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Namesake: An Ekphrasis on La Sagrada Familia Basilica in Barcelona, Spain

Rachel Henry

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There he was, despite almost a quarter century of avoidance, in front of the monstrosity masquerading as a temple, the flight of fancy that belonged in the Magic Kingdom, the unrelenting spectacle of Antoni Gaudí’s La Sagrada Familia. Antoni Bonet consciously unclenched his fists and relaxed his jaw. Much as he resisted admitting it, the colossal cathedral with its soaring towers visible from anywhere in Barcelona went beyond spectacle to spectacular. The glittering, almost comical bishop’s mitre, crozier, and ring atop the campaniles; the not quite
clownish colors, the larger-than-life grapes and wheat representing the Eucharistic feast atop the smaller pinnacles—he wanted to hate it all but couldn’t quite. How could it be so overdone and so beautiful at the same time? Was Gaudí, Antoni’s personal demon and much-loathed namesake, whose vision still held his family hostage almost a hundred years after the devout architect’s death, going to be redeemed by these soaring heights of sculpted stone? Not if Antoni could help it. And yet, as his feet dragged him, unwilling, across the forecourt, the absolute excess of it all coalesced into a whole that he was tempted to call divine. Why couldn’t he have stayed away?

Neither frieze nor frontispiece adequately described the sculpture garden in front of him that was the Nativity façade, the only part of the church to be completed during Gaudí’s lifetime. Though the church’s namesake, the Holy Family, stood front and center, they were almost lost amid the stone foliage. Not a single inch had been neglected as the stone curved and curled in on itself giving the appearance that the rock had either grown from seed or been poured, molten, around a pre-existing jungle and hardened in place. Everyone was there to adore the baby Jesus, those who were expected—the magi, the shepherds, the angels—and those that were not—the turkey, the sea turtle, the chameleons—all witnessing then as Antoni witnessed now the birth of Christ, the anointed one, who had come into the world—to do what exactly? Have this tribute built to him? Antoni couldn’t quite believe Jesus of Nazareth would approve.

Though the massive tympanum had been filled with angels, the star of Bethlehem, the Annunciation, and the coronation of Mary before he’d left—run away really—the entry to the Portal of Charity had stood empty, and Antoni couldn’t resist running his fingers along the intricacies sculpted into the exquisite doors that now filled what he remembered as gaping holes. Sculpted in bronze and painted in a green so lush he wanted to lie down in it, with swooping highlights of red and spots of yellow flowers, a jubilation of leaves poured over the doors, the perfect entrance to the stone forest that waiting within. What was a Japanese sculptor doing devoting his work to this Catalan basilica, as he supposed he had to call it now? What was it about this man Gaudí that so many people spent
their lives realizing his vision? He had to admit Etsuro Soto had gotten it right, though. The fecundity of Gaudí’s Incarnation dripped off the tip of each midsummer leaf and crawled along with each lifelike metal beetle.

