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Ten Moments of Synecdoche in Rome

It is quite clear that the modern neo-Classical myth of Rome as the spiritual and cultural centre of the Western world – Rome the eternal, the New Jerusalem, the holy city, the Imperial city, the mother of empires, the city of the 7 hills later symbolised by the 7 churches of Rome, the New Babylon, and so on – had already emerged by the time the popes had begun consolidating their semiotic and temporal power in the first millennium (cf. Fedeli Bernardini 1991), after 754 AD when Pepin the Short gave the village of Sutri, 50 km north of Rome, to the Church as a fief.

There are many reasons for Rome's quasi-mythical status, explored over the centuries by others who, indeed, often contributed to building the myth as much as they analysed it. In fact, I am convinced that the power of the myth is as much due to the vehicle as to its content. The ambiguous nature of synecdoche, with its elusive and unpredictable alternation between signified and signifier, allowed ancient Romans and, later, the Church to create the myth of Rome the Eternal: this was not a reference to Rome's historical depth but to the fact that the Church could incarnate and represent its claims to control a universal and atemporal spirituality *despite* massive changes to Rome's politics, topography and architecture – once pagan, now Christian; once all-powerful, then weak, and again powerful under the tutelage of the Popes; sanctifier of European monarchs yet for nearly 1000 years a fiefdom of the Byzantine Empire. It may be that the blending of categorical boundaries of signifieds in synecdoche leant itself to representing the early republic, which fused a blend of continually evolving components and a strong political identity that, paradoxically, was in part based on the Roman theory of the inherently weak and unstable (and therefore feminine) nature of civilisation. In other words, how best to represent a thing (republic, literaly, *res pubblica*) whose component parts were always changing and considered as inherently weak since they had been conquered by the virile Romans? The ambiguities of synecdoche may have seemed the best vehicle. In this book I would like to present ten snapshots of how synecdoche has played a role in the creation of this myth. No one theme is complete without the others. They are intertwined and not presented seperately as ten chapters, since the necessary arguments are not of equal richness. Here, I will present a brief outline of the main arguments that will follow.

1) The pre-Imperial Romans had their own process of mythification, attributing mythical status to the remains of shepherds' huts they found on the Capitoline Hill; they were known as *casa Romuli*, the house of Romulus (see Balsdon 1979:11).) Recently (November 2007), archaeologists have found the Lupercale, Augustus' restoration (or creation) of the cavern situated under his own palace, alleged to have been the lair of the She-Wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus. Augustus, however, undoubtedly had another reading of the wolf lair. The sexual signification of cavern seems obvious, especially in light of the founding myth that identifies Romulus and Remus as the bastard sons of Aeneas (or of one of his descendents) and a Vestal Virgin from Alba Longa, abandoned and adopted by the shepherd Faustulus and his wife Acca, a prostitute and so nick-named La Lupa. Rome, therefore, was oriental, illegitimate and, ultimately, of lowly origin even after the legitimating adoption by a landless shepherd and a prostitute. Rome, therefore, was born of unchecked sexuality, a theme that was to re-emerge with the dome of Saint Peter's.

2) The Vatican's exploitation of the bloody martyrdom of the founding fathers of Christianity established its moral authority vis-à-vis the emergent barbarian powers after the fall of the Empire in the west. There was a brisk trade in Saint's relics and body parts from Rome to Frankish kingdoms that helped feed the legend (Llewellyn 1971:184-187).

3) The first guide books have been dated from the middle of the 7th century (Llewellyn 1971:177). Rome's many semiotic dimensions had already made it impossible to draw *a* map of the city (Fedeli Bernardini 1991) by the 12th century. Not only were its representations necessarily thematic because no single map could contain all the semantic richness attached to the urban landscape, as one could expect (the Seven Hills, the Seven Churches, the Imperial monuments, etc.) and as one still sees today in tourist guidebooks, but even the topography underlying the various thematic overlays did not correspond from one map to another.

4) From the papacy of Sixtus V (1585-1590), Rome had been massively transformed to unite its pagan past and the future-oriented utopia proposed by Church beliefs. For example, under Sixtus' plan, the heart of the city became a sacred space circumscribed by recycled obelisks that the Emperors Augustus and Hadrian had imported from Egypt (cf. TOBIA 1996:176). These were arranged to define an arc linking St. Peter's and the Lateran that symbolised the other five great churches of Rome, forming a horizontal arch that symbolised the entrance to paradise popularly represented as a vertical arch (and possibly continuing to mine the earlier image of the cavern-vagina). This semiotic vision not only underscored the Church's control of civic space but also its claim that Rome was special (and, in an extraordinary claim that underscored the Vatican's semiotic power, that old Rome had been more Christian than pagan, since a unitary time line projected onto the past blurred the distinction between paganism and Christianity); the vertical projected onto the horizontal plane in fact symbolised the Church's control of the past and future; space became time.

