

Joachim Du Bellay

The Ruins of Rome

(Les Antiquités de Rome)

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Translator's note:

The text used is from the 1588 edition of *Les Antiquités de Rome*. The rhyme-scheme follows Du Bellay, unlike Edmund Spenser's fine Elizabethan translation which offers a simpler scheme, more suited to the lack of rhymes in English! Joachim du Bellay, born around 1525 was poet, critic, and a member of the poetic circle led by Ronsard, named the Pléiade. In 1553 he went to Rome as one of the secretaries of Cardinal Jean du Bellay, his first cousin. The poems of *The Ruins of Rome* belong to the beginning of his four and a half year residence in Italy. He departed for Paris at the end of August 1557. He was plagued by increasing deafness, and weak health, and died on New Year's Day 1560. The sonnets of *Les Antiquités* provide a fascinating comment on the Classical Roman world as seen from the viewpoint of the French Renaissance.

The Ruins Of Rome

I

Divine spirits, whose powdery ashes lie
Under this weight of ruins, buried deep;
Yet not the fame, your living verse will keep
From Hades' halls; fame that will never die;
If we have power to make our human cry
Downwards, from here, to that region leap,
Let mine pierce the abyss, this dark steep,
That you might hear my voice from on high.
Three times circling beneath heaven's veil,
In devotion, round your tombs, I hail
You, with loud summons; thrice on you I call:
And, while your ancient fury I invoke,
Here, as though I in sacred terror spoke,
I'll sing your glory, beauteous above all.

II

The Babylonian praises his high wall,
And gardens high in air; Ephesian
Forms the Greek will praise again;
The people of the Nile their Pyramids tall;
And that same Greek still boasting will recall
Their statue of Jove the Olympian;
The Tomb of Mausolus, some Carian;
Cretans their long-lost labyrinthine hall.
The ancient Rhodian will praise the glory
Of that renowned Colossus, great in story:
And whatever noble work he can raise
To a like renown, some boaster thunders,
From on high; while I, above all, I praise
Rome's seven hills, the world's seven wonders.

III

Newcomer, who looks for Rome in Rome,
And little of Rome in Rome can perceive,
These old walls and palaces, yet believe,
These ancient archways; are what men call Rome.
What ruin and what pride, temple and dome!
Now she, of whom the whole world once asked leave,
Who tamed all others, tames herself: conceive,
She's prey to Time, a leaf from some old tome.
Rome now of Rome's the only monument,
And over Rome alone Rome wins ascent;
Only the Tiber, flowing to the sea,
Remains: of Rome. O, this world's transience!
That which stands firm, Time ruins silently,
While what flows, against Time shows resistance.

IV

She, who with her head the stars surpassed,
One foot on Dawn, the other on the Main,
One hand on Scythia, the other Spain,
Held the round of earth and sky encompassed:
Jupiter fearing, if higher she was classed,
That the old Giants' pride might rise again,
Piled these hills on her, these seven that soar,
Tombs of her greatness at the heavens cast.
On her head he heaped the high Capitol,
Then on her belly set the Quirinal,
On her stomach planted old Palatine,
On her right hand the Caelian stone,
On her left the Esquiline's long bone,
On her foot, Viminal and Aventine.

V

He who would see the vast power of Nature,
Art, and Heaven: Rome, let him view you.
I long to know if he could now construe,
From what death reveals, your lost grandeur.
Rome is no more: if downed architecture
May still revive some shade of Rome anew,
It's like a corpse, by some magic brew,
Drawn at deep midnight from a sepulchre.
The corpse of Rome lies here entombed in dust,
Her spirit gone to join, as all things must
The massy round's great spirit onward whirled.
But her writings, that eternal praise
Drags from the tomb, despite the waste of days,
Ensures her image wanders through the world.

VI

As in her chariot the Phrygian goddess rode,
Crowned with high turrets, happy to have borne
Such quantity of gods, so her I mourn,
This ancient city, once whole worlds bestrode:
On whom, more than the Phrygian, was bestowed
A wealth of progeny, whose power at dawn
Was the world's power, her grandeur, now shorn,
Knowing no match to that which from her flowed.
Only Rome could mighty Rome resemble,
Only Rome force sacred Rome to tremble:
So Fate's command issued its decree,
No other power, however bold or wise,
Could boast of matching her who matched we see,
Her power with earth's, her courage with the sky's.

VII

You sacred ruins, and you holy shores,
You that, alone, the name of Rome retain,
Old monuments, that still in dust maintain
Those divine spirits' ever-honoured cause.
Triumphal arches, domes at heaven's doors,
That an astonished heaven sees full plain,
Alas, by degrees, turned to dust again.
The people's fable that the public gnaws!
And though awhile against Time they make war,
These buildings still, yet it must be that Time
In the end, both works and names, will flaw.
Sad longing, rest content then: for if Time
Makes an end of things that so endure,
The pain too that I suffer it must cure.

