

Two famous journeys to Rome: Goethe, the German poet, in 1786, and Eino Leino, the Finnish poet, in 1908/1909

Teivas Oksala, Espoo
PhD, Professor (h.c.), Lecturer Emeritus
University of Tampere

“All roads lead to Rome.” Many have found the foundation of our culture in Rome because the *Imperium Romanum* once welcomed the Greek civilization, made its own contribution to it and conveyed the tradition to the later peoples of Europe. For two thousand years, Rome has been a place of pilgrimage. The *Grand Tour*, with Rome as a favourite destination, has been an essential part of a gentleman’s education.

On his journey to Italy, **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** held Rome as his basic place of residence but visited also Naples and made a roundtour of Sicily with the Botanical Museum of Palermo as his primary target. This journey is documented in his diaries and letters and it is the fictive subject in his collection of poems called *Römische Elegien* (“Roman Elegies”). They include an account of a love episode - sensual and with an almost painless end - between the poet and a Roman lady by the name of Faustina. Goethe’s most famous poem about Italy “*Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn*”, written a couple of years earlier, had already anticipated the journey which took place *ex tempore*.

To Goethe, the journey to Italy was a fundamental experience of classicism which he found in the architecture of Andrea Palladio and in the smiling nature of Italy (in contrast to the mighty “Gothic” Alps) and which was crystallized in Wickelmann’s theory of art (“*Edle Einfalt und stille Grösse*”).

Eino Leino visited Rome in mid-winter: in December, January and February, 1908/1909. The journey to the Eternal City was documented by him in his travelogues *Matkan varrelta 9. – 21.* (“In the Course of the Journey”) which he sent on to be published in three papers. When in Rome, Leino gathered experiences for Johannes Tamminen’s “Odyssey” i.e. for *Orja* (“The Slave”), the tetralogy (1913). The events of its fourth novel, *Onnen orja* (“The Slave of Luck”) are set in Rome.

The poet himself as well as Johannes Tamminen believed that the Spirit of Rome could be attained on the lookout terrace of Gianicolo Hill. There the polyphonic history of Rome passed through their consciousness, and they crystallized the essence of the city into an idea of “a circle embracing the eternity”.

On his journey to Rome, the fundamental truths of classical humanism became clear to him as an inseparable part of Finnish identity. In the stream of traditions, a glittering pearl appeared: a small Greek sepulchral relief which was found by Leino in Museo Barracco and in which the moment of the eternal separation of two people was depicted. He described it in one of his travelogues and published, ten years later, a poem entitled “A Greek Relief” (Helsingin Sanomat, Sept. 21st, 1919). This can be regarded as the main document of Leino’s classical humanism. For Leino, classicism did not mean a scheme of form – it was an attitude of mind described by the Greeks as *ethos*.