

A Voice for Troubled Times

Dante's 'Purgatorio' Rings Out in the Pantheon

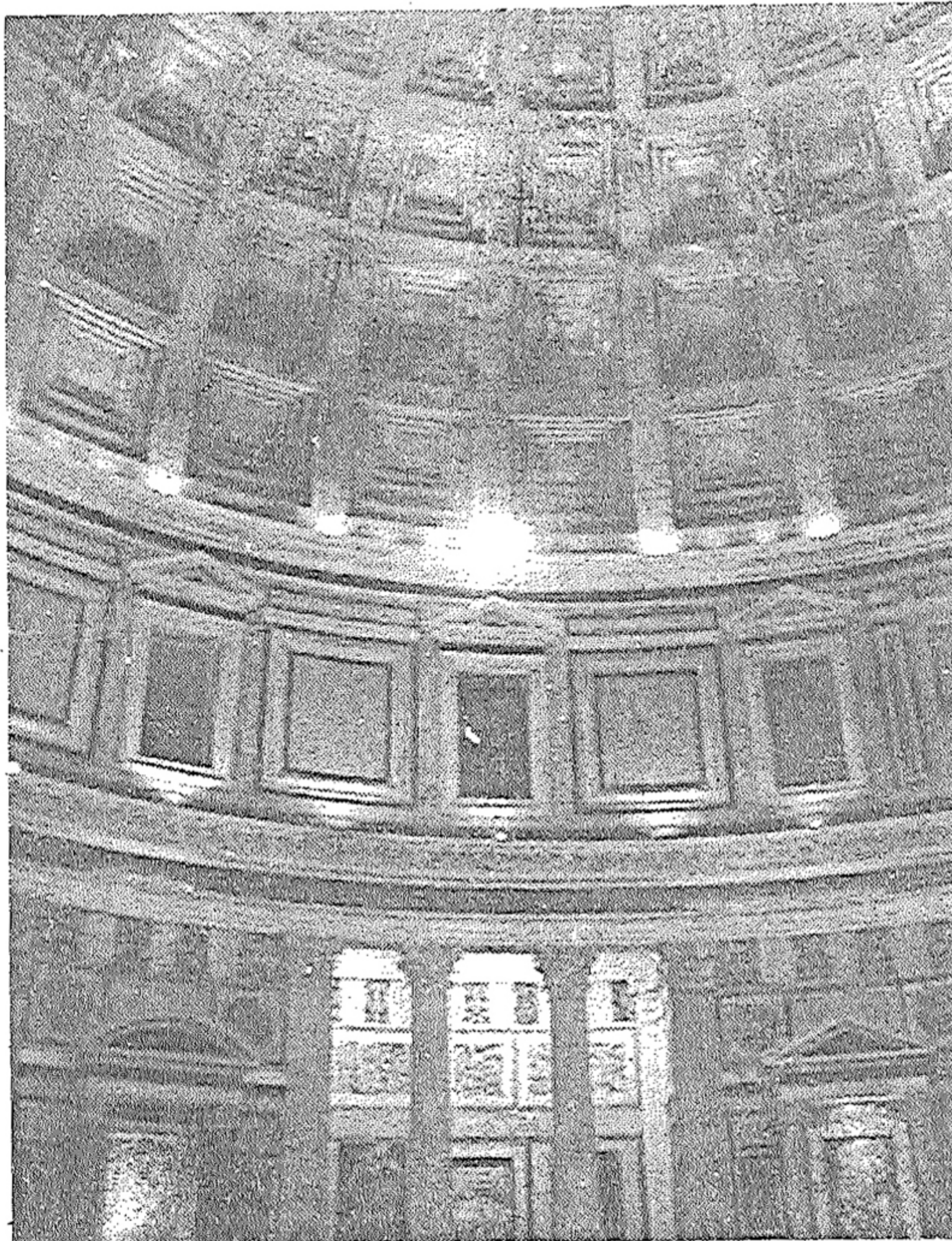
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ROME

POETS SPEAK to us in times of trouble, it has been said. Riding the bus in downtown Rome not long ago, I watched a man pull a tiny volume of the "Divina Commedia" out of his jacket pocket, leaf through the onion-skin pages and nip into a canto or two, "nel mezzo del cammin," in the middle of the journey, as Dante so famously wrote in "Inferno," canto I. It has been 700 years since the first great poet of the embryonic Italian language composed that very first line of the 100 cantos of "Inferno," "Purgatorio" and "Paradiso." Yet people still turn with something like thirst and hunger to the words of Dante. It's one of the mysteries in our age of reality TV and digital fiction — or maybe it's no mystery at all.

