

The Most Beautiful Monument in Europe

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The most beautiful of all monuments in Europe is not the palace of Versailles, notwithstanding the Hall of Mirrors with its endless reflections of chandeliers and pillars, notwithstanding the fairy-tale grace of the Trianons, notwithstanding the sumptuous Hall of Congresses where the 1919 peace conference put a formal end to years of massacring of the young generations of almost every European country by one another, and where the victors' arrogance laid the seeds of the next catastrophe. There are no mirrors in the most beautiful of European monuments, or if there is one (I don't actually know since — full disclosure — I have never been inside) it probably wasn't useful for much more than a cold-water shave before donning one's uniform in the early morning mist.

The most beautiful of Europe's monuments is not in Munich. It is not the old Pinacothèque, in spite of its incomparable collections (the most beautiful of Europe's monuments may have on its wall a washed-out pinup calendar, but no old-master landscape); neither, for that matter, is it the new one, nor any of the other landmarks so conveniently and punctually served by the public transportation network, U-Bahn and S-Bahn, whose helpful map occasionally reveals, among the names of nondescript suburbs, one that sounds vaguely familiar, leading the suddenly pensive visitor to wonder whether it is *that* one (and, having enquired, the visitor will learn that, yes, it is that one) : Dachau.

You might, looking for the most beautiful of all European monuments, take one of the paths that lead to Rome: to the Campo de' Fiori where Giordano Bruno was burned alive on 17 February 1600 for having dared to challenge the established religion, to Saint Peter which to this day remains the headquarters of that very religion, to the Sistine Chapel, to the luxury of the marble palaces ransacked on 6 May 1527 by the troops of Emperor Charles the Fifth in a devastating and cruel invasion of the South of Europe by the North of Europe, continuing a tradition firmly confirmed by, one after another, the Gauls, the Visigoths, the Vandals, the Ostrogoths and the Normans; a tradition that mirrored, sans the pretense of a civilizing mission, the more ancient but no less brutal colonization of Europe by the Romans. You will not find marble in the most beautiful of Europe's monuments; the main material is just concrete, of embarrassingly mediocre quality. One cannot exclude the possibility that — even today — people sometimes come inside and lie down, but probably not to paint frescoes. As to the outside, while decorations do occasionally appear, no one will call the artist a Michelangelo.

In Spain? In Seville, the city of Figaro as imagined by Beaumarchais, Da Ponte and Mozart, the city of Carmen, the very symbol of amorous passion so central to the European vision of life? Another defining event for Seville, less conspicuously featured in the tourist guides, was the pogrom of 1391: one of the first fatal blows which in just a few decades would destroy the delicate fabric, patiently woven over many centuries, of a society of partial tolerance between the three Mosaic religions, and replace it by the

culture of the auto-da-fe, whose last avatar led, in our own time, to forty years of moronic dictatorship. Should we search instead in the vicinity of proud Madrid: in the Escorial palace, triumphal and austere, built — as we might have guessed — to commemorate some slaughterous triumph in a faraway land? Sun-bathed Iberia is replete with such memorials; yet it is not there that we will find the most beautiful of the monuments of Europe, accustomed for its part to colder rains than fall on the plains of Spain.

Might we perhaps find the most beautiful of European monuments on the continent's outermost borders, in the ancient capital of the Holy Roman Empire even if (as Voltaire said of its Germanic counterpart) it was neither holy, nor Roman any more, nor much of an empire? European indeed was the history of Byzantium: European in the refinement of its successive civilizations; European too, alas, in its lootings, starting with the Vikings as early as 860, in its tortures, in the Crusaders' sack of 13 April 1204, all these battles pitting European against European up to the inevitable and definitive Ottoman conquest. A basilica that became a cathedral, a cathedral that became a mosque, with its intact and incomparable cupola, Saint Sophia remains resplendent as ever near the banks of the Bosphorus. One may argue that Turkey is at least partially European, or that it is not, but the most beautiful among all of Europe's monuments never was pagan, orthodox, catholic, or Muslim; never did it have a cupola, only a modest tiled roof; and Istanbul is not where you will find it.

