

REVIEWS

Daniel Monk, *An Aesthetic Occupation: The Immediacy of Architecture and the Palestine Conflict*

Duke University Press: Durham and London 2002, \$18.95, paperback
244 pp, 0 8223 2814 3

GABRIEL PITERBERG

POSTCARDS FROM PALESTINE

This ambitious excavation of ‘the career of architecture’ in the prehistory of the Palestine conflict was written between September 1996, when Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the opening of the ‘archaeological tunnel’ running from the Buraq, or Wailing Wall, to the Muslim quarter, and Ariel Sharon’s ‘visit’ to the Haram al-Sharif, accompanied by a thousand or more Israeli security troops, four years later. Daniel Monk’s aim is to explore the relation of consciousness to matter—to examine the projections, the representations, the mutually ‘interpretative performances’ through which the stones of old Jerusalem have, it seems, become so imbued with meaning that it is self-evident that such acts will result in ‘explosions of anger’, ending in bloodshed. It is this obviousness that *An Aesthetic Occupation* subjects to critical examination. In providing ‘a record of all the work that had to be done for the “archaeological tunnel”, or Sharon’s “visit”, to achieve their unquestioned political immediacy’, Monk sets out to undermine ‘the presumption that, in architecture, a political reality presents itself to view directly and without mediation’.

His focus is on the early Mandate period—in particular, on the career of E. T. Richmond, 1920s political assistant to the British administration and later director of the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem; and on the work of the Shaw Commission set up in the aftermath of the 1929 Buraq

riots. Drawing upon an extraordinary breadth of sources—official reports, memoirs, private collections (Monk is the editor of Richmond's unpublished papers), travel literature, newspapers in Arabic, Hebrew and English, contemporary scholarship and Adornian critical theory—he shows that what we have in the sacred geography and religious architecture of Palestine is not a timeless obviousness but a historical obviation.

In 1883, two years before his death in Khartoum, General Charles Gordon arrived in Jerusalem, flourishing the latest topographic survey of the Palestine Exploration Fund. Beneath the 'cumulative debris' of oriental history—the shroud of the contemporary Ottoman city—its contour lines, he claimed, revealed the shape of an anamorphic figure embedded in the landscape. Its head lay in a rounded—'skull-shaped'—knoll, to the north of the city (its phallus, according to Gordon, at the Dome of the Rock). Here, then, was the true Golgotha; in Aramaic the 'place of skulls'. Gordon thus dislodged the site of the crucifixion and Christ's burial place from the marble-encased tomb at the heart of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, venerated by Catholic and Eastern churches, but on whose authenticity Protestants had long shed doubt. The 'Garden Tomb' rapidly became a site of Anglican devotion.

Monk's concern in rehearsing the story, however, is not to decipher the great-power politics of France, Russia and Britain at play within this imaginary geography. In fact, he specifically distances himself from such an approach, since it would itself be tacitly sustaining the symbolic 'immediacy' of the sites—treating the monuments of Jerusalem as 'the unmediated reflections of a secular *Realpolitik*', just as Gordon took them to be identical with the features of his mystical figure. Instead, he takes Gordon as the first in a series of vaulting horses that will help him towards a materialist critique, *après* Adorno, of such phenomenologies of Spirit. The second leap is the rigorous scrutiny of Gordon's mystical-imperialist topography by the PEF's Charles Wilson, who posed a series of sharp questions that would need to be answered by any scientific attempt to authenticate the accepted crucifixion and burial sites. The third is the impassioned, idealist rebuttal to Wilson that takes form within the work of the Anglo-Catholic Arabist, Ernest Tatham Richmond.

Son of the Victorian painter, William Blake Richmond, the future eminence grise of Jerusalem's grand mufti trained as an architect before departing for Egypt in 1895, at the age of twenty-one, to commence a civil-service career in the Ministry of Public Works. Richmond's visceral hatred of the colonial philistinism he encountered in Cairo found expression in the 'Dialogue about Foreign Dominion' that he penned on his disillusioned return to England in 1911. Here, 'Abdullah' and 'Dinsdale', a gifted Arab nationalist and insightful English civil servant, earnestly debate the contradiction

between the stated aim of empire—to improve the lot of other peoples—and its actual, patently oppressive, methods. Summing up, Dinsdale recapitulates Abdullah's position as objection not to imperial power as such but 'to the rule of ignorant foreigners who know nothing and have greedy desires and no real sympathy'. Abdullah proposes instead a new sort of empire which, through its very forms of government, would 'foster the outward expressions of virtue an indigenous people lack and, in doing so, inaugurate a process that culminates in a natural dissolution of dominion; empire *gains* in that loss, recuperating from the subject people a virtue the occupier once possessed but lost to greed'.

