

Book Review

Manfredo Tafuri, *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects*, trans. Daniel Sherer, introduced by K. Michael Hays, New Haven: Yale UP, 2006

REVIEWED BY ANDREW LEACH

First published in Italian as *Ricerca del rinascimento* (Einaudi, 1992), *Interpreting the Renaissance* is a translation project of many years duration. Daniel Sherer won the contract from Yale UP in 1994, shortly before Tafuri's death, and a number of factors have conspired against its timely completion: difficulties with the author's estate, with the Italian publisher—which was bought out by an interest of Silvio Berlusconi within months of the contract being awarded—and (not least) with the complexities of the book itself. The appearance of *Interpreting the Renaissance* in April of this year is thus very welcome. It is a handsome hard cover volume, well designed, set in the appropriately-named Bembo and printed on acid free paper that will ensure its durability in any library.

As its title suggests, the book studies the interplay of architectural ideas and patronage in a series of settings where, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, an extraordinary number of artistic, intellectual and political conflicts and correspondences fed a seemingly unprecedented explosion of building, 'projecting' and writing—involving, one way or another, the precedent of Antiquity. *Interpreting the Renaissance* is neither encyclopaedic in its scope nor in its intentions, and does not claim to be definitive. Nor is it introductory, but demands prior knowledge that will escape many readers. Each of the seven chapters begins from a specific point—an example, a history, a biographical or bibliographical detail—and interrogates it thoroughly, sometimes bringing the specific to bear upon the general, otherwise leaving lessons unvoiced. These largely independent chapters comprise a series of entrances into a broad theme that pervades the whole book: the relationship between the Renaissance and the contemporary world. "The reflections that have provided the basis for this book", he writes in the Preface, "stand out against this horizon. Formulated in the space where the present finds its problems, they attempt a dialogue with the 'era or representation'." He reiterates an observation that underpins two earlier Renaissance histories, *L'Architettura dell'Umanesimo* (1969) and *Venezia e il Rinascimento* (1985; Engl. 1995): that the term given traction by Michelet and Burckhardt fails to account for the complexity of this period, its forces, or its legacies.

Sherer published the first chapter—"A Search for Paradigms"—in *Assemblage* (1996), alongside an early version of his Translator's Preface. This chapter demonstrates the dexterity with which Tafuri shifts between the history and historiography of the period, holding historians accountable to history, and extrapolating a theme, it seems, from among the 'mentalities' of the era itself. It draws a long

bow, covering developments from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and thus recalling the first chapter of *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* (1968; Engl. 1980). He meditates briefly on the concept of *sprezzatura* in Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1528; Engl. 1959)—that art which does not appear to be so—and on the manner by which it can inform an unforced historical reading of the machinery of humanism: between architectural ideas, intellectual activities, artistic practice, the practical exigencies of architectural work and patronage. He intends to “describe forms of contradiction that are held together ‘heroically’ . . . by a cultural moment oscillating between the need for certainty and leaps forward into the unfounded”. Tafuri neither understands nor presents the Renaissance as a “sure triumphal march.”

Chapter Two, “*Cives Esse Non Licere: Nicolas V and Leon Battista Alberti*,” re-presents Tafuri's introduction to the Italian edition of William Carroll Westfall's *In This Most Perfect Paradise* (1974; It. 1984), which in turn builds on an early book review. The chapter investigates the famous relationship between Alberti and his papal patron, questioning the synchrony of their visions for Rome and the Christian world. Tafuri accuses Westfall of maintaining a series of strict correlations between Nicolas V and Alberti, instead positioning their relationship as a series of ideological and intellectual conflicts, resolved in the courageous manner noted above. Tafuri's Alberti—he of the *Momus* rather than *De re aedificatoria*—struggles with the limits of intellectual autonomy. Tafuri, in turn, translates the internal contradictions of the Albertian case into grounds for chastising anyone game enough to tackle the Renaissance with simple historiographical formulations:

[T]he rift we have introduced into our analysis to separate the single-mindedness of the Pope's intentions from the tormented ambiguities of the cultivated intellectual surely cannot be used to reaffirm the thresholds dividing the medieval period from the first stirrings of the modern—thresholds that are as unverifiable as they are taken for granted.

