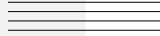


PIETRO CAVALLINI AND
THE RUINS OF ROME



R U S S E L L F R A S E R

Pietro Cavallini ranks among the great painters. Born in Rome in the 1240s, he became a man to reckon with in his native city. Late in life he moved to Naples, joining the entourage of the Angevin king. But Rome drew him back, perhaps the urge to finish in the place he began. In his last years, said Giorgio Vasari in *The Lives of the Painters*, piety grew on him and he was “almost considered a saint.” He wasn’t an ascetic, though, but among the grand old men of art – Titian is one, Henri Matisse another – with all that implies for vivacity and toughness. For more than half a century he labored at his craft, dying at a great age in the 1330s or 1340s. These are the bare bones of the life.

Unluckily for Cavallini, he wasn’t one of the famous Florentines, and future generations let him sleep in his grave. Vasari, at a loss to explain how an artist of such quality could have preceded Giotto, simply reversed the relation. He enlisted Cavallini among his hero’s “other pupils,” turning him into a derivative painter. But his star has been rising, and an article in the *Times* tells of long-buried work coming to light again or of work once assigned to others now re-assigned to him. Some art historians put him north of Rome in his middle period, maybe at Assisi, where he gave a

lead to Giotto. Perhaps the pupil was the master, who created part or all of the great St. Francis cycle on the walls of the basilica.

I don't mean to inflate his claim on us, however, but to say what I know to be true. Mostly, that depends on three contemporary records. In 1273, he witnessed a legal agreement to transfer land near the church of Sta. Maria Maggiore. When I lived in Rome in the 1970s, I walked by the site every day. Signing himself "Petrus dictus Cavallinus de Cerronibus," he lets us know that he was a member of the ancient Roman family of the Cerroni, also that his nickname was Cavallini. Italian "cavallino" is horse-like, and readers will make of this what they choose. Three decades or so later, he received the grant of a house in Naples with an annual pension "for as long as the king wishes." After his death his son Giovanni scribbled a note commemorating the painter, "whose life spanned a hundred years, who never covered his head even in the cold, and who was my father."

Every credentialed artist has two strings to his bow, even in times when art serves a greater end than itself or when, self-delighting, it is its own sufficient end. Cavallini is no exception, and his art both pleases and instructs us. But it doesn't gratify our modern avidity for sensational detail, and though more is known about him than any artist of his time, he keeps to the shadows. In this he resembles Shakespeare, a mystery man whose biography is replete with matter-of-fact. The fact breeds, if you look at it hard enough, suggesting a type of the artist as opportunist, like Shakespeare the "botcher" of plays. Not solicited by the Muse but discharging a commission, he did what he could to give value.

Time and bad luck have much diminished his oeuvre. His ghost haunts about Roman churches like S. Francesco a Ripa, close to the river where the flea market is today. Once frescoes of his brightened the interior, like those he made for the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls. A picture gallery's worth of scenes from the Old and New Testaments, they took two decades of his life. In 1823 fire gutted the basilica, destroying what he made, and how such rage can be in heaven is a mystery. Seventeenth-century watercolor copies, now in the Vatican, tell us what the frescoes were like. But in painting as in poetry, paraphrase falls short, and Cavallini's most prestigious work is lost.

Frescoes in St. Peter's, "of extraordinary size," said Vasari,

disappeared when Pope Julius knocked down the old church to build his city on a hill. Michelangelo and Bernini did their best for the pope, but I'd like to have seen old St. Peter's. Vasari remembered Cavallini's frescoes for the Trastevere church of S. Crisogono, a "titular" church – that is, one where primitive Christians assembled. The fantastic floor – great swirling circles and hourglass shapes, surrounded by cubes, rectangles, and octagons – is a gift to posterity of the Cosmati, members of a single clan domiciled in Rome from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. Their business and pleasure was beautifying the city, and they left their gorgeous telltale in dozens of churches like this one. The same motive that inspired them drove Cavallini, loyalty to craftsmanship, raised to the ultimate power.