For Richmond, a reader of Chesterton and, especially, Belloc, that greed was Mammon, the 'great fog' of modern materialism that encompassed the shabby industrialism of British society, Bolshevik atheism and the Zionist financiers of New York. Under the sign of 'Liberal Democracy', as he would explain to his brother in 1937, this

has spilt the blood of our best and bravest in bolstering up the Industrial Revolution and the financial supremacy of the City of London, the gilded manure heap of modern Progress, and is now busily engaged under the direction of Mammon, its beloved chief, in establishing by force the reign of the anti-Christ in the Holy Land.

In this context, the East might provide a cleansing alternative. As Richmond would put it in an outspoken memo to the Palestine administration's chief secretary Wyndham Deedes in 1922:

Asia had a past when Europe was a forest inhabited by savages. As the successors of these savages gradually poison themselves with a feverish industrialism, Asia is recovering from a long rest-cure, is beginning to look about, to move . . . The western people who can recognize this will have a great opportunity.

In practice, Richmond's neo-imperialist Arabism would find remarkable kinship with Zionist policies. After a (presumably) dispiriting Great War designing hand grenades, followed by a stint at the Imperial War Graves Commission, he was asked by Allenby in 1917—the British military assault on Palestine still in progress—to report on the structural condition of the Muslim shrines of Jerusalem, and especially the Dome of the Rock. There were those, Richmond wrote later, who would wish to see the mosque as 'so neglected by its [Palestinian Muslim] guardians as to have lost any value it may once have possessed: a building that might well be left to a natural and rapid decay, culminating in its early demolition and replacement by a worthier shrine built perhaps to the honour of some other Faith'. This was not the case: 'The bones of the building are sound', he reported. 'Its outer skin, however, is in need of extensive renewal'. During his tile-by-tile

examination of the facing, Richmond was rapt by the discovery of many ages of repairwork, a 'patchwork of effort extending over many generations'. The mosque's ability 'to adapt itself' through the changing conditions of twelve centuries was proof of a 'continued vitality in the ideas and the beliefs that the building has symbolized'—its superficial transformations a condition of 'its continued power to represent those ideas'.

This, then, was what actually defined the Dome of the Rock: an immutable idea expressing itself through the successive refashioning of its architectural vestment. This idealism, Monk suggests, sets Richmond against any 'magical' understanding of adequation, as in Gordon's assertion of a simple identity between mutable and immutable. It equally pits him against 'befogged western heretics' like Wilson whose sceptical demystification of a 'cult of worldly places' actually presupposes another form of identity, that between architecture and secular politics—the 'fantastic suggestion', as Richmond called it, that people motivate the significance of monuments, rather than discover the eternal motivation within them.

Richmond's political interventions, however, were 'worldly' enough. Returning to England in 1919, he began lobbying the government for repair funds, on the grounds that this 'material symbol of a mighty Religion' commanded so great a reverence among the world's Muslims that London's investment would 'cement friendship and disarm enemies'. It would also put the lie to the 'rumour'—created initially by British officers' attempts to broker the purchase of the Buraq/Wailing Wall for the Jews in 1918, and soon to be strengthened by Sir Alfred Mond's notorious after-dinner speech—that the Zionist settlers intended to rebuild the Temple of Solomon on the site. Following the Nabi Musa protests of the native population in 1920 and worrying reports from Cairo and Delhi, Richmond—now the High Commission for Palestine's assistant secretary for political affairs—proposed instead that an appeal for funds should come from the Muslim authorities in Palestine. Scandalously manipulated elections in the spring of 1921 resulted in the victory of Richmond's candidate, Muhammad Hajj Amin al-Husayni, as grand mufti of Jerusalem. The grand mufti was carefully nurtured—'this active work is drawing out all that is best in Hajj Amin' Richmond wrote hopefully after a tour of the Haram in 1922—and vigorously defended against charges of corruption. Richmond saw his role as encouraging 'the direction of Muslim energies towards constructive work' rather than 'political agitation'. The position was hard to maintain, however, within the framework of an assertive settler programme in Palestine, backed by British might.

