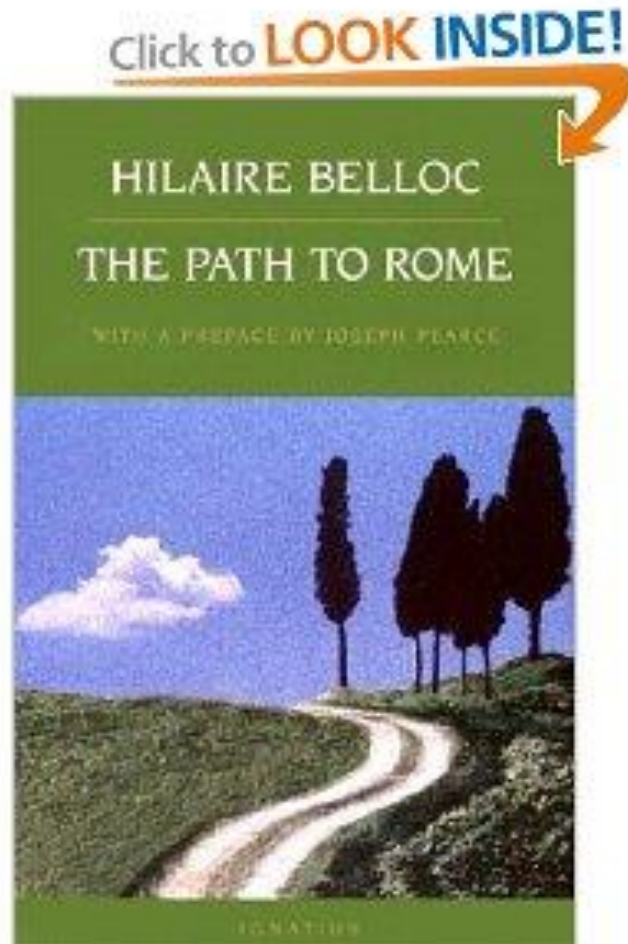


## A Summary of *The Path to Rome* by Hilaire Belloc



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## About the Author

Hilaire Belloc was one of the most prolific writers of the early twentieth century. Born on July 27, 1870, in France to an English mother and a French father, he grew up speaking both languages as native tongues. When Hilaire was just two years old, his father died after a tragic loss in the stock market. His mother, a writer, moved Hilaire and his sister to England, where he was well educated. He returned to France as a young man to fulfill his duties in the French military, and grew mightily in stature and endurance. When he was twenty years old, he walked a good distance across the United States in order to woo his future wife, Elodie.

Belloc became very active in English politics and was a member of Parliament for a short time. He wrote a great deal, and was therefore naturally often in need of money. He, along with his great friend and colleague G. K. Chesterton, found that making a living with the pen was a difficult life. Chesterton was a very reasoned and generally tactful individual, but Belloc made many nicknames for himself by his individually bombastic and polemic style. He was often called “Old Thunder”. He penned *The Path to Rome* at the age of 32, and enjoyed writing poetry, essays, travel literature, military history, religious history, Theology, and more. Some of his most famous works include *The Servile State* (1912), *The Crusades: The World’s Debate* (1937), and *The Great Heresies* (1938).

A recent, definitive biography has been written about the life of Hilaire Belloc by Joseph Pearce entitled *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc* (2002).

## General Overview

This is a thoroughly delightful book that recounts one man’s pilgrimage on foot from the heart of France to the heart of the Catholic Church. Hilaire Belloc determined to make an old-fashioned pilgrimage, but with strange rules that only he could devise. He would walk in as straight a line as possible from Toul, France, to Rome, Italy, no matter what rivers or mountains happened to be in his way. He would travel relatively quickly by sleeping during the heat of the day and walking in the cool of the night. He would use only his feet, and would disdain the use of any rolling cart or wagon.

The style of this book is mostly free association writing combined with a factual chronological and topographical narration. Belloc focuses on the people and places that he enjoyed the most, and completely overlooks scenes and scenery that he found dull or monotonous. His interests, which are numerous and varied, all center around one theme: how the Catholic Church has affected and formed the world in which he lives.