But though much of him is gone, much remains. (Laying it out here, I draw on Paul Hetherington's monograph of 1979, the chief scholarly authority.) Trastevere across the Tiber, the oldest part of Rome and incorrigibly provincial, seemed to touch a spring deep inside him. He was provincial in the best sense, delighting in lowercase things. The apse mosaic in Sta. Maria in Trastevere is his, and enough to establish his greatness. Lorenzo Ghiberti, he of the famous Doors of Paradise in Florence's Baptistery, had "never seen this medium used better."

Working in it needed a strong arm and an estimating eye. Having blocked out his cartoon on the wall of the church, he applied a thin coat of cement, enough to fix his bits of colored stone, glass, or marble. Like other artists in his time, he let the dead bury their dead, chiseling these materials from the ruins of Rome. He took care, in fitting his tesserae into the wet cement, to make the planes of the surface uneven. That way, the light bent, shooting off at odd angles. The bulging eyes of the piping shepherd in his Nativity scene are owing partly to the play of light on the surface.

Cavallini's mosaics, depicting the life of Mary and the birth and childhood of Jesus, look unstained by time, as fresh as when he finished them in the last decade of the thirteenth century. His Mary and Joseph satisfy convention, she a young woman dressed in a colorful robe and mantle, he an old man with gray hair and a receding hairline. But the "ancient aspect" touches a new mind, a



UNIVERSAL JUDGMENT—*Angels (left detail), Pietro Cavallini*
Basilica di S. Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome

phrase of Wallace Stevens's that catches the relation of convention to the individual talent. Mary in the Annunciation scene plays the role convention assigns her, and it supplies the lilies on the table to her left. Atop a second table, however, Cavallini sets a bowl of figs, something new. He needed them to ratify his sense of composition, but the figs are important for their own sake as well, like the stewed prunes in a fruit dish of threepence we hear about in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. "No matter for the dish, sir," says the impatient magistrate, wanting to get on to the heart of the matter. What that is is hard to say in so many words, but we can't come to it without referring to the dish and its contents and even the room where the action goes forward, "an open room and good for winter."

For Cavallini's mosaic, the life is in the details. That is new, altering our sense of the familiar grouping he inherits. Most of the details are given, like the rude cave and the ox and ass watching over the infant. But the artist re-invests this ancient aspect, adding to it his special apprehension of things. On the day Christ was born a fountain of oil, bubbling up where the church is now, ran all day long to the Tiber. Cavallini accommodates this story in his mosaic, linking the fabulous birth to the piazza in Trastevere, no place more prosaic, and a brownish stream flows away from the manger. The emotional pull in the stuff of his art will be to flesh or spirit, depending on who renders the story. In him, the pull isn't to heaven but to earth.

Other mosaics of the time are more strained of impurities, Torriti's, for instance, in the apse of Sta. Maria Maggiore. Cavallini is coarser grained and his figures fill a place. They aren't stolid, however, like convention when it atrophies, but refined in shape and feature. Gravity, tinged with melancholy, marks his St. Joseph, trepidation the aged Simeon, presenting the youthful Christ in the Temple. (In his mind's eye he sees the tragedy to come.) Cavallini's figures seem sculpted, bringing to mind Arnolfo da Cambio — he has a marvelous Nativity under the floor in Sta. Maria Maggiore — or the Pisani, father and son, who did the pulpit in Pisa Cathedral. Or they are like late Byzantine mosaics in Istanbul's Kariye Camii, work of an unknown master. All lived when Cavallini did. But it isn't influence that connects them, allegiance to the last flowering of Byzantium or the new Italian art of the



UNIVERSAL JUDGMENT—*Apostles (detail), Pietro Cavallini*
Basilica di S. Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome

fourteenth century. The common denominator is affection for the physical world.

