

Letter From Rome

by Andrei Navrozov

Nothing Better to Do



I have always wanted to spend some time in Rome, for a whole rosary of personal reasons. As with much else in a person's private life, to recount these in print is to expose oneself to public ridicule. Yes, Rome is a wonderful city. Yes, the food is good.

But then in England, where I live, the new Labour government came in to finish what the Tories started. And since another famous fact about Rome is that it has already fallen, I figured that over here my chances of being buried under the Eurorubble were encouragingly smaller. So I moved. Days are now passing like centuries outside my window, to the ringing of church bells and the flashing of Japanese cameras.

The paramount joy in all this is a newfound superficiality. On my terrace, in the suggestively Decembrist sunshine, I have been reading a collection of Russian memoirs from the 1830's. How people knew and valued their cities in those days—Petersburg, Moscow—how well they described every facade, every little bridge they had known since childhood! And of course we have all read such memoirs of London, of Paris, of Vienna, even of New York or San Francisco, written by the natural or adoptive children of those cities with the same tenderness, the same observant devotion.

This, alas, is no longer possible. To know a great city like London or Rome nowadays, to know it by heart and in depth and over the span of a lifetime, is to sustain an emotional injury that would render a sensible man all but mute with indignation and shame. Only a giddy foreigner, a pliant, impressionable, superficial stranger, is ignorant enough not to taste the anti-oxidizing agent in his bottle of bubbly *prosecco*; nor has he met enough cranky old-timers to acquire their inevitable bitterness. He knows nothing of the way things used to be 50, 20, even ten years back. To him, every-

thing is the real thing.

"The knowledge that the world is ending," wrote a Russian writer in the 1920's, "is what distinguishes an individual from a philistine." In retrospect I am beginning to think that this leave of absence from London, a place which during the last 13 years I had learned to use and to love like the great library it is, was really a convoluted means of getting a few months' respite from living the life of an individual.

Of all the countries I have ever visited, Italy is the only place where one can live like a philistine without wearing trainers, reading the *International Herald Tribune*, or degenerating into an animal in other ways. One look in the dining room of a middle-of-the-road hotel anywhere in Europe will remind us that, at the moment of pouring anemic, bluish milk over their bowls of high-fiber cereal, middle-class Swedish, French, or Belgian families look exactly alike; that is to say, they look American. They are ready for life in the United States of Europe, where everything will be "better and more fun," as their predecessors in interest used to sing, not always tunefully, aboard eastbound cattle trains.

By contrast, in Italy, philistine life is possessed of an aesthetic so richly ritualized that a Roman pharmacy owner on a week's skiing holiday with his family in Cortina d'Ampezzo will be mistaken for a serious nobleman among serious noblemen. Neither he nor his wife will go skiing, of course; hauteur, like couture, will not be ruffled by rude Teutonic winds; instead, they will join the carefully timed round of cocktails and promenades that exhibit their exquisite, almost hypochondriac idleness, his languid wit, and her new furs to fine advantage.

Admittedly the weight of tradition is responsible. The Italian bourgeois had begun to promenade when the aristocracy still fenced and boxed. Now that the middle classes of the world have united, under the colors of Benetton, in Americanism—sport, most conspicuously, and all the attendant trappings of the sporting life—the Italian is the odd man out. His vision of the active life may be centered on the English country house of a century ago, but unlike Ralph Lauren he never ran and sweated to get there in one generation. To the contrary, the Italian

simply promenaded until every bourgeois around him turned *gentilhomme*, and now he promenades among them like a great aristocratic original. None of which, incidentally, has deterred Benetton from selling the Brooklyn Bridge to Brooklyn, or at least Brooklyn Heights.

Apart from tradition, which has saved the Italians from the embarrassment of ending up like everyone else, another powerful characteristic that humanizes their middle class is a kind of seriousness, a seriousness which at times resembles cheerfulness and at times cheerful resignation. I have already alluded to the image of life which the Americanist set all over the world holds up as a banner of progress, and I allude to it again in this connection. The familiar strangeness of seeing, on the No. 22 bus in central London, a young woman wearing a track suit or a Walkman is explained by the conjecture that she does not enjoy being on the No. 22, indeed that riding it is only a transitory phase of her existence, and that she would gladly swap this for a run in the park or an evening at the local discotheque. Looking around, one may note that just about everyone else on the bus, including the driver and the conductor, shares her anxiety and her sense of displacement.

What is it with people? From the exodus of the Jews from Egypt to a Sotheby's drinks party, everybody wants to be somewhere, if not something, else. You are talking to an old stupid woman with a glass of champagne in her trembling hand, you think you are being polite as a boy scout, you suppose the woman is grateful for the attention, but no! You catch her eyeing the door through which a famous used-car salesman is entering, and before you can murmur something suitable ("Madam, is it not time, now that you are in the frosty autumn of your life, to be thinking of higher things?") she is off like a shot. And for the stupid old woman of the parable, read "everyman," read baker and banker, newspaper editor and lover, bootblack and writer.