VIII

With arms and vassals Rome the world subdued,
So that one might judge this single city
Had found her grandeur held in check solely
By earth and ocean's depth and latitude.
So richly was this fertile race imbued
With virtuous nephews, its posterity
Surpassed the past, in brave authority,
Measured deep earth and heaven's altitude:
So that, holding all power in its hand,
No end to empire would Rome understand:
And though Republics Time might consume,
Time could not so diminish Roman pride,
That some head raised from the ancient tomb,
To speak her name, might be deemed to have lied.

IX

You cruel stars, inhuman deities,
Envious heavens, harsh mother Nature,
Whether by chance, or some deeper law,
You steer the course of human destinies,
Why did your hands work all those centuries
To fashion a world that might so long endure?
Or why was the substance not made more sure
That formed the brave fronts of these palaces?
I do not sing here to the common tune,
Claiming that everything beneath the moon
Is corruptible and subject to decay:
But rather I say (not wishing to displease
Those who would argue by contraries)
That this great All must perish some fine day.

X

Much as brave Jason by the Colchian shore,
Through magic arts won the Golden Fleece,
Sowing the plain with the old serpent's teeth,
To engender soldiers from the furrow's store,
This city, that in youthful season bore
A Hydra's nest of warriors, raised a yeast
Of brave nurslings, who their proud glory saw
Fill the Sun's mansions, to the west and east:
But in the end, lacking a Hercules
To vanquish so fecund a progeny,
Arming themselves in civil enmity,
Mowed each other down, a cruel harvest,
Reliving thus the fraternal harsh unrest
Which had blinded that proud seeded army.

XI

Mars, now ashamed to have granted power
To his offspring who, with mortal frailty,
Engorged with pride in Rome's bravery,
Looked to infringe on Heaven's grandeur,
Cooling again from his initial ardour,
With which Roman hearts he'd filled completely,
Blew new fires, with ardent breath, and fiercely,
Warmed the chilly Goths with his hot valour.
That new-born nation, the new sons of Earth,
With war's lightning bolts creating dearth,
Beat down these fine walls, on every hand,
Then vanished to the countries of their birth,
That not even Jove's sire, in all his worth,
Might boast a Roman Empire in this land.

XII

As once we saw the children of the Earth
Pile peak on peak to scale the starry sky,
And fight against the very gods on high,
While Jove to his lightning-bolts gave birth:
Then all in thunder, suddenly reversed,
The furious squadrons earthbound lie,
Heaven glorying, while Earth must sigh,
Jove gaining all the honour and the worth:
So were once seen, in this mortal space,
Rome's Seven Hills raising a haughty face,
Against the very countenance of Heaven:
While now we see the fields, shorn of honour,
Lament their ruin, and the gods secure,
Dreading no more, on high, that fearful leaven.

XIII

Not the raging fire's furious reign,
Nor the cutting edge of conquering blade,
Nor the havoc ruthless soldiers made,
In sacking you, Rome, ever and again,
Nor the tricks that fickle fortune played,
Nor envious centuries corrosive rain,
Nor the spite of men, nor gods' disdain,
Nor your own power in civil strife displayed,
Nor the impetuous storms that you withstood,
Nor the river-god's winding course in flood,
That has so often drowned you in its thunder,
Not all combined have so abased your pride,
As that this nothing left you, by Time's tide,
Still makes the world halt here, and gaze in wonder.

XIV

As we pass the summer stream without danger
That floods in winter, king of all the plain,
Rendering farmers' hopes and shepherds' vain,
In his proud flight, sinking fields in water:
As we see coward creatures at the slaughter
Outrage the dead lion after his brave reign,
Staining their jaws, revealing their disdain,
Daring their enemy bereft of power:
And as the least valiant Greeks at Troy
With brave Hector's corpse were wont to toy,
So those whose heads once used to bow,
When to Roman triumph they were drawn,
On dusty tombs exact their vengeance now,
The conquered daring the conqueror's scorn.

XV

You pallid ghost, and you, pale ashen spirit,
Who joyful in the bright light of day
Created all that arrogant display,
Whose dusty ruin now greets our visit:
Speak, spirits (since that shadowy limit
Of Stygian shore that ensures your stay,
Enclosing you in thrice threefold array,
Sight of your dark images, may permit),
Tell me, now (since it may be one of you,
Here above, may yet be hid from view)
Do you not feel a greater depth of pain,
When from hour to hour in Roman lands
You contemplate the work of your hands,
Reduced to nothing but a dusty plain?