Like a good cobbler whose skill brings in custom, Cavallini kept busy. While at work on his mosaics, he painted the nave in the nearby basilica of Sta. Cecilia, also a Last Judgment for the convent next door. “All with his own hand,” said Ghiberti – that is, without an assistant. Eighteenth-century remodeling did for the nave painting, but the Last Judgment survives, together with fragments from the Old and New Testaments. For a long time the convent frescoes were lost, bundled away behind the nuns’ choir stalls, but in 1900 they came to light again, and the world recognized a great painter.

The twelve apostles, seated on thrones, divide in two groups, facing a magnificent Christ in the center. Around him are angels and two standing figures, Mary on one side, John the Baptist on the other. Below Christ an altar holds the symbols of his Passion, and flanking it, pairs of angels blowing trumpets. To their left the elect, among them St. Cecilia, patron saint of the church, are ushered to their reward, to their right the damned descend into Hell. Flames are licking up from the bottom of the fresco, and the damned, going into them, are naked. Some are old heads, one tonsured.

Italian “fresco” is fresh, and Cavallini’s is that but something besides. Known as “buon fresco,” it didn’t flake off, like paint on dry plaster. Rough-plastering the wall, he traced his cartoon on the surface while it was damp. Mixing his pigments with water heavy on lime provoked a chemical reaction, and his colors, integrated with the wall, stayed fast. He worked with thick, dragging brushstrokes, sometimes charging his brush with too much paint, but he painted from top to bottom, blotting out accidents as he went down. When he put up his brushes at day’s end, he cut away any unpainted surface, applying a new coat of plaster in the morning. That way, his working surface stayed damp. If you look closely, you can see joins in the plaster, separating one day’s work from the next. Add them up and you can tell how long the job took him. The Last Judgment took approximately sixty-three days.

A long time for a wall, it was “vare la pena,” as Italians say, worth the pains. The herringbone-like wings of the angels blush with color, red, brighter red, teal green, and lavender. Eyes in the

painting seem to search out a beholder's eyes. Christ's are inquisitive, Mary's near-Oriental, the angel's leading the elect full of wonder at what she sees – for angels in the fresco are female. Cavallini knew about hair. St. James the Great's is beautiful, like the hair of a Botticelli Venus, and a wavy rope of it cascades down his neck. The thick hair and long beard of St. Simeon, mingling white and gray, might model God the Father's. Like all the apostles, he is one of a kind. Wrinkles gather the skin at the corner of an eye, and the creases in his forehead and pursed lips hint at the misgiving of a man for whom judging is hard. Loath to condemn, he condemns without reprieve, though.

Did Cavallini study Roman togas on some old sarcophagus? The drape and fold of his garments make you think so. Light and shadow chase each other across his chiseled faces, apparently flesh and bone. Vasari called him a sculptor as well as a painter, and perhaps he knew something we don't. A record dating from his middle age tells of a "petrus romanus civis" – Peter, citizen of Rome – at work on the tombs in Westminster Abbey. Ever hopeful, I prick up my ears at this. Shakespeare, some say, went to Italy, and why not Cavallini to England?

His Last Judgment stands with Giotto at the pinnacle of medieval art. If you don't know the painting, you are likely to scoff. But the nuns, who used to bar the door to visitors, have recently got on to the good thing in their midst, and for a few euros you can see it and decide for yourself.

Re-crossing the Tiber early in the new century, Cavallini put his signature on the Aracoeli church in the heart of classical Rome. Saint Mary of the Altar of Heaven marks the spot where the pagan Sibyl showed the Christ Child to Augustus. Astride the Capitoline Hill, it overlooks Rome's greater peaks, St. Peter's in the far background, nearer at hand the baroque splendors of Sant' Andrea della Valle and the Gesù. Ignatius Loyola, whose new Jesuit order promoted a "casuistical" reading of truth, is buried in this church. On its trompe l'oeil ceiling, painted angels merge easily with sculpted angels above the windows, blurring the line between real and fictive. The damned occupy the ceiling, too, spilling over from our middle earth into Hell. "From morn to noon they fell, from noon to dewy eve," a vertiginous progress. This impositional art

delights us partly as it beguiles us, the last thing Cavallini intended. His art advances nature and, though improving it, never aims to displace it.

