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Katherine Rinne
Illustration by Rebecca Sunter

Water's Pilgrimage in Rome

“If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.”
From Philip Larkin, “Water,” 1964

Rome is one of the world's most hallowed pilgrimage destinations. Each year, the Eternal City's numinous qualities draw millions of devout Christians to undertake a pilgrimage there just as they have for nearly two millennia. Visiting the most venerable sites, culminating with St. Peter's, the Mother Church of Catholicism, the processional journey often reinvigorates faith among believers. It is a cleansing experience for them, a reflective pause in their daily lives and yearly routines. Millions more arrive in Rome with more secular agendas. With equal zeal they set out on touristic, educational, gastronomic, and retail pilgrimages. Indeed, when in Rome, I dedicate at least a full and fervent day to “La Sacra Giornata di Acquistare le Scarpe,” the holy day of shoe shopping, when I visit each of my favorite stores like so many shrines along a sacred way. Although shoes are crucial to our narrative and to the completion of any pilgrimage conducted on

Opposite: The Trevi Fountain, 2007. Photo by David Iliff; License: CC-BY-SA 3.0.

foot, our interest in this essay lies elsewhere, in rededicating Rome's vital role as a city of reflective pilgrimage by divining water's hidden course beneath our feet (in shoes, old or new) as it flows out to public fountains in an otherwise parched city. Just as streams of religious pilgrims flow through the Eternal City, sustaining and reinvigorating it with every step, so too the flow of water through Rome nourishes and rejuvenates the city with every drop.

Water has been called the "source of the soul" of gardens, and perhaps it is also the source of the soul of cities. If so, nowhere is this clearer than in Rome. Its ancient foundation myth recalls that the twin babies Romulus and Remus, set adrift in raging flood waters, were washed ashore on the rustic banks of the Tiber River, which today, now bound within flood control walls, carves a serpentine path through Rome's urban core. It is this river, the Tiber, that the poet Virgil affirms is "the river closest to the gods," although that is probably not the case today. The orator Cicero declares the city of Rome to be rich in springs: even today some urban springs still flow, only now they are imprisoned in subterranean conduits and drains, no longer deemed useful, fouled by urban development. The surrounding countryside of karst and volcanic soils still harbors hundreds of abundant springs that hold a seemingly inexhaustible, although seasonally variable, supply. Some of these springs still feed Rome's aqueducts, which in turn feed the fountains, just as they did in antiquity. Indeed, the springs, aqueducts and fountains provide a warp onto which the weft of Rome's history and daily life has been continuously woven for nearly three thousand years. Stepping into the shoes of a new type of pilgrim, one who follows water, allows us another way to enter into Rome's tapestry of time and place.

Anyone who has been to Rome will recall what an extraordinary benediction it is to see water splashing and squirting in scores of fountains. Like no other city, Rome is heartbreakingly generous—



Figure 1: The Babuino, a public drinking fountain from the 1570s where Romans can still post anti-clerical and anti-government *pasquinades*.

water gushes into piazza fountains with reckless abandon, and bubbles from neighborhood taps in nearly every corner of the city. Little drinking fountains even take root like beneficent barnacles from palace and church walls. No facade is too aloof that it might not, someday, sometime, support its own little nymph or satyr spewing water into a sidewalk basin as an offering to any and all passersby (Figure 1). Rhapsodized by poets, tourists, and artists, the fountains are essential to Rome's identity and are part of the everyday environment of its citizens. What those of us from drought-plagued regions might see as an astounding luxury or extravagance, Romans see as a right of citizenship. Ever present and ever flowing, the fountains symbolize the abundant goodwill and generosity of the Romans themselves: to give water freely, to family, neighbors, and strangers alike, affirms a genuine openness of spirit.