No need, on the track of the most beautiful European monument, to travel to Warsaw. Hardly any real monuments remain there anyway as the Nazis burned everything. Reconstructions are only reconstructions, and the dour Soviet skyscrapers do not make up for the loss. Search not in Bucharest, devastated by a dictator who for being more recent was no less detestable. Perhaps one might try to find the most beautiful of the monuments of Europe in Prague. Prague! Bridges that look like museums, museums that look like churches, churches that look like castles, castles overflowing with marble and gold, tombs out of which one expects the Golem to walk, lanes out of which one expects Tycho Brahe to walk, porches where one believes for a minute believes it is Kafka walking. To judge by the crowds of tourists who every hour stand shoulder to shoulder fascinated by the astronomical clock, we might think we have arrived; but it too is largely a reconstruction after the bombardments of 1945. Not far away, the austere statue of Jan Hus, a somber reminder of centuries of slaughter between sibling religions, is not a pretender for the title; but one remains captivated, fifty yards away, by the gold of the Kinsky palace and the pink rococo lace of its triumphal balcony, the very place where on a freezing morning of February 1948 Klement Gottwald notified his dumbfounded people, in the dour tone of funeral announcements, that soon the lid would fall that would stifle them for the next forty years. How much one would like to find in Prague the most beautiful of all the monuments in Europe!

We might think of uncovering the most beautiful of Europe's monuments in Venice, and could be forgiven for believing we reached our goal as we stroll along the water reflections of palace after palace, all resplendent, all ever so fragile. No one requires the visitor to abandon the beaten path and venture, through the Ducal palace, into the appalling prison of the Leads, from which Jacques Casanova, another herald of the

European Eros, was in 1756 the only inmate ever to escape. The Ducal palace is also where the idea was conceived to do away, once and for all, with Turkish naval power, a mission accomplished on 7 October 1571 at the battle of Lepanto, at the collateral price of thirty thousand dead and many more wounded. One of those who survived, returning home richer with experience and poorer by one arm, took advantage of the former to write with his remaining hand one of Europe's timeless contributions to universal culture: *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. Too bad that the most beautiful among all of Europe's monuments is neither the ducal Palace, nor Saint Marc, nor any of the other landmarks in the Venice of the South.

Neither can it be found in the Venice of the North, Saint Petersburg, Peter the Great's formidable wager to contain the hereditary enemies, the Swedes, in an outpost chosen brazenly close to their home ground. The wager was technological as well as military; it could only succeed thanks to the blood of thousands of prisoners and serfs, in just the same way as, two and a half centuries later, Stalin's construction of Leningrad's lavish underground. Called by its creator "a window opened on Europe", Petersburg in truth remained mostly a window closed to a world of successively designated aggressors, real or invented. In the imperial city the candidates to the title of most beautiful European monument are legion, from the immense and unforgettable Winter Palace to Rossi's triumphal colonnade and, between the two, the Alexander column in the middle of the grandiose square which served as the sinister theater of so many confrontations, executions and revolutions. Or, leaving the city for its suburbs, we might investigate other imperial residences: if not Peterhof, then the Summer Palace of Tsarkoie Selo so often celebrated by Pushkin, a student in the first class of the nearby Lyceum. Many of his classmates became Decembrists and inaugurated — those, at least, who were not executed — the infamous tradition of deportation to Siberia. Having contemplated the perfectly reconstructed monuments, the sparkling gold of the church bulbs, the galleries of stunningly realistic sculptures, the museums replete with flawless malachite vases, one has trouble believing the photographs that show the Peterhof palace, in 1943, savagely destroyed by the barbarian invaders, with nothing left but a few broken walls. Of such cruelty unleashed barely a few miles from the starved metropolis, where it followed years of terror and centuries of oppression, on this earth where in the words of Anna Akhmatova's Requiem, written by a desperate mother searching from dawn to dusk for some information, any information, about her imprisoned son (words never then written, in fear of the ubiquitous secret police, but hushed to friends, who all learned the poem by heart, and all kept them secret):

In front of such adversity even mountains will bow,

of such cruelty nothing visible remains today; but the memory is never far away. One would almost forget it when admiring, in the Summer Palace, the astounding amber cabinet, a peerless gift from the king of Prussia to the Tsar of all Russias; soon, however, one realizes that it is a modern copy, funded by German money and patiently remade, cameo after cameo, panel after panel, wall after wall, from monochrome shots made in the nineteen-thirties, as the original was carried away to Germany and never found again. Can one fail to be moved by the thought of these jewels and these armies traveling,

century after century, the same westbound and eastbound routes linking two empires that sometimes were allies and sometimes mortal foes? Forgetting the armies and admiring the jewels, we might believe, copy or not, that we have reached our goal; but we have not. In the most beautiful of Europe's monuments neither amber, nor gold, nor precious stones, nor stucco, nor colonnades are to be found, and unlike Rastrelli whoever designed it left no trace in the history of architecture.