On 24 September 1928, the Day of Atonement, a Jewish beadle at the Western Wall put up a screen across the pavement, to separate the sexes during prayer. The Supreme Muslim Council, set up in 1921 with

Richmond's assistance, deemed this a violation of the religious 'status quo' enshrined in the League of Nations' mandate that had ratified Britain's military conquest of the region: Palestinian Muslims would continue to be the custodians of the holy places—Islamic, Christian, Jewish—as they had under the Ottomans. The police removed the screen, leading to Jewish protests against the British authorities, and growing Muslim suspicion as to Zionist goals. The tension culminated in the Buraq riots the following summer.

In Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* Count Mosca, well aware of what may be developing between the Duchessa Gina and Fabrizio, knows that he must avoid behaving 'churlishly' lest Gina, 'purely out of injured vanity', should follow Fabrizio to his destination—'and there, or on the way there, chance may produce a remark that will give a name to what they feel for one another: and after that, in a moment, all the consequences will follow'. Monk's stimulating discussion of contemporary descriptions of the disturbances betrays the same awareness of the significance of naming things—of the fact that form might constitute content—as Count Mosca. If contemporary observers measured the significance of the mass protests of the Mandate era in terms of their ability to deflect or influence British policy making, 'the struggle to assign a name to the violence', as Monk points out, 'has also been a significant part of the history of that same violence'. He highlights three terms deployed by colonial officials, Zionist leaders and, to a lesser extent, by Arabs. 'Pogrom'—the expression had been invoked during the Nabi Musa disturbances of 1920—carried the implication both of elite incitement of the masses and of state complicity. It served to transcode the riot from an expression of resistance to an active Zionist colonization programme into a signifier for the timeless and placeless persecution of passive Jews, inexplicably transferring European anti-Semitism to the Middle East.

'Cataclysm' and 'conflagration' proposed a more natural and spontaneous outbreak, with the implicit absence of elite manipulation. The terms were a specific feature of colonial administrations' 'prose of counter-insurgency'—the immanence and spontaneity of native violence sustaining the assertion that Empire could do little about it, and was not itself part of the story of the unrest. Yet the definitions were unstable: the acting superintendent of police Major Alan Saunders depicted the 'conflagration' as 'sparked' by incendiary speeches in the mosque—hence an elite, 'pogrom' aspect to the elemental force. There were also moments of elite defeat. On 23 August 1929, the first day of a week of protests, 'the mufti and some Arab and British policemen went from group to group in an attempt to disperse [the crowds gathered outside the mosque], but failed'.

The mufti's former protector, now the 'non-political' head of the Department of Antiquities, commented bitterly:

The Zionists needed a new cry to stimulate enthusiasm. The Wailing Wall incident gave them their opportunity. This provocation roused the Arabs. Hence the war again took an active though unpremeditated form. Now we are to have the same mandate, the same methods backed by troops, renewed immigration due to an enthusiasm which has been worked up by advertisements and emotional appeals.

Is Richmond here conducting 'an immanent critique of his own prior theory'—the failed phenomenology of the eastern Spirit? Monk's position is opaque. Earlier, he has stated that it is not the 'truth content' of claims that the Zionists wanted control of the Dome of the Rock that concerns him: 'far more significant is [their] representational schema'. What is missing from *An Aesthetic Occupation* is any sense of the structuring historical realities of the situation—of a conquering military power imposing an overseas-settler programme on an unwilling native population. Instead, two symmetrical sides lock horns in a futile interpretative battle.

This becomes particularly clear in the book's final section, which centres on the cross-examination of witnesses during the course of the Shaw Commission's inquiry into the disturbances of 1929. Sir Boyd Merriman was the leading attorney for the Zionist Executive; W. H. Stoker represented the Arab side. Crucial to the argument was the interpretation of a series of Zionist propaganda postcards and pictures, offered in evidence by the mufti (and reproduced in the book). One of these—published in a Yiddish newspaper in 1920—shows Herzl, standing on an elevated site, gazing down at the multitude pouring into the Temple Mount in Jerusalem; the Zionist flag flies from the Dome of the Rock. Another is a flap-picture of the Buraq wall—lift the flap, and inside is the interior of the Haram al-Sharif, in the form of a synagogue. A third—discussed as an allegory—depicts an elaborate, double-columned triumphal arch. Its central space contains four images, vertically imposed one above the other: the Buraq is at the bottom, surmounted by the Dome of the Rock, above which rise the seven-branched candlestick, the Ten Commandments, and, at the summit, the Crown of Zion. The outer columns frame *trompe l'œil* landscapes of other holy sites.