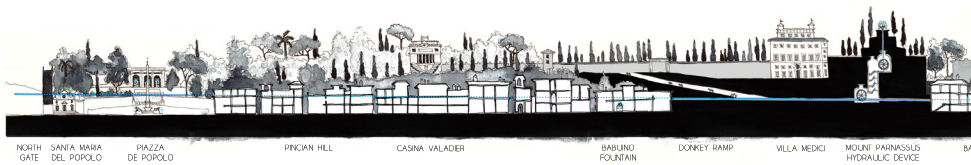
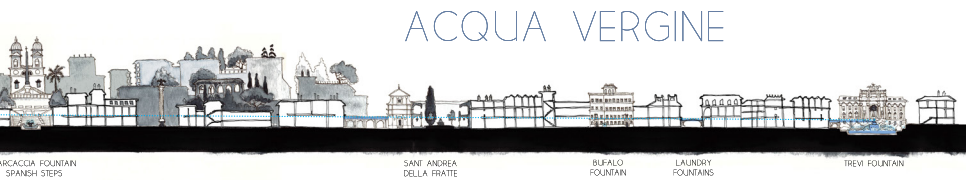


Figure 2: Water's pilgrimage from Piazza del Popolo to the Trevi Fountain.

The Pilgrim's Path

Momentarily stupefied by the beauty of Rome's fountains, most tourists gawk, then heave a wistful sigh, toss a coin, take a photo, perhaps take a sip, and walk away. Those embarking on a water pilgrimage actively and deliberately engage with each fountain, querying its purpose and meaning while marveling at its beauty. Architect Charles Moore's (1925-1993) advice to a mindful water pilgrim in Rome is "to follow where the water leads you." In essence, this means allowing gravity to pull you along with the water's flow, since gravity was, until the late nineteenth century, the organizing principle of the entire urban water system. To consciously surrender to water's inexorable forward journey is to track the flow of history; to sense the emerging shape of the ancient city as it morphed into medieval, Renaissance, and modern Rome; to understand the highs and lows of topography; to derive pure enjoyment; and to embrace water's sacred spirit. Fortunately, anyone, regardless of creed, can become a devout water pilgrim in Rome. Water is central to most, if not all, religions: it is non-denominational. Although every religion consecrates water for its own rituals of purification, none can contain it, name it, or claim it exclusively. Like Philip Larkin's constructed religion, they all "make use of water;" it is ecumenical, ours in which



Rebecca Sunter, 2014.

to cleanse our souls, to take solace, or take pleasure as we follow where it will lead.

How do we follow Moore's advice? How do we consciously follow the pilgrimage of water through the city? Since the eighth century Rome's pilgrims consulted guides, like the *Einsiedeln Itinerary* or the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* (The Marvels of Rome) that pointed out ancient and Christian monuments, to help navigate the city. The water pilgrim is no different. Even with so many fountains, we sometimes need the help of maps, handbooks, and images to negotiate Rome's hills and valleys in our efforts to trace water's flow. The fountains give us clues, but most of the story lies hidden beneath Rome's streets, in subterranean infrastructure.

Today Rome has six aqueducts; for me, the most compelling of these is the Acqua Vergine, the Virgin's Aqueduct (Figure 2). Its purity and brisk taste made it Rome's favorite drinking water for hundreds of years. Although no longer providing potable water, it serves many of the city's most famous ornamental fountains—the Trevi, the Barcaccia, and those in Piazza del Popolo, Piazza Colonna, Piazza Navona, and Piazza della Rotonda—all in the low-lying Campo Marzio, the alluvial plain on the left (east) bank of the Tiber.





Figure 3: The Trevi Fountain, 2007. Photograph by David Iliff; License: CC-BY-SA 3.0.

