

The Passenger

Roger Connah

The script begins here. On board flight AZ0137 to Rome. Before the worries make themselves apparent, before we go to Siena to find this architect in exile, we need to wake up.

‘You have been to Rome before,’ the man says

‘No! To Venice yes! But not Rome.’

‘Ah, but you are well aware of the famous places.’

I think I know what he means. The Spanish Steps. The Vatican. Then he says, almost as if he knows I have forgotten, as if there is something on my face that shows my ignorance:.

‘The Colosseum! The old city!

I am shocked though I hide it well. Had I just forgotten about the Colosseum? Had it just slipped my mind? Did I wake up in 1950 when I was born, sensing that if I studied architecture I could forget about history itself? Had I studied architecture to forget just about where it started? The Parthenon. The Colosseum. Or even further in the past! Would I have been as confused if we had been flying to Athens and the passenger next to me had asked if I was going to see the Parthenon? What? The Parthenon? Or was this a realisation of that simple turn in my life at the age of 13?

Did I not study architecture because I had an uncle in Birmingham who was an architect? And though he wasn't a real uncle, I thought the Modern Bungalows that he drew were what architects did. I could also use my Latin which was near hopeless. I had no other idea about architecture. Almost forty years later I wondered if I had any other idea about architecture. The Colosseum? What?

What did I know about this man I was visiting? He had once lived in the North but now lived in Siena. He had once been a Professor in Vienna but had given that up. Once very well

known amongst the post-war younger Finnish architects during the 1960s and 1970s, he was now almost regularly dismissed from the critical histories.

His story didn't seem simple but I felt I had to make it as simple as possible. For me he was in exile. And for anyone who had consistently used architecture as an exile, as an alibi, his story had to be interesting. I imagined his passion greater than mine, so ordinary were my thoughts, so tired had I become of anything connected with architecture. Was this to be a rude awakening?

One of the clearest films I remember from my years at Cambridge was Michaelangelo Antonioni's film, *The Passenger*. The story, the possibility of picking up another's passport by chance, the possibility of assuming the identity of this person and forgetting one's real identity, fascinated me. I have never stopped thinking of some variation of this story. I now realised that the *Passenger* on the flight AZ 0138 to Rome and the *Passenger* at the Cambridge Arts Theatre were necessary coincidences. By visiting this architect in Siena I was re-tracing what I felt was lost in the twentieth century. And I too had become a passenger to the century.

Before we get to Rome and take the train to Florence I feel I must explain my worry. I am, and it is increasing, worried about worrying. Organised but oppositional, this worry may be a form of coping with difficulties that have come since childhood. But worry to me also demonstrates intense self-doubt, intense questioning. In a way it is a game of censorship played on the person closest to you, yourself. If it implies a future, worry has only one fall back, death itself. If it is a reaction, a strong coping strategy, it must accept selflessness, it must recognise the lack of passion, the loss of drive. If it is a nagging activity that must always be ridiculed, it has never been so for me. Worrying occupies so much in any day that it quite simply blocks out any other worrying. In this the worrier is safe. People often trifle with worriers, dismiss them, ask them to drink more, play more, go out more. Worrying can turn on-days into off-days, or more happily, turn sadness into joy. But I agree with the psychotherapist who is reminding me of all this. We just don't do enough worrying about

worrying. Of course if I want to make a success of this visit to the architect, if I want to understand exile and architecture, I should be doing more worrying about architecture itself. This I promise to attempt when I reach my destination. But right now I am looking down at my Italian shoes, the pale tan leather and wonder why they look so shabby so quickly. Now *that*, the psychotherapist says, is worrying.

There are apparently more respectable worries which we think make our simpler worries a little ridiculous. If so, this is the other worry I have right now. If writers can set out to write a life, or put a life into words, could the architect build his life, or put a life into buildings? Was this the sort of question I could put to a once-renowned Finnish architect, exiled or not, worried or not about philosophy, architecture or, possibly, his liver?

The non-stop train that I need to take into Rome is hourly. Pity the traveller that just misses that hour. The espresso I take served in a small glass has medicinal associations. After almost an hour of heat and humidity, thoughts cannot turn to architecture. Instead I have this ridiculous idea of meeting the architect dressed in shorts. Why this should be ridiculous in a temperature of 35 celsius I cannot say, but the psychotherapist informs us that such concerns demonstrate an 'internal openness to the essential strangeness within every person'.