Frescoes in the Aracoeli's transepts are his, and Vasari called his Sibyl in the apse, prophesying to the Emperor, his "best work in the city." All that is left is a haloed face with rueful eyes. But the fresco in the south transept has survived time's tooth, despite or perhaps because of successors who did their best to wipe it from memory. Romans are thrifty, overpainting the surfaces their predecessors worked on, and only now is this fresco emerging from its baroque encrustation. Saints on the wall, their faces seamed by hard thinking, are like the apostles in Sta. Cecilia, not ideal but idiosyncratic. You can tell one from another.

Looking at the plain brick facade of the church, all color leached away by the fierce Roman sun, you feel that you have got down to bedrock. Inside is a different story. Pinturicchio's frescoes throb with color, and above the nave the coffered ceiling, inlaid with gold, remembers Lepanto, where the Christian West beat back Islam. The marbles of the dancing floor say that the Cosmati, "golden smithies" who worked in mosaic, have been here. Maybe or maybe not their sumptuous decoration is a carpet thrown over the void. If so, and all is emptiness, the Christian Middle Ages, more than any other time, made life supportable.

Some medieval Christians, like puritanical St. Bernard, deplored the work of our hands, calling it vanity. Only decades before Cavallini, Joachim of Flora, a mystic and estranged from the world, wanted to usher in a reign of pure spirit. He saw it beginning in Cavallini's young manhood. The artist, silent in his person, spoke through his art. Like that St. Odo of Cluny who said on his deathbed, "Lord, I have loved the beauty of thy house," he found much in our middle earth to sustain him.

The dizzying flight of stairs leading down from the church to the piazza dates from the first half of the fourteenth century, about the time Cavallini himself died. A thank offering to Heaven for Rome's deliverance from the Black Death, the stairs, by my count, number 124. First man up was Cola di Rienzo, a latter-day Caesar who meant to restore the city's ancient grandeur. That no doubt was vanity, and the Roman mob, ever fickle, tore him to pieces. Four hundred years later, Edward Gibbon passed this way. Art is

longer than life, so he must have thought, as he looked up at the church and saw, as in a vision, the Decline and Fall, still to come.

The tomb fresco in the north transept shows Cavallini tending to business. Adorned with Cosmatesque work, a gothic canopy surmounts the tomb, on it the effigy of a forgotten prince of the Church. (But Dante remembers him in the *Paradiso*.) He needed a memorial, and since he could afford it, Cavallini answered the need. Above him is the fresco – a Virgin and Child with attendant saints – and in a roundel in the center Christ the Pantocrator. Always in Cavallini it's the eyes that compel attention, and Christ's, slightly elevated, almost skeptical, look past the cardinal on his "lit de parade." Cavallini's art has its cantle of mystery, and what they are looking at is outside our ken.

Of Rome's seven hills, the Aventine is fourth in line, moving away from the Capitoline. Near its foot on the Tiber, the ancient church of S. Giorgio in Velabro sets off vibrations, powerful even for Rome. In the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman was its titular cardinal, the church, a special preserve, belonging to him when he came to the city. If you care about our English language, the association will seem worth a footnote. The fourteenth century was young when Cavallini embellished S. Giorgio. Plainness, mounting to austerity, describes his new venue, a flat ceiling, round arches lining the nave, carried on simple Ionic columns. This muted enthusiasm for the world of the senses bespeaks priorities, and entering the church you feel that salvation comes first.

