Italy in Travel Books of the XVIIth Century

by
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It is well-known that during the XVIth Century famous writers like Joachim Du Bellay, Montaigne and Rabelais traveled to Italy and wrote about their experiences. It is less well-known that during the next century there were numerous French travelers to Rome, Venice, Milan, and many other Italian cities. Obviously, these travelers were not all famous writers, but their goals and interests were nonetheless quite worthwhile and diversified.

This period saw more and more French travelers going to Italy. One can find many books describing this country, presenting geographical, historical, and artistic information which helped guide the traveler on his journey. Among them were Pierre Duval, Louis XIII's geographer, André Félibien, the Marquis François du Val-Fontenay-Mareuil, Ambassador of the King of France to the Vatican, Alfred Jouvin, François de Laboullaye de Gouz, and travelers like the Benedictine Bernard de Montfaucon, and Saint-Didier, art historian.[1]

Various purposes dictated these travels: politics, religion, art, science, and entertainment. Guides were printed with meaningful titles, such as *Guides des routes de toutes les Provinces d'Italie, de France, d'Allemagne et d'Espagne*; *La ville et la République de Venise*, and *Les délices d'Italie*, for example.

It would be impossible to give a complete description of all these movements through Europe, and also to take into account all the texts, letters, books, poems and plays which refer in one way or another to experiences and observations of Italy. However, in order to give certain points of reference, I limited the subject to three considerations:

1) why some French travellers went specifically to Italy;

2) what caught the attention of those who were there more or less by chance (most often accompanying important authorities to Rome); and

3) what influence did these cultural exchanges exert on the French literature of the XVIIth Century, (theater excluded).

Curiously enough, many French Libertines went to Italy to encounter teachers considered, a posteriori, as atheists. Gabriel Naudé, the librarian who had studied in Padua for a degree in medicine, willingly quoted the Italian atheists. He affirmed that above the eighth celestial sphere there was nothing, except perhaps a dish of macaroni for the Great Inquisitor! (Vedel 247) In his *Naudaeana* and his letters, according to Rice, in *Gabriel Naudé, 1600-1653*, (The Johns Hopkins Press, 1939, 13) Naudé wrote concerning the University of Padua, "there were few good teachers; the rest were mostly of a common class; the lectures were too few and the vacations too long." (Rice 13) One of his teachers (Cremonini, later accused of atheism) had, he wrote, "un esprit vif et capable de tout, un homme déniaisé et guéri du sot, qui savait bien la vérité, mais qu'on n'ose pas dire en Italie." (Rice 13) Naudé traveled to Italy a second time and stayed in Rome for 12 years (1631). While there, an eruption of Mount Vesuvius occurred and Naudé wrote a little book *Discours sur les divers incendies du mont Vésuve*.

Another writer in the same group of friends, La Mothe Le Vayer, learned also from the Italian free thinkers, as Vedel says, "how to ridiculize the reasoned proofs of the immortality of the soul"; Gassendi—priest, doctor and professor of mathematics—was also a disciple of the same teachers. He attempted to oppose the Cartesian spiritualism and the stoic-christian ethics with his materialism and his epicurianism.

Despite their influence on certain circles of free thought, such reasons for going to Italy were not the most frequent. However, it is interesting to remark in this context that Venice was most attractive at this time because it was one of the rare towns where tolerance reigned and where people could encounter other religions, other thoughts and philosophies, not to mention the fact that it was the capital of entertainment.

So writes Sieur de Saint-Didier in his book *La ville et la République de Venise* (1680). He was the ambassador of Louis XIV in Venice for two years (1672-1674). We learn much from the book of Dumesnil, *Voyageurs Français en Italie*, about St. Didier's descriptions of the entertainment available at Venice (games, love, carnivals, parties, dances, banquets, boxing...). One interesting thing he noted besides—the clergy and the monks were closely watched by the authorities of the Republic, and there was little confidence in Rome or in the Jesuits. The influence of the religious Inquisition was minimal, and people were tolerant toward Orthodox, Protestant and Jew.

But Saint-Didier also wrote about the political structure of the Republic of Venice. His presentation of the government of the Republic seems to be very objective, without much personal interpretation. He just reported what he saw, what he heard from authorities, what he read in the chronicles and books of families covering eight centuries of history. However, the fact that he gives many details about the structure of an aristocratic Republic might make us think that he had other thoughts in relationship with the political preoccupation of France at this time. In the last chapters, Saint-Didier points out again, but with a slightly different point of view, that the liberty found in Venice "n'était qu'un libertinage politique, avantageux à la républicque, commode à la noblesse et agréable au peuple, qui ne s'aperçoit pas que la liberté qu'il prétend avoir au-dessus des peuples qui vivent dans un Etat monarchique n'est qu'une chimère" (Dumesnil 101). Obviously it would have been impossible for an Ambassador of the King of France to say the contrary, especially when this king was Louis the XIVth!

