

The Second Fall of Rome

Have the past two centuries of Western culture been one long saga of lionizing Greece while disparaging the cultural prestige and classical values of ancient Rome?

by Michael Lind

T

he reputation of Roman civilization in the Western world has never been lower than it is today. To a remarkable degree, the cultural and political legacies of both the Roman republic and the Roman Empire have been edited out of the collective memory of the United States and other Western nations not only by multiculturalists attacking the Western canon but by would-be traditionalists purporting to defend it.

The loss of the ancient Romans has been the gain of the ancient Greeks. Today, Western democracy is usually traced back to Athens rather than the Roman republic, something that would have astonished the American Founding Fathers and the French Jacobins. The Roman philosopher-statesman Cicero—perhaps the most important historical model in the minds of early modern European and American republicans—has been replaced by the Athenian leader Pericles as the beau ideal of a Western statesman. The art of rhetoric, once thought to be central to republican culture, has come to be associated with pompous politicians and dishonest media consultants. As for the Roman Empire, it is often thought of as an early version of 20th-century Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, or, if the emphasis is on decadence, as a rehearsal for the Weimar Republic.





The Course of Empire: Destruction (1836) by Thomas Cole

The reputation of Roman literature has fared no better than that of Roman government. Roman authors such as Virgil and Horace and Seneca and Plautus are often dismissed as second-rate imitators of the Greeks. By common consent, the three greatest epic poets of the West are identified as Homer, Dante, and Milton. Even though the epic was a Roman specialty, Virgil, Statius, and Lucan are demoted to a second tier or ignored altogether. In two and a half centuries, Virgil has gone from being the greatest poet of all time to a feeble imitator of Homer and, finally, a paid propagandist comparable to a hack writer in a 20th-century totalitarian state. The Roman playwright Seneca, once revered as a tragedian and a philosopher, is no longer taken seriously by students of literature or philosophy.

The denigration of the Romans and the promotion of the Greeks has not been the product of increased knowledge or refinement in taste. Rather, it is the result of an anti-Roman and anti-Latin bias that has warped Western European and American culture since the late 18th century—a bias that 20th-century modernism inherited from 19th-century romanticism and 18th-century neoclassicism. An unbiased re-examination of the Roman legacy reveals that the ancient Latin traditions in art and philosophy, if not in foreign policy

or government, contain much of value to the contemporary world.

Rome's low reputation today seems astonishing when one considers how central the legacy of Roman civilization was to Western identity only a few centuries ago. From the Middle Ages to the late 18th century, the Roman classics dominated the Western literary curriculum. Before the Renaissance, many Greek classics, preserved by the Byzantines and Arabs, were unknown in the West. Dante, for example, knew Homer only by reputation. Even when more Greek classics became available, few members of the Latin-educated Western elite studied Greek. An English translation of Aeschylus did not appear until 1777.

Renaissance humanists, despite their eclectic interest in Greek as well as Egyptian and Jewish traditions, were chiefly concerned with reviving the culture of Roman antiquity. The architect Palladio combined Roman motifs with vernacular Italian architecture to create a style that replaced Gothic throughout Italy and western and northern Europe. Literary scholars devised "Ciceronian Latin," an artificial dialect using only words Cicero used. Seneca inspired Renaissance tragedy, and his fellow Romans Plautus and Terence provided the models for Renaissance comedy.

A succession of European rulers from Charlemagne to Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor from 1519 to 1556, shared the dream of reviving the Roman Empire in the West. Both Dante and Machiavelli imagined a new Roman Empire. Absolute monarchs such as Louis XIV portrayed themselves as new Caesars. Eighteenth-century republicans in the United States and France identified their new states with the Roman republic and identified themselves with republican statesmen such as Cincinnatus, Cato, and Cicero, or tyrannicides such as Brutus.

Unlike some of the radicals of the French Revolution, most of the American Founders had reservations about treating either the Roman republic or the Greek city-states as precedents for a modern national and liberal republic. In 1791, James Wilson denied that "the Grecian and Roman nations" understood "the true principles of original, equal, and sentimental liberty." He declared, "But no longer shall we look to ancient histories for principles and systems of pure freedom. The close of the 18th century, in which we live, shall teach mankind to be purely free." George Washington expressed a similar sentiment in his call for a stronger federal government: "The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition; but at an Epocha when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any other period."