Personally I think this is more direct. Architects, many in the twentieth century, surely have often turned out their own work from that essential strangeness within them. Would I ever get this far in my discussions with this Finnish architect, whom I once shared a sauna with – silently and unspeakingly - many years back?

Car cars cars! I find the Florence train and from the window leaving Rome I glimpse a motorcycle crash. The traffic continues to weave and I notice the words on the cover of the book I have with me by Adam Philips: "a telling, engaging, brilliantly, amusingly and unsettling book...almost provocatively casual." Was it still possible to be provocatively casual in architecture and remains seriously interesting? The landscape sent a message: if you missed it, you missed the history of the suburbs in any European town. The light was fierce, the sun still high at this late afternoon hour. It was five o'clock. The train approached Chiusi

where I was to change for Sinalunga. There I was to telephone again. I would be met by a young boy or an older woman. They'd recognise me.

I made a quick mental summary of worry. Why an architect? Why a man apart? Why live in three countries? Lapland, Austria, Italy? Why the philosophy project: from boredom, passion, outrage or revenge? Why the exile? Out of indifference, desire, dissatisfaction, or arrogance? Why the rejection of home? And why do these worry me?

The station immediately imposed upon me some feeling on the monastery, of isolation. It was comfortable to wait in its emptiness, shaded from the heat. The white walls, the wooden slatted benches looked as if they waited for the one person who wanted to spend the rest of their life there. I wanted to hang onto the dignity of the waiting room. The dead too would be treated with such respect. The craft was spare but not without delicacy. It was difficult to imagine it bettered, anywhere in the world.

She did find me. Outside the Sinalunga station. An older lady. No sooner had we turned out of the station piazza we were climbing. The drive of 10 kilometres to the architect-in-exile was quietly spectacular. And the space at the station stayed with me as we travelled along what my daughter called 'swishy' roads up into the lush olive slopes and hills of Tuscany.

We try some conversation. Spare but it works. *Architetto Timo, molto intelligente, molto studioso. Molto secluso.* It is not difficult to work out the exile implied in the words, an exile so close to myself that I shiver with expectation. The thrill of closing out luxury is everywhere. We arrive, pass olive trees, along the winding gravel and sand road. High up and lo and behold, from behind a wall, there's the *gentile architetto* to greet me. And yes, he's in shorts!

He's lost weight and looks fitter than ever. I could not remember the heavier person I met in Hvittrask outside Helsinki some 16 years ago. Nor did I recognise the figure from the lectures. We quietly shook hands. There was nothing else to do. There were no questions. Good food? Good journey? Instead: should we sit here? Within five minutes we were sitting in the green veranda at the top of the flight of outer stairs into the kitchen. There was no time

to fetch the mineral water. Our conversations began instantly. Any other ceremony was redundant. I was immediately relieved and when I gave the Glenlivet he announced that he had given up alcohol. We laughed. Whether this was a message to the past, to the heavier days I wasn't sure. So many of his generation had demonised alcohol and been made demonic themselves. Hallucination had theorized their architecture, practice had swerve between yachting and drinking. The stories merged. The Finnish architects hypnotised themselves, some went silly with abstinence, some binged and died. He had, I was glad to notice, survived both.

Already the possibility of good red or a malt later, settled everything. He got up for the mineral water a full half hour after I had arrived. I was gagging for it. Our conversations were not structured but they kept returning to two main areas, or worries, as I liked to think of them: the problematics and errors in metaphysics on architecture and the inevitability of disbelief. I must admit I was thrilled at the possibility of trying to understand dissatisfaction and disenchantment. Life and architecture rarely came together this way. His colleagues thought him a touch insane to stop practising architecture. If they thought it a betrayal, he said, were they not betraying themselves? He had a right surely, after 15 years as a Professor in the world's most conservative and possibly nepotistic academy to retire, to think, to write, to read. Why should such a decision be considered suspect or, worse, madness?

As we talked, lizards dropped through the foliage as if in a game someone had zapped them to earth. Crickets made up the evening noise. The aeroplanes, he said, for once were too distant to be heard. On and on the conversations went, back and forth. It didn't seem important to discuss my own disbelief, or the worrying over worrying. And though I hadn't seen myself as a disbeliever or a madman, coincidences became more prominent. Both of us were trying to return to zero, both drinking mineral water, both silent finally.