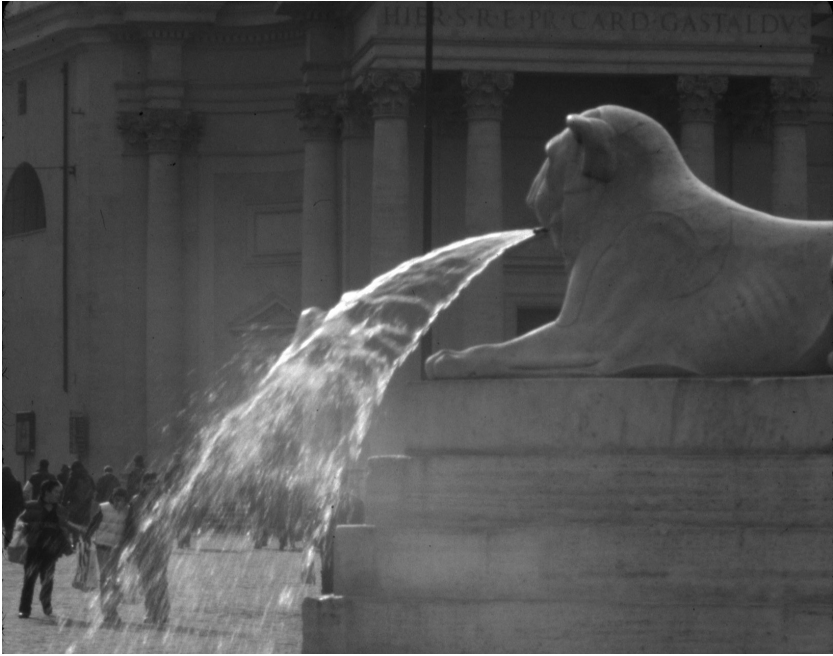


Figure 4: The water fans at the Lion Fountain, blown by the wind, twist and twitch into ground-level basins.

Originally built by Marcus Agrippa in 19 BC as the *Aqua Virgo* (to serve the free public baths of Agrippa, the ruins of which stand near the Pantheon), the low pressure, low elevation aqueduct still draws water from subterranean springs located at Salone, about sixteen kilometers outside the Aurelian Wall.¹ The aqueduct continued to function throughout the medieval period, although in a degraded and reduced state. Then, between 1560 and 1570, it was fully restored back to its source and many new fountains were built: the first of these was in Piazza del Popolo where our pilgrimage begins. Today the *Acqua Vergine* terminates at Nicola Salvi's Trevi Fountain (1732-1762), just as our water walk will, in, what he describes as “a welter

of water” and “foaming cascades” that “seem to be emerging from the hidden veins of the Earth!”² (Figure 3).

Like Christian pilgrims arriving in Rome since the Middle Ages, we enter through Porta del Popolo, the northernmost gate in the Aurelian Wall, to begin our pilgrimage of Acqua Vergine water. Without drinking fountains in the piazza (or in most parts of Rome) until 1570, the thirsty Christians began their processional journey by heading south out of the piazza to link up with Via Papalis, the pilgrimage road leading to St. Peters. Today Piazza del Popolo is filled with fountains; straight ahead we catch our initial glimpse of Vergine water at the Four Lions Fountain, which was introduced at the center of piazza in the early nineteenth century (replacing the original fountain from the 1570s). The lions are poised at the foot of an ancient Egyptian obelisk, brought to Rome by the Emperor Augustus and placed in this location by Pope Sixtus V in 1589. Lions are an apt symbol for the first fountain we encounter dispensing life-giving Vergine water, since it was thought, well into the Renaissance, that the mother lion's gentle licking of her newborn cubs not only stimulated respiration by removing the amniotic sac, but actually started their hearts to beat. Here, rather than licking cubs, with puckered lips the four lions each eject a perpetual spray of water that, splashing into receptive basins, quickens our own heart beats and helps give purpose to our mission (Figure 4).

Sweeping our eyes across the symmetrical piazza we see an urban landscape full of fountains. Two drinking basins to the right and left as we enter Porta del Popolo, not unlike the holy water fonts at the entry to every Catholic church, introduce the idea of Rome as an urban-scale basilica with water as its liturgy: we become acolytes as we enter the piazza. Two ornamental cascades erupt at the far ends of the grand oval piazza and enormous waterfalls rush down the Pincian hill to our

left, drowning out the traffic's noise (a twentieth century mechanically pumped aqueduct feeds these other fountains, so they are for another water pilgrimage).

At this point we need x-ray vision to follow the Vergine's flow: the aqueduct is off to the east, hidden behind the Pincian's slope. In back of the terraced roads and gardens, we would see the stone and concrete aqueduct channel running about three meters above the level of the piazza; gradually descending from north to south. Since we cannot walk into the hill to begin our water pilgrimage, we will ascend the Pincian to Rome's first public park so that we can walk above the aqueduct channel, now nearly thirty meters beneath the hill's crest. Perched above the waterfall we viewed from the piazza, there is a spectacular view of Rome: the Aurelian Wall, Porta del Popolo, scores of bell-towers and cupolas, the Pantheon dome, the London Plane trees that snake along the Tiber Embankment, and in the distance Monte Mario, the Janiculum hill, and St. Peter's. Before the river embankment was built at the end of the nineteenth century, this would have been the best vantage point to watch approaching floodwaters rush through Porta del Popolo from Via Flaminia to the north, just as they did in 1530, 1557, 1598, 1606, 1660, and many times both prior and since.

