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Jonah Siegel: Haunted Museum

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INTRODUCTION

A Haunted Form

THE MUSEUM AND THE JOURNEY

A LONELY ARCADE of ornate classical columns leads from the beautiful sky of a tranquil day to an elaborate but rationally ordered interior. In this light-filled space elegantly dressed men are surrounded by canvases showing ruined buildings or fragments from classical sites or paintings and statues also from antiquity. Among the many admired objects, the eye picks out a few at a time: the *Farnese Hercules* and the *Dying Gladiator* are visible in the left foreground, the *Laocoön* is on the right, along with a statue far more famous in Panini's day than our own—*Silenus with the Infant Bacchus*. Down the central arcade heading out, the *Apollo Belvedere* and the *Borghese Gladiator* are visible, accompanied by numerous other noted works. Near the center of the image, connoisseurs contemplate a rare example of antique painting—the “Aldobrandini Marriage”—while artists gathered near the *Dying Gladiator* look up, perhaps momentarily distracted from their studies. On the fancifully imagined walls, famous sites have been transformed into paintings—the Colosseum, the Pantheon, and various triumphal arches from the Forum among them.

Recent years have seen renewed popular affection for Giovanni Paolo Panini's 1757 *Views of Ancient Rome*, a piece, like its companion, *Views of Modern Rome*, designed to evoke in some measure nostalgia, but also pleasure at the elegant conceit of an abundance of beauty elegantly displayed.¹ At once souvenirs of a voyage and fantasies of a perfect collection of admired art, these works of Panini, of which several versions exist, all painted for foreigners, may be understood to occupy an important point of transition between the soon-to-be-outmoded culture of the Grand Tour and the emergence of a dream that was to preoccupy later eras, that of the perfect museum. For a vision of clarity and organization such as that which covers Panini's canvas to come into being, however, as much needs to be left out as invented. To experience all the admired works of ancient Rome together is an evident impossibility. Indeed, to transmute the Colosseum into a size comparable with that of the Pantheon is just one of the flamboyant and necessary falsifications required in order to gather all these admired objects into an assimilable form. We might go further and propose that the straightforward quality of Panini's work

stands against what we know of museums in general: that they are not perfect, that they cannot show us all we want to see, that we do not want to see everything they hold. Even in the most well-lit gallery each component part on display as much as the ensemble those parts constitute is shadowed by ghosts of promise or of disappointment.

Unmasked-for gifts, trophies of plunder, voids suggested by the presence of objects always in surfeit though never quite sufficient—*all* museums are haunted in some measure. To gather together prized material in the hope that the Muses will thereby be encouraged to manifest themselves—that is the magic or necromancy promised by the institution. But every collection, be its aim novelty or conservation, becomes immediately historic, and it is the nature of repositories of the past to intimate more than any visitor can ever realize, to evoke memories not entirely one's own, to speak at once about the endurance of things and the impermanence of individuals, about the seductions of fame along with its evanescence.

To describe Italy as a museum is to evoke the aspiration for a world like that imagined in the fanciful views of Panini, one of order, light, and clarity, of learning and pleasure coexisting in comfort, of the simulacrum of the thing successfully standing in for the thing itself. To describe Italy as a museum, however, is also to acknowledge the world in which that aspiration is born, one that is the absolute antithesis of Panini's image, one in which admired sites can never be taken in at a view, in which works known from beloved reproduction seem different when confronted in their actual existence or, worse, in which the self that longed for a thing seems disturbingly different from the self experiencing the desired object.

Each of the texts discussed in this book describes a voyage at once toward something precious and new and toward something dangerous and old—a voyage in which the route is only valuable insofar as it is felt to offer the prospect of novelty, but is only recognizable because it is to an important degree already known. Although the museum and the voyage can seem all-too-material—and, indeed, the promise of the materialization of one's desires is a vital part of their importance—both phenomena are traceable to notably conceptual drives. Whether something is displaced in order to be shown and admired or individuals make their way to centers of culture to see marvels that exist nowhere else, the aim is evidently to move from ignorance to immediate knowledge, to make actual or tangible an object of desire. As travelers never stop discovering, however, the objectification of desire entailed in journeys and collections will tend to yield—as Proust will put it—something less and something more than satisfaction.

What is Venice to London, Naples to Weimar, or even Paris to Boston? As with any object of longing, so with an important cultural center: certainty as to its importance cannot to be confused with clarity as to the

sources of a passion. The new significance of the aesthetic in nineteenth-century culture, with the attendant interest in art, artists, and prized art objects still evident today, was contemporaneous with the development of a new set of relationships, practical and imaginary, between an ascendant North and a politically weak but culturally rich South. The nature of travel itself was bound to change from the eighteenth century on, and not simply due to the ever-greater practical ease brought about by technological developments or to the collapse of old political dispensations and the consolidation of new ones. The period of this study saw concepts of cultural identity that had been emergent throughout the eighteenth century meet new social arrangements in a manner that ensured ever-greater ease of arrival at longed-for destinations but that did not make arrival itself any less troubling.