There are no chapter divisions in the book, for Belloc simply treats the work as a journal of naturally varying lengths. He devotes episodes in his book to short essays on the value of morning Mass, for example. One quirk of his writing style is that episodically he will speak directly and hypothetically to the reader, who he imagines is quickly bored with the book, and allows the reader to vent his frustrations. In normal Belloc fashion, however, he usually tells the reader how Belloc’s version is correct, or simply to shut up.

The book, on the whole, is a captivating read of an experience which no one could have nowadays. In this modern era of passports, visas, and fenced-in borders, no one could cavalierly march through three countries, over mountain ranges, and through rushing rivers without being quickly detained by the local authorities. Although he takes pride in his accomplishments, he does not spare himself any humiliation, but bluntly records all of his frustrations, broken vows, and moments of rage.

## The Path to Rome

### Proverb

The book begins with a French proverb that means, roughly, “the first step is the hardest part.” Belloc immediately takes exception to the proverb which he has put forward, claiming that it is not the first step which is most difficult, but the launching of the project in whole. He concludes that the person who composes proverbs knows the folly in the phraseology, but continues to err gleefully. This proverb, he claims, is actually designed to dissuade one from ever beginning anything. In writing a book, Belloc sees three difficulties: the beginning, the grand climacteric (i.e. that point in which the reader begins to desire to read more), and the ending. He goes on humorously to bemoan the difficulty of properly ending literature, and how one simply ought to tack on a piece of fine writing to the end of a book, no matter the subject.

## **Toul, France**

The beginning of his path to Rome was at Toul, France, in the earliest of June in the evening. He walked along a road which paralleled the Moselle River. Belloc planned to walk at night and rest during the day, due to the oppressive heat of the summer. Immediately after beginning, he turned and drew his first sketch of the trip, a drawing of the garrison of St. Miche, where Belloc himself had served in the First World War. In his satchel was a large piece of bread, some smoked ham, a drawing-pad, newspapers, chocolate, and a quart of fine Brulé wine. The wine recalled to Belloc some of his early soldiering days, with memorable incidents of men who cared somewhat too deeply about the fruit of the vine, with Belloc being chief among them. The moral of this narrative section is that what men love is not money but their own way.

As he walked along that first pleasant evening by the Moselle, he found himself in the mood in which all books are conceived, but none are actually written. His imagination began to run wild in a type of reverie full of reflection, reminiscence, and familiarity. But when night began to fall, a certain loneliness and uncertainty came upon him. In the full dark of the forest of Lorraine, he sat and had a good meal which restored his traveling spirit. He lit a pipe and began to sing, when he heard other voices down the road. He met with four soldiers on their way to roll-call at a nearby village-fort, shared a conversation, and then parted courteously. By midnight he had traveled twelve miles.

As he started to become fatigued, he began to wonder if he had not been a little too cavalier about his attitude to sleeping under the stars. He now wondered if a rug of some sort, a fire, and some comradeship were not essential for outdoorsmen. Even on this first night he began to waver in his conviction of how he had planned his trip, and he began to want a warm bed. But he stayed firm for now, passing villages which denied him sleep anyhow. In a bit of temper and fatigue, he made himself a bed in an orchard and slept for a little while until daylight.

Upon awaking, he discusses the peculiarity of breakfast, for which all men seem to prefer only certain and specific foods that they could not imagine at other parts of the day. For his breakfast that day he had his Brulé wine, which had tasted so wonderful the night before, but now seemed like vinegar. He continued his march, but now instead of a river, he was walking beside a canal that fed from the river.

## **Flavigny**

At Flavigny, he found companionship among the many peasants that lived there. This village stretched out all along one street, which he says is a Roman style, and the style of civilization. He sat down at the baker’s house – he is especially fond of men who become honest bakers –, and ate warm food. He went out from his nice breakfast, and feeling drowsy, fell asleep just beyond the village.

He woke up in the heat of the day, irritated at himself for having wasted good marching hours. At the next village he found Mass already over, and was annoyed, since a man should attend Mass every morning. He says that daily Mass is a source of spiritual comfort for him for four reasons: 1) at the opening of each day one is silent and recollected during repetition of familiar action, 2) the Mass is a ritual, and all rituals are important,

3) the surroundings lead one to good and reasonable thoughts apart from busy wickedness, and 4) one is doing what men have done for thousands of years, part of the continuum of existence.

