

III

Life at Rome

(i)

At a first glance the rough outline sketch we are able to construct of Jerome's life and personality as a student at Rome might seem to be almost as devoid of concrete incidents and identifying traits as our blurred picture of his childhood at Stridon. In fact we are slightly better off. There are a few further items of information available which are both interesting in themselves and help us to understand the importance of this phase in his development.

First, we know something about the young men, or some of them, who were his close associates. One was Bonosus, the playmate of his Dalmatian boyhood, of whom he speaks in consistently glowing terms of admiration and affection.¹ Markedly different in character, the one apparently a model youth of undeviating rectitude and Jerome clever, sharp-tongued, and arrogant, the two were to exercise a profound influence on each other for many years to come. There was also the future writer, translator, and ascetic, Turranus Rufinus, a lad of exemplary bearing, scholarly, serious-minded, perhaps already over-solemn.² Of good family, at the very least comfortably off, he had been born at Concordia, a small town west of Aquileia, had probably attended the elementary school there, but had come to Rome for his secondary and higher education.³ In later life Jerome was to be tragically, irreconcilably divided from him, but in a letter written about 375, when he still loved him wholeheartedly, he suggests that Bonosus, Rufinus, and himself had studied liberal arts together in the capital and been bosom friends.⁴ He also hints that Rufinus

and he had 'sometimes erred, sometimes shown good sense' in each other's company.

It seems likely that a third member of Jerome's circle was Heliodorus, whose friendship with him was to remain unbroken throughout their lives.⁵ Born at Altinum, then an important city on the marshy shores of the gulf of Venice, he may have met at any rate Rufinus, from nearby Concordia, in early youth. On completing his education he was to serve as a soldier for a time, but was to abandon that calling in his enthusiasm for the ascetic life. He was to become bishop of his native town at some date before 381, for he attended the council held at Aquileia in that year. Much later we shall find him encouraging Jerome in his literary projects and providing money to pay for stenographers and copyists.⁶

These three, like Jerome himself, were all well-off bourgeois boys from north-east Italy or Dalmatia. The fourth friend who calls for mention, Pammachius, came from an altogether different background and lineage.⁷ A scion of the ancient *gens Furia*, he belonged to one of the noblest and richest Roman families. He was to possess vast estates in Numidia, to be a leading senator, and to hold proconsular rank. He was also (a rare phenomenon among male members of the Roman aristocracy at that time) a Christian, one moreover whose theological and religious concern, and involvement in Christian causes, were to become progressively more intense. Although their paths were inevitably to diverge for a great many years, Jerome was in later life to find him a staunch ally and defender in the capital. The fact that the two were already friends during these early student days emerges clearly from two letters which Jerome was to write to him in 393. In these he speaks of their 'friendship of long standing', and salutes him as his 'sometime fellow-pupil, comrade, friend'.⁸ It is confirmed by a further letter in which Jerome reminds him how as young men they had both, along with the other students present, been convulsed with laughter in a Roman lecture-hall when the lecturer repeated a pithy saying of Cato's.⁹ It is a guess, but a reasonable one, that they had met at Donatus's grammar school, which must have been a magnet to the affluent and well-born.

(ii)

In addition we have some information, woefully fragmentary but

⁵ Cavallera was probably right in arguing (5, 14 n. 1) that Jerome's language in *Comm. on Oedipus* prol. (CCL 76A: 361-2) implies that Heliodorus was a fellow-student with himself and Pammachius at the rhetor's school. For Heliodorus's career as a soldier see *Letter* 14, 2 and 6.

⁶ See below p. 284. For his presence at the council see Mansi, *Sac. concil. ampl. coll.* III, 600.

⁷ See his notice in *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1971), 663, with the references there given.

⁸ *Letters* 48, 1: 49, 1.

⁹ *Letter* 66, 9.

¹ *Letter* 3, 4 and 5 (it specifically mentions 'our studies at Rome').

² For Rufinus see F. X. Murphy, *Rufinus of Aquileia* (345-411): *His Life and Works* (Washington, D.C., 1945). 'Turranus', which was an ancient Roman family name and which is given by Apollinaris Sidonius (*Ep.* 2, 9, 5), seems the correct form. Jerome was frequently to caricature his serious demeanour (e.g. *Apology* 1, 30).

³ Palladius (*Hist. Latine*, 46) describes him as 'very well born'. For his comfortable background see F. X. Murphy, op. cit., 3 f., although he is unduly cautious in assessing Jerome's references to his wealth. Murphy also (op. cit., 2) collects the evidence for his birth at Concordia. The date 345 given for his birth depends on the correct assumption that he and Jerome were roughly contemporaries and the erroneous one that the latter was born c. 347.

