

WORLD WAR FROM UMBRIA

Themes and variations in almost real time

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This is the first section of a long essay which takes as its starting point a holiday in Umbria around the time of the the first anniversary of the 9.11 bombings

It was the fourth day of our holiday in September 2002. We had spent the first three days driving from Folkestone to the one-up, one-down hunting lodge we'd rented just outside Amelia, a hill-top town twenty or so kilometres South-East of Orvieto. Amelia possesses no architectural, artistic or spiritual set pieces to compare with those in, say, Perugia, Assisi, Gubbio or Orvieto itself. It is slightly scruffy but there are signs of investment, and it could easily end up like Todi; a prosperous community for second-homing, weekendng Florentines and Romans.

Tracy was inside sleeping. She felt ill. She burnt up then shivered, a reaction to release from her job. Work binds up our minor ailments, which stretch their arms once the bonds are removed. We suffer withdrawal. When I used to work in an office, I suffered gallons-of-bad-coffee-and-recycled-air withdrawal for the first forty-eight hours of each holiday.

I was sitting on a small concrete terrace in front of the house. Ants, scorpions and spiders held demonstrations on every surface; butterflies – that I noticed them at all highlights how rare they've become in England – mobiled around between thread-held Crane flies. Seven primary-coloured dwarves peered from behind the trees in the garden. I could recognise Dopey, Grumpy and Doc but not the rest: Greedy – Artsy-Fartsy – Deeply Dippy ?

The garden comprised a thinned-out area, boundaried from the surrounding wood by an irregular circle of stones.

At the top of the drive two pigs nosed occasional grunts. Over the course of our holiday they would accompany our comings and goings with the enthusiasm and wondrous bemusement of Holy Simpletons, their ears flapping in the sunlight as they rollicked round the woodshed to view us through wire mesh. They'd burp, snuffle and smoker's cough companionably as we got in and out of our car.

Three kilometres across the valley, Amelia's outline resembled the superstructure of a great warship.

People still hunted the area. I could hear shots – they sounded like twigs snapping underfoot – from the woods further down the hill and across the valley.

Umbria is not yet Tuscany but it may be heading there. The last time I went to Florence I fell out of love with, and into a more lukewarm admiration for the place. No matter how ill-founded the hope and scoffed-at the attempt, many of us travel to great places to experience historical empathy: short-cuts to a more three-dimensional sense of the past than we can get from fiction or Penguin paperbacks. Some of us, at least, want to see the great works of art where they were originally displayed, in the light of their original purposes. Forty years of scholarship have shown this is more difficult than it seems, maybe impossible. But that doesn't stop us trying or, in face of almost certain failure, filling in the details ourselves.

Tuscany has too few attractions, or maybe I've worked my way through them and worn them out. It only has art and weather and food. The food is getting less and less to write home about; weather seems to be undergoing some kind of nervous breakdown after organising seasons, crop cycles, package holidays and the growth rings in trees for thousands of years. It's become as random as the loony on the

bus. Art is a moot point because ostensibly that's what many people go to Tuscany for. But taste in art, like the human personality, changes over time. Read D H Lawrence and Wordsworth at 15 and in all likelihood you'll live by the former and declare the latter a boring old fart. At 40 or 50 things look pretty different. I loved H P Lovecraft, Allen Ginsberg, T S Eliot, Woody Allen's funny films and Marcel Duchamp when I was a teenager but they now make me feel slightly nauseous. Keats, Velazquez, Goya and Dickens have only started to figure over the last fifteen years.

That's either because we change; or art, like everything else, wears out; or, after experiencing enough art, reading up on the background, what people think of it and the lives of the people who created it, our original view of its importance undergoes a major revision downwards. Certainly, in Florence's case, many of the "great works" I've seen regularly over the years, excite nothing more than admiration for their achievement, which is less exciting (and less dangerous) than rapture by their perceived message. Michelangelo's David, as an instance, now seems a peculiarly empty, cold and absurd exercise in overblown rhetoric, looking forward to Mannerist neurosis and Baroque camp rather than backwards to the haunting Giotto's in Santa Croce or Masaccio's Brancacci Chapel.

Tuscany goes out more than halfway to meet the people who visit it, like an aged retainer in a country house, or someone trying to sign you up for a charity on a shopping street. That is precisely what travellers searching for real experience don't want. New Yorkers should be rude; Stockholmers should look vaguely troubled and quote Heidegger; Icelanders should be drunk, drugged and young or should climb mountains or all of the above.