But some columns, Corinthian, flower in exuberant shapes, and though the interior is dim, colored like an eggshell, bits of bright tesserae spruce up the altar. Framing it, the ciborium tells of self-conscious art. In the empty church, Newman seems palpably there, positing an eternal enmity between salvation and the things of the world. On the other hand, "philosophy is its own end," he tells us (in *The Idea of a University*), maintaining that "there is a knowledge worth possessing for what it is, and not merely for what it does." The psychology of S. Giorgio in Velabro, and that of the artist who painted it, is like that, honoring the form that is functional and the form that pleases but gets nothing done.

Cavallini's minatory Christ in the apse has come to bring not peace but a sword, and his "red right hand" seems raised to chastise us. St. George, clad in armor, flanks him on one side, on the

other St. Peter, keeper of the keys. Gray-haired and bearded, he wears an abstracted look, the narrowing eyes turned inward, the forehead wrinkled with thought. There is air about the portrait, and what the saint's mind is beating on is personal to him. Versions of the preoccupied man come up often in Cavallini. Perhaps he is giving his own likeness, a man plagued with questions. St. Sebastian is part of the ensemble, not the naked boy stuck over with arrows but a stern-faced soldier equipped with lance and shield. Was he of the Church Militant, doing battle for the Lord when he fell? After his martyrdom, his mutilated body went into the sewer. Called the Cloaca Maxima, it entered the Tiber just across from the church. Nothing is ever forgotten in Rome, and Cavallini, remembering, means to bear witness.

In the center of the piazza, the Arch of Janus holds its own after two thousand years. Janus, the god of gates and beginnings, is two-faced, and the doors of the arch, closed in peacetime, swung open for war. Every door looks two ways, like Cavallini's art, didactic but also concessive. One eye is on eternity, the other inspecting the ground at his feet. The faux-gothic building on the edge of the piazza was once home to Clara Petacci. Mistress of Benito Mussolini, she died with him, hung upside down from a meathook. Between the building and church, the arch "of the moneychangers" frames a patch of rising ground where a lemon tree flowers in springtime. In bas relief on the arch, the boy making a sacrifice is the young Caligula, his name not yet a byword for horrors.

Cavallini was nearing seventy, perhaps already in his eighth decade, when he set off for Naples. He might have stayed where he was, dwindling into a slippered pantaloone, but absorption in his craft kept him moving. "Tomorrow to fresh fields and pastures new." Little in Italian art before him prepares us for his apocalyptic Virgin Clothed with the Sun, painted for the Neapolitan church of Sta. Maria Donna Regina. His Virgin stands upright, hands raised, palms outward in the "orans" position. At her breast is the head of Christ, a bizarre pendant, enclosed in a mandorla. Evidently she is pregnant, remembering Isaiah, "Behold a virgin shall conceive." But the dragon menacing the woman, and the archangel who casts him out, remembers Revelation. Though this painter is primarily a realist, his late work shows him out on the

periphery of representational art. He wanted to get everything down before nightfall.

Art historians credit Cavallini with other paintings in Naples, but when attribution isn't sure, it all depends on whose divining rod is keener. Frescoes in the Angevin church of S. Domenico Maggiore, site of the city's first university, seem to bear his imprimatur. The church's custodian is learned in its treasures and proud to be part of a greater whole than himself. Did I know that Thomas Aquinas wrote part of his *Summa* while a monk of St. Dominic's? The Crucifixion, "certainly Cavallini's," awaits me in the Brancaccio Chapel (second on the right). A vulpine St. Dominic stands beside the Cross, and I vote yes to his fine-combed hair and lowering eyes, set in a heavy, sensual face.

Cavallini's Virgin in the Donna Regina church shares the west wall with a Last Judgment, scenes from the Passion, and a trio of female saints. All are close in style to the frescoes of Sta. Cecilia, made a generation before. Too close, Hetherington thinks, as if time had stood still for the artist. That seemed unlikely, and he supposed a tried-and-true assistant, practiced enough to do the master in his sleep. I know the painting only from photos, so mustn't express an opinion. That doesn't preclude my letting off steam.