With the aqueduct channel and water so far below, it is not illogical to ask, "Where are the fountains?" since this hilltop location renders them ineligible for a gravity-flow system. In the late sixteenth century, the force of gravity was overcome by the force of will (and no small amount of money) to bring water to the spectacular Villa dei Medici, to the south of our vantage point, now home to the French Academy. Once owned by Cardinal Ricci da Montepulciano, the gardens were modest by late sixteenth century standards, but Ricci was a man of enormous ambition and cunning. He had contrived in 1567

to be appointed the head of the papal water committee that oversaw Rome's waterworks, including the *Acqua Vergine* that ran beneath his property. Once restored, he leveraged his position to grant himself the right to tap down into the aqueduct channel. He had an irrigation system devised whereby mules carried water up from the aqueduct to the level of the garden along a newly built ramp. This was tedious and labor-intensive, so he commissioned a more elegant, strategy. In 1574, Ricci hired Camillo Agrippa, a renowned hydraulic engineer, architect, and mathematician from Milan, to build an impressive waterwheel inside the aqueduct that relied on the constant water current to supply kinetic energy to an hydraulic pump that raised the water to the level of the garden.

Cardinal Ferdinando dei Medici purchased the property in 1576 and immediately rehired Agrippa to improve the waterworks and to add to the garden its most prominent feature, the "Parnassus," an artificial hill meant to recall Mount Parnassus, home of the Delphic oracle and the Muses (and hence home of poetry and literature) in Greek Mythology. Hidden inside the hill was a grotto and another hydraulic device that raised the water to a little bubbling fountain standing nearly twenty meters above the garden; that is, about fifty meters above the aqueduct. Lust of any kind can be obsessive. Water lust is no different, as Medici's efforts at the Parnassus prove. Unfortunately, Agrippa's mechanism was intricate and like most complicated hydraulic machinery, it was difficult and expensive to maintain: it may have been abandoned shortly after Medici's death in 1609. Today a higher-pressure aqueduct, the *Acqua Felice*, supplies the villa fountains (and the pretty little fountain that stands before it), but that line is for yet another water pilgrimage.

Instead of climbing the hill, it is also possible to begin the *Vergine* pilgrimage by heading south out of Piazza del Popolo along *Via del Babuino*, which runs along the bottom of the Pincian's slope. The street



Figure 5: Even at 5:00am on a summer morning, the Barcaccia Fountain provides solace.



Figure 6: The Spanish Steps. Detroit Publishing Company, circa 1890-1900, Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

is named for a little drinking fountain (originally intended for people and horses) decorated with an ancient sculpture of a satyr, so eroded and bruised by time that he is called the Babuino, the Baboon (Figure 1). When built in the 1570s, this was the first privately financed public drinking fountain to dispense Vergine water. Smooth rivulets still flow into the Babuino's basin, but since the Vergine is no longer potable, today, a different aqueduct feeds it. Like many Roman fountains predating the city's modernization at the end of the nineteenth century, this one is peripatetic—moved here from across the street, when it was widened, to a spacious swath of sidewalk to be out traffic's way.

The Babuino is one of Rome's four "talking statues"—Pasquino at Palazzo Orsini, Marforio formerly in the Roman Forum, and Madama Lucrezia in Piazza Venezia complete the roster. Lacking a free press during the Renaissance, anonymous Romans penned *pasquinades*, critical remarks, directed at current papal policy, and hung the placards around Pasquino's neck. Overnight one or more of the other talking statues responded with an equally prickly reply, also anonymous, which might itself be answered by another *pasquinade* the following night. To this day, the Babuino and Pasquino, adorned with anti-government placards and graffiti of every political stripe still have heated conversations across the kilometer or so that separates them, but at the Babuino fountain, even the most impassioned argument is cooled by the water's murmur.

Whether we take the high road or the low road on our water pilgrimage, we will reach the Barcaccia Fountain, the Little Boat (1627-29), located in Piazza di Spagna at the foot of the Spanish Steps (Figure 5). Even without being able to see into the Pincian hill, it is clear that we are back at the Vergine's own level (only now, the aqueduct is even lower than when we stood in Piazza del Popolo). Unlike the hilltop Medici fountains, at the Barcaccia, there are no tricks, no mules, no devices; there is only gravity.