⁴ *Letter* 3, 4 ('Bonosus tuus, immo meus et, ut verius dicam, noster...': addressed to Rufinus).

illuminating, about one or two of Jerome's activities at Rome, where he seems to have had (as we should expect) a full and absorbing time.

One of his most enthusiastic extra-curricular pursuits, and one which was to remain with him throughout his life, was the building up of a library. This was to become his most precious possession, and he was later to confess that, when he abandoned everything else for the religious life, he could not bring himself to surrender 'the library which I had collected at Rome with immense zeal and labour'.¹⁰ He doubtless purchased a number of volumes, but he probably either had the majority transcribed by professional copyists or transcribed them himself; this would be the 'immense labour' to which he refers. As regards its contents, the passage quoted specifically mentions the works of Cicero and Plautus, but we may reasonably conjecture that it included other favourite writers like Vergil, Sallust, and Terence. At this stage it was almost certainly confined to the pagan classics. The library was to accompany him on the lengthy journeys he was to undertake in Europe and the Near East, and was to be finally installed in his monastery at Bethlehem. Continually growing in size and variety, it must eventually have become the most important private collection of the period.¹¹

But we should not picture the young Jerome exclusively as a scholar and bibliophile. We may discount his references later in life to the scabrous songs chanted by schoolboys in every classroom or by smart worldlings at their banquets.¹² It is unlikely that he held aloof from the boisterous fun of his teenage companions, but these are not necessarily reminiscences of his own youthful experiences. What is more to the point, his later writings reveal that he was a man of strong passions which he had difficulty in controlling, and he seems to have found an outlet for them, both as a student and for years after, in the uninhibited society of the day. A time would come when he would be filled with revulsion for the disorders of his adolescence and early manhood, and it is from his later confessions of corruption, extravagantly worded and vague, that we have to estimate how real these disorders were.

Thus in a series of letters, most of them written some thirty years after this period, we find him bitterly lamenting that he is the prodigal son who has squandered the whole of the portion entrusted to him by his father, who has been 'befouled with the squalor of every kind of sin', and who lies like Lazarus in the sepulchre bound fast by the shackles of his misdeeds and desperately awaiting his Lord's summons to come forth.¹³

¹⁰ *Letter* 22, 30.

¹¹ So C. Wendel in F. Milkau-G. Leyth, *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaft* (2nd ed., Wiesbaden, 1953) III, 62.

¹² E.g. *Apology* 1, 17; *Comm. on Isaiah* xii, pref. (CCL 73A: 493-4), where he speaks of 'Milesian fables' and *The Testament of Corovitha*.

¹³ *Letters* 2, 4, 2; 7, 3.

More precisely, he reproaches himself with having stumbled and fallen on 'the slippery path of youth', and recalls how he and Rufinus had on occasion gone astray together.¹⁴ Later still (in 384) he was to confess that, when he was living alone in the desert, he would imagine himself immersed once again in the sensual pleasures of Rome. However chill his body, his mind would be surging with carnal desires and the flames of lust would burn up his half-dead limbs; meanwhile his fantasy would be haunted with visions of himself mingling with bands of girls.¹⁵ And we have his frank admission in 393 to Pammachius, who as his fellow-student was in a position to know the truth, that if he exalted virginity to the skies, it was not because he possessed it himself but because he admired what he had lost.¹⁶

Scholars have extracted very different conclusions from these avowals, and some have attempted to play them down. They have argued on the one hand that the highly coloured language reflects Jerome's penchant for exaggeration and the rhetorical flourishes in which he delighted, on the other that it is the misleading but understandable habit of deeply religious people to magnify their pre-conversion peccadillos and represent them as enormities. Yet while allowance must clearly be made for these factors, enough that is concrete remains to convince us that Jerome's student days were marked by sexual adventures to which he was afterwards to look back with loathing. There is nothing improbable in this conclusion, and the denial of it makes nonsense of his obviously sincere professions of penitence and revulsion. It is further evident from the letters mentioned that, notwithstanding his baptism (which, as we shall see, took place at some point during his stay in Rome), Jerome was to continue for several years in the grip of passions which filled him with shame, and to be tortured with remorse for his enslavement to them.¹⁷ The lack of detailed information is disappointing, but the realisation that in youth and early manhood Jerome was strongly sexed should assist us to understand his character and behaviour in middle and later life.

(iii)

Meanwhile, absorbed though he might be in his studies on the one hand and in the pleasurable excitements of the capital on the other, Jerome had not forgotten that he was a Christian. Bonus and the others of his set

¹⁴ *Letters* 7, 4; 3, 1 ('Illud os quod mecum vel erravit aliquando vel sapuit...').

¹⁵ *Letter* 22, 7.