Another city of canals has claims on the title of Venice of the North. Should we move our search there? Amsterdam's houses are high and narrow, a result, is it said, of the bourgeois' effort to skirt a width tax. They emanate an impression of cozy wealth, extending even to commercial-use buildings such as number 263 on Prinsengracht, the Prince's Canal, headquarters of the Opekta company whose attic served for more than two years as shelter for Otto Frank and his family, up to the anonymous betrayal that sent them all to Auschwitz. The most beautiful among European monuments does have a small attic, but no teenage girl ever sat there to write her intimate diary.

An urge to wrap up our search might take us near where we started it, to admire in Paris the elegant Louis XV architecture of the École Militaire, the central military school, a masterpiece of the Enlightenment whose construction was financed by Madame de Pompadour; to admire, particularly, its huge courtyard, where in the freezing cold of 5 January 1895 an officer, passionately patriotic, impeccably professional and wholeheartedly dedicated to his chosen job stood erect to hear the most terrible accusation, high treason, in front of the heinous troops and the crowds hollering to death. In a few brisk moves, an adjutant tore from his uniform the red stripe distinguishing the alumni of the École Polytechnique, and the other insignia unsewn on the previous day to prepare for the event; in one straight blow he tore apart on his knees the officer's sabre, similarly broken and glued back in advance. For the victim that day was only the prelude to years of indignity: exile and anguish under the deleterious skies of Devil's Island, including for endless weeks the horrible torture of the double loop. Not a judicial error all this, but a crime of state, the result of an accusation supported by not even the slightest trace of evidence, and cooked up as an attempt to pacify racist newspapers. Months later, the real traitor was identified — and acquitted, so much had truth become perilous for the men in power. The innocent was still languishing in his tropical inferno. When public protest became too loud, there was no other way than to bring him back to the mainland and set up a new trial which ended up as a confirmation of the first, with an early release for extenuating but unspecified circumstances. Had the story ended there, the École Militaire could claim the title of most shameful monument in Europe. But after years of patient meandering through the legal system of a democratic country, a system that political and military leaders had been able to hijack for a while but not to corrupt forever, the highest court of the land reestablished truth and justice. The official rehabilitation took place in the same cobblestoned courtyard, but this time in the joy of summer on 21 July 1906. The triumph of integrity, at the very place where it had been so grossly violated, allowed Europe to show to the world that a state draws its glory not only from what it does right but also from its ability to correct what it did wrong. The memory of this moment of pride could lead us to designate the classically-lined military school as the most beautiful among European monuments; it does not, however, get the prize.

The most beautiful of Europe's many monuments is modest in its dimensions and, let us not be coy about it, mediocre in its style. It markedly lacks charm, and tourist guides do not award it any stars. As a matter of fact, no tourist guide deigns mention it. It is not registered in Unesco's repertory of the world's heritage, nor in the repertory of any European nation. Still, tourists pass it by, tens of thousands of them year in and year out; but they never stop. Worse: even if they notice it — and, as time goes by, ever fewer of them pay any attention — they are happy and proud not to stop for the most beautiful monument of Europe. Perhaps you sighted it yourself, at a hundred and thirty kilometers an hour on the freeway, and if you barely eased the pressure on the accelerator pedal it is not just because the most beautiful of all of Europe's monuments is sloppily maintained, its walls defaced by graffiti, its yard overrun by multi-national refuse; it is mostly because you no longer have to stop. The most beautiful European monument is nothing more than a hut, a cabin, a barrack. It once served as a border post between France and Luxembourg — or was it Belgium and Germany? We don't quite remember any more, in that monotonous expanse, Victor Hugo's "dismal plain", which for so many centuries provided such convenient terrain for invasions by infantry, horses, then tanks. Now it no longer serves any purpose, as you move from one country to the other without any immediately noticeable effect save for a welcome sign, as you would pass from Hautes-Alpes to Alpes-Maritimes, from Tuscany to Emilia-Romagna, from Sax to Bavaria, and much less visibly than, within a single country, from Flanders to Wallonia.