The Holy Family stood on the crown of a cypress tree between the two doors as Mary and Joseph admired their newborn as any first-time parents might. Antoni paused to give a rueful smile to St. Joseph who, even in this church supposedly dedicated to him, remained overshadowed by his wife, his son, the leaves, and nature run riot, an apt metaphor perhaps for the patron saint of the working class. Antoni pushed the doors open reluctantly, passed through the Portal of Charity, and was almost overrun by eager tourists behind him as he stopped in his tracks. His grandfather, born to the Sagrada Família’s chief assistant architect the year Gaudí died, destined to follow in his father’s footsteps and birth a daughter who would do the same, had held on through long years of sickness to see this: not the glass but the light. How many times had his grandfather, his avi, put his arm around Antoni’s shoulders and repeated that precious piece of family lore, words heard directly from the master that “light was God’s paintbrush”? He remembered the weight of his grandfather’s large hand resting on his slight frame as his avi used his free hand to trace in gestures what Antoni now saw before him, dazzling in its reality. He had chosen to come in the late afternoon specifically to see what exploded before him. It was just like Gaudí, to wed the light inside the temple to the turning of the seasons, to make the Holy Spirit dance on the walls most vibrantly at the winter solstice, to illuminate the darkest time of year with a cold fire that Antoni couldn’t deny enkindled joy in what could only be his soul. How fitting to pass through the nativity and immediately see the ultimate fruits of incarnation, the indwelling spirit made visible and swirling across the forest of tree-like columns, their abstract yet impossibly life-like branches reaching impatiently toward the heavens, though one had to wonder why they weren’t content to remain below given the gushing beauty that enrobbed them in every available hue of red, orange, and yellow brightness. And how like Gaudí, self-proclaimed expiator of the sins of all humankind—hadn’t that already been taken care of?—to make the Spirit spill forth from the interior of the wall that would reveal, on its exterior, the Passion narrative.
Finding his feet beneath him and moving down the transept toward the apse cost Antoni a serious effort. Before he reached the altar, he turned slowly around to face the way he had come. The cool, blue waters of life pouring from the eastern windows were more muted this time of day, of course. Their glory hour had been in the morning. Still, he had to admit that Joan Vila Grau, the glass artist, deserved a bow of respect. He hadn’t met the man, having left a few years before Grau joined the masses of artists and architects enthralled by Gaudí’s obsession, but the glazier knew how to make a person wish he could drink light. Antoni knew he had to give Gaudí some of the credit with his concept for inverting the usual Gothic approach to stained glass, calling for thicker glass at the bottom and only clear glass at the tops of the walls, thereby maximizing the brilliance of his forest so that it practically pulsed with light. All down the nave tourists craned their neck heavenward to see the light scamper across the ceiling, the green almost neon, yellows like a technicolor lemon, turquoise from the sea, the orange of mums liquified, each shade bumping up against its neighbor, like children playing gleefully on the beach, their exuberance kissing the stone into life.

Antoni rested his hand on one of the columns, feeling the grit of that living rock. The towering trunks had always been his favorite part of the temple. “Look,” his avi had said, “the trees are sprouting up everywhere.” And indeed they had, grown as if from the earth during his boyhood, stone on stone until the rock parted ways with itself, narrowed, and began to grow separately, diagonally, in those oddly realistic branches that were one of Gaudí’s engineering wonders. Antoni remembered the smell of this place on a summer day when it was still open to the elements. The walls were there but no glass, no ceiling, and after it rained, it smelled the same inside as out, that pleasant, acrid smell of life and wet soil. Maybe Gaudí had erred in designing a ceiling at all. Maybe, if God’s architect had thought people were closest to God in nature, he should have left God’s temple open to the rain. And yet, watching the tourists—baptized in water and the Holy Spirit whether they knew it or not, baptized by and into the light, and baptized perhaps more profoundly by sheer awe—crane their necks to see the tops of the trees disappear directly into the ceiling’s arched starbursts.
lit by clear glass skylights, Antoni wondered whether heaven and Earth had truly been joined at last.

Turning ninety degrees to face the presbytery and the altar, Antoni paid little attention to the windows spewing light from earthly green to heavenly white as they climbed the wall, to the organ, to the eight apse chapels dedicated to the O antiphons, or even to Jesus hanging on the cross, eyes lifted heavenward. Instead, his eyes traced each detail of the baldachin that dwarfed the altar far below. The structure of steel, glass, and fabric hung suspended from the surrounding columns and in turn held the crucifix in midair. His grandfather had written to him, so proud of bringing Gaudí’s unrealized design for the baldachin in Mallorca into existence here in Barcelona, so excited that it would hang over Pope Benedict’s head as he anointed the altar, a symbol of the Holy Spirit that through the pope’s blessing would make this temple a basilica. His grandfather had always loved the Spirit best. “The Son is good,” he had said to the young Antoni countless times, “but the Spirit is with us, the Spirit is the one who lets us do this work.” And every time, his avi’s eyes had watered and his voice had gotten quiet and Antoni had known that this man who loved him so much was saying something important. When had he forgotten that? His grandfather had also written about the red script he had designed that ran around the baldachin’s perimeter, enumerating the gifts of the Holy Spirit and shining forth that most foundational of prayers, “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit….” Studying the baldachin, Antoni saw his grandfather’s vision and Gaudí’s woven together. If his grandfather’s vision had been shaped by growing up in the shadow of this impossible grandiosity, had it even been his own? But then no one had ever learned to see by themselves.