XVI

As we gaze from afar on the waves roar
Mountains of water now set in motion,
A thousand breakers of cliff-jarring ocean,
Striking the reef, driven in the wind's maw:
View now a fierce northerly, with emotion,
Stirring the storm to its loud-whistling core,
Then folding in air its vaster wing once more
Suddenly weary, as if at some new notion:
As we see a flame, spread in a hundred places,
Gather, in one flare, towards heaven's spaces,
Then powerless fade and die: so, in its day,
This Empire passed, and overwhelming all
Like wave, or wind, or flame, along its way,
Halted at last by Fate, sank here, in fall.

XVII

So long as Jove's great eagle was in flight,
Bearing the fire of Heaven's menaces,
Heaven feared not the dire audaciousness,
That so stoked the Giants' reckless might.
But soon as the sun's fierce burning light
Singed the wings that had abased the Earth,
Earth sent forth, out of her weighty mass,
That ancient horror that assails the right.
Then was the German raven seen, disguised,
Echoing the Roman eagle in the skies,
And once again towards Heaven spread
These brave hills once reduced to dust,
No longer fearing lightning overhead,
Borne by that eagle on the stormy gust.

XVIII

These great heaps of stone, these walls you see,
Were once enclosures of the open field:
And these brave palaces that to Time must yield,
Were shepherd's huts in some past century.
Then shepherds took the badge of royalty,
And the stout labourer the sword did wield:
The Consuls' power was annually revealed,
Till six month terms won greater majesty,
Which, made perpetual, accrued such power
That the Imperial Eagle seized the hour:
But Heaven, opposing such aggrandisement,
Handed that power to Peter's successor,
Who, called a shepherd, fated to reign there,
Shows that all returns to its commencement.

XIX

All perfection Heaven showers on us,
All imperfection born beneath the skies,
All that regales our spirits and our eyes,
And all those things that devour our pleasures:
All those ills that strip our age of treasures,
All the good the centuries might devise,
Rome in ancestral times secured as prize,
Like Pandora's box, enclosed the measure.
But Destiny, untangling this chaos,
In which all good and evil once were lost,
Has since ensured the heavenly virtues,
Flying skywards, left the vices behind,
Which, till this day, remain here confined,
Concealed within these ruined avenues.

XX

Exactly as the rain-filled cloud is seen
Lifting earthly vapours through the air,
Forming a bow, and then drinking there
By plunging deep in Tethys' hoary sheen,
Next, climbing again where it has been,
With bellying shadow darkening everywhere,
Till finally it bursts in lightning glare,
And rain, or snow, or hail shrouds the scene:
This city, that was once a shepherd's field,
Rising by degrees, such power did wield,
She made herself the queen of sea and land,
Till helpless to sustain that huge excess,
Her power dispersed, so we might understand
That all, one day, must come to nothingness.

XXI

She whom both Pyrrhus and Libyan Mars
Found no way to tame, this proud city,
That with a courage forged in adversity,
Sustained the shock of endless wars,
Though her ship, plagued at the source
By great waves, felt the world's enmity,
None ever saw the reefs of adversity
Wreak havoc on her fortunate course:
But, the object of her virtue failing,
Her power opposed its own flailing,
Like the voyager whom a cruel gale
Has long since separated from the shore,
Driven now by the storm's wild roar,
And shipwrecked there, when all efforts fail.

XXII

When this brave city, honouring the Latin name,
Bounded on the Danube, in Africa,
Among the tribes along the Thames' shore,
And where the rising sun ascends in flame,
Her own nurslings stirred, in mutinous game
Against her very self, the spoils of war,
So dearly won from all the world before,
That same world's spoil suddenly became:
So when the Great Year its course has run,
And twenty six thousand years are done,
The elements freed from Nature's accord,
Those seeds that are the source of everything,
Will return in Time to their first discord,
Chaos' eternal womb their presence hiding.

XXIII

Oh how wise that man was, in his caution,
Who counselled, so his race might not moulder,
Nor Rome's citizens be spoiled by leisure,
That Carthage should be spared destruction!
He foresaw how the brave Roman nation,
Impatient of the blandishments of pleasure
Once sated with vain amusements' measure,
Would turn to civil war as a distraction.
For in a people pledged to idleness,
Like swollen tumour in diseased flesh,
Ambition is engendered readily.
And so it chanced, for envious pride,
That no peer or superior could abide,
Made Pompey Caesar's fated enemy.

XXIV

If that blind fury that engenders wars,
Fails to rouse the creatures of a kind,
Whether swift bird aloft or fleeting hind,
Whether equipped with scales or sharpened claws,
What ardent Fury in her pincers' jaws
Gripped your hearts, so poisoned the mind,
That intent on mutual cruelty, we find,
Into your own entrails your own blade bores?
Was this, Romans, your harsh destiny,
Or some old sin, with discordant mutiny,
Working on you its eternal vengeance?
The gods denying, in just indignation,
Your walls, bloodied by that ancient instance
Of fraternal strife, a sure foundation.