The Barcaccia provides a tempting and beautiful place to pause. In 1627, Pope Urban VIII commissioned the fountain to commemorate a restoration of the *Acqua Vergine*. Unveiled in 1629, it barely rises above the pavement in which it has been purposefully nestled to compensate for very low pressure. Encircling benches surrounding the pool invite sitting. Stepping-stones lead to drinking spouts. Its designers (first, Pietro Bernini and then his son, Gian Lorenzo, to whom we owe the final form), “waved a wand over the mute creations of the past, transforming them into something new, allusive, and purely poetic.”³ Distinct from earlier “mute” fountains, the Barcaccia is overloaded with explicit papal symbols—there is no mistaking its papal sponsor—and the fountain is a storyteller. Depending upon your particular interest, the narrative is either of a warship shooting life-giving water rather than cannon fire; Catholicism’s resurgence during the Counter-Reformation; the physical representation of a poem by Urban VIII; a legend relating the most calamitous flood in Rome’s history; or, all of the above. Unlike the talking statues chattering away across the city, the Barcaccia’s voice is only for those who linger and deliberately engage with it, there, in *Piazza di Spagna*.

The fountain’s site, partially settled into a dip in the street suggests that it washed ashore, nudged into an awaiting berth that, in some ways, appears to have been there always. An anecdote relates that a real boat was stranded at this point during the devastating 1598 flood. Although most scholars discount the story, a small river craft could have come aground in this very spot; the flood reached this far inland. Veracity is ultimately irrelevant. It is the bewitching fountain, not the story that seduces the pilgrim as suave sheets of water fan out from the sinking boat and glide over the fountain’s rim, making up in quantity what it lacks in pressure.

Not only do fountains provide vessels for water to pause temporarily—and provide a locus for political discourse, like the

Babuino, or storytelling through iconography, like the Barcaccia—they also allow the water to speak for itself. By now it should be clear that the pilgrimage of water is also one of sound. Each fountain has a voice: the Lions whistle; the Babuino bumbles; the Barcaccia whispers. For Romans, every fountain speaks, not just the Babuino. When they describe a fountain as *muta*, mute, they do not mean that it fails to tell a symbolic narrative like the Barcaccia, rather that the fountain lacks water, life, its voice, and its soul: it is dead. The Trevi Fountain's voice was stilled when Marcello Mastroianni died in 1996. To honor him and symbolize Rome's loss, water stopped flowing and the fountain was draped in mourning. Like Marcello, the fountain passed into silence. The 2002 drought left Rome's fountains literally panting for water in the late summer.⁴ A Roman friend offers his insight, "Everyone leaves town in August not because of the heat, but because the fountains are dry," they are mute.

Almost a century after the Barcaccia was unveiled, the Spanish Steps (1717-26), which terminate near the fountain, were built to facilitate circulation from the church and convent of Santa Maria della Trinità, under French patronage at the top of the Pincian and the Spanish Embassy at the bottom (Figuer 6). With the steps in place, the French and Spanish were now physically and symbolically united and the steep unstable slope had been conquered. Francesco de Santis' design mimics water's flow: it is fluid in section, with cascading stone steps; undulating in plan, with waves uniting church and piazza; and in elevation, it is a rippling theatrical backdrop for commercial life that can best be seen emerging from Via dei Condotti (Conduit Street).

The entire Piazza di Spagna neighborhood is rich in water history tempting us in many directions. Near to the Babuino is the "Fontana degli Artisti," created at Benito Mussolini's bidding in 1929. It is decorated with painter's brushes and easels, sculptor's mallets and chisels,

and architect's rules and calipers, meant to represent its neighborhood, a warren of artist's studios. All around the nearby streets, there are also many inscriptions recording the terrifying floods of 1530, 1557, and 1598. At nearly every corner, Rome's beneficent barnacles invite us to drink as do the cast iron "Nasone," Big Nose, drinking fountains that were installed in the 1870s.