¹⁶ *Letter* 49, 20. Cf. *Letter* 22, 5, where his declaration that even almighty God cannot restore a virgin after her fall has a note of personal regret about it. See also *Letter* 130, 9.

¹⁷ Cf. *Letter* 14, 6 (date 376/7), which seems to imply some recent sexual lapse. He was later to claim (*Letters* 15, 2; 52, 1; *Against John* 41) that his retreat to the desert had been motivated, in part at any rate, by the desire to discipline himself and make amends for his excesses.

were probably Christians too. The fact that they shared this common faith may have helped to draw them together, just as it may have prompted the young aristocrat Pammachius to join the group. We further get the impression that Jerome's Christianity was now less lukewarm than we earlier suggested the attitude of his family probably was when he was a child at Stridon. This at any rate seems implied by a striking reminiscence which his efforts as an old man to expound Ezekiel's description of the Temple instigated him to set down. 'When I was a youth at Rome,' he wrote,¹⁸ 'studying liberal arts, it was my custom on Sundays, along with companions of the same age and the same conviction, to make tours of the tombs of the Apostles and the martyrs. Often we would enter those crypts which have been hollowed out of the depths of the earth and which, along the walls on either side of the passages, contain the bodies of buried people. Everything was so dark that the prophet's saying, "Let them go down living to hell",¹⁹ seemed almost to have been fulfilled. Here and there a ray of light admitted from above relieved the horror of blackness, yet in such a way that you imagined it was not so much a window as a funnel pierced by the light itself as it descended. Then we would walk back with gingerly steps, wrapped in unseeing night, with Vergil's line recurring to us, "Everywhere dread fills the heart; the very silence dismays".'²⁰

This narrative evidently refers to Jerome's visits to the catacombs, the vast network of underground corridors, at several levels, outside Rome in which Christians had buried their dead from the second century onwards. In the first half of the fourth century, with the cessation of persecution and the growing acceptance of the Church, the practice of paying honour to the martyrs became increasingly popular,²¹ and these subterranean cemeteries, which had been confiscated and closed at the outbreak of Diocletian's persecution in 303,²² began to be the setting of pilgrimages and cult services. In the popular imagination the deceased buried there, who in the vast majority of cases had in fact died in the ordinary way, were identified as martyrs for the faith. We know that Damasus, who was to become pope in autumn 366 and whom Jerome was later to serve in a secretarial capacity, took in hand the work of clearing, restoring, and embellishing the catacombs. Jerome's graphic account reveals that well before this

¹⁸ *Comm. on Ezekiel* 40, 5-13 (CCL 75: 468).

¹⁹ Psalm 55, 15.

²⁰ *Aeneid* 2, 755 ('Horror ubique animos, simul ipsa silentia terrent').

²¹ For an accurate popular account of the cult of martyrs see J. A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy* (ET, London, 1959), chap. xiv. Julian the Apostate denounced it as contemptible and contrary to Christ's instructions (*Against the Galileans* 335B-D).

²² Cf. the statement in the *Depositio episcoporum* (*MGH auct. antiq.*, ix, 75) that the Roman see was officially vacant for 7 years, 6 months, and 25 days from 304 onwards. We have indirect evidence for the restitution of the 'loca ecclesiastica' to the authorities of the Roman church in 311 in Augustine, *Brevit. coll. cum Don.*, 3, 34-36 (PL 43, 645 f.).

refurbishing they were being visited by Christians, and provides valuable evidence of their state at the time. But it is even more instructive for the light it throws on his own mental and spiritual attitude. He expressly states that he and his companions were 'of the same . . . conviction ("propositi"?). This means that theirs was already a positively oriented Christianity, and their practice of visiting the catacombs discloses the form their piety was taking. The description itself in the original, it may be remarked, is a splendid example of Jerome's mastery of prose style, and while it dates from more than half a century later, it illustrates in its interweaving of classical and scriptural motifs the ever-present tension in his mind between the two cultures on which it had been nourished.

These Sunday walks in the catacombs are clear proof of Jerome's deepened interest in the Christian faith, and their impact on his impressionable mind is likely to have been profound. At all events it was during his residence in Rome that he took the decision to offer himself for baptism. He himself provides the evidence, recalling twice over in later letters to Pope Damasus that it was at Rome, from the see of Peter, that he had received 'the vesture of Christ' (the reference being to the white garment in which the newly baptised person was clothed on coming up from the font).²³ The date of his baptism is unknown, and all we can say is that it must have taken place before the accession of Pope Damasus in autumn 366. The bishop normally administered baptism, and even if Jerome was still in Rome in 366, it is inconceivable that he should not have mentioned the fact when he proudly reminded the pope that he had been baptised in Rome.