A very tall house loomed up before him, surrounded by a low wall. The owner of the house sold wine in a curious manner, namely by any quantity, not just in bottles. The man's concept of rank was foreign to Belloc, being based entirely on money and clothes, not on leisure or luxury. Belloc departed that place, by now completely exhausted and hobbling. He limped slowly into the town of Charmes, which he thought a wonderful name and therefore a wonderful way to think about how past ages have handed down impressions via place names. The actual town was, to him, a grave disappointment, however, and he quickly departed in the heat of the day. He yielded to the temptation to snooze in a grove.

He arose in the cool of evening, having gone already some forty miles, but his foot and now his knee were beginning to become painful. He asked heaven if this was really necessary on a pilgrimage but soon was to find a soothing balm in Epinal, a charming island city with a church that mixed architectural styles delightfully. He encountered some children celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi. He found an inn and happily threw himself upon a soft bed, breaking another pre-pilgrimage vow, and praying humbly an intention to not attempt impossibilities like walking only at night or not sleeping in beds.

## Epinal

Beyond Epinal, he got lost in the woods. He remembered the following advice: if lost while going upwards, make for the steepest line; if lost while going downwards, listen for water and follow it down. He climbed up a steep hill through a forest, came to a crest, and looked down over the whole Moselle valley. This is one of the landscapes that came back to Belloc while writing the book; he remembered the whole journey as a series of landscapes. This way of travel, he felt, was vastly superior to railroad travel, which is shut away from these captivating sights.

Belloc found his rugged appearance was causing some middle-class persons to look at him sideways. He also found that the middle-class is the anchor of civilization.

As he came to the end of the Moselle valley, he approached the village of Rupt where he found an indifference to place-names. A hill above the city had no name of its own, but was even on the map as "the hill above Rupt." At the next village he made sure to go to Mass and then belligerently instigated a political discussion on anti-Semitism. He passed through that town and approached the base of the great mountain called Ballon d'Alsace.

He made his own road up that mountain and to the summit, from which he looked down upon Europe. To his right were the Gauls, to the left were the Germanics, and in front of him were the Italian highlanders. These three people, in his view, were vastly different from each other in background, custom, philosophy, and outlook, and only at the Ballon d'Alsace did the three meet. He slogged down the slope painfully and took rest at an inn on the mountain, where the hostess spoke "the corpse of French with a German ghost in it." It would be very difficult to follow a perfectly straight line into Rome, so he devised as close a method as possible. The first town he came upon was Giromagny, of the France of the plains, and he went to Mass.

## Belfort

In the next town of Belfort, Belloc bought some "open wine," that is, wine in un-lidded containers. The shopkeeper simply ladled some wine off the top for the customer. To Belloc's surprise, he found the wine to be very sweet and yet unspoiled. Belfort had two other surprises: 1) the way they built a bridge, simply waiting for the river to run dry and then feverishly sinking the foundations before the water returned, and 2) a great lion carved into a huge rock by Bartholdi, of Statue of Liberty fame. He stumbled across a large powder-

magazine which reminded him of two friends from youth who had zealously guarded such a depot; in one night they killed a donkey, wounded two mares, and seriously stunted the growth of a tree.

In a prideful effort to be out of France by the fourth day, he plodded on in haste along the marshy valley. As he marched, he pondered the mysteries of the immortal soul, wondering why men attempt to dissolve their spirit wholly from their bodies in detachment. His reverie was broken by the crashing of his Open Wine, which fell from his satchel. He had avoided drinking this wine in hopes of saving it as long as possible, but now it was no more. Lighter in sack but heavier in heart, he crossed the border to Switzerland.

## Switzerland

His first acquaintance in Switzerland was the Commercial Traveler from Marseilles, a thoroughly wonderful font of knowledge who well represented his area of the world. This man even secretly gave up his bed at an inn in order that the disheveled Belloc might rest. Belloc next encountered the first of the German cities, by which he means the spirit of the people from Eastern Europe who love to preserve the past, love ease, and fit their towns to the terrain and the mountains. The first of these cities was Porrentruy, where he had to pay before eating but was consoled by the quality of the wine.