Still, I confess I was astonished by the crowds when on a recent evening I headed down to the Pantheon to hear the great Dante expert and performer Vittorio Sermonti read from and comment on the "Purgatorio," a free-to-the-public series that no self-respecting Roman evidently wants to miss. I'd been warned to get there at least half an hour early, but even so I had to plow my way through the sun-tanned celebrities, the dreamy, long-haired 20-somethings, the book-bearing elderly ladies and the well-dressed middle-aged gents to find a seat.

With new Dante translations abounding (two have appeared in English since 1995) and a major new critical edition of the "Commedia" by Italian scholar Federico Sanguineti out this year, these are heady times for Dante. When Mr. Sermonti recited the "Inferno" in the more intimate space of Trajan's Market last fall, the Roman crowds, from the President of the Republic Carlo Azeglio Ciampi down to the nearby shopkeepers, flowed out onto the streets every night. From Mr. Ciampi on down they came back this year — and brought their friends to the Pantheon, Agrippa's great temple to all the Roman gods.

There were probably close to a thousand of us squeezed inside that otherworldly hemisphere as the daylight began to fade and the heavens above the great oculus in the dome turned a silvery gray. At 6:30 sharp Mr. Sermonti strode to the lectern and with no preamble began reading that evening's canto, number V ("Io ero già di quell'ombra partito"). One finger stabbing the air, Luciferian dark eyes flashing, a velvety bass voice easing down the octave, he was erudite but not academic, more rap star from a distant planet than professor. He



The Pantheon (above) is the awesome setting for readings by Vittorio Sermonti (right) from Dante

REVIEW THEATER

talked us through the canto line by line, translating the difficult parts into modern Italian, before reading the whole over once again.

In canto V, Dante talks to souls who repented at the last instant before meeting violent deaths. He meets Buonconte di Montefeltro, a Ghibelline captain killed in battle in 1289, and the mysterious La Pia ("Siena mi fe, disfecemi Maremma"), a Sienese lady murdered by her husband in the Maremma, the wilds of Tuscany.

The souls of purgatory are frightened when they see that their living visitor is made of flesh and casts a shadow. Dante writes about these "shadows without shadows" with unexpected tenderness, Mr. Sermonti wants us to notice. "In the medieval imagination — in what is medieval in our own imagination — we the living are terrorized when the dead souls of purgatory appear. But Dante, with an unprecedented delicacy, imagines a purgatory where it is the dead who are shocked and frightened to encounter the living."

Despite his evident learning, the 72-year-old Mr. Sermonti did not start life as a Dante scholar. After a long-ago university thesis on

Mozart's favorite librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, he wrote novels and did translations, taught Italian and Latin at a Roman classical high school, worked as a radio journalist, a broadcast actor and director — and once even wrote a book about soccer. He started studying Dante in earnest only in 1985 when he began preparing what would be a highly successful radio broadcast of the "Commedia" for Italy's Radiotre. Later, he went on to publish his own three-volume edition with interpretation and notes, garnering praise from professional Dante scholars.

But like the great circuit lecturers of the 19th century, Mr. Sermonti's preferred medium is theater, not criticism. He's out to rescue the sommo poeta from the jaws of the pedants. He wants us to drink up Dante's dazzling language, hear the poet's powerful voice and impetuous pace. Although Mr. Sermonti's line-by-line commentary is pithy, he does not condescend to his public.

He was nine when he first heard Dante's verses read aloud, he says, and "it was a language both incomprehensible and familiar, like the buzz a child hears when the aunts and uncles are talking around the table." Young people respond to Dante's poetry even when they don't altogether understand it, he thinks. "It's violent, it's theatrical. It's closer to the

crude Italian that kids speak than to the well-mannered prose of the Dante scholar. When Dante wants to say ass, he never says backside." When Mr. Sermonti taught high-school students in the 1960s, he much preferred the "concave ignorance" of the young to the "convex ignorance typical of grown-up fools."

The vast concave interior of

the Pantheon is Rome's most mysterious sacred space. Mr. Sermonti, who has recited Dante in San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Istanbul, Tel Aviv and all around Italy, claims he finds the Pantheon's mathematical perfection intimidating, but he's clearly in his element in the temple of ecumenical divinity. His public, meanwhile, listens in absolute silence. "The quality of that silence always outstrips the reading," he says. "The attention is voracious. I think people are hungry for poetry."

And maybe for difficulty? As in "Purgatorio," where Dante must walk through a wall of flames to get to the gates of heaven (canto XXVII), there are no cheap consolations or shortcuts to understanding here. (Mr. Sermonti's recitation of the 33 cantos of "Purgatorio" continues through Nov. 9. Information at www.enel.it)

