

ON THE PANTHEON IN ROME

PUBLISHED IN

Palimpsesto Architectonico. Madrid, 2018

Sharpening the scalpel. Madrid, 2019

How many times have I written about the Pantheon in Rome?

I wrote about Beauty in my inaugural speech at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, on "Relentlessly Seeking Beauty". And I wrote "On Intellectual Enjoyment", in my recent farewell lesson from the School of Architecture on the occasion of my retirement. And in both speeches I spoke about the Pantheon, because in the Roman Pantheon both come together, Beauty and Intellectual Enjoyment.

And why do I choose to do it over again? The answer is very simple. Because I'm not the only one who mentions the Pantheon when discussing beauty. Because many of the greatest writers in the world have written about the Pantheon and so magnificently!

The Roman Pantheon is the most beautiful piece of architecture in the world, capable of arousing deep emotion. Yesterday, today and tomorrow. I made a deal with my students many years ago that when they visit the Pantheon, if they shed tears, they have to send me a postcard, telling me that they have cried. All those who have written have cried. And I've amassed a sizeable collection of postcards of the Pantheon in Rome, all handwritten and a few smudged with tears.

I must confess that the origin of this text, of this excursus on the Roman Pantheon, is the discovery that Cervantes, in his novel *Don Quixote*, speaks of the Pantheon, through the words of the ingenious knight himself.

And Cervantes (1547-1616) is joined by Stendhal (1783-1842), Henry James (1843-1916), and Marguerite Yourcenar (1903-1987) and others whom I cannot include here for reasons of brevity.

CERVANTES

I still recall my puzzlement when a good friend of mine, knowing of my devotion to the Pantheon, told me something that I did not know, that I had not been aware of: that, in *Don Quixote*, Cervantes had spoken of the Pantheon. And of course, Cervantes lived for a while in Rome.

At the end of 1569 Cervantes was in Rome as page to Cardinal Acquaviva. And so Rome appears in some of his works, such as *The Lawyer of Glass* and *The Works of Persiles and Sigismunda*.

But what hardly anyone knows or mentions, is that Cervantes was in the Roman Pantheon. He describes it so well in chapter VIII of the second part of *Don Quixote* that I have no doubt but that he was there.

But let us proceed to the text.

"And something of the same sort is what happened in the case of the great emperor Charles V and a gentleman in Rome. The emperor was anxious to see that famous temple of the Rotunda, called in ancient times the temple 'of all the gods,' but now-a-days, by a better nomenclature, 'of all the saints,' which is the best preserved building of all those of pagan construction in Rome, and the one which best sustains the reputation of mighty works and magnificence of its founders. It is in the form of a half orange, of enormous dimensions, and well lighted, though no light penetrates it save that which is admitted by a window, or rather round skylight, at the top; and it was from this that the emperor examined the building. A Roman gentleman stood by

his side and explained to him the skilful construction and ingenuity of the vast fabric and its wonderful architecture, and when they had left the skylight he said to the emperor, 'A thousand times, your Sacred Majesty, the impulse came upon me to seize your Majesty in my arms and fling myself down from yonder skylight, so as to leave behind me in the world a name that would last for ever.' 'I am thankful to you for not carrying such an evil thought into effect,' said the emperor, 'and I shall give you no opportunity in future of again putting your loyalty to the test; and I therefore forbid you ever to speak to me or to be where I am'; and he followed up these words by bestowing a liberal bounty upon him. My meaning is, Sancho, that the desire of acquiring fame is a very powerful motive. What, thinkest thou, was it that flung Horatius in full armour down from the bridge into the depths of the Tiber? What burned the hand and arm of Mutius? What impelled Curtius to plunge into the deep burning gulf that opened in the midst of Rome? What, in opposition to all the omens that declared against him, made Julius Caesar cross the Rubicon? And to come to more modern examples, what scuttled the ships, and left stranded and cut off the gallant Spaniards under the command of the most courteous Cortes in the New World?"

Chapter VIII Part two, Don Quixote. Miguel de Cervantes

Cervantes, in the words of Don Quixote, speaks here of the "temple of the Rotunda" describing it as being "in the form of a half orange and of enormous dimensions", a clear reference to the Pantheon.