Belloc determined to climb across the Jura, several ridges of high mountains, following the advice of locals. Reaching the top of the second ridge, he took his last look north, seeing a high isolated rock, the vast plain of Alsace and the distant Vosges. His descent down the south side of the mountain was terribly steep. In the valley of the Doubs below, which was shaped like a severe bend upon itself and which led nowhere, was the village of St. Ursanne. A church there had lower windows which were shaped like upright horseshoes, as though the weight of the church had completely bowed out their arches. This fascinated Belloc because he said that windows are to a building what eyes are to a man. He waxed eloquently on the virtues of windows, extolling their many virtues and uses. He wrote: "I will keep up the high worship of windows till I come to the windowless grave."

He tried to go across a very high railroad bridge despite the warning of the stationmaster, but was quickly seized with terror. He reflected upon the nature of terror, since there really was little danger to him due to the construction of the bridge. He did not dare to turn around, and did not dare to stop. He made a vow to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, and ran the last bit.

## Glovelier

On entering the town of Glovelier, before the fourth ridge of the Jura, he gave his benediction to a group of children playing. He wrote that three kinds of men can bestow benedictions: 1) the good man, whose goodness makes him a giver of blessing, 2) the Religious Official who exercises his office, and 3) one who is engaged in an act of goodness, like a pilgrim. The people of the town barely acknowledged him until he spoke to them in concise commands. He left Glovelier without regret. A boy hailed him and offered him a ride in a wagon. Belloc's original vow not to ride held some strength, and he merely clung to the back of the wagon in a pitiful manner so as to preserve the literal meaning of the vow.

## Undervelier

The next village, Undervelier, marked the transition from the French language to a dialect that Belloc found barbaric. The whole village poured into the church together for Vespers, which inspired Belloc to contemplate the nature of Belief and its hardness. "It is a good thing to have loved one woman from a child, and it is a good thing not to have to return to the Faith." He found their cooking in Undervelier worse than any other place except Omaha, Nebraska. He remarked offhand on the nature of clichés. He left the city for Moutier, and

encountered his first person who spoke German instead of French. Since this man did not drink coffee, Belloc declared that he must be a heretic and walked off, singing an impromptu song about heretics.

## **Moutier**

The road beyond Moutier was boring to Belloc, and so he instigated an imaginary conversation with the reader. He attempted to prove that common things are really boring and uninspiring, no matter how literateurs are supposed to lift the common to the uncommon. He continued into a tangent about writing literature with symbols instead of words, and related a story about a young boy who was rejected from a forced priestly vocation.

## **Weissenstein**

The last slope of the Jura, a mountain called the Weissenstein, lay ahead. He stopped at an inn and bought wine from an old woman who looked like a witch. She gave him counterfeit change. He charged up the mountain and looked down from a gap and saw a natural sight so beautiful that he spontaneously praised God. The majestic Alps showed him how tiny and insignificant human achievements can seem before God. The down slope was a difficult cliff, and at the bottom were more villages that spoke only German. Knowing only English and French, Belloc felt very lonely among all these incommunicable strangers. He had already come 180 miles in seven days, and passed over seven great heights and seven great depths.

## **Tedious**

In a day without energy or a muse, Belloc had to choose a road slightly circuitous to the perfect straight line to Rome due to the terrain. While trudging along, he debated whether one should say “under these circumstances” or “in these circumstances,” without reaching a conclusion. His writing becomes intentionally as tedious as his journey during this day. At the end of the day, a peasant asked Belloc to hold his horse while he would drink in a bar. After holding the horse for most of an hour with no relief in sight, Belloc let the horse go and walloped it away with a crowd of peasants running after it. He slept at a small hotel.

## **Brienzer Grat**

Before him now was the Brienzer Grat, a sharp mountain ridge surrounding Interlaken and Lake Brienz. He climbed in the dark before dawn, perilously risking his life before waiting for full light. When he could suddenly see through the mist: there were the Alps just before him, and he was dangerously perched on the summit of his ridge. He wrote: “Have you ever tried looking down five thousand feet at sixty degrees?” His descent was difficult and heart wrenching. Upon reaching the town of Brienz, none of the citizens there believed that he could have crossed the Brienzer Grat before breakfast.

## **Grimsel Pass**

His next topographical hurdle was a complicated knot of ridges, rivers, and valleys at the Grimsel Pass. He found, to his surprise, a tourist trap in the city of Meiringen, at what he thought was the pristine root of the world. He thanked God that he was delivered from being a tourist. There were already gaping holes and flaps in his boots. The Aar River was a torrent, but he followed it for quite some miles through the knot. At the top of another mountain, he pondered mountainhood: mountains themselves, in the vast scheme, are really not very giant things, but yet we feel that the whole world is small beneath us when we are on top of them. He finally came to a point where he could see down the Rhone valley for miles.