Nevertheless, the American state constitutions and the federal consti-

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tution of 1787 incorporated what elite Federalists such as John Adams and the authors of the *Federalist Papers* considered to be the features that gave the Roman constitution a stability missing from the faction-ridden city-states of ancient Greece and medieval Italy: a strong chief magistrate and a bicameral legislature with a powerful senate.

Rejecting this prescription, American populists and radical democrats found a different precedent not in Greek democracy but in the “Ancient Saxon Constitution” of England, whose assembly was invoked as a model for a unicameral legislature with members serving short terms.

Thomas Jefferson, who believed in the populist myth of the democratic Anglo-Saxons, informed his fellow former president John Adams in December 1819 that he had been reading the letters of Cicero: “When the enthusiasm . . . kindled by Cicero’s pen and principles, subsides into cool reflection, I ask myself What was that government which the virtues



George Washington (1832–40) by Horatio Greenough

of Cicero were so zealous to restore, and the ambition of Caesar to subvert?” Adams had once written that “the Roman constitution formed the noblest people, and the greatest power, that has ever existed.” But now he agreed with Jefferson about the Romans: “I never could discover that they possessed much real Virtue, or real Liberty there.” (This concession, however, was less damaging than it might appear, because Adams and other Federalists believed that

institutions such as the Roman Senate were more important than civic virtue in ensuring the success of republican government.)

Despite their doubts about the relevance of classical precedents in politics, the American Founders did not hesitate to borrow the imagery of the Roman republic. Among other things, this practice disguised the extent to which the United States was an organic outgrowth of English society. The very name “republic” was a version of the Latin *res publica*. The building that housed the legislature was called the Capitol, not the Parliament; the upper house was the Senate; a creek on Capitol Hill was waggishly named the Tiber, after the river that ran through Rome. The Great Seal of the United States includes two mottoes from Virgil: *Annuit coeptis* (He approves of the beginnings), and *novus ordo seclorum* (a new order of the ages). In the *Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay argued for the ratification of the federal constitution using the name of Publius Valerius Publicola, the first consul of the Roman republic. The enemies of republicanism that they described—faction, avarice, corruption, ambition—were those identified by Cicero, Tacitus, and other Roman writers.

The triumph of Roman imagery in the American and French Revolutions, however, marked an Indian summer of Roman prestige in the West. By the late 18th century, new trends in Western culture were undermining the classical values symbolized by both republican and imperial Rome.

The first challenge came from Scotland. In 1762, the Scottish writer James Macpherson published a “translation” of a supposed third-century epic by the fabled Gaelic bard Ossian. The poems purported to be a loose collection of primitive ballads rather than a polished work of a civilized writer. Before it was exposed as a forgery, the work inspired a Europe-wide vogue; Goethe praised it, and Napoleon took a copy with him to Egypt. The influential German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) argued that the Homeric epics, too, grew out of the spontaneous songs of the ancient Greek *Volk*.

Virgil, once preferred to Homer because he was more civilized, was now considered inferior to Homer—for the same reason. The neoclassicism of the late 18th century was not so much the final stage of Renaissance and Baroque humanism as it was the beginning of a new romantic primitivism that would manifest itself in 19th-century romanticism and 20th-century modernism. The primitive was now associated with virtue and imagination, the sophisticated with immorality and triviality. Among Greek writers, the more primitive and sublime, such as Aeschylus, came to be preferred to those such as Euripides who seemed too sophisticated and self-conscious to Europeans seeking an intellectual vacation from civilized life.

Germany was the center of romantic Hellenism. Among other things, German romanticism was a declaration of independence from the cultural and political hegemony of France. If France identified itself with Rome

(both republican and imperial), then Germany would champion the Greeks. “A break was made with the Latin tradition of humanism, and an entirely new humanism, a true new Hellenism, grew up,” writes the historian Rudolph Pfeiffer.

Goethe called the 18th century “the age of Winckelmann,” after the German aesthete Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68), who transformed art criticism by attributing the perfection of Greek art to the social and even physical perfection of the ancient Greeks themselves. “The most beautiful body of ours would perhaps be as much inferior to the most beautiful Greek, as Iphicles was to his brother Hercules,” Winckelmann speculated. The humanist Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) inspired the 19th-century elite German educational system that put the study of the Greeks at the center of the university and high school curricula. (The German *Gymnasium*, or high school, was inspired by the Greek institution combining the sports arena and the school.)