And after relating in this passage the gentleman's impulse to seize his Majesty the Emperor Charles the Fifth on his visit to the Pantheon and fling himself from the skylight, with the idea of becoming famous, Cervantes takes advantage of the situation to sing the praises of humility in the words of his Don Quixote:

"All these and a variety of other great exploits are, were and will be, the work of fame that mortals desire as a reward and a portion of the immortality their famous deeds deserve; though we Catholic Christians and knights-errant look more to that future glory that is everlasting in the ethereal regions of heaven than to the vanity of the fame that is to be acquired in this present transitory life; a fame that, however long it may last, must after all end with the world itself, which has its own appointed end. So that, O Sancho, in what we do we must not overpass the bounds which the Christian religion we profess has assigned to us. We have to slay pride in giants, envy by generosity and nobleness of heart, anger by calmness of demeanour and equanimity, gluttony and sloth by the spareness of our diet and the length of our vigils, lust and lewdness by the loyalty we preserve to those whom we have made the mistresses of our thoughts, indolence by traversing the world in all directions seeking opportunities of making ourselves, besides Christians, famous knights. Such, Sancho, are the means by which we reach those extremes of praise that fair fame carries with it."

How could anyone remain immune to such beauty, not to mention someone with the extreme sensitivity of Cervantes? And consequently, and so very understandably, he passes it on to us, his readers, in his finest work.

STENDHAL

And Stendhal? Stendhal, author of novels as well-known as *The Charterhouse of Parma* and *Scarlet and Black* also wrote of the Pantheon. How could he not write about the Pantheon in his *Walks in Rome*? So let us go straight to what he wrote:

“The most beautiful memory of ancient Rome is, without a doubt, the Pantheon. This temple has suffered so little that it seems to be the same as in the Roman era. In the year 606, Emperor Phocas, whose column in the Forum was uncovered in the 1813 excavations, gave the Pantheon to Pope Boniface, who consecrated the temple as a church. What a pity that all pagan temples were not handed over to the church in 606! Ancient Rome would have remained almost entirely in place.

“The Pantheon has a great advantage: in a matter of seconds one is overcome by its beauty. The visitor stops at the portico, advances a few steps, sees the church and that’s it. What I have just said is enough for the visitor; he does not require further explanation; the spell that the monument casts on you is proportional to the sensitivity that Heaven has given you for the fine arts. I do not think I’ve ever met anyone who is not in the least excited to see the Pantheon. This famous temple has a quality not found in Michelangelo’s frescoes or in the statues on the Capitoline Hill. I believe that this immense dome, suspended above their heads without any apparent support, inspires fools with fearfulness, which quickly turns to a sense of calm and they tell themselves: ‘And it is, however, to please me that they have taken the trouble to offer me such strong feelings!’

“This famous temple is no more than one hundred and thirty three feet in diameter and thirty three feet high. It was built by Marcus Agrippa during his third consulate, in the Roman calendar year 727, twenty six B.C. or one thousand eight hundred and fifty-four years ago.

“The inscription on the frieze of the portico reads:

M · AGRIPPA · L · F · COS · TERTIVM · FECIT ·

“It was restored by the emperors Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius, and finally by Septimius Severus and Antoninus Caracalla. There is not the slightest doubt in this respect, since the following inscription can be read on the portico architrave:

IMP · CAESAR · LVCIVS · SEPTIMVS · SEVERVS ·

PIVS · PERTINAX ·

ARABIC · ADIABENIC · PARTHIC · PONT · MAX ·

TRIB · POT · XI · COS · III · PP · PROCOS ·

ET · IMP · CAES · MARCVS · AVRELIVS · PIVS ·

FELIX · AVG · TRIE · POT · V · COS · PROCOS ·

PANTHEVM · VETVSTATE · CORRVP TVM ·

CVM · OMNI · CVLTV · RESTITVERVNT ·

“Agrippa was Augusto’s son-in-law. He dedicated this temple to Jupiter the Avenger in memory of the famous victory his father-in-law obtained near Actium against Mark Antony and Cleopatra (one thousand eight hundred and fifty-nine years ago). In it

were the statues of Mars, protector of Rome, and of Venus, protector of the family of Julio.

“The total height of the Pantheon (one hundred and thirty-three feet) is divided into two equal parts; the upper half is occupied by the curve of the great dome; the architect has divided the lower half into five parts. The first three fifths, moving upwards from the pavement, display a Corinthian order entirely similar to that of the portico. The other two form an attic with its cornice.

“The Pantheon is the most perfect remaining structure of ancient Roman architecture”.

Stendhal wrote so many pages on the Pantheon that I will not dwell any further on it.

HENRY JAMES

Henry James, who was born in New York and became a naturalized Englishman in 1915, wrote many wonderful short stories including *The Last of the Valerii*, in which he writes beautifully about visiting the Pantheon. Not long before that, shortly after his arrival in Rome, he had declared: “Finally, for the first time, I live!”

In *The Last of the Valerii*, Henry James tells the story of a rich American woman who marries a Roman aristocrat, Count Valerio, in whose garden a statue of the goddess Juno is discovered. The count becomes infatuated with the statue, is and falls under her spell, rather like a religious conversion. And at a culminating moment in the story the Pantheon takes on the role of protagonist:

“I wandered about Rome, turning over these questions, and one afternoon found myself in the Pantheon.