He met a woman at an inn who was not shifty-eyed. Thus he could tell she was a good person. He warned the reader sternly to beware all those who have shifty eyes.

He meant to leave the inn and travel over the frontier, but the woman stopped him and found him a guide who dissuaded him from starting immediately. The mountain was evidently terribly treacherous that day, having soft fallen snow upon it. Belloc attempted the mountain early the next morning with the guide, but the higher they went, the colder it became and the more difficult the snow made their journey. Belloc pushed on against the guide's advice. They marched directly into a gale blizzard with horizontal snow flying through them, stooping against the wind. But 800 feet from the summit (that is, from Italy), the guide refused to go on for any sum, and they returned defeated (though the return was anything but simple). Italy proved to be well defended. He set off again for Italy, this time by the normal (and dull) road.

## Italy

Just eight francs and ten centimes were in Belloc's pocket when he entered Italy. It was such a paltry sum that he felt like singing silly songs about it, and did. He could not get more money until Milan, so he had to devise strategies to make this sum last until then: 90 miles away. He had to make forced marches and do without luxuries. He figured that he could do two days of forty-five miles apiece. His guardian angel, in amazement, chastised: "Ninety miles is a great deal more than twice forty-five."

He bought food in Bodio and Biasca early the first morning, and was left now with just seven francs. He was very fatigued and losing sharpness and focus. He forgot his poverty and bought drinks for some men in Bellinzona, and after a meal there was down to under five francs. He attempted to find shortcuts to decrease the length of his journey (no thanks to a rude mapmaker), and encountered some enchanting Italian lakes. Down at the town of Lugano, he ate a satisfying and, more importantly, inexpensive meal. He pushed on in the night, though he regretted it: his light purse had prevented him from taking a room. He was not able to travel before he collapsed in sleep near a telegraph pole. He attempted to walk farther, waking up in the middle of the night, but he was so exhausted that he attempted to find a bed anyway. He was refused by several members of a house, yet they provided him a bed while still refusing! After morning coffee, he was left with just two francs.

He attended morning Mass, where he received a mysterious omen: one of the altar servers had a half-shaved head. He entered Lombardy over the last of the Alps and found the town of Como mostly flooded, like Venice. He ate, but still found himself twenty-five miles from Milan in the heat of noon. He sat, thought, and watched the candles burn in the Como cathedral, and finally determined to ride the train to Milan in violation of all his previous vows. His tiny amount of money was exactly enough to get to the Milan station.

He had walked 378 straight miles.

## Milan

Milan appeared to be a magnificent city, resplendent with civilization. Belloc relaxed there, but felt ashamed by his shabby appearance. He left the city with regret, and was immediately disappointed with the flat muddy and rainy marshiness of Lombardy. He spent much of his time devising ways to accurately describe the ugliness and dullness of the countryside. The area was so dull that he actually ended up traveling north at one point. He began telling boring stories to himself just to pass the time. His story of the Learned Man who cheated the Devil, however, is a priceless example of Belloc's moralizing raconteurship.

He crossed the Po River – really a very large stream – on a boat bridge. In Piacenza, as the rain and mud continued, he discovered that Italians still live in mini palaces and that they are the impoverished heirs of a

great time. He also found that all good and wonderful things exist – but not on the Emilian Way in the rain. The rain finally stopped at Borgo, a town at the foot of the Apennines.

He set out for Medesano by country roads, and was mistaken for a Venetian at a roadside inn. Evidently Venetians were not held in high regard in that town, and he was threatened by several men, one with a knife. He became very angry and yelled nonsensical Italian phrases at them, showing them that he was a foreigner. The innkeeper defended him verbally, and the belligerent Italians abated. After this, all were neighborly.