A scene of this kind, which is routine in New York, Rockford, or Paris, is almost unobservable in Rome and hilariously inconceivable in a provincial town of Italy. Of course I would not say under oath that there are no waitresses here who are actually critically acclaimed ac-

tresses, and no taxi drivers who have had series pilots produced. But what one observes emanating from each individual soul is extreme, almost sacramental seriousness with respect to its predicament at this or that given moment in time. Until it became the mark of the bourgeois, this solemn self-satisfaction used to belong to no particular social group and marked equally the upper and the lower classes throughout Europe. A German grain merchant (see Thomas Mann), a Russian nobleman (see Tolstoy), and an English orphan (see Dickens) all saw their position in the world as reasonably convincing, reasonably convenient, and reasonably permanent. The main exceptions were poets, men with bad gambling debts, and Hans Christian Andersen's little mermaid—all tragic and romantic and worthy, yes, but not 99.9 percent of the population, either.

What I am trying to say is that the seriousness of the Italian way of life, its solemn ritualism and its cheerful acceptance, now accounts for the incredible fact that only in Italy will one see a mother nursing her child or a beggar begging alms or a butcher slicing meat "as if they had nothing better to do." They don't, and in the world as it is today, this is a miracle well worth watching.

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Letter From Alabama by Michael Hill

The League Replies



Dr. Samuel Francis describes secession as an "infantile disorder" and casts The League of the South in the role of Margaret Mitchell's impetuous Stuart Tarleton in contrast to the part he imagines he is playing—the cool, rational Rhett Butler. But if Dr. Francis had bothered to read the League's literature, he would have learned that, while we honor our Southern ancestors and believe they were right in leaving the Union in 1860-

61, we do not dwell in the past. We look to a future in which all Americans will be free from the intrusion of the Leviathan state. And we don't hate all "Yankees"; in fact, the League has chapters in 27 states and members in 48. When we use the term "Yankee" perjoratively, we speak of the smug, self-righteous attitude that still exists toward Southerners in some places above the Mason-Dixon Line and of a government whose questionable lineage began with Appomattox. The Yankee government, and not the Northerner, is the target of our criticism.

Secession, as Dr. Francis has admitted, is a legal recourse against tyranny. Moreover, he concedes that the South in 1860 "had an arguable case for separation" in order to protect its economic interests. However, he sees the situation as radically different today because the South has been the recipient of so much federal largesse. While it is true that the South has received more federal dollars than it has paid out in taxes, this does not mean that the region's interests have been advanced by the government in Washington. It is not too difficult to buy off most of the current crop of "Bill Clinton is no Jeff Davis" politicians in Dixie, but in the South there are still millions of decent, honest Americans who deplore the golden chains of dependency with which the central state has bound them.

One of the dirty little secrets of American politics is that, over the past 30 years, the South's congressmen and Senators in Washington have been consistently outvoted on issues such as abortion, gun control, immigration, and racial quotas. Conservative Southerners realize that these enormities have been forced down their throats by the very same Solons who supposedly represent Dr. Francis's Middle American Radicals.

I continue to admire Dr. Francis for his outspokenness on the issue of immigration. However, he is mistaken when he points to a demographic future of the South in which white Southerners will be a minority except in a few areas of the interior uplands. This future is likely to become reality only if the national government is allowed to continue its current open-door policy.

In criticizing the League of the South and its belief that secession should be viewed as a viable option for all states—not just Southern ones—bedeviled by an intrusive federal government, Dr. Francis reveals himself as an arch-nationalist intent on saving the whole of America.

Battered on a steady diet of Antonio Gramsci and assorted leftist thinkers, Francis apparently believes that a nation lost to the liberal-socialist "Great March" through its institutions must be reconquered in the same manner. Perhaps it could be, if we only had the luxury of time. But already, as mentioned above, the golden door beckoning Third World immigrants has been knocked clean off its hinges, and it would be naive to think that the elites in Washington and Manhattan will bow to the demands of Francis's Middle American constituency.

Middle American nationalism, according to Francis, is the key to "resisting the domination of the ruling class and its antiwhite and anti-Western allies in the underclass." If such a successful resistance could be mounted, the resulting state of affairs would indeed be desirable. Breaking the stranglehold of the elite-underclass alliance should be the right's first order of business; success would mean a rebirth of American independence. But is Francis's vision realistic?

Obviously, Dr. Francis and I disagree on the means, not the end: liberty and self-government. Since its inception in 1994, The League of the South has stood firmly for Southern independence. Our position is based on the fact that the South has always been a "nation" in the historical and Biblical sense: a people with a distinct religious and cultural identity. Independence, as the League's leaders have said repeatedly, can be achieved by restoring the federal Constitution complete with the 10th Amendment's guarantee of the rights of the states. In practical terms, the League's members support every measure that would bring about a Constitutional restitution. If such efforts fail, then it will be up to the states themselves (not to an organization) to determine their future relationship to the union. It is not the League that is seeking to break up the union but the various ethnic revenge movements—Latino, black, and white. Indeed, Dr. Francis has lectured to groups that have indulged in ill-considered discussions of ethnic separatism. He had better save his unionist rhetoric for racist organizations that are promoting both ethnic antagonisms and hatred for the Christian religion that serves to unify rather than to divide Americans of good will.

Michael Hill is the president of The League of the South.