Ossian Receiving the Napoleonic Officers (1802) by Anne-Louis Girodet

Influenced by German philhellenism, Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby School from 1828 to 1842, reformed the public schools that educated the ruling class of Victorian Britain. The Greek cult of the athletic youth (quite alien to Roman culture, which was symbolized by the middle-aged consul or general with furrowed brow) influenced the British culture that produced the poets A. E. Housman and Rupert Brooke. As George Steiner has observed, “The Homeric saga of warfare and masculine intimacies, with its formidable emphasis on competitive sports, seems immediate, as is no other text, to the boys’ school, to the all-male college, the regiment, and the club (configurations cardinal to British, not to Continental societies).”

Hellenomania was a characteristic that English romanticism shared with the German version. Lord Byron’s career took him from Scotland, the home of the noble Ossian, to Greece, where he died fighting the Turks on behalf of Greek independence. Shelley declared: “If not for Rome and Christianity, we should all have been Greeks—without their prejudices.” An entire minor genre of romantic literature was devoted to nostalgia inspired by Greek ruins or artifacts. In *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812), Byron, regarding a broken column, wrote: “Cold is the heart, fair Greece! that looks on Thee, / Nor feels as Lovers o’er the dust they loved.” It is no accident that Keats wrote an ode inspired by a Grecian urn rather than a Roman vase.

Ancient Greece, a sunny paradise populated by athletes and poets, was contrasted with repressive medieval Christendom or the hideous modern industrial West. For homosexuals such as Oscar Wilde and libertines such as Algernon Swinburne, it symbolized freedom from bourgeois and Christian sexual mores. Roman civilization—imperial, metropolitan, urban, bureaucratic—was too reminiscent of contemporary Europe and North America to be used as a contrast with 19th-century society.

Once Rome became a symbol of stultifying civilization, anti-Latin romantics were quick to find virtuous primitivism and purity in tribal societies—the ancient Celts, Teutons, or Slavs. Indeed, from a romantic nationalist point of view, the fall of Rome before the onslaught of the various trans-Alpine tribes was the necessary precondition for the formation of modern European nationalities.

Romantic nationalism and populism led 19th-century intellectuals to seek ethnic heroes in peasant folklore and long-neglected medieval manuscripts. Ossian was joined by Germany’s Siegfried, Ireland’s Cuchulainn, England’s Beowulf, and Spain’s Cid, among others. These new heroes inspired Richard Wagner and William Butler Yeats to create dramas set in the misty prehistory of Germany and Ireland. And the saga of Beowulf, rediscovered in neglected manuscripts in the 19th century, became the foundation of the nationalistic new scholarly discipline of “English literature.”

The rise in the reputation of Greek bards and northern European barbarians was accompanied by a rapid decline in the reputation of Roman



Dante and Virgil in Hell (1822) by Eugène Delacroix

writers. The shade of Virgil, eclipsed by Homer, may not have had to compete with Ossian once Macpherson's forgery was exposed, but he found a new rival in his admirer Dante.

Most of the leading literary intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries preferred Dante to Virgil, whose ghost served as the Florentine poet's guide through hell. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who translated the *Divine Comedy* into English (1865–67), introduced the cult of Dante to the United States. T. S. Eliot, whose poetry contains many echoes of the *Divine Comedy* and who saw Dante as the ideal poet, declared in a 1944 lecture that Virgil "is at the center of European civilization, in a position which no other poet can share or usurp," and that "we are all, insofar as we inherit the civilization of Europe, still citizens of the Roman Empire." But Eliot's classicism was really a kind of Anglo-Catholic romantic medievalism that led the poet to view Virgil through Dante's eyes. Eliot was more interested in Latin Christendom than in pagan Latindom, in Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire than in the Roman Empire of Augustus.

The reputation of Cicero, as well as that of Virgil, underwent a drastic reevaluation in the 19th and 20th centuries. The union in Cicero of republican statesman, lawyer, philosopher, and master rhetorician made him the hero of the educated elite in the early American republic. John Adams declared in his *Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America* (1787) that "all the ages of the world have not produced a greater statesman and philosopher united in the same character." His son John Quincy Adams described Cicero's *De officiis* (On Duty) as the manual of every republican.