The Palestinian interpretation, articulated by the mufti and others, was that these images were a clear indication of the Zionists' intention of rebuilding the Hebrew Temple on the ruins of the mosque: 'there is but one inference—that the Jews have designs on all our Holy Places'. This intention, the Palestinian position continued, had its backers in the imperial centre and administration. The Zionist counter-interpretation was to argue for the autonomy of the artworks. They denied the intentions ascribed to the exhibits in Arab readings which they dismissed as either excessively literal or overly figurative, concocted by mendacious or fanatical leaders to incite the masses against the Jews in familiar anti-Semitic fashion.

To this battle, *An Aesthetic Occupation* brings neither context nor historical perspective. There is no distinction between the interpretation of the natives who—on the verge of being irrevocably defeated and dispossessed—tried to divulge the fact of their imminent colonization and perhaps prevent it, and that of the settlers-colonizers who denied the coming conquest because they did not feel ready to announce it at that point. Because of this absence, the interpretative battles over religious architecture in the Jerusalem of the twenties look almost interchangeable with those of the nineties, as if nothing had happened in between; and as if the Palestinians in 2002 were not in danger of yet another round of ethnic cleansing. Nor does Monk consider the possibility that, if the Palestinian interpretation of the propaganda pictures was not a metonymy, as Merriman argued at the time, but a synecdoche of how the Zionist enterprise in Palestine would unfold, it was not a bad exercise in prolepsis.

The view that the Zionists denied the synecdochal Arab interpretation with such vehemence precisely because it accurately represented the gist of their enterprise in Palestine is supported by an analogous interpretative debate that was taking place during the same period within their own movement. In 1923, Vladimir-Ze'ev Jabotinsky, founder of Revisionist Zionism, published two essays on 'the iron wall'. This, too, was a prognostic synecdoche of the colonization of Palestine. Jabotinsky's assessment was that 'The Arabs are as good Zionists as we are. The entire country is full of Arab memories'. From this, he deduced that there was 'no prospect of political compromise': a literal and figurative 'iron wall' was required—initially consisting of British bayonets and, later, of the craved Jewish army—which would facilitate, through military force, the colonization of Palestine, the establishment of a Jewish state and, in the long run, the resigned acceptance of this state by the Arabs. In 1934, Jabotinsky had a meeting in London with Ben-Gurion, the leading Labour Zionist. Afterwards he confessed that he had never realized how similar his views were to Ben-Gurion's. Political competition apart, if Jabotinsky and his heritage have been so vituperatively denounced by the Israeli Labour movement and 'peace camp', it is for the same reasons that the Zionists of the Mandate era so insistently emphasized the absurdity of any literal interpretation of their propagandistic art. The iron wall as a synecdoche vexed Ben-Gurion and Weizmann precisely because they knew how valid—and therefore disastrous, as an admitted narrative in the 1920s and 1930s—such a trope might be.

A critical analysis of shared assumptions of the immediacy and adequacy of architecture does not have to entail this denial. In desecrating nothing more than a symmetrical collusion, Monk's work conceals the realities of colonization, dispossession and failed resistance, while hiding for radical cover under a quilt of half-quotations, ripped out of context, from Adorno or Benjamin.

It is, perhaps, particularly inappropriate to cite phrases torn from Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', written in 1940, in full cognizance of the implications of the Fascist victory, to support an argument that does not distinguish between the perspectives of the victorious and the dispossessed—which, here, makes a critical Palestinian journalist collusive with Ehud Olmert, mayor of Jerusalem, and Charles Krauthammer, the *Washington Post's* hardline neocon, in creating 'a "state of emergency" that "is not the exception but the rule"'.

The dissident Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin has drawn a very different lesson from the 'Theses', with his proposal to counter the foundational myths of Zionism—the 'return' to the Bible land, the negation of exile—with a mode of remembrance, at once Jewish and universal, that would allow the repressed Palestinian presence and memory to resurface and, with it, the consciousness of Palestine as a bi-national place. Monk should perhaps look again at the words he has excised from Benjamin's eighth thesis: it is 'The tradition of the oppressed' which teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule.

Gabriel Piterberg teaches history at UCLA; *An Ottoman Tragedy* will be published next year.

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