The book's subtitle borrows from its third chapter: “Princes, Cities, Architects.” This long piece—building on a version that appeared in *Zodiac* (1989)—considers the cases of Medicean Florence (Lorenzo il Magnifico) and Rome (Leo X) followed by a long reflection on Venice and shorter commentaries on Milan and Genoa, all within the time-frame spanning from the end of the fifteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth. This chapter demonstrates that comparative analysis of urban centres leads to a proliferation of histories rather than the concentration of abstract phenomena. Concerned, above all, with the fresh demands made upon the fifteenth century city, Tafuri here sets out “to isolate . . . the means by which this administrative network was modified when new protagonists, ideal representations, and political subjects entered the scene”. How solid, he then asks, are the connections between Florence and Rome? Does something in the manner of a ‘Medicean strategy’ pass from father to son in 1513, the year of Giovanni's ascendancy? To what degree does a comparison of Lorenzo's urbanism (building on the work of Caroline Elam) with the famous incursions planned by Leo X for Rome, inform our present understanding of the tension between Rome's new golden age and the sacrifices made in its advance? This, we learn, is fundamentally a question of representation: of the Pontiff himself, and of

the cultural ambitions of the Medici. Venice, which dominates the third section of the chapter, offers a completely different experience, one that most poignantly illustrates the intersection of *longue durée* and *histoire événementielle*, between the tendency towards continuity and the event: the city as an evolving project and its components. The histories of Florence, Rome, Venice, Milan and Genoa, taken together, tear apart whatever image we might have of the Renaissance. What, then, would remain in accounting also for Palermo, Naples, Vicenza, Bologna and Urbino? These further cases would inform the 'radical renewal' of studies on the 'long Renaissance' that is ultimately Tafuri's provocation.

Chapter Four extends the relationship between Florence and Rome by testing the status of the 'Medicean myth' in Rome under Leo X's rule. Three projects allow Tafuri to make his case: the competitions for the Florentine San Lorenzo and for the church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini in Rome and a project for the Florentine church of San Marco. Together, they implicated the entire early sixteenth century architectural 'avant-garde'—across Rome, Florence and Venice—and encapsulate the ambitions of the Leonine pontificate, not least the Roman *renovatio urbis* and the celebration of the glorious reinstatement of the Medici. Yet despite the force of Leo X's will, and the completeness of his ideology, Tafuri observes that he left little more than unrealised works and fragments: "On the one hand, it attests to a magniloquence that comes close to expressing utopia; on the other hand, it was compromised by continual revisions, a perpetual surrender to the demands of reality." As such, Leo X's architectural legacy shares the ambivalence of his pontifical bequest: a failure to match the voracity of Julius II in reorganising the city, a denial of Erasmus's calls for religious reform in the face of an increasingly Pagan Rome, and a refusal to set straight the papal treasury.

Tafuri's observations on the dissipation of Lorenzo's cultural and intellectual bequest naturally preface his fifth chapter, which concerns the Sack of 1527. He attends to this moment as both a moment of rupture and a proof of the forces of historical continuity. In this, he explicitly returns to themes of the *Annales* and to the dialectic of *longue durée* and *histoire événementielle*. What begins, and what ends, with the Sack of Rome? Tafuri's study is close and fragmented, turning to history, philosophy, literature and theology to demonstrate the inherent multiplicities of this moment, showing it to be a climactic and contradictory accumulation rather than a consequence of linear developments. His implicit target is the historical category of Mannerism, and he succeeds in demolishing the premises of a category with which he evidences a thirty-year long battle of uncertainty—an uncertainty that penetrates much deeper than his disquiet with Humanism and the Renaissance itself.

The concluding chapter and epilogue study "some of the most significant embers left behind by the massive conflagration of the Sack": the Palace of Charles V in Granada; and the architecture of Sansovino in Venice. Both chapters are essentially discrete, reflecting the earlier life of his Carlo V essay in the journal *Ricerca di storia dell'arte* (1987) as well as the delineation of Tafuri's many incursions into the *œuvre* of Sansovino: one of most provocative of Tafuri's subjects, sustaining his interest over more than two decades. He concludes his study on the Palace of Carlo V with a profound reflection on research: "It should not be necessary to recall the function of a hypothesis. It is merely a furrow in an otherwise insufficiently tilled ground, a path through a dense forest. Its function is exploratory. Often, it dissolves

in falsifications that nevertheless remain fecund exercises.” Testing material with new tools, asking of it new questions, constitutes an on-going interrogation of historiographical method, and (once more—recalling a familiar conclusion) a multiplication of the complexities rather than the resolution of new readings. The “Venetian Epilogue” (“Epilogo lagunare”) concludes “the entire serpentine course of [his] study.” Sansovino, like Tafuri himself, “has for some time harboured doubts concerning the universality of the ‘reborn’ forms,” translating these doubts into a ‘radical critique.’ Tafuri’s conclusion is melancholic and open, recognising that to question the fragility of Humanism and its mythological structure is to recognise “the rootlessness that our historical condition must confront.”

The task of translating Tafuri’s writing is unenviable, and Sherer’s feat is truly noteworthy. Sherer understands the *Ricerca*—literally, the “search”, the “quest”: an impossible title to translate well—intimately and accords it the appropriate respect as a disciplinary milestone. His introduction is helpful, and should be read by anyone who wants to position the book within contemporary historiography and among the better known of Tafuri’s books.