Thanks to Cicero's influence, the major American literary form before

the Civil War was the oration, not the novel or the lyric poem. The celebrity attained by great orators such as Daniel Webster and Edward Everett was only possible in a culture saturated with memories of republican Rome. The replacement of the orator by the Ossianic bard or shaman as the model of the poet was another victory for the primitivist aesthetic shared by neoclassicism, romanticism, and modernism—and another defeat for Rome. Rhetoric, a Greek and Hellenistic art brought to perfection by Cicero and other Romans, was incompatible with romanticism. The romantics equated the rhetorical with the insincere and the spontaneous with the authentic. Although most of the great romantic poets continued to write metrical verse in recognizable versions of traditional genres, the aesthetics of German romanticism, disseminated in Britain by Coleridge and others, held that each art work should be an “organic” outgrowth of the personality of the artist or, in the case of the nationalistic romantics, of the genius of the tribe or race. According to romantic-modernist orthodoxy, “rhetorical” was the greatest insult that could be used in connection with a poet’s work, which was supposed to be a spontaneous and sincere effusion, not a work of verbal artifice crafted with an audience in mind.

Even more than Cicero, Seneca was a victim of the German romantic revaluation of the classical past. The Italian writer Giraldo Cinthio, who supplied the plots of *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*, wrote of Seneca in 1543: “In almost all his tragedies he surpassed (in as far as I can judge) all the Greeks who ever wrote—in wisdom, in gravity, in decorum, in majesty, and in memorable aphorism.” Elizabethan tragedy, down to its five-act structure, its lurid violence, and its use of ghosts, was inspired by the tragedies of Seneca; Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a Senecan play.

Like Cicero, Seneca was admired as a philosopher as well as a literary stylist and praised by Dante, Chaucer, and Montaigne. Saint Jerome nominated him for sainthood, and his Stoicism influenced thinkers on both sides of the Reformation divide. For a millennium and a half, his place was secure alongside Virgil at the peak of Parnassus. In the 20th century, however, Seneca has been dismissed by literary critics and historians, with a few exceptions such as the poet Dana Gioia. Herbert J. Muller writes in *The Spirit of Tragedy* (1956): “Almost all readers today are struck by how crude his drama is, and how invincibly abominable his taste. It is hard to understand why for centuries western critics and poets had so high an admiration for Seneca, installing his plays among the classics.” (Among other things, this implies that Shakespeare, who learned so much from Seneca, was a poor judge of drama.) *The Norton Book of Classical Literature* (1993) does not include one word of Seneca.

The only art in which the Roman tradition held its own in the 19th and 20th centuries was architecture. Beginning with late 18th-century neoclassicism, fads of abstract, primitive simplicity in architecture have repeatedly been followed by shifts in taste back in favor of ornate Roman

or neo-Roman Renaissance styles. Neoclassicism gave way to gaudy Second Empire; the Greek Revival in the early 19th century was followed in the second half of the century by the Beaux-Arts revival. In the 1980s and '90s, one reaction against the geometric abstraction of International Style modernism took the form of neo-Palladian revivalism.

The reason in each case was the same—neo-Greek simplicity in poetry or drama may be sublime, but in architecture it is merely boring. Generations of connoisseurs have shared the sentiment expressed in the 18th century by Lord de la Warr on viewing the Greek Revival building commissioned by Lord Nuneham: “God damn my blood, my lord, is this your Grecian architecture? What villainy! What absurdity! If this be Grecian, give me Chinese, give me Gothick! Anything is better than this!”

Although the Latin-based high culture survived longer in the provincial United States than in Britain or Germany, with Emerson and Whitman most American intellectuals joined the transatlantic romantic movement. By the middle of the 19th century, Ciceronian orators such as Daniel Webster, Augustan poets such as the Connecticut Wits, and classical painters such as Thomas Cole and Benjamin West seemed to belong to another civilization.

The older culture of Latinity did linger on in the American South. The poet Allen Tate described the South’s “composite agrarian hero, Cicero Cincinnatus”: “I can think of no better image for what the South was before 1860, and for what it largely still was until about 1914, than that of the old gentleman in Kentucky who sat every afternoon in his front yard under an old sugar tree, reading Cicero’s *Letters To Atticus*.”

By the 20th century, the ancient Greeks had almost completely replaced the ancient Romans as the preferred cultural ancestors of Americans. What David Gress, in his recent study of changing conceptions of the West, *From Plato to NATO*, calls the American “Grand Narrative” of Western history was shaped by the Contemporary Civilization course devised at Columbia University after World War I and the Great Books curriculum promoted by Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler at the University of Chicago during the 1930s. These curricular reforms inspired American college courses in “Western Civ,” a version of world history disseminated to a wider audience by popularizers such as Will and Ariel Durant and Edith Hamilton, author of *The Greek Way* (1930).