Umbria is not deserted: it tends towards a Tuscany-like state of over-observation. But once you've seen Michelangelo's David, booked before you went and got into the Uffizi, brawled for a silver necklace under the amused gaze of Benvenuto Cellini on the Ponte Vecchio or turned funny half way up the inside of Brunelleschi's dome – once you've done the sights, washed Tuscany's dust off your brilliantly white tennis shoes, yet want something similar, then you might head for Umbria. If Giotto and Piero della Francesca are not the artistic equivalent of Manchester United (known by even those who don't like football), then they are Firenze F.C. in their pomp, before they went bankrupt; rated very highly by the aficionados and therefore not stretched as thin by the attention of heathens. Umbria owns the St Francis brand – a Manchester United among Saints. But we'll get back to Saints in a little while.

Apart from the Scalo industrial suburbs and most of Terni, Umbrian cities are of-a-piece, beautiful, which is more than can be said for Rome where you have to walk a two-lane rat-run to get to the catacombs, or Florence where sewage-scented, closed-for-siesta shopping streets have to be suffered before you penetrate Piazza Santa Croce.

Umbria is a peculiarly human-sized place. It's heavily farmed so, no matter how large the valleys or plains, they offer part-measures which add to graspable dimensions. Umbria's mountains are, for the most part, hills which haven't achieved their goals; which therefore look slightly melancholy, and propose none of the terror or awe that eighteenth and nineteenth century gentlemen of sensibility would have found worthy of capturing in a sketch. Umbria's cities are English market towns with walls marking the boundaries and oversized churches at the highest points. The roads were made for people, not cars and for that very reason are death-traps for pedestrians. They were built for two-abreast religious processions and men on horses; to discourage mobs and to make the job of an army vanguard particularly difficult. Cars now run along pavements and we all know who wins in the battle between a soft, individual, existing human being and a domestic tank.

The road layouts in these towns are illogical in the way that the human mind is illogical. We love to draw mazes when we're young. People sit on trains trying to track their pencils to the exit of a printed maze, where sits a grainy black-and-white of Kylie Minogue or Robbie Williams. Mazes have been used in primitive (and modern) religions, and in magic, to denote mystery. Some mazes are based upon a principle or algorithm (turn first right, second left, third right, fourth left etc.). Others are like pencil doodles on meeting notes: knotting, interlacing and wandering. Umbrian town plans are like this latter

form of labyrinth, a metaphor for Godhead or mysterious power but also, and closer to home, to the way we experience our own minds; our feeling that we should be in control but keep getting lost; that the world should be reducible to an argument but never is.

Then, there's the fact that most of these towns are built on top of hills. This gives Umbria a peculiarly child-like and innocent quality. Piling things on top of each other is a developmental phase babies go through; they are assessed at set ages by health visitors and paediatricians to check how many bricks they can tower before the edifice topples. Of course grown-ups do the same in grown-up places: the Lake Front of Chicago, Manhattan Island, Central and Eastern London. What makes Umbria's medieval towns seem so childish – and human – is the comparatively man-centred-dimensions, or at least proportions, of the elements they use. The assembly halls of their major public buildings are smaller than most cinemas. Their churches may be oversized, but cross-plan churches are models of human beings. They are giants, but with no part of their anatomy distorted. A well-made church is the human form writ large as is, some would suggest, the religion it celebrates. Traditionally planned churches are scalable, whereas skyscrapers are abstractions or metaphors for things as logical, mechanistic and planned as they are. It is very difficult to relativise them. Getting lost inside a tower block or office complex is less like the bemusement of consciousness, more akin to the increasing frustration when someone is advancing an argument which we are too dumb to understand.

Children's world's are first face- then human-shaped. Abstractions fixate the supposedly more mature.

And Umbria is human-sized because of its indigenous and visiting population. A guide book tells me that it has 850,000 inhabitants spread over 8,456 square kilometres which doesn't sound much. Despite this, look out over the Umbrian valley and you suddenly understand that it seems quite heavily populated; not just the industrial areas that corona towns but the neatly (and not so neatly) plotted farms and smallholdings that checkerboard the valleys; the tumbledown houses and luxurious villas that cling with whitened fingertips to rocky outcrops. From any high point (which, in central Umbria, usually involves standing on city walls) you can see a church or two, a monastery or nunnery, the remains of a fort built by the Venetians, a Holy Roman Emperor, Pope or mercenary commander to cow his newly conquered possession. The area was always pretty well-populated. There are tunnels and caves in the tufa outcrop on which Orvieto is built which suggest that the Etruscans got around a bit and needed a reasonable infrastructure to service a not inconsiderable population. Their major bequest to us consists of cemeteries. Numbers of dead people correlate exactly with pre-existing numbers of live people; one of the world's regularities which never ceases to spook me.