Recent decades have witnessed a flowering of interest in travel writing, an important general category subsuming many forms. Promising lines of research have studied nineteenth-century literature in relation to the rise of modern tourism, scientific exploration, and the development of anthropology, and all of these cultural phenomena have been fruitfully considered in the context of imperial expansion. Analysis of the art romance benefits from work done in these areas, but the mode's particular commitment to the fantastic and to the unavoidable force of other texts, its thoroughgoing intertextuality, makes it particularly resistant to forms of analysis that want to return to a real it has never inhabited, whether experiential or political. The argument of this book depends on recognizing the unblinking artificiality of the romance as its only access to whatever of the real it is able to represent.² While the cultural exploitation of an economically faded southern Europe by a newly predominant North may well offer insights for the understanding of forms of exploration or more self-evident modes of dominance that came to the fore late in the century, studies attempting to make the connection will need to begin from the insight that in the art romance access to the real is not an alternative to the tradition but the most florid and most dangerous symptom of fantasy. More convincingly the literary descendant of the Grand Tour than the ancestor of imperial exploration, the mode also only goes so far with recent work on travel and wonder.³

This is a book about the kind of story that emerges at the confluence of two related but distinct cultural phenomena, the nineteenth century's fascination with creative genius and the same period's insatiable appetite for tales of the European South, Italy in particular. As such, *Haunted Museum* draws on two further concerns, the genius as type and cultural difference as destiny. Where is genius born? Does it have a native land, the source of a fundamental nostalgia motivating creative souls? Today such queries, like the presuppositions about temperament and national

characteristics underlying them, are likely to seem not only old-fashioned but deeply misguided. Nevertheless, the nineteenth century offered bracingly clear answers to both. Southern Europe—most compellingly Greece, most accessibly Italy (and sometimes France)—was considered to be, consistently, and with real practical results, the natural home of genius. And, indeed, longing for the South as for a lost birthright or homeland of the creative soul is a recurrent element in representations of the psychic makeup of the artist in the period, a wishful naturalization of a relation to classical antiquity that was not new in European culture but that saw a notable efflorescence in the era we have come to call neoclassical.

Haunted Museum is concerned with the two-way traffic between fiction and the culture of art during a period for which poems and novels often served as conceptual and even practical guides to the experience of art. The overlap between the exigencies of fiction and the elements of art culture was capitalized on by storytellers throughout the century, usually by referencing earlier texts in the tradition. While the art romance plays an important part in the diffusion of a notably troubled yet productive relation to art characteristic of the nineteenth century, its special interest in the phenomenon of creative ambition insistently foregrounds the complex and even embarrassing relations between passion and artifice.⁴ Behind the characteristically modern notion that true creativity takes no color from convention, that genius has no necessary native home, we may detect a wish to avoid recognition of the fact that important sources of creativity develop in the interplay of received idea and emotion. The works studied in *Haunted Museum*, however, are characterized by a tendency to run counter to modern wishes—indeed, to represent passion itself as running straight (back) into the arms of convention.

The special case of artists in an era committed to the idea that the sources of culture were only accessible at certain prized locations, the resting places of admired relics, is a particularly important instance of the difficulty of arrival. As artists and critics struggled to negotiate the relationship between modern creativity and admired art, the repeated productive crisis was to find representation not only in the nascent field of art history, but in works of self-conscious fantasy. That European culture has tended to trace the origins of much it admires, much that it aspires to do or to be, to the South, that Italy in particular and Greece are not only the sources of certain traditions in pictorial and literary arts but subsequently the resting places for the chief relics of those traditions—these are inescapable historical facts. That modern achievement came to find its validation in often unsatisfactory returns to these sources is no less deniable, if not quite so self-evidently necessary.⁵ The period in which the art romance emerged was one in which the possibility of fulfillment of aspirations toward the encounter with admired foreign culture was running only slightly behind

the desire for that encounter. New technologies and new social arrangements made the wonders of the continent ever more available.⁶ And yet, the new ease of travel did not make much-longed-for arrival any less troubling for the artist. The art romance evokes the conventional frustrations of the romance form broadly understood in order to represent an overdetermined anxiety about intimacy with culture that is particularly pressing in the artistic self-imagination of the period. If romance has at its heart the inability to arrive at a prized but ever-deferred goal, Italy is an overdetermined destination for the artist, a passionately desired space combining the prospect of erotic pleasure with the hope for intimacy with the most profound sources of culture.