Western Civ (WC) held that Euro-American history between Pericles and Thomas Jefferson was a long and regrettable detour. According to Gress:

Literature, founded by Homer, came to fruition in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Representational art, which lay at the core of modern Western identity from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, reached heights never since rivaled in the sculptures of the Parthenon at Athens or the temple of Apollo at Olympia. Philosophy matured in Socrates and culminated, in the fourth century, in Plato and Aristotle. As if all that were not enough, the Greeks also invented democ-

racy and the study of history, and the two were related, just as philosophy and the scientific outlook on nature were related.

This conventional wisdom represented the hardening into orthodoxy of the once-revolutionary claims of the early-19th-century romantic philhellenes. According to the WC orthodoxy, Rome's historical mission was merely to pass on the heritage of Periclean Athens to the modern Atlantic democracies. "Given its liberal slant," Gress writes, "it downplayed the Romans, both of whose aspects caused discomfort: the aristocratic and patriarchal *libertas* [freedom] of the early fathers and the slave-holding, exploitative imperialism of the later conquerors and their henchmen."

The task of the popularizers of Western Civ was made easier by the fact that American Protestantism had always disseminated a negative image of the Roman Empire (and its successor, the Roman Church). American Protestants thought of the ancient Romans as an evil and dissolute people whose favorite pastime was watching Christians being fed to lions in the Coliseum. In the popular mind, hard-bodied Greeks exercised; fat Romans lay on couches nibbling grapes between orgies. The lesson of Roman history seemed clear: if you have too much fun, you will be wiped out by invading barbarians and exploding volcanoes. In Protestant America, Rome symbolized not only pagan immorality but tyrannical big government. The comparison of government entitlements and popular entertainment to Rome's "bread and circuses" for the depraved and riotous masses became a staple of American conservative rhetoric.

If the reputation of Roman culture declined in the 18th and 19th centuries, the reputation of the Roman polity suffered in the 20th. Already a symbol of unimaginative, derivative art and literature, Rome came to be thought of as the forerunner of the most monstrous tyrannies of modern times.

Although early-19th-century Germans, divided among petty states and more adept at art than at arms, imagined themselves as the heirs of the city-state Greeks, 20th-century Germany seemed suspiciously like Rome. The Second Reich (Empire), founded in 1870, was led by a Kaiser (derived from Caesar). Hitler's Third Reich looked even more Roman. German National Socialism was influenced by Benito Mussolini's neo-Roman Fascism, the very name of which referred to the Roman symbol of authority (the fasces, a bundle of sticks bound together with a cord).

Unlike some members of his movement, Hitler had little interest in the culture of the ancient Teutonic barbarians. But pagan Rome, with its Capitol and coliseums and boulevards and triumphal arches, provided the model for his new Berlin, "Germania," the grandiose and never-built capitol for his European empire. The Nazi salute was modeled on the Roman salute, with "Hail, Caesar!" becoming "Heil, Hitler!"



The Ambassadors of Agamemnon Visiting Achilles (1801) by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

In reality, of course, the Roman Empire had as little in common with National Socialist Germany as the Roman republic did with the republics of George Washington or Robespierre. Even so, the image of Rome, already damaged by generations of philhellene propaganda, was further tainted by association with 20th-century dictatorship.

Ironically, the flight of intellectuals, many of them German Jews, from Europe to the United States during the 1930s and 1940s reinforced the influence of the German cult of Greece in the United States. In the writings of Hannah Arendt, American liberals found an idealized version of Greek democracy; in the writings of Leo Strauss, American conservatives found the claim that the American republic was rooted in a tradition of Greek political philosophy.

Whenever a Golden Age of stable government, full churches, and expanding wealth has dawned among western nations, Virgil always returns to supreme favor," the writer Robert Graves observed. "His reputation flourished in . . . Paris under Louis XIV, London under Queen Anne and Queen Victoria, Baltimore in the first half of the 19th century, Boston in the second half, and Potsdam under Kaiser Wilhelm II."

By this logic, one would expect the United States to take a new

interest in its Roman heritage at the beginning of the third millennium A.D. It is, after all, not only the dominant military power on the planet, but it also possesses the most prosperous economy and influential metropolitan culture as well.