Facing west, Antoni stood directly in front of the window of the Resurrection. Less eye-catching than the reds and yellows pouring in through the clerestory, rose, and lancet windows flanking the nave, the placement of the Resurrection window just below the point of the arch above the western portal indicated its importance. This strangely unassuming oval-shaped collection of browns rising to mostly clear glass
seemed to indicate that resurrection meant leaving behind Earth, with its soil and trees. Antoni wasn’t sure Gaudí, who saw God manifest in nature, would have agreed with this representation. As Antoni walked toward the portal, he looked up to his left at the choir that wound its way around the entire basilica, breaking only at the transept, the 800 voices it could host further evidence that Gaudí found divinity within creation. He wished he had accepted his avi’s invitation to stand beside him, the chief architect for so many years, on the day the temple became a basilica. He wished they had listened to those voices together.

Leaving behind the forest of stone trees—some on fire, some submerged in flood—Antoni pushed through the Door of the Gospel of Matthew and turned to see the setting sun illuminating the Passion façade. Funny that no one ever called it the Resurrection façade even though that was the point of the story the entire edifice was designed to tell. He had seen the first few statues of the Passion raised into place as a young man but had never experienced the full weight of it, the entire Via Crucis rendered even more painful through the statues’ harsh angles, the square faces somehow expressing the depths of human sorrow without the relief of a single gentle curve. Where the eastern façade roiled with lushness and the roundness of nature, here nature was absent, reduced to right angles as the Son of Man made his way to the massive cross where the two Marys and John wept at his feet at the center of the façade. If stone could shed tears, these statues would be perpetually wet. Amid all the horror and starkness, Antoni found his attention drawn to Judas’s betrayal. On Jesus’s face, surprise and anxiety, his body frozen, but looking at Judas, one would think the two men were lovers. His hand cradled the bottom of Jesus’s head, his lips parted slightly as he leaned in, only inches from his friend and teacher’s face. In this stone kiss, square cheek to square cheek, Antoni saw not loathing but love. Is it always love, he wondered, that underlies our betrayals, love we cannot quite live up to, love we cannot find it in ourselves to accept?

Antoni let his eyes travel upward, past the wretched, crucified figure and the grieving figures at his feet; past the pediment gallery of the prophets and patriarchs showing Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and the
prophets as well as the Messiah of the line of David; past the empty tomb and the angels at the base of the now-conquered cross; past the ascending Jesus robed in gold to the finials of the four campaniles, glistening with mosaics of Venetian glass covering undulating geometric curves that twisted the gaze around in ways it hadn’t known it wanted to go. Though he couldn’t read them this close up, he knew the words enshrined there: “Hosanna, Excelsis, Hosanna, Excelsis.” He supposed Gaudí meant the Latin phrase as highest praise, but Antoni—thinking of his avi buried only a few days ago and finding himself much to his surprise on his knees, that unmistakable sting in his eyes—couldn’t help but think of the original Hebrew for Hosanna, “Save us, please.” He could only hope that the Expiatory Basilica of the Holy Family would do its work on him.

Note: Jordi Bonet oversaw construction of La Sagrada Família from 1985 to 2012. His father worked with Gaudi, and his daughter also worked as an architect on the basilica. His grandson and any enmity between the family and Gaudi are my invention.

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