5) Strangely, before 1930, the Vatican was not visible from the city. On the north bank of the Tiber, thus outside the many walls that over the centuries have defined Rome on the southern bank, the Church had encouraged this little game of visual hide and seek by allowing various artisans and other Vatican workers to build and define a small neighbourhood, the *borgo*, precisely in front of the Church. These two to four storey buildings made it impossible to see the body of the Church. The result was an image of the dome that floated over the entire city, especially since the Popes had long forbidden the construction of buildings over 4 storeys. The dome conveyed the idea of the asexual head dominating the 'lower' secular spaces of the *popolo*. We are not sure that the *popolo* did indeed give itself to orgiastic feasts (though there certainly were public feasts outside the sacred arch and beside Rome's churches), but this was the image of original and natural sin the Church propogated.

6) Visually and spatially isolated, located in the 'wrong' side of Rome's sacred river (not only outside the city proper but the left, as one goes upriver; or, in Italian, the sinister side as one penetrates the interior), the site of the Vatican had been chosen for its visual

impact on invaders, allies and pilgrims coming from the north. When cresting the final summit of the hills that surround Rome, the first vision these outsiders saw was the Vatican with the low-lying city to the south (see Causati Vanni 1999:111-2); in a visual and metaphorical sense, beneath the Vatican. This astute management of space and image was a winning strategy for an organism whose political dependency made it imperative that it communicate a sense of its importance to foreigners. For centuries, the Church had played a complicated game of military and political alliances with other European powers, especially with the States forming the Holy Roman Empire, whose soldiers or citizens would descend on Rome as friends or enemies according to the prevailing political climate.

7) Although the Vatican's power waned with the arrival of the Italians in 1870, Rome's power stayed intact, since between 1860 and 1870, the Church had tried to bolster support by holding its allegorical spectacles (especially important with the Counter-Reformation, since the the Church was acutely aware it was losing political ground) outside the region bounded by the sacred arch, by the creation of huge *macchine* (the same word used to describe the mobile floats of *carnevale*). There were now many parts representing the whole, and these were attached to non-sacred spaces, where the little people (*popolo*) had traditionally held their secular feasts. This spatial relocation to the *popolo*'s heartland allowed the new government after 1870 to create a secondary myth that its power rested on the natural and earthy power of the people on whose space the *macchine* had been erected. Not only were these macchine intended to set the stage for a temporary festival or ritual, the space they sanctified also became temporary, since they were built of paper-maché and plaster, and were dismantled a few days after the public spectacle (or they were left to disintegrate with the rain). This had the effect of breaking Rome's unified time whose construction the Church had carefully managed, into many bits of time, each detached from the linear time-scape the Church had insisted linked the 'pagan' past (metonymically Christian, by projecting the Church's unitary time line), the Christian present and heavenly future.

8) After 1880, there was a massive transformation of the urban symbol-scape to reorient the synecdochic signifiers of Rome. Prati and the new Trident (streets oriented away from Vatican), taller and more massive buildings to hide the Vatican, hiding the Tiber by building huge embankments. Ironically, this was a reprise of the Vatican's 1860-70 policy of decentralising signs of power – from a few signs of Rome to many. It is not surprising that Mussolini took up this theme with the creation of the New Empire under his Fascist regime.

9) The old Black bourgeoisie identifies with the Vatican, not with the State. By extension, it sees itself as the guardian of the community of values that defines the fatherland. Despite their relative lack of financial or political power (which is a matter of pride), they see themselves and are seen as keepers of the *patria* of Rome precisely because they are identified with the Vatican and not with Rome. Their uselessness and impotence confirms their links not only to the Vatican, a part of Roman space, but to a fragment of time forever frozen by their archaic views and rituals. The patria they represent, however, through their embodiment of the old rules of sociability becomes even more important as

corrupt and inefficient governments give way to the decentralised and diffused power of the new Europe.

10) Finally, Rome as symbol is encapsulated in various body rhythms, especially those that are adopted as a status sign by members of the old bourgeoisie. These rhythms emphasize grace, which is seen as a metoynym for time since it is affirmed that it takes at least 5 generations of careful breeding to produce bodies receptive to the special training needed to develop this quality. Time in this sense becomes particularly important against the background of continually changing political regimes that have rocked the social pyramid. Graceful bodies are therefore synecdochic signs of one dimension of bourgeois and therefore of Roman identity, of Rome the eternal with its infinite capacity to absorb change.