More interesting than the date of his baptism is the fact that, for all the awakened earnestness of his Christian faith, Jerome apparently did not immediately feel called upon to make a dramatic gesture of renunciation. In the fourth century it was common for really serious Christians, at their baptism or when they experienced a deeper conversion, to break with the world, abandoning career, marriage, and material possessions in order (in the expressive phrase of Gyprian of Carthage) 'to hold themselves free for God and for Christ'.²⁴ The ascetic strain which had been present in Christianity from the start, and which in the west tended to set a premium on virginity,²⁵ inevitably received a powerful practical impulse with the disappearance of persecution and the emergence of a predominantly Christian society where much of the Christian colouring was skin-deep. Monasticism of an organised kind was at this time just beginning to make a tentative, hesitant appearance in the west, but the withdrawal of

²³ *Letters* 15, 1; 16, 2.

²⁴ *De hab. virg.* 24.

²⁵ Cf. R. Lorenz, 'Die Anfänge des abendländischen Mönchtums im 4. Jahrhundert', *ZKG* 77 (1966), 28 f.

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committed Christians, or 'servants of God', could take various forms according to their circumstances. Many years were to pass, however, before the challenge of renunciation was to present itself to Jerome.

(iv)

How long did Jerome's student days last? The general assumption has been that he must have attended his rhetorical school for three, or at most four, years, but this is no more than a guess based on the normal practice. A serious, ambitious student, such as we may reasonably presume Jerome to have been, might prolong this stage of his education for several years.²⁶ True, steps were to be taken at Rome to clamp down on this, and a law of 12 March 370 was to prohibit students from the provinces from remaining in the capital after their twentieth year.²⁷ But its enactment strongly suggests that the authorities were concerned about the number who exceeded the stipulated age-limit.

We have no means of ascertaining whether or not Jerome was one of these, but the possibility cannot be dismissed out of hand. In any case the obscurity which envelops his youth and early manhood becomes a black-out in the 370s. A whole decade and more of his life is lost to us, and while we can speculate about his doings we cannot hope for answers to our questions.

IV

Trier and Aquileia

(1)

The black-out begins, slowly and patchily, to clear in 367 or 368, when Jerome was in his later thirties; he was to leave Europe for the Near East in 372. These dates are of course approximate, but they cannot be far out.¹ The half dozen years separating them he spent partly at Trier, in Gaul, partly in Dalmatia and north-east Italy. His movements and activities at this time are extremely obscure, with only a few isolated shafts of light piercing the darkness. But it is apparent from these that this was a period of crucial importance for his personal development and for the shaping of his career.

The actual evidence for his sojourn at Trier is much sparser, and less free from ambiguity, than we could wish.² For example, we have his noteworthy statement, set down in 374, that after concluding their studies at Rome Bonosus and he had settled 'by the half-barbarous banks of the Rhine', where they had 'shared the same food and lodging'.³ Taken strictly, these words might suggest that they had resided much nearer the Rhine itself than Trier, which lies on the Moselle almost a hundred kilometres west of Bingen. There is another letter, however, written a year or two later, which can only refer to this phase in his career, and in which he specifically mentions certain books 'which I copied out with my own hand at Trier'.⁴ This not only establishes the fact that he spent at any rate some time at Trier, but makes it likely that the rhetorical expression 'half-barbarous banks of the Rhine' denotes that city or its environs. This conclusion is supported by the fact that in late Roman usage 'bank', 'banks', or the related adjective ('ripensis') could embrace the whole region of which the river concerned was a prominent feature. Further,

¹ The former may be suggested (see below) by Valentinian's transference of the seat of government to Trier in 367; Jerome's presence there in 369-70 is confirmed by his reminiscence of the *Attacotti* (see below); perhaps also by the curious fact that Q. Aurelius Symmachus used exactly the same expression 'Rheni semibarbaras ripas' in a panegyric he delivered there on 25 Feb. 369 (*MGH auct. antiq.* vi, 1, 46). For the latter see below p. 36.

² For this section I am much indebted to J. Steinhilber's full and learned discussion, 'Hieronymus und Laktanz in Trier', *Trierer Zeitschrift* 20 (1951), 126-54.

³ *Letter* 3, 5.

⁴ *Letter* 5, 2.

²⁶ See A. Müller, 'Studentenleben im 4. Jahrhundert nach Chr.', *Philologus* 69—NF 23 (1910), 298 f.; P. Petit, *Les étudiants de Libanios* (Paris, 1956), 63-6.

²⁷ *Code de Théod.* xiv, 9, 1.

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 His Life, Writings,
 and Controversies

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Frontispiece: Illumination from the First Bible of Charles the Bald (mid-9th century) depicting scenes from Jerome's life. The top band shows Jerome writing at his desk. The middle band shows Jerome in a boat on the Tiber. The bottom band shows Jerome in a study surrounded by other figures.