Yet there are no signs of a rehabilitation of Rome's reputation in the United States, and the battle between PC and WC is really no more than a battle between yesterday's anti-Latin romanticism and today's. It is only a small exaggeration to say that the entire period from 1760 to 2000 in Western culture has been a prolonged rebellion against the Hellenistic/Roman/Renaissance tradition. By now the war has long since been won. Little purpose is served by ritual abuse of Roman authors such as Statius or Seneca, who have not been read or even translated for generations. The defenders of Western civilization should defend it all, instead of skipping from the Greeks to the Middle Ages to modernity, leaving out the allegedly "sterile" and "derivative" eras of Hellenistic culture, Roman civilization, and Renaissance/Baroque humanism. To write the Roman Empire (and its Byzantine successor) out of Western history is as absurd as trying to remove China from the history of East Asia.

Many, if not most, aspects of Roman society and culture are irrelevant to the modern world, and some are repugnant to modern values. The evil of slavery has been eliminated in most places. Imperialism is archaic in an industrialized world of nation-states. The martial virtues prized in Rome, although perennially relevant to soldiers and police officers, are not central to our civilian, commercial society. It is in the realms of literature, art, and philosophy that Rome has the most to offer us today.

From Roman poets, architects, and sculptors, who revitalized Greek traditions in making them their own, today's writers and artists can learn how to build upon a great tradition without enslaving themselves to it. Western classicism, the architectural historian Michael Greenhalgh writes, "is an approach to art and, indeed, to life that emphasizes the ideal (in form and in content) over the everyday; the power of reason over the often misleading emotions; clarity and simplicity (that is, understatement) over prolixity; measurability (as an index of beauty) over intuition."

Because the classical tradition is cumulative and evolving, Greenhalgh adds, "it is but rarely that the need is felt to return to the sources and to make . . . a *tabula rasa*. Hence to reject the Renaissance and Baroque traditions is to reject the classical tradition." Finally, according to Greenhalgh, "The tradition is logically Roman and *not* Greek, because Rome has consistently been at the centre of European consciousness; whereas Greece (except in antique times, during parts of the Middle Ages, and since the 19th century) has been at the periphery." Artists who are truly postmodern and postromantic might turn for inspiration to the spirit, if not necessarily the forms, of Roman art.

The Roman example in philosophy is even more important in our time. The Roman ideal, which inspired the “Renaissance man,” was not the cloistered pedant but the worldly philosopher-statesman who combined contemplation with action. Latin moralists such as Cicero and Seneca, unlike modern philosophers such as Hegel, were interested less in metaphysics and epistemology than in practical questions of how to live an ethical life in a turbulent and evil world. In the modern world, as in the Middle Ages, philosophy has degenerated into an esoteric game played by scholars remote from the centers of public affairs and political debate. Renaissance humanists such as Petrarch, rejecting medieval scholasticism, made the Ciceronian ideal of the engaged, public-spirited intellectual their own. If a new public philosophy is to transcend the dichotomy between academic theory and partisan ideology, its champions could profit from the example of the Roman scholar-statesman.

If one word sums up the central difference between us and the Romans, it is *public*. Roman poetry and oratory were public and theatrical; Roman architecture was public and grand. The very term *republic* (the “public thing”) incorporates the word. The horrors of 20th-century collectivism have left us with a reasonable suspicion of coerced community. Even so, the contemporary eclipse of the public and accessible in literature, art, and philosophy by the private and idiosyncratic would have been considered a disaster by the Romans as well as the Greeks. Our term *idiot* comes from the Latin *idiota*, an adaptation of the Greek *idiotes*, which means “private person.” The concern about restoring community, shared by many liberals as well as conservatives, suggests that the pendulum is beginning to swing away from the extreme of radical individualism in thought and life.

From the 18th century until the present, an idealization of the primitive has driven the revolt against Rome (or, rather, against what Rome is thought to symbolize). Civilization, classicism, tradition—these have been swear words for most Western intellectuals for the past two centuries. Those who would defend the idea of a cumulative civilization that is at once traditional and progressive must reject the romantic notion that all development is decadence, along with the corresponding bias in favor of the primitive over the civilized, the spontaneous over the studied, the original over the allusive. In defiance of the political avant-garde’s cult of revolution and the artistic avant-garde’s cult of novelty, it is necessary to insist that we are not limited to the choice of repeating tradition or rejecting it. Renewing tradition is an option as well.

The bias against Roman civilization is not so much a bias against Rome as against civilization itself. As the third millennium dawns, it may be that those defending the idea not only of Western civilization, but of civilization as such, will also find it necessary to defend the idea of Rome. □