“A light spring shower had begun to fall, and I hurried for refuge into the big rotunda which its Christian altars have but half converted into a church. No Roman monument retains a deeper impress of ancient life, or has more of the form of the antique faiths whose temples were nobler than their gods. The huge dusky dome seems to the spiritual ear to hold a vague reverberation of pagan worship, as a shell picked up on the beach holds the rumour of the sea. Three or four persons were scattered before the various altars; another stood near the centre, beneath the aperture in the dome.

“The sun was struggling through the clouds without, and yet a thin rain continued to fall, and came drifting down into our gloomy enclosure in a sort of illuminated drizzle. The Count watched it with the fascinated stare of a child watching a fountain, and then turned away, pressing his hand to his brow, and walked over to one of the rather perfunctory altars. Here he again stood staring, but in a moment wheeled about and returned to his former place. Just then he recognised me, and perceived, I suppose, the curious gape I must have fixed on him. He waved me a greeting with his hand, and at last came towards me. He was in a state of nervous exaltation—doing his best to appear natural.

“‘This is the best place in Rome’, he murmured. ‘It is worth fifty St. Peters’. But do you know I never came here till the other day? I left it to the forestieri. They go about with their red books and their opera-glasses, and read about this and that, and think

they know it. Ah! You must feel it —feel the beauty and fitness of that great open skylight. Now, only the wind and the rain, the sun and the cold, come down; but of old— of old’ —and he touched my arm and gave me a strange smile— ‘the pagan gods and goddesses used to descend through it and take their places at their altars. What a procession, when the eyes of faith could see it! Those are the things they have given us instead!’ And he gave a pitiful shrug. ‘I should like to pull down their pictures, overturn their candlesticks, and poison their holy-water!’”

MARGUERITE DE YOURCENAR

And finally, for now, Marguerite de Yourcenar, author of the novel *Memoirs of Hadrian*, in the center of which the Pantheon makes its appearance. In the chapter “*Saeculum Aureum*”, Hadrian has the following to say:

“The construction of a temple for All Gods, a Pantheon, seemed increasingly desirable to me. I had chosen a site on the ruins of the ancient public baths given by Agrippa, Augustus’ son-in-law to the people of Rome. Nothing remained of the old structure except a porch and a marble plaque bearing his dedication to the Roman citizens; this inscription was carefully replaced, just as before, on the front of the new temple. It mattered little to me to have my name recorded on this monument, which was the product of my very thought. On the contrary, it pleased me that a text of more than a century ago should link this new edifice to the beginning of our empire, to that reign which Augustus had brought to a peaceful conclusion.

“On the same day, with graver solemnity, as if muted, a dedicatory ceremony took place inside the Pantheon. I myself had revised its architectural plans, drawn with too little daring by Apollodorus. Utilizing the arts of Greece only as ornamentation, like an added luxury, I had gone back for the basic form of the structure to the primitive, fabled times of Rome, to the round temples of ancient Etruria. My intention had been that the sanctuary of All Gods should reproduce the likeness of the terrestrial globe and of the stellar sphere, that globe wherein are enclosed the seeds of eternal fire, and that hollow sphere containing all. Such was also the form of our ancestors’ huts where the smoke of man’s earliest hearths escaped through an orifice at the top. The cupola, constructed of hard but lightweight volcanic stone, which seemed still to share in the upward movement of flames, revealed the sky through a great hole at the centre showing alternately dark and blue. This temple, both open and mysteriously enclosed was conceived as a solar quadrant. The disc of daylight would rest suspended there like a shield of gold; rain would form its clear pool on the pavement below; prayers would rise like smoke toward that void where we place the gods.”

With such authentic testimonies from four extraordinary writers, how could anyone doubt the beauty of the Roman Pantheon? Architecture, perhaps with a stronger force than any of the Fine Arts, can achieve a beauty capable of moving our hearts and our heads, producing true intellectual enjoyment. That intrinsic beauty, the beauty in which the best Architecture is clothed, is what we find so eminently vested in the Pantheon of Rome.

And should we continue —and continue we will— studying the Roman Pantheon, and the creators who have had a relationship with it, we would never end. Goethe in his *Italian*

Journey writes: "The Pantheon is one of the buildings in Rome that has taken such a firm hold of my soul that there is hardly room for anything else".

Velázquez displayed his portrait of Juan de Pareja on the doors of the Pantheon, when he entered the Academy of Saint Luke and the Congregation of the Virtuous in Rome. Eduardo Chillida wrote about his feelings on embracing the column of light that came from above. Rafael Sanzio and Arcangelo Corelli were buried there. And our Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, houses the drawers of the Westmorland containing many drawings of the Pantheon. And so much more.