See Naples and die, says the old proverb, true in more senses than one. The Donna Regina church, off the beaten track like the Chapel Perilous, hugs itself to itself up a dank, narrow alley. Deconsecrated and no longer a church, it has become a city museum. Italians have a sense of humor, and calling it "civico" makes a good joke. No hours are posted and the phone book lists no number. If you go along anyway, you find a courtyard choked with rubbish and a rusty chain with padlock closing off the *portone*. Beyond it are the frescoes, like the Holy Grail. Barring a miracle, Cavallini's public won't see them.

Not far away in the Duomo, the blood of S. Gennaro, patron saint of Naples and New York's Little Italy, liquefies every year. This is a miracle but doesn't rub off. A photo in Hetherington lets me know what I'm missing. St. Thomas in the fresco is a doubter like me and wants to thrust his finger in the wounds. His strong aquiline nose above the sensuous lips, most of all the cold, almost somnolent eyes, more than doubting, incredulous, put me out of

temper with Naples. The sleep and dream of the Dark Ages still hold this city captive, my bad luck and reason for Cavallini to leave it.

Near the end of his life, he went back to Rome, finishing where he began, in the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls. Pope John XXII wanted a mosaic for the church's facade, and accepting the commission, Cavallini assembled a heavenly conclave. His Christ and angels, Virgin and Child, the four Evangelists, and other saints, Paul conspicuous among them, look west to the setting sun. Or rather they used to. After the great fire of 1823, the mosaic, still undamaged, was taken down from its wall, divided in two, and set up inside the church, on the triumphal arch and the apsidal arch over the altar. Sadly out of kilter, it makes one sigh for Cavallini, not for the first time. His curved surface on the exterior wall, "flattened to a planisphere," relates to the re-fabricated mosaic like the globe of the world to a one-dimensional map.

Returning to St. Paul's gratified nostalgia but came with a price. In winter, miasmas poisoned the air around the basilica; in summer, malaria laid low the farmers who worked the land. Centuries were to pass before the monks of the Tre Fontane monastery not far to the south planted eucalyptus trees to ward off the mosquitoes. Perhaps Cavallini, having lived a long time, thought himself immortal or believed he owed God a death. Standing all day in the damp, he pieced his mosaic together. Two hundred years later Vasari remembered the hatless old man, dying of the cold he took, "caused by working at a wall."

The huge church where they buried him look like a cenotaph on the grand scale. How splendid it once was, though, and is still, even in its diminished state. In the eighth century its portico extended to the Porta S. Paolo, a full mile away. There the apostle began the long walk that led to his death. If you follow in his footsteps, your way takes you past gas works and stunted hovels, home to the urban poor. St. Paul, his head struck off, is buried under the altar, encased by the Emperor Constantine in a sarcophagus of marble and bronze. Above his grave the canopy is the work of Arnolfo da Cambio "and his partner Pietro," most likely Pietro Cavallini.

Outside the church is Rome's most beautiful cloister, not an

adjunct but a living part of the whole. Insisting on symmetry, it accommodates wildness. Squares of clipped boxwood shape up the garden, cordoning off clumps of feathery papyrus. Writhing pillars seek to deny the rigor of the arches that bind them. The constraint and the abandon, both needful, give the sense of the place. On the wall enclosing the cloister, a fragment of antiquity – the head of a horse with an arm and hand tugging at the bit in its mouth – seems an emblem of the blasted church and the truncated work of the master.

He came into his force in the 1280s and 1290s, a time of artistic burgeoning in Rome, rivaled only by the great days of Pope St. Paschal I (817–24). Not gilding the lily but making it afresh in the likeness of the thirteenth century, painters and mosaic workers beautified the city’s four major basilicas, St. Peter’s and St. Paul’s, the Lateran, and Sta. Maria Maggiore. Cavallini’s part in this is mostly gone with the wind, but Ghiberti, who saw it, said that among his contemporaries he was “the most noble master.” The best of the contemporaries is Jacopo Torriti, whose name should roll off the tongue at least as easily as Jackson Pollack’s, though no one today recalls it. How he differs from Cavallini is worth spelling out.