Our itinerary pulls us gently southward along Via dei Propaganda Fide toward the Trevi Fountain. Even before the Vergine was restored, there were gardens filled with sculpture and fountains in this neighborhood. Their owners, some of the most famous early sixteenth century Humanists living in Rome (the intellectual one percent), were able to tap directly into the aqueduct, before the 1570 restoration, and legally extract water for their gardens from the perilously low public supply. Antonio Colocci's gardens and its fountain, "The Sleeping Nymph," were the subject of poetry and much discussion among his guests, and, perhaps, grumbling from outside the garden gates.

There are few remnants of those gardens (some fragments remain hidden in courtyards), but there is a reminder of how access to drinking water improved after the 1570 aqueduct restoration and how water altered the social contract between the "haves" and the "have-nots." First, there is the sadly degraded Fontana del Bufalo just past the Church of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte. Like the Babuino, this small drinking fountain is a reminder of a kind of public/private partnership that developed post-restoration whereby some property owners were allowed to buy aqueduct water (or receive it as a gift from the seated pope) with the stipulation that they provide a public drinking fountain on the street abutting their property wall. Meant for people and animals alike, these "semi-public" drinking fountains also reflected prestige on their owners. Most have disappeared with street widening, or been moved, like the Babuino. In any case, drinking water still flows to the

Bufalo Fountain, but now from another aqueduct (the Acqua Marcia built in 1870), and it is a welcome place to adjust our bearings as we begin the last leg of this water pilgrimage.

There is a more imposing Vergine relic a few steps to the south on Via Nazzareno heading toward Via del Tritone. To the left, there is an old wooden door, almost the right size for Alice to enter Wonderland, set into a small arch, over which hovers Sixtus IV's (1471-84) papal coat of arms. The padlock alone tells us that even though we won't be able to enter, something important is on the other side; it is a remnant of the ancient aqueduct channel. Then, to the right, imprisoned by the municipality behind a wall and fence, by a local café with *al fresco* tables and chairs and by padlocked motorcycles, stands a fragment of the aqueduct—with an ancient carved inscription—and the arches that supported it. When built, it passed over a public street and it was possible to ride under the arch on horseback. This is no longer possible because the ground level has risen many meters over the centuries, most notably from alluvial deposits left by recurring Tiber floods. Today the best view of the partially buried arch is from the stairway to the bathroom inside the coffee shop.

Though now inaccessible, in the seventeenth century, this stretch of the ancient aqueduct was the site of a large public laundry, one of many in the city. The laundries, too, were artifacts of the revised social contract between the municipality, the papacy, and the people that made water available for human needs. As with the drinking fountains, this was not water bought and sold, but water made freely available to all, night and day, every day, in perennial complimentary abundance. To this day, this is one of the hallmarks that have set Rome apart from nearly every other major city since antiquity.

Standing at the corner of Via del Tritone, there is a glimpse of shimmering water to the left, up the street. Here is Bernini's Triton

Fountain, but like the fountains in the Villa dei Medici, it is fed by the Acqua Felice and thus is part of that water story. Our path leads instead across the street, where, no later than five o'clock in the morning, it is possible to hear a low *rimbombare*, a rumble; not of traffic, but water. Like Sylvia, Anita Ekberg's character in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), the water pilgrim is drawn audibly into the orbit of the Trevi.

Following Via della Stamperia, the rumble intensifies. This is true even today when the fountain's water ration has been drastically cut. Our route is now adjacent to the aqueduct; we are almost shoulder-to-shoulder. The channel is sandwiched between addorsed palaces on our right—the ancient arches and waterway enclose a twentieth century concrete conduit. Once past a slight bend in the street, the water's thunder overwhelms; we have no resistance and can show no restraint. We are compelled forward.

The Trevi is arguably the most famous fountain in the world; noted for its gigantic scale, magnificent sculptures, complex iconography, dramatic water display, embracing piazza, and its starring role in many movies; most notably, *La Dolce Vita*. Like St Peter's, it has come to epitomize Rome. We can't enter into the shimmering pool the way that Anita Eckberg and Marcello Mastroianni did, but, as water pilgrims, we understand that it is more than a photo-op and an oasis for weary tourists. It deserves our sustained attention at many levels.