The house is simple, the kitchen entered via the brick steps. To the left a bedroom doubling as a private study, reading area with library and television. Off the kitchen, far right, a long generous corridor which leads to the study and the two guest bedrooms. All three rooms on

the right and on the left a continuous bookshelf, curving somewhat under the weight of the tomes: travel, silence, cities and architecture in various languages.

The kitchen I have come to like the best. We prepare food together. All the utensils are exposed as in any country kitchen set against red ceramic tiles. All the stainless steel pots and pans rhythmically arranged, their tops resting. Spices, two bowls, a simple drying rack, whisky, brandy and a couple of bottles of wine on the top shelf, I felt myself back in the waiting room at the station.

The huge table – wooden – can take the food, the few books and papers that we may use but in fact never do, a hat, the mineral water. Here we sit and eat the salad. This we prepare together, directly, from one bowl to another. Salting it and then oiling it. The cherries are kept in water. We dip our hands into the bowl. Never forced, nothing ritualistic, probably as near zero as we can get. I imagine the monastic side of this exile and this architect and probably exaggerate it, emphasizing the simplicity. For someone who admits to being an arrogant young prize-winning architect, for someone who now needs all the time he can get for his own project and reading, this seems as expected. Yet there's more than I imagine, more to it than meets the eye. Something here challenges me, just as living in India challenged the last six years of my own life since returning from India. And to this day, years later, it's the kitchen that still holds this challenge. And it's the India within that continues.

At the supermarket I had bought the following. I classici di Giovanni Rana, tortelli freschi ai carciofi, ai funghi porcini, Molino e pastificio Fara San Martino dal 1887 no. 91. Orecchiette, i ripieni preziosi alibert-cappelletti alla carne, miscela de caffè torrefatto/macinato espresso napoletano, caffè Kimbo. Is this ridicule brought on by the exile or the circumstance? Is this questioning brought on by the possibility of ridiculing your own self? I read Emil Cioran's words from the 1930s. So normal can his extreme words appear, so difficult it is to register astonishment. I see the passengers emerging from the railway station. 'At the edge of life' Cioran writes, 'everything is an occasion of death. You die because all there is and all there isn't. Every experience in this case is a leap into nothingness.' It's page 9, number 9, of the volume I am reading. The coincidences are clear. In calm, we can ridicule

the exile that keeps pulling us away from each other. Until the coincidences are all we have left! From a piece of writing about the nature of pessimism, I note my worries once more and think of them, quite unrealistically, as a film script. With possible titles: The Impossible, The Disappearance, The Impossible Family. Or the Optimism of Exile? We talk endlessly, he sits, I write. I read his writings, he reads mine. We swap books. I film. He remains silent. He reads, he pauses. He pours a drink for me. Look at this. What do you think this means? We eat, cook together and sleep. Lazy mornings, long nights. Notebooks filled again, journals written out. New chapters started, old chapters changed. His manuscript is almost 1000 pages. We watch soccer.

After four days I leave. I take my worries with me. I'll be back I say. Whether he believes it or not I don't know. It's hard to emphasise such a thing. Unnecessarily we part with the same simplicity as we greeted each other. The record might exist elsewhere of our conversations. A life might be written out and architecture questioned. I began to understand his exile, his desire to leave it all behind, even the dramatic act of destroying all drawings. Could I be so brave and burn just about everything I had ever written? And leave what? The wonder of nothing. We shook hands just as quietly as we did four days ago.

The train is stopped somewhere between Chiusi and Todi. It is as hot upon departure as it was on arrival. Sitting in the train I recall the dark, shadowed spaces of the house. *Eat the Heat* I remember seeing outside a Chili restaurant in Stockholm before I travelled to Rome. The house had adequately eaten the heat. The shutters remained closed during the important hours giving the house its meditative ambience. I remembered the three baskets on the wooden chest besides the open fireplace. They were strong baskets, would last for years. The coffee was thick and black, nothing lightened its strength, nothing tempered its slightly oily taste. Nothing extraneous was left. When I cleared out my bags from the twin bedroom, it looked as inviting, as empty as upon arrival. I had been there, I had not been there. No wear registered itself, no visit could be traced back except possibly to the four day soiled sheets and the blue towel draped over the metal bedstead.