XXV

Would that I might possess the Thracian lyre,
To wake from Hades, and their idle pose,
Those old Caesars, and the shades of those,
Who once raised this ancient city higher:
Or that I had Amphion's to inspire,
And with sweet harmony these stones enclose
To quicken them again, where they once rose,
Ausonian glory conjuring from its pyre:
Or that with skilful pencil I might draw
The portrait of these palaces once more,
With the spirit of some high Virgil filled;
I would attempt, inflamed by my ardour,
To recreate with the pen's slight power,
That which our own hands could never build.

XXVI

Who would demonstrate Rome's true grandeur,
In all her vast dimensions, all her might,
Her length and breadth, and all her depth and height
Needs no line or lead, compass or measure:
He only need draw a circle, at his leisure,
Round all that Ocean in his arms holds tight,
Be it where Sirius scorches with his light,
Or where the northerlies blow cold forever.
Rome was the world, and all the world is Rome.
If naming like things alike may bring it home,
The name of Rome why bother to employ?
Name but the land and sea, your map unfurled,
Since world, itself, for Rome, you may deploy,
For a map of Rome's a map of all the world.

XXVII

You, by Rome astonished, who gaze here
On ancient pride, once threatening the skies,
These old palaces, where the brave hills rise,
Walls, archways, baths, the temples that appear:
Judge, as you view these ruins, shattered, sere,
All that injurious Time's devoured: the wise
Architect and mason, their plans devise
Still from these fragments, these patterns clear:
Then note how Rome, still, from day to day,
Rummaging through her ancient decay,
Renews herself with hosts of sacred things:
You'd think the Roman spirit yet alive,
With destined hands continuing to strive,
That to these dusty ruins, new life brings.

XXVIII

He who has seen a great oak dry and dead,
Bearing some trophy as an ornament,
Whose roots from earth are almost rent,
Though to the heavens it still lifts its head;
More than half-bowed towards its final bed,
Showing its naked boughs and fibres bent,
While, leafless now, its heavy crown is leant
Support by a gnarled trunk, its sap long bled;
And though at the first strong wind it must fall,
And many young oaks are rooted within call,
Alone among the devout populace is revered:
Who such an oak has seen, let him consider,
That, among cities which have flourished here,
This old honoured dust was the most honoured.

XXIX

All that the Egyptians once devised,
All that Greece, with its Corinthian,
Ionic, Attic, and its Dorian
Ornament, in its temples apprised,
All that the art of Lysippus comprised,
The hand of Apelles, or the Phidian,
That used to adorn this city, and this land,
Grandeur that even Heaven once surprised,
All that Athens in its wisdom showed,
All that from richest Asia ever flowed,
All that from Africa strange and new was sent,
Was here on view. O wonder now unfurled!
Living Rome, the ornament of the world,
Now dead, remains the world's monument.

XXX

As the sown field its fresh greenness shows,
From that greenness the green shoot is born,
From the shoot there flowers an ear of corn,
From the ear, yellow grain, sun-ripened glows:
And as, in due season, the farmer mows
The waving locks, from the gold furrow shorn
Lays them in lines, and to the light of dawn
On the bare field, a thousand sheaves he shows:
So the Roman Empire grew by degrees,
Till barbarous power brought it to its knees,
Leaving only these ancient ruins behind,
That all and sundry pillage: as those who glean,
Following step by step, the leavings find,
That after the farmer's passage may be seen.

XXXI

That we see nothing but an empty waste
Where one was seen the pride of all the earth,
Is no fault of yours, you men of other birth,
Who Nile, Euphrates, Tigris, Ganges taste.
Africa, Spain, neither are you disgraced,
Nor that race that holds the English firth,
Nor, by the French Rhine, soldiers of worth,
Nor Germany with other warriors graced.
O, Civil Fury, you alone are the cause,
In Macedonian fields sowing new wars,
Arming Pompey against Caesar there,
So that achieving the rich crown of all,
Roman grandeur, prospering everywhere,
Might tumble down in more disastrous fall.

XXIX

Do you have hopes that posterity
Will read you, my Verse, for evermore?
Do you have hopes the lyre can soar
So high as to win immortality?
If what's beneath the sky knew eternity,
The monuments, whose form I had you draw,
Not on paper but in marble, porphyry,
Would yet preserve their live antiquity.
Yet may you never cease to echo sweetly,
Lyre, that great Apollo deigned to grant me:
For if Time fails to topple you from place,
You may boast, however slight a thing
You are, you were first, in French, to sing
The ancient glory of the toga'd race.

FINIS