First is the subtlety of its situation in the piazza. Salvi took advantage of an existing re-organization of the piazza that was part of an unfinished scheme for the Trevi that Bernini had created for Pope Urban VIII in the 1640s. But Salvi excavated more deeply into the sloping ground, created a basin that almost fills its small piazza, and worked at a perhaps unprecedented scale; the fountain wall is fifty meters wide! Its size is difficult to fathom. Even while standing before it, it is almost impossible to envision the three football field end-zones

that would fit comfortably within it, with room left over for the coaches, referees, and cheering squad.

The Trevi terminates the Acqua Vergine, so water is abundant, although, now, rather than relying on an endless gravity-fed supply, a smaller quantity is mechanically re-circulated. The water level inside the aqueduct is about the same elevation of Via della Stamperia, along which we just walked. With the water at a level no higher than the street, an extraordinary sleight of hand was necessary; the low pressure left little room to maneuver for a spectacular water display. Salvi's mastery of the site, in this regard, is restrained and clever. He has provided a few stairs down to the basin, but most visitors are unaware of how he manipulated the slope. To the east, the entire site was excavated as much as two meters to create space for an ocean (Figure 3).

The Trevi is not only a seductive hybrid landscape of water and stone mimicking a natural grotto at the edge of the sea with mythic characters traipsing around. As art historians, John Pinto, Vernon Minor, and others, have pointed out, this fountain and piazza have made the ancient ideal of *rus in urbe*, literally the country in the city, tangible.⁵ Salvi brought water into Rome as an emollient to soothe the body and calm the soul, but he also turned this small piazza into a classroom, open to all. Hereward Lester Cooke, who was the first scholar to understand the importance of Salvi's own notes about the Trevi, has clarified how Salvi intended the fountain as a "symbolic demonstration of certain principles in natural science and physics which had been discovered in the early eighteenth century."⁶

Salvi's curiosity led him to study medicine, philosophy, architecture, botany, hydraulics, and poetry. The Trevi is a concrete articulation of his personal and cogent interpretations of then current theories concerning water, moisture, air, and botany that were circulating among his erudite circle of friends. A member of the prestigious Accademia del Arcadia,

he was an early-adopter of new ideas then taking shape among its members concerning the true nature of the hydrological cycle, and, as he makes clear in his notes, he used a mythic narrative to graphically represent eternal philosophical truths embodied in the perpetual cycle of water at the Trevi.

The god Oceanus commands the center of the Trevi's active sculptural tableau. Above him, a sculptural allegory of a virgin leading Agrippa to the source springs unfold. Beneath his feet are craggy rocks over which water jets bubble and cascades foam. Lesser gods and beings populate the scene: plants and animals have been deftly carved into the quarried travertine stone. Everything, as Salvi explains, is symbolically contained within the ocean at the god's feet; the water forever re-enacts the hydrological cycle as it circulates through the fountain's interrelated parts. Salvi has demonstrated, through design, his belief that water "has no limit, and is not restricted in the material world by any bounds. It is completely free and always at work in even the smallest parts of the created Universe." Through water and stone he articulated concepts that natural philosophers had struggled to understand since antiquity. That is,

...the essential mobility of water, which never ceases in its operation and is incapable of ever remaining still, even for the briefest moment; thus Oceanus is different from Earth which...is passive, and received the imprints which external forces, and particularly water, form upon her...which passes through her pores as rain.

Salvi saw the god Oceanus not as

...the symbol of the powerful operative forces of water gathered together in the sea so much as the actual working manifestation of these powers, which appear as moisture; in this form water permeates



Figure 7: Carved water-loving plants, including *Caltha palustris* and *Arundo donax*, emerge from the Trevi basin.

all material things, and winding through the veins of Earth, even into the most minute recesses, reveals itself as the everlasting source of that infinite production which we see in Nature, which water also is capable of perpetuating.

Salvi's interest in precise and accurate description of naturalistic effects is also made evident in his carved simulacrum of the Campagna landscape, represented by animals like salamanders, serpents, and snails, and more than thirty species of native plants which populate the Trevi's rocky crags and pools. Each plant grows as it would in nature; thirsty plants like canes and reeds grow at the water's edge, while those that thrive in semi-aridity like oaks and figs cling near the top of the carved rock face. For Salvi, the plants represent the "new forms of life, which water can perpetuate, multiply and cause to grow." Before urbanization wiped

away Rome's native landscape, many of these plants would have grown in this very spot. Today, a few opportunistic plants, like wild capers, take root in the crevices beyond the reach of the maintenance crews, making nature a simulacrum of the fountain's fictitious flora (Figure 7).

