through a long series of staterooms where the red silk cloth hung in tatters on the walls. The oil paintings were as black as if covered with soot from a thousand candles; their golden frames with their shells and acanthus leaves leaned, encroaching, into the room. Mostly the rooms were abandoned; the old proprietor, wrapped for warmth in a violet crocheted stole—even in hot weather—used to sit with his cook in the kitchen where the television stood, watching the Telenovela news. All day, the cook’s essential task was continually to regulate the daylight that penetrated through the window shutters—closing the inner shutters, opening the outer shutters. She was to “paint the light,” so to speak, with many shadows and shadings, until sunset, when all the shutters were opened and, for a brief spell, the warm, apricot-hued rays of the declining sun illuminated the interior. It was like the moment of recognition shortly before life’s end: “Ah, that’s how it should have been!”

My room offered the greatest possible contrast to this wealth of golden thrones and full-length curtains with tasselled tie-backs. It was large and practically bare; beneath the ceiling, vaulting six meters high, stood a table top supported on two painter’s trestles, a rickety garden chair, a washbasin with a single tap—cold water, as was appropriate under the circumstances—and the sleeping quarters, which consisted of a richly carved new-Renaissance bedframe and, within it, a camp bed. There was, nonetheless, a mirror for shaving. And if I leaned out of the window, I could see, far below me in the street—filled with the rattle and roar of motorbikes—at the foot of the opposite house, a wall of irregular gray stones. “From republican times,” said the owner. “But not the present republic, per carità!
From the time of the real republic, two hundred years before Christ!

Rome, repeatedly rebuilt from its ruin and—faced with the new—firmly rooted in its ancient soil for two thousand years (and far more), triumphant over all destruction, turning each loss into a profit; this Rome-ideology is so convincing, yet I have managed to shake it off. I know of Roman wounds and injuries that cannot heal; grave breaches in the organic Roman tissue that have profoundly undermined its integrity. In recent times, in Rome, I have found myself staring at the squares and streets, aware of just how many medieval churches, monasteries, palaces, and almshouses have been sacrificed for them. The Parisian architect Baron Haussmann is often singled out as the heartless wrecker of old cities, ploughing his boulevards through Gothic Paris. But Haussmann's boulevards have considerable aesthetic value: They are so beautiful that, while one may regret the vast losses they involved, it is impossible to feel appropriately outraged, and one is left with a gentle melancholy in the face of history's appetite for thoughtless consumption and birth-giving. Yet the Savoy kings and Mussolini had no Haussmann; Italy in the nineteenth century had sunk into an artistic mediocrity, and Mussolini's foolery (that cost so many human lives) in attempting, as a second Cola di Rienzo, to re-establish the empire led to the faceless travertine housing blocks that, with their space-consuming bulk, obliterated the unique profile of a Christian city that had embraced the remains of antiquity. O this eternal travertino! At sunset it adopts a roseate hue, but under the pitiless hammering of the midday sun, it looks like bone—an impression substantiated by the blisters and patches of damp facilitated by its fine porosity.

Rome is the first city to have suffered severe damage from the introduction of tree-lined avenues; I mean the lush plane trees along the Tiber banks and elsewhere. They were planted when Rome became the Italian capital; the Savoyards brought them with them from the north—but plane trees do not belong in Rome. Rome is not a southern French provincial city with people playing petanque below the subprefect's office. Sunlight sentimentality—glittering points of light amid bright green foliage—is not Roman. Rome's trees are the timeless ancient pines of black-green, stiff lines of trees towering over human beings and looking, from a far distance, like a cortège following a coffin. Autumnal, vernal emotions do not suit Rome; Rome desires the dead evergreen, the serious recollectedness of plants in their relation to stones.

The worst effect of modern times on Rome's ancient inheritance lies much further back, however, and the more I know of it, the more heartache it gives me. I am referring to the demolition of old St. Peter's, the basilica created by the emperor Constantine, the papacy's most precious relic. It was supplanted by the St. Peter's of Bramante, Michelangelo, and Maderna. Listing these master architects and the buildings they created, which never cease to amaze me, I realize how little any individual genius can actually contribute to a city and to the life of a religion. In Constantine's hall of pillars, the ancient world and Christianity had come together in a way that can be called truly Catholic. By contrast, the new cathedral, though it belongs unquestionably to the Renaissance and the Baroque, seems to be strangely lacking in history. In its luxuriant exaggeration of what is "Roman," it is basically a modernist revolt against the Roman idea of organic growth through all periods of history. The Roman idea must oppose all stark contrasts; this is what Rome means. Inwardly to experience the multiple destructions of old Rome is to sense the real picture of Rome, endangered Rome, more and more vividly in one's imagination.

I wrote the major part of my last novel in a little room on the roof of the Chiesa Nuova. The Chiesa Nuova is situated on the Corso Vittorio Emanuele. A mountain of travertino had to be removed to make room for it; the church was fitted into the maze of little streets like an ocean liner. Is it actually beautiful? It is another of those showy marble halls with pillars and cupolas—of a magnificence that, in Rome, is almost commonplace. The Romans of antiquity had the great thermal baths, decorated with statues, in which, of course, they spent their days. The Romans of Christian Rome have their church buildings (not, in a way, unlike the thermal baths now in ruins) that are filled with paintings, mosaics, sculptures, and bronzes; here they behave just as they do in the public squares.

On the roof of the church, however, reached by a narrow spiral staircase, a hermit's idyll awaited me. The uneven floor followed the contours of the side chapels' little cupolas, and through a window almost totally obscured by grime, I could see the dust-caked wings of a stucco angel hovering high above a shimmering altar below. A sarcophagus with a wave motif contained a garden hose that was used to water the many flowerpots. St. Philip Neri, this church's founder, had his cell up here—though not the one that is nowadays pointed out as his, with his mattress and black soutane that are kept behind grilles to right and left of a small altar. His original cell was...
burnt down at one time, as is the case with many places full of memories. The streets near the Piazza Navona have been transformed into a single pizzeria; at many street corners there are crowds of people who disperse only gradually at four o’clock in the morning, but here on the roof there was a positively rural tranquility.

In Rome, in the autumn, a miracle of nature can be observed, as beautiful as a sunset or a mighty waterfall: Clouds of starlings with their little black bodies take off in a daring attempt to darken the skies. They are a particularly impressive testimony to Roman continuity—even Pliny the Elder described them. There could be no better place from which to watch the starlings than my hermitage. They put on a kind of firework display, compacting together in thousands to make a dark sun, and then exploding in all directions like sky-borne chrysanthemums; they change into a swarm that wafts this way and that like waving flags; they form huge hearts, vast ellipses, as if their common aim is to present the world with an astonishing, perfect show of figure-flying. Then they change plan and allow themselves, from great height, to drop like rain onto the city roofs. A winged vanguard aims directly toward me and then, just in front of my window, shoots into the air again, only to return and repeat the game. They do this only to let me hear the most beautiful and delicate sound of all: the rustling of the tiny wings, like—what? Like the rustling of a taffeta petticoat or the gentle chatter of a stream over multicolored pebbles, or the bursting of soap bubbles. No, it is indescribable, and awakens in me a yearning to hear it anew, again and again.