Of course the tourists are right to queue up at the Rijksmuseum, at the leaning tower of Pisa whence Galileo, casting both a one-pound ball and a hundred-pound ball, was also casting the foundations of the experimental method, at the Louvre since as a result to the Commune there is no longer a Tuileries palace to visit; they are right to flock to the Dalmatian coast, almost fully recovered from the last cannonade. And yet, if out of Europe's entire magnificent legacy we had to choose one monument of which we would be the proudest, it might well be, ahead of the triumphal arches, ahead of the palaces, ahead of the cathedrals, the lowly shack on the side of the freeway. On these borders where people killed each other for millennia, it is no longer necessary even to show your credentials. The guns are silent, and the only radars you have to fear are those of the police, prompt to bring you back (politely) to reason if, getting carried away by trans-border enthusiasm, you let your foot press the accelerator pedal a trifle too hard.

Why then are we not more proud of it? That getting there took a disaster of planetary scope and a genocide, followed by decades of tyranny on the whole Eastern half of the continent, diminishes in no way the collective achievement of the peoples of Europe and their leaders. Enough whining. Enough of French peasants throwing their beets on the street to protest a European authority to whose generosity they owe their very survival. Enough of referendum failures engineered by demagogic politicians warning of imaginary disasters. Enough of those English newspaper editorials railing day after day against corrupt and mustachioed continentals. Enough of complaints about high prices allegedly due to the Euro, about the nasty Northerners who prevent the Southerners from producing unpasteurized cheeses or butchering migratory pigeons. The truth is that we

are one people. Our landscapes differ, and so do our villages and our customs; our histories too (or rather, since these histories encountered each other so often and so violently, our memories of who was the vanquished and who got to bestow the battle's name on his streets and his railway stations), our languages, all that one notices at first, and all that cannot hide the essential: that we are siblings and fellow citizens. We never again will wage war on each other; what better example is there, for the entire world, than Germany and France, who after three abominable wars became the closest of allies? We no longer kill, granting to even the worst criminal the respect owed to a fellow human — and proudly demonstrating, through homicide rates nine times smaller than in the paradise of heavily armed citizens, that such humanism is not only good moral principle but effective social policy. We do not torture our enemies, including those who hate us the most. Women among us dress themselves as they please, paying no attention to the killjoys and the preachers, controlling their own bodies, and making up at a breathless pace for centuries of frustration by becoming chief executives, ministers, chancellors. We support everyone's right to health and education. We protect the entrepreneur's right to create wealth and benefit from it, and yet we do not forget the poorest in our midst. We freed ourselves from superstition; while we respect religions, we are careful to prevent them from fighting each other and tyrannizing the rest of us. Quietly ignoring all the prophets of doom including in our own ranks, we managed to switch overnight, through a process planned down to the smallest detail and executed faultlessly, to a common denomination replacing ancient and cherished national currencies. Just as quietly we devised and implemented thousands of common rules, from the most visible which relegated border posts to the status of historical curiosities, to the humblest which help us get along with each other in everyday projects. We take seriously the future of the earth and its climate, and do not play the game of who will impress his neighbor most through outsized gas-guzzlers. We do not threaten anyone, even though some, of the most terrifying kind, threaten us. And if others adopt our model, it is not because of any propaganda from us: in the past forty years, candidates for membership in our club — apparently undeterred by our own incessant self-criticism — have come from ever further away, starting with Mediterranean states freshly freed from dictatorship, continuing with former vassals of the Habsburgs freshly freed from the Soviet yoke, and extending today to the Balkans, Ukraine, even Turkey. (Can one imagine Latin America and Canada begging their huge neighbor to admit them into its federation?)

Our assets are the same; similar too are our risks: a declining demography, the difficulty of retaining our elites, the necessary balancing act between solidarity and personal reward, the continuation of our economic success in the face of massively imported cheap-labor goods, our relations with empires that are always susceptible to the temptation of totalitarianism. These challenges too are a link between us.

Enough divisions. Our countries are provinces; Europe is our country. Let us start with humble, symbolic and daily moves, to help bond this country that does not even know it exists: Europe-scale phone area codes, license plates, emergency numbers. Continue with politics: Europe-wide parties (a European socialist party, a European centrist party), a central bank that is not impeded from doing its full job, a foreign affairs minister of Europe, a parliament elected by universal suffrage on a single day and on shared political

themes; and of course a President of Europe, directly and simultaneously elected by all the voters of Europe. Let him not forget, on his inaugural day, to go and pay his respects not on a battlefield, a cemetery, a war memorial, a cathedral or a triumphal square, but on a small lane off the freeway, next to a decrepit shed, covered with graffiti, a former and now useless border post: the most beautiful of all the monuments in Europe.