Two beautiful and apparently quite large bronze serpents once ornamented the Trevi. Long vanished, they slithered around a carved ancient vase, and water spewed in jets from each of their mouths into a drinking basin below. Salvi seems not to have written directly about the meaning of the serpents within the Trevi narrative, so we are invited to speculate, like Pinto, who sees these snakes as “amplifying the metaphor of organic growth” that is evident throughout Salvi's design, and surely that is true.⁷

There is more. Perhaps, it was not incidental that drinking water flowed from the serpents' mouths, for to drink at the Trevi meant to engage directly with them. No one needs reminding that the serpent has always loomed large in Christian narratives. It is the very symbol of what makes us human—the longing for knowledge and the willingness to sacrifice everything to learn about and to be a part of the larger world outside of the Garden of Eden. We all know how, in Christian religions, this search for truth led to what some people call sin. Yet it was also true for those same believers that water could wash away their sins. Did Salvi intend for us to cleanse our souls by drinking at the Trevi? Perhaps not, but it seems clear to me that he provided a means for Romans to enter into the perpetual cycle of rebirth and renewal in this small Arcadian piazza where myth and metaphor intersected with scientific investigations in an entirely new kind of urban environment.

Every day and every night since 1762, the *basso profundo* of roaring water has invited Romans and Rome's water pilgrims to step into a secular travertine and marble temple dedicated to the hydrological cycle. We arrive at the Trevi with new insights into the hidden working

of Rome's water supply and it is here that our narrative reaches its climax. Now awakened to the complexity and subtlety of Salvi's iconographic program, we understand how the Trevi was, and still is, an all-encompassing theatrical reenactment of the birth of life, made possible by the actions of water on the Earth. Here, at the terminus of the Acqua Vergine, in a stage set of sacred springs and triumphal arches, we can watch the eternal drama of water's cycle of life and perhaps even glimpse the possibility of personal renewal.

As pilgrims following water we may not be any nearer to salvation when we complete our itinerary at Rome's most sacred water temple, but we will have the reward of a deep haptic experience of a portion of Rome; a knowledge of pulses and flows that alters our spatial sensibility of the city's topography. Water moving through subterranean stone conduits mimics water flowing through Salvi's "veins of the Earth... into the most minute recesses," which, for the pilgrim, are symbolized by Rome's public fountains. Through sight, sound, symbols, and steps we can construct a new mental map built around the armature of water infrastructure, an armature that tethers together the monuments, and indeed the entire city of Rome; the center of the ancient Roman Empire, the Catholic Church, and the modern Italian State. Rome's other fountains and aqueducts await the water pilgrim. What we learn about Rome by walking on her waters, we can take home with us as we consider water in our own cities—where it comes from, how is it used, where it goes, and how to protect it as a treasured resource for the future.

[Endnotes]

1 Like Rome's other aqueducts, access rights were purchased where necessary, to draw water from often-remote springs in uninhabited areas. Unless flowing underground (like the Virgo), as aqueducts headed toward Rome, water was allotted for agricultural fields and villages along the way, allowing them to prosper in ways not previously possible.

2 Nicola Salvi's personal notes on the fountain of Trevi, published in Hereward Lester Cooke, "The Documents Relating to the Fountain of Trevi," in *Art Bulletin*, 33 (1956), 149-73.

3 Hibbard, Howard and Irma Jaffe. "Bernini's Barcaccia." *The Burlington Magazine* 106 (1964): 128.

4 Some ornamental fountains were turned off entirely so that water still flowed to the drinking fountains. Even Rome, with its seemingly endless water supply, feels the effects of drought and city and regional administrators understand that the city's social contract with water is changing. Eliminating the ornamental fountains is not yet a part of the conversation.

5 Pinto, John. *The Trevi Fountain*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986; Minor, Vernon. *The Death of the Baroque and the Rhetoric of Good Taste*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pinto's book is still the most important source for the Trevi; his book has informed my own approach to understanding the fountain.

6 Cooke, 170; also in Pinto, 224.

7 Pinto, 224.