

ROMAN PALIMPSEST

Prologue. Fragmentos de Roma. José Antonio Flores

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Writing an introduction to a text as wonderful as this one by José Antonio Flores is a gift. Under the title *Fragmentos de Roma* (Fragments of Rome), he recalls his time at the Spanish Academy in Rome. And as if it were a living palimpsest, the author goes back to write about well known topics, but in such a suggestive way that it seems that all of them are new. Because the way in which José Antonio Flores shows us that treasure is new.

And Flores begins with a table of contents in which each heading is capable of uncovering a whole host of perfumes capable of provoking our memory. A memory full of all the memories that Rome evokes in all of us who have visited it. Rome was, is and will always remain the most intense city in the world. Flores compares his long stay there to a "trip to the center of the earth". He knows well that there in the Campidoglio the earth, from the wise hand of Michelangelo, has emerged forever. Check it out on your next trip to Rome. Take this text of Flores along with the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, both in English (on my desk I have a Penguin Book edited in 2004 with *Meditations*. I always carry it with me). And stand in the very center of that square, next to the beautiful equestrian statue of the Roman emperor. And read there some of these texts, both fragmentary, and tell me later. "That no one should feel inferior before him" says the emperor. And Flores repeats "good architecture belongs to no one". No comments.

And if the Pantheon appears in several chapters, as it could not be less, Santo Stefano Rotondo and Santa Sabina and Santa Cecilia and Santa Maria in Trastevere accompany it appropriately. And Santa Constanza and Sant Ivo alla Sapienza and even the Pescile wall. And we could not miss Bernini's luminous jewels: the chapel of the Beata Albertoni and that of Santa Teresa.

Of course, the fragment of the snow falling on the Pantheon and disappearing without touching the ground is priceless. Flores knows well that the evocative words of Dante in the *Divine Comedy* that he quotes "Come di neve in Alpe senza vento", are the same ones that Italo Calvino in his *Six proposals for the next millennium* states that they are taken from a verse by Cavalcanti "E bianca neve scender senza venti". Well, in a third reading, Flores dares to make them his own to write a truly memorable page. Delight in reading this fragment slowly.

It reminds me of the scene of the very fine rain falling through the Pantheon's oculus on Count Valerius, the protagonist of a beautiful story by Henry James, when he is discovered kneeling inside the Pantheon touched by the moonlight alone that fills the raindrops falling on him. Of course, Henry James, to accentuate the scene, describes a Pantheon in ruins and open.

I don't know if Flores' description is more beautiful than Henry James'. But I do know that it is a wonderful text from someone who deeply understands and loves architecture.

And if you start giving reasons for these "Roman fragments", ends with a "return trip" that has no waste. He gives us all kinds of explanations of the "trip to Rome", which was called among the architects of yesteryear as the trip par excellence. Because if today a trip to New York is essential, a trip to Rome is also essential.

It is necessary to recognize to José Antonio Flores that the original system of dividing the book into many and very small chapters is very effective. It is the same thing that some poets do in their books of poems. And as if it were the fragments of an archaeological excavation, he collects the most beautiful fragments of the most beautiful city. And beauty upon beauty, he gathers them in his book as if it were a Roman antiquarium. As the most selected pieces of Roman statues are all placed on a wall as a collage of history. And immediately, for the sake of being together, all the pieces are put in value, they increase even more their value. And after reading these fragments, one by one, we are deeply moved. It is not in vain that the author says that, after the Roman experience, "it is impossible to remain the same".

We must recognize that the book is not only written with an extreme devotion to Rome, but also with a very good literary style. From the beginning where he summarizes everything as "a dream fulfilled" to when he describes "how the sun sinks behind the Gianicolo hill". To the lines in which he convinces us that "it is an experience not for ecstasy stopped in appearance but for a reflection on the form". A reflection on form that evokes the definition of Beauty as splendor formae made by St. Thomas Aquinas and that somehow leads us to architecture.

As the author himself declares: "it is not a diary but a manual, an enchiridion of first aid in Rome", for all of us who have been wounded there forever.

N.B.

As I write these words, Allegri's Miserere is in the air. A sublime work capable of getting us high better than a bottle of the best Chianti. It sounds the absolute voice of Roy Godman who is able to scale and sustain the notes of Allegri with a divine air. The CD is from Decca and is performed by King's College.

The Miserere was composed by Allegri in Rome at the request of the Pope who, so beautiful was the composition, threatened to excommunicate anyone who dared to copy it. Mozart in 1770, at the age of 14, was in Rome during Holy Week and, after only one hearing, on a Holy Wednesday, he transcribed the work from memory. How could one write about Rome, the Rome that José Antonio Flores offers us in his marvelous text, if not against the background of Allegri's Miserere? I strongly recommend that, when you read this precious book, you do it together with Allegri, with his Roman Miserere. You will thank me for it.