Pope Nicholas IV, when he renovated Sta. Maria Maggiore, chose this Franciscan monk to do the apse mosaic. Its subject is the glorifying of women, something new beneath the sun and reserved to the High Middle Ages. On the conch of the apse, Christ and the Virgin sit enthroned together, making a majestic ensemble. She is our mother and humble, befitting the role women played. But she is also Heaven’s Queen, crowned with a diadem, bedecked with jewels, and robed as a Byzantine princess. This mosaic of Torriti’s lifts the heart. But like illuminations in old missals, it is static, its figures frozen in God’s holy fire. Cavallini’s art is natural, not naturalistic but more nearly human.

That doesn’t make it better. Though talent may be greater or less, there isn’t any progress in art, only difference. But sometimes an artist is lucky, and his sails catch the new wind. Torriti didn’t have that kind of luck. He looks to the past and the hieratic art of Papa Pasquale Primo, as affectionate Romans still call him. Cavallini looks forward, his psychology aligning him with the introspective art of the future.

In the church of Sta. Cecilia, chance juxtaposes old and new, letting us inspect and contrast them. The apse mosaic is old, made at the behest of Papa Pasquale. Tradition mandates its furnishings, the two cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem and the twelve lambs that come from their portals, the ground Jesus stands on, dark blue, green, and red, like nothing in nature, artificial palm trees, the martyred saint and the reigning pope. You know him by his square halo, denoting the living. Except for the iconography, tipping us off, he and the others might be anyone or no one.

Cavallini, next door in the convent, is new. His apostles are one of a kind, their features expressing doubt, solicitude, or approval. But in the ninth-century mosaic the individual disappears, sunk in the type. No asymmetries call attention to the body, no flickering eye or “foolish hanging of the nether lip.” Characters stand side by side, full faced, their eyes immobile and looking beyond the sight line to the world over yonder. These stereotypical figures resemble childish cutouts when you pink a piece of paper across the fold.

In the older art of Rome, pre-Cavallini, history hasn’t been invented yet. The time is now, and all action occurs on one continuous plane. Point of view is egalitarian. To put it another way, this art is paratactic, devoid of “subordinate clauses.” No one is front and center, no one takes a back seat, and perspective gets its quietus. It wasn’t that they couldn’t do it, they didn’t want to.

But the lowered prestige of the particular is overset by the greater prestige of the general. In St. Paul’s Basilica, roundels of the popes, beginning with the first one, Peter the rock on whom the Church is founded, make an unbroken sequence, girdling the walls. They run on to the crack of doom, it seems to this fascinated beholder. Thrilling to contemplate, such continuity in a world of change. Meanwhile Cavallini, looking higher or lower, commits to the mutable world. His focus is on the particular man and his special subject is our “human face divine.”

Back in the beginning, his best mosaic, the one he did for Sta. Maria in Trastevere, signals his break with the past. On either side of the sanctuary arch, he hangs a wicker birdcage. Next to it, an Old Testament prophet holds a scroll in his hand. Isaiah’s reads: “Behold a virgin shall conceive,” the very text Cavallini renders again many years later in the Donna Regina fresco in Naples. Jeremiah’s scroll tells us that “Christ the Lord is captive in our

sins.” Born of the womb and dowered with human nature, He – and we – are like the bird in its cage. However, this inheritance is lucky.

For the body saves us as it defines us. Otherwise, we should leak away into air. Soft-pedaled in platonizing times when the spirit wars on the flesh, this truth is at the heart of Cavallini’s new dispensation. The impulse in earlier mosaics is to skimp on the surface of the natural world, with its myriad of particular exemplifications. Pope St. Paschal’s artisans, supposing that the special case is half-baked, give it only a cursory glance. Though Cavallini understood how our mortality leave us open to decay, he didn’t seek to transcend it. He immersed himself in the world of the flesh, and that is why he lives to the future.