

HADRIAN'S VILLA

*between heaven
and earth*

A tour with
Marguerite
Yourcenar

Nicoletta Lanciano

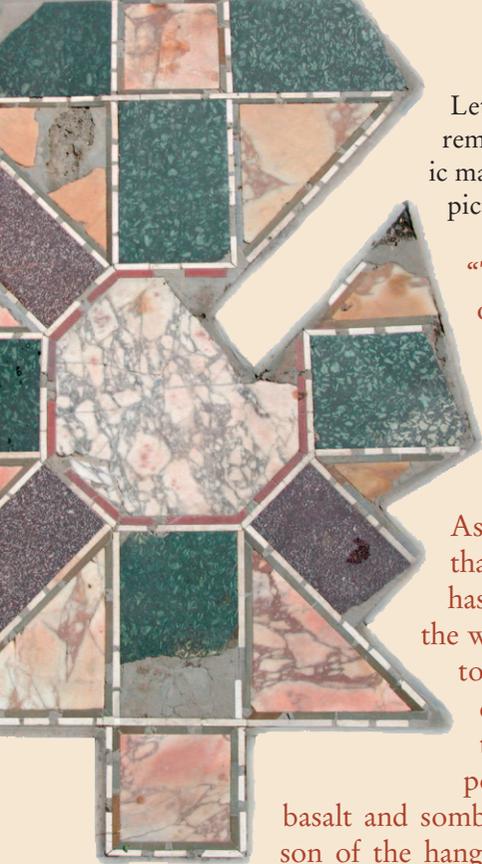
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To the Canopus

The “Canopus” refers to the Canopus canal, derived from an arm of the Nile between Alexandria and Abukir, and in which a port of notable commercial importance had developed. The temple built there and dedicated to Serapis became famous – writes Strabo – for its miraculous cures. Around the pool, to the north of the Serapeum, there are Roman copies and recent reproductions of statues whose originals are dispersed in museums all over the world.

“We are crowded with statues and cloyed with the exquisite in painting and sculpture, but this abundance is an illusion, for we reproduce over and over some dozen masterpieces which are now beyond our power to invent. Like other collectors I have had copied for the Villa the Hermaphrodite and the Centaur, the Niobid and the Venus. I have wanted to live as much as possible in the midst of this music of



Let's find out how much remains of the polychromatic marble floors or of traces of pictures on the walls.

“The Villa was the tomb of my travels, the last encampment of the nomad, the equivalent, though in marble, of the tents and pavilions of the princes of Asia. Almost everything that appeals to our taste has already been tried in the world of forms; I turned toward the realm of color: jasper as green as the depths of the sea, porphyry dense as flesh, basalt and somber obsidian. The crimson of the hangings was adorned with more and more intricate embroideries; the mosaics of the walls or pavements were never too golden, too white, or too dark. Each building-stone was the strange concretion of a will, a memory, and sometimes a challenge. Each structure was the chart of a dream.”

Memoirs of Hadrian, pp. 128





“Everything here was arranged to facilitate work as well as pleasure: the chancellery, the audience halls, and the court where I judged difficult cases in last appeal all saved me the tiring journeys between Tibur and Rome. **I had given each of these edifices names reminiscent of Greece: the Pœcile, the Academy, the Prytaneum.** I knew very well that this small valley planted with olive trees was not Tempe, but I was reaching the age when each beautiful place recalls another, fairer still, when each delight is weighted with the memory of past joys. I was willing to yield to nostalgia, that melancholy residue of desire. I had even given the name of Styx to a particularly somber corner of the park, and the name of Elysian Fields to a meadow strewn with anemones, thus preparing myself for that other world where the torments resemble those of this world, but where joys are nebulous, and inferior to our joys. But

most important of all, in the heart of this retreat I had built for myself a refuge more private still, an islet of marble at the center of a pool surrounded by colonnades; this gave me a room wholly apart, connected with, or rather, separated from the shore by a turning bridge so light that with one hand I could make it slide in its grooves. Into this summer pavilion I had two or three beloved statues moved, and the small bust of Augustus as a child, which Suetonius had given me in the period when we still were friends; I used to go there at the hour of siesta to sleep or to think, or to read. My dog would stretch out across the doorway, extending his paws somewhat stiffly now; reflections played on the marble; Diotimus would rest his cheek, to cool himself, against the smooth surface of an urn; my thoughts were on my successor.”

Memoirs of Hadrian, p. 252-253