Interpreting the Renaissance is the second translation of the *Ricerca* out of Italian. A Spanish translation (*Sombre el Renacimiento*) by Mónica Poole Bald appeared in 1995, and made less of a to-do than its later counterpart. Bald does not expand on points that are imprecise or ambiguous in the Italian, and neither she nor any VIP make lengthy prefaces—no one will miss a thing for skipping Hays’ introduction to the English edition. The linguistic proximity of Spanish and Italian naturally helps this clarity, as does a strong awareness in Spanish speaking circles of Tafuri’s scholarship on the Renaissance. His books regularly appeared in Spanish translation since the 1960s. In contrast to Bald, Sherer often confuses the tasks of translator and editor, extending phrases beyond their natural limit and taking liberties in “explaining” Tafuri’s more obscure passages without making his personal contribution clear. We can easily explain this by recognising that Sherer is an architectural historian who has a heavy disciplinary investment in the material. This is evidenced in his illuminating and intelligent Translator’s Preface—which does not, in the end, discuss the specific constraints of translating this book, as one might expect.

Regarding his liberal approach to the translator’s task, though, one example perhaps describes the tenor of my disquiet: ‘Un “piano” per Roma: certo, ma con quali caratteristiche e fini?’ (roughly, ‘A “plan” for Rome: indeed, but with what characteristics and aims?’) becomes ‘Discussion of a “plan” for Rome under Nicolas’s reign cannot be ruled out a priori. But what were its essential features and objectives?’ Following Benjamin, Sherer has taken the legitimate approach of seeking out a purity in the language that works beyond the nuts and bolts of rendering phrases precisely in a second tongue. These things are a matter of taste, but to me this seems like too much colouring in.

However, beyond this niggle, I have a number of more serious concerns that pertain to the way this book gets used. I do not wish to detract from Sherer’s impressive accomplishment—a task I am ill equipped to attempt myself. These complaints surely reflect an entire production process, including budget, timing and other factors that regularly stand in the way of a perfect outcome.

At the risk of sounding nerdy: I found an incredible number of errors introduced in the transcriptions of Latin quotations from the Italian to English editions. In a sample ten-page section, each one of the four block quotations contains errors, totalling 14 separate mistakes—including one that re-dates the Trevi Fountain inscription from 1453 to 1353 (watch those Cs!). The fact that the Latin is not translated to English (just as it remained as Latin for the Italian and Spanish editions) warns readers that serious Renaissance scholars will consult the original *Ricerca* or the source material Tafuri cites, rather than the English edition. (As a point of comparison, the Spanish is better, but not perfect in this respect.) But for graduate students who might further transcribe these passages, these errors are more troubling; Yale UP has seriously dropped the ball on its foreign language copy-editing. Latin can hardly have been a priority, but the Spanish typographical errors that pepper the chapter on Carlo V are less understandable. If Yale UP—surely such things are beyond the GSD as the book's co-publisher—cannot take care of such details, then who can? In addition—a stylistic quibble—Sherer's English can, in places, render the text more stilted and academic in tone than needs be, and the book lacks a standardised practice for signalling idiosyncratic translations or original usages, often leaving the printed page unnecessarily messy.

Exercising my bibliographic train-spottery, I found a number of bizarre errors in the notes to Sherer's introduction—again worth noting in review only because of the potential for mistakes to carry forward by student readers in particular. The subject of Tafuri and Foscari's *L'Armonia e i conflitti* is San Francesco della Vigna, not Santa Maria alla Vigna; Ingersoll's 1986 interview 'There is No Criticism, only History' was reprinted in *Casabella* 619-20, Gregotti's "Il progetto storico di Manfredo Tafuri", not in the non-existent 620-21; *L'Architettura del Manierismo nel Cinquecento Europeo* is mistitled (as concerning *Rinascimento Europeo*); the article 'Committenza e tipologia nelle ville palladiane' appeared in 1969, not 1960, and Sherer insists on an unconventional abbreviation for the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura 'Andrea Palladio' in his references to *Bollettino del CISAP*. This pedantry ought not undermine Sherer's achievement—which James Ackerman calls a 'precise and sensitive translation'—but something has fallen short in the offices of Yale UP for these inevitable human errors to pass unchecked.

One of the book's most curious translations goes beyond language and into Tafuri's personal history. The Italian "Premessa" concludes with a series of acknowledgements that are absent in the English edition, concluding 'Questo libro è dedicato a Manuela Morresi' ('This book is dedicated to Manuela Morresi'), a scholar of the Renaissance and Tafuri's partner of the last decade or so before his death (1994). However, the translation not only removes the paragraph wherein Tafuri says his thanks—itsself informative as to his later milieu—but renders the dedication 'For Giusi': his legal widow. This has no bearing, of course, on the book itself, but the change has been subject of much bemusement, nowhere more than in Italy.

Despite these criticisms of the book's polish, all scholars who profess an interest in the long modern era ought to have it on their shelves. The *Ricerca* is a fundamental, groundbreaking contribution to the field of architectural historiography, and its importance and influence will only grow through being available to a more international audience.