## Taro River

The next river in his path was the Taro, which, he was informed by some natives, was impassable due to *rami* (i.e. the separate branches whereby the river flows through its arid bed). Drowning was a real threat in those turbulent waters. He did manage to find a guide, however, who found a reasonable area in the river. Belloc climbed on the guide's back, who walked him through the deep water in the first branch, about 20 yards in all. The guide taught him an interesting way to discover fords: toss a heavy rock into the middle of the water and observe the type of splash; the splash appears different if the water is less than four feet deep. Crossing another branch, the guide fell with Belloc on top of him, and Belloc immediately discovered how treacherous these icy waters were. For the last five branches, it was not necessary for the guide to carry Belloc. This guide's business was exactly that of St. Christopher's.

The path beyond disappeared from Belloc's feet, and he realized that he had lost it. After a nap, he climbed a glen and found to his disgust a nice road and to his delight a tremendous view down onto Italy. He was able to see all the way back to the Alps, from which he had come many days before.

## Calestano

But before him lay the town of Calestano, which awaited him with “ill favor, a prison, release, base flattery, and a very tardy meal.” He was merely eating a meal at a café, surrounded by people who seemed suspicious of him, when he was arrested and taken to the jail. He was cross-examined, which was an interesting experience, seeing that he knew no Italian. The policemen asked for his passport or visa, but he was able to produce neither, since he had neither. He parried with the policemen with almost too much spirit, but eventually the policemen took him to the mayor, who released him. He returned to the original café, where he was oddly met with rejoicing and was even offered a bed for the night. He thought the people ridiculous, and therefore he loved them. “And when you have arrested [a vagrant foreigner], can you do more than let him go without proof, on his own word? Hardly!”

## Enza River

After sleeping, he went over another ridge, singing. He met a peasant who also enjoyed singing in private, and they shared some moments together. He found a miller, and knew that where there is a miller, there is a mill, and where there is a mill, there is a river. He crossed the water with the help of a young man with stilts. He reflected that the Catholic Church makes men – not in the sense of being bullies or boasters, but full human beings capable of firm character.

He ate in the middle of the day, at Tizzano Val Parmense, in a large room with very many peasants who were eating soup with macaroni in it. He asked the innkeeper specifically for macaroni with cheese and tomato, and wine. In order not to appear as though he was throwing about his money, he narrowly haggled with the innkeeper. All the peasants applauded appreciatively.



Later in the afternoon, he encountered the Enza River at the bottom of a valley, but this river was not fordable. He asked for directions, but unfortunately misheard a word, and thought his destination, Collagna, was far closer than it actually was. The road seemed interminable to him, and went on and on all the way into deep night. He hobbled on and was denied a bed. He approached a bridge but was fearful to attempt it in the dark, and stopped. He found that the hour before daylight is the worst and loneliest hour. He walked on for need of something to do, but heard no animals or birds. Then, suddenly, the light appeared, and he collapsed into sleep.

## **Collagna**

Well beyond Collagna, he encountered a young priest, and was able to speak to him in Latin. Since he knew that revered language, the peasants around him gave him great admiration. The next sixty miles were an oven which Belloc would rather have forgotten, though he encountered some fascinating architecture. He continued to march too far too fast and was always fatigued. He wrote so little about this part of the journey that he criticized himself for writing it in the first place. He reduced himself to telling the origins of place names, which, despite himself, he made very interesting.

## **Lucca**

He found the town of Lucca to be perfect. He found much of the rest of his pilgrimage to be uninteresting, that is, to have nothing new. He began telling humorous stories again to pass the time. He jumped on to a passing oxen cart at one point, and enjoyed sleeping while traveling. He preaches against the temptation to write in a terse and overly brief style. He jumped on another two-wheeled cart, joyously riding against his vows yet again.

## **Viterbo**

When Belloc came to Viterbo, he found a fabulous wall around the city which captured his imagination. The streets were narrow and tortuous, but they were vibrant and real. He departed Viterbo in yet more heat, and made his way to a mountain from which he could see Alba Longa, the city that birthed Rome. Rome itself was still hidden by the Sabinian hills, but the end of his pilgrimage was within reach. Etruria was behind, and Campagna and home were ahead. “Upon this arena were first fought out the chief destinies of the world.”

## **Rome**

Excitedly, he made his way towards the Eternal City. He approached a bridge which crossed a river: the Tiber River. Just beyond was the Dome of St. Peter’s Basilica, and his journey, and his book, reached an end. He determined to tell the reader nothing of Rome, since the book was only concerning his pilgrimage and his very singular journey. He ended the story with an original poem about his pilgrimage.