I was taken to the station by a young boy in the ubiquitous Fiat. He attends Siena University and had just completed an exam in English. However his English is studied, prepared for the written exam only and we struggle to make any real conversation. Little more than three days earlier with his grandmother. We didn't say much before I left. The passenger and the architect-in-exile. The last hour was spent with the architect reading Hermes Trismegistus and me leafing through Gianni Vattimo's book *The End of Modernity*. The idea of weak thought, weak thinking interested me and I made a mental note to follow it up. One comment before I left made me wonder whether he expected the impossible. Of every writer or book we had discussed, there were always failures. Was a writer to be found, I thought, a thinker that could ever be agreed with? And why would this be necessary? Was there a writer with whom the coincidences had to be near perfect? 'Vattimo has some strange ideas on culture, believes it to be a contemporary structure of religion.' His look upwards over glasses slightly suggested I should agree with him. I was emptied. I had no knowledge to agree or disagree. I could not find it strange nor worry whether this was a contemporary structure of religion. Instead I remained silent and then offered to prepare our last pasta salad for lunch before the driver arrived.

I quickly threw the pasta salad together: oil, pesto, tomato, mozzarella and some local sausage meat. It took no more than a couple of minutes whilst I attempted to think about the 'end of modernity' from what little I knew. 'I've learnt something from you' he said. And I looked up. How was that possible? A man writing a 1000 page manuscript on philosophy and architecture! 'I'd never thought of using cold pasta this way,' he continued. The humour and warmth of it added with the half smile that I was getting used to. 'Of course besides the other things I have learnt from you.' Added later after a pause it could only sound a little artificial and forced and we both laughed. I preferred the possibility of being remembered however briefly for the pasta salad rather than the confused notions about nihilism, existentialism and worried thoughts about a misunderstood and incomplete modernity that had filled our days.

Near Milano now, there is haze to be seen from the plane. A later plane, this being Italy, allowed me to try and begin the book on *Contemporary Treachery*. It was difficult to get past the opening remarks for a book which so openly invited instability. But it seemed unnecessary to read on. I made a quick mental note of the worries as I saw them right now, knowing they would alter as I took the back seat on the plane and found some space to be alone. Had our disbelief collided? Did we disbelieve the same things? What in our reactions was similar and what resistance could we use against others who disbelieve us? What flaw in my own argument have I missed which will make our lives irrelevant to each other, and life and architecture once more diverge. No photos, no T-pot, no Lapsang Souchong tea, no interruptions, nothing but coffee, books, philosophy and the thrill of the next worry.

I sit in Piazza Navona trying to take in breath after sitting in the Pantheon. After watching for some minutes everyone in the Pantheon it felt difficult to come down or back to earth after living fraudulently. For anyone noticing this, even the architect in his vineyard, there may of course be nothing more than naivety in this realisation. Inside, the answer is one of humility. Or then, if one had ignored history so consistently, stupidity. It is possible to have flirted with cities in just the same way as we have flirted with other thinkers. We have not done much with either but they still serve us a momentary understanding of life. Rome is to me part of my own joke knowledge, left aside as if modernity could remove the need to understand its past, the need to understand any past. A random visit to the world might be all that is left us.

I arrived into Rome at about 4 in the afternoon and began walking at 5.45 returning to the hotel at 10.45. Using the priorities of Rome's past as a route, The Colloseum, then St.Peter's finally the Spanish Steps. But Rome's fascinations showed no break between leaving The Colosseum and arriving at St Peter's. The city trawled, St Pozzo's ceiling left behind, the train to the airport took 30 minutes again.

The splendid melancholy of the North invited me back once more. The truancy from my family began to pain me. I began to think I knew what the architect felt, why he left his own country Finland and what exile was. For what is the relief of pain in having nothing more to say, and not having to write books or building buildings in order to prove it. How much exile

resembles that moment when we all return and offer our apologies to birth? To live a life with nothing more to say, to enter the cloister or the kitchen and yet live in full everything that is implicated by this silence. Lost to all outside, exile is however not the gain to those few we wish to imagine. Everyone is listening. Everyone is silent. Life is never over, architecture is never over, but to some it is, and then returns

I began to plan, in the form of a worry, where next to go. Nothing like a real worry yet! Nothing like shoddy leather for example on Italian shoes, just essential estrangement waiting to find its other form. *Gentile Timo, Gentile Architetto. Molto secluso!*

Roger Connah May 2002/May 2011