In Umbria you're never far from a person but you're never too close to one...or rather you're rarely too close to too many. Which is where the tourists come in.

There are Umbrian places and times that induce the same sort of claustrophobia I associate with the Mona Lisa or the front row of a Robbie Williams concert. Guide books are full of dire warnings about arriving at Assisi early in the morning to avoid ravaging hordes of humble supplicants, and of the impossibility of catching the town's true atmosphere (except in mid-Winter when the place is presumably crawling with guide-book authors, crowing about the fact that they don't have to work in offices in order to save up for mid-Summer sun and/or culture). Tracy and I arrived in Perugia around 10 o'clock and the main square was, if not deserted, at least sparsely populated. By 11.30 the steps to the Cathedral were lined with ice-cream smeared kids, men with digital cameras the size of Volkswagens and girls blinding you with light reflected from their belly button studs. The steps down to see the body of St Claire and the tomb of St Francis in Assisi reminded me of Oxford Circus tube station in the rush hour.

But such phenomena are sporadic. Umbria is a day coach trip from Florence and Rome. The crowds pulse briefly in the mornings, disappear, attain a shallow peak in mid afternoon then leave the towns to the locals. Some places were jovially busy – Norcia on market day; others were eerily empty like Todi, which is an archetypically quaint Umbrian town with a beautiful central square.

Umbrian town layouts filter crowds, in much the same way as Venice's does. Ten yards away from St Mark's Square and the Rialto and you're in an East London back street – albeit one which contains a small baroque masterpiece and two 16th century palazzos. Away from the – as I've mentioned – less intense set pieces of Assisi or Perugia, and your companions are usually an 80 year old woman mountaineer, dressed in a black dress and carrying a string bag of beans, or an old man who would be played by Anthony Quinn in any film built round his story. Rationally planned modern cities can't achieve this effect because their whole purpose is to centre human activity where the action is. Hence the Champs Elysees resembles the entrance to the largest football ground in the world and once you've started your promenade it's impossible to escape – for both geographical and psychic reasons.

Sitting in Norcia's town square, I felt as though I was watching human behaviour in its natural state unvitiated by social or town planning: people like water joining in currents, whirlpooling then breaking free, knotting like the surface of a fast flowing river, cutting themselves off as they headed into new channels, being splashed. This is, of course, a dilettante observer's view; Italian society is as culturally bound as any other and more stratified than some. There's still a hint of Medieval divisions into the nobility (usually carrying mobile phones, wearing very smart suits and designer sunglasses; or nibbling at chocolate injected pastries in pavement cafes while discussing hair tinting and perms); the religious (who are especially apparent in Assisi, but also strolled across town squares wherever we went carrying their shopping in supermarket logod bags); the military (a chocolate box assortment of police, graded by the seriousness of the weapons they tote) and peasants (the rest).

O.K.; alright; already ! I'm offering a good, if self-defeating marketing ploy. This small central area of Italy is a place where you can feel human and undiminished by all the strategies our race implements to psychologically diminish its individual representatives; strategies which seem to have taken up a disproportionate amount of human ingenuity and effort throughout our history. Partly this psychological impact is based on size, population, accidents of geography, sociology, politics, finance, and culture, which accidents do not preclude the other unstoppable currents of sociology, politics, finance and culture. The better my puff is communicated, the less true it will become since (irresistible ?) currents of sociology, politics, culture and especially finance will make sure Umbria quintuples its population and will acquire an infrastructure designed to diminish the self-esteem of the existent individual within five to ten years more effectively than the pyramids of the Pharaohs.

But there's another element in this view of Umbria: St Francis of Assisi. As promised, let's consider Saints not forgetting, as I could not forget the whole time I was in Umbria, those broken twig sounds in the woods round our house. They recalled a Labour Day in America, when, driving late at night in search of a motel, we realised that every other vehicle on the road was a pick-up truck topped by a huge gun rack and high-mounted searchlights to blind animals. The later it got, the more often the technology was joined by the corpses of deer that the driver and his passengers had bagged.