Starting with the fundamental influence of eighteenth-century neoclassicism, the nineteenth-century culture of art came to be marked by a tendency to validate itself in relation to privileged historical moments linked to specific locations. Rome, Florence, Athens, eventually Venice, and in its own way Paris—art always had its home elsewhere. Indeed, a related structure underlies and makes inevitable even such variations as the claims for southern France, Polynesia, Japan, Africa, and other lands championed by avant-garde art movements that have often been seen as antithetical to nineteenth-century historicism. Yet, on the other side of the power inherent in the longing for a distant center of art, authors recognized from early on a danger inherent in satisfaction itself. There is far more at stake than a romantic challenge to neoclassical values in William Hazlitt's claim in 1827 that "Rome is of all places the worst to study in, for the same reason that it is the best to lounge in," because "[t]here is no end of objects to divert and distract the mind." While art throughout the century made recourse to admired models from the past for its validation, Hazlitt's "English Students at Rome" recognizes a recurrent anxiety: "If it were nothing else, the having the works of the great masters of former times always before us is enough to discourage and defeat all ordinary attempts." In his account of the challenge to modern achievement presented by the heterogeneity that is most recognizable in Rome, the critic draws on a striking classical reference: "Modern art is indeed like the fabled Sphinx, that imposes impossible tasks on her votaries, and as she clasps them to her bosom pierces them to the heart."⁷ The Sphinx is a doubly appropriate image for the challenge Hazlitt has in mind; not only does the riddle it poses contain the shape of human development, but, as Oedipus discovered, the hero's problems only worsen when he overcomes the challenge and enters the desired city.

To such high-cultural determinants as the centrality of Rome in culture and art education throughout the period of this study, we must add another, apparently more trivial source for the fascination of Italy: its temperate climate and the related tradition (not to say wishful reputation) of

sensual license that from the eighteenth century forward made the South not only the native place of artistic beauty but the site of a much-desired physical liberation. As will be clear throughout this study, the distinction between physical passion and inspiration was not always clearly maintained, even in cases where it might be insisted on in theory. In Winckelmann's seminal *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755), for example, the ideal beauty of classical statues is in some measure traceable to a contingent fact of no little interest to the author—that the temperate climate of Greece allowed the natives of that fortunate land to pass much of their lives nude. Forty years later, Goethe's "Now on classical soil I stand, inspired and elated," like the rest of the *Roman Elegies* (1795) to which it belongs, only more forcefully links erotic passion, creativity, and the South. The student of Winckelmann counts out hexameters on his Roman lover's back, a playfully erotic and naturalizing culmination of the yearning for culture indicated by the opening line of the poem.⁸

IN THE PALACE OF ART / THE UNANSWERED QUESTION

Although the kind of elation Goethe discovers on arrival in Rome is expressed by literary visitor after visitor in later years, the fantastic harmony between creativity and sexual passion suggested in his verse is far rarer. The sometimes overwhelming love for art of the past that is characteristic of the period running from the eighteenth century to our own day is, as Hazlitt noted, far more likely to result in the emergence of an apparently unavoidable and contradictory conflict between desire and fulfillment, aspiration and achievement than in simple pleasure. In the art romance the satisfaction of longing, particularly the apparent satisfaction of a longed-for return to sources, inevitably provokes a crisis. The balance of this introduction revolves around two such crises, one provoked by the fantasy of the perfect museum, the other by the fact of travel to a much-desired center of culture.

The mutual complication of art and passion at the point of satisfaction is a theme vividly developed in Tennyson's 1832 poem, "The Palace of Art," not an art romance but perhaps the most economical literary representation of the haunted museum. "I built my soul a lordly pleasure-house," declares the speaker boldly at the outset,

Wherein at ease for aye to dwell.
I said, "O Soul, make merry and carouse,
Dear soul, for all is well."⁹

The speaker divides into a self and a soul at the moment of secluding himself from the rest of mankind, as if the fantasy of a perfect museum

housing ideal aesthetic isolation somehow requires or provokes a doubling form of self-alienation.

Through nearly fifty stanzas the poem traces with loving attention the furnishing of the palace for the soul's enjoyment, in itself beautiful and filled with works inviting aesthetic appreciation—an ideal museum before anything close to it was available in England. But, the claim of artificial perfection is not the main burden of the poem. The fundamental split determining the opening separation of self and soul returns with force at the center of the poem as the text swerves abruptly away from ease, merriment, carousal, and even from the indifferent intellectual self-indulgence in which the soul's pleasures culminate:

Full oft the riddle of the painful earth
 Flashed thro' her as she sat alone,
 Yet not the less held she her solemn mirth,
 And intellectual throne.

And so she throve and prospered: so three years
 She prospered; on the fourth she fell,
 Like Herod, when the shout was in his ears,
 Struck through with pangs of hell.

Lest she should fail and perish utterly,
 God, before whom ever lie bare
 The abysmal deeps of personality,
 Plagued her with sore despair.

(213–24)

At once a moralist and a psychologist, God summons an *inborn* despair to rescue the soul from selfish isolation:

When she would think, where'er she turned her sight
 The airy hand confusion wrought,
 Wrote, "Mene, mene," and divided quite
 The kingdom of her thought.

Deep dread and loathing of her solitude
 Fell on her, from which mood was born
 Scorn of herself; again, from out that mood
 Laughter at her self-scorn.

(225–32)

When the soul tries to reassure herself she traces the power of the palace not to that external, and therefore describable, beauty that had characterized it up to this point in the poem, but to its source in her earliest desires and knowledge:

"What! is not this my place of strength," she said,
 "My spacious mansion built for me,