We understand better now why, as Dumesnil wrote, "la licence de Venise attirait les étrangers en foule, les divertissements et les plaisirs les y arrêtaient et épuisaient leurs bourses" (Dumesnil 101). Not only simple individuals but also nobles and princes went there to attend carnivals (the Duke of Savoy, the Duke of Mantua, the princes of Brunswick among them).

Another reason to go to Italy was the art and literary treasures to be found in the libraries. It was not essentially Renaissance art which attracted French travelers but the art of Antiquity. André Félibien, for example, spent two years in Italy (1647-49) to study it. He visited many churches and palaces in Rome and elsewhere, and met several artists and scholars, among them Poussin, Lanfranc, and Pietro de Cortone. When coming back to France, he wrote his book: *Discussions sur les Vies et oeuvres des plus excellents princes*. In this book can be found one of the most accurate biographies of Poussin. It is essentially the technical aspects of painting in which Félibien was interested and his work may be considered as one of the first important books of art history.

Italy also attracted the religious scholars, of course, because of the many libraries maintained by the clergy in various towns. A Benedictine, Dom Bernard de Montfaucon (1655-1741), interested in anything concerning early Christian writings, and in particular the Greek Fathers, obtained the permission of his superiors to travel to Italy (1698-1701). He took notes from chronicles, histories, ancient inscriptions and manuscripts of the Greek Fathers in order to make comparisons with the texts which were in France and to verify their accuracy. He published his notes in his book *Diaricum italicum* (Paris, 1702). He traveled first to Genoa, which proved rather unuseful for his studies, then to Milan where he met the curator Muratori at the Ambrosian Library. He visited the Library of the Sovereign at Mantua, and finally Rome, where he spent two and a half years visiting its antiquities and its libraries. He had no interest in the works and the monuments of the Renaissance, only in the ancient Roman laws, mores, arts and habits. He studied works of authors

who wrote on Rome, correcting them when necessary, and gave advice on what guides were the best to consult. He recommended the reading of the books of the Middle Age, (called by the Italians, *bassi tempi*!) and he published a Thirteenth Century manuscript written by the General "Procureur" of the Benedictines concerning the marvels of Rome, *Liber de mirabilibus Romae*. When back in France, Dom Bernard de Montfaucon published many books, including two about the Greek Fathers, *Collectio novae patrum et scriptorum graecorum* (1706), and fifteen volumes of *L'Antiquité expliquée et illustrée* (1719). However, it seems, according to Dumesnil, that not many personal commentaries were given concerning Italy and the Italians.

To find this kind of information, we have to leave the scholars and look to people who went to Italy more or less by chance, those accompanying ambassadors, especially to the Holy See, or even those more or less obliged to go there due to banishment. This was the case for Maynard and Scarron for example, and even Marie Mancini.

Maynard had the opportunity, in 1634, to accompany the French Ambassador, Le Sieur de Noailles, to Italy. In his letter to Richelieu to obtain permission to accompany the Ambassador, he says he wanted to go to Rome "pour essayer si la piété ou la curiosité apporterait du soulagement à sa douleur" (Maynard 11). (It was after the death of his son and the illness of his wife). After a difficult trip by boat, he arrived in Rome. Many Frenchmen, apparently, were living there. Gaston Garrisson, in his introduction to the poetic works of Maynard, relates that the latter included in his letters many details of what he saw as a life of continuous pleasure and entertainment. He describes cardinals, clergy and nobles having a sumptuous dinner "dans une grotte, au bruit d'une douzaine de fontaines, où les melons fesoient leur jeu, et le boire avec de la neige" (11). With much wit he mocked the faults of the clergy: "Le Pape se porte bien, et les vieux cardinaux sont malades depuis qu'ils le voient monter à cheval avec la disposition d'un jeune homme qui voltige sur un cheval de bois" (14). Of the weather he writes:

> Ne comparez pas les estés de Rome à ceux de Paris: nous souffrons icy des chaleurs qui dessechent tellement nos gosiers, qu'il faut perpetuellement consulter la bouteille, hausser le verre, et tenir le vin et l'eau investis de neige. Ceste saison m'a tellement étourdi, que je ne sçay où j'en suis, et comme si j'estois ivre quand je regarde le Pape, il me semble qu'il est double, et que N.S. a deux lieutenants sur terre. Nous taschons de nous resjouir avec une demy douzaine d'abbés de France, dont la conversation n'est pas mélancolique. (11)

There is not enough room here to give more details from these letters. However, let us quote a last remark. Maynard enjoyed very much his stay in Rome, as the best period of his existence, according to Garrisson, because in this frivolous and joyous company, a certain liberty of speech was possible. "Nous y disons en toute liberté tout ce que vous étouffez dans vostre ame, de peur de Ferragus (Richelieu)." (11)

Scarron also went to Rome with the same group as Maynard, and also to have a good time. Jacques Jeramec, in his *La vie de Scarron ou le rire contre le destin*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1929), eloquently describes this important trip where Scarron's vocation for the burlesque found its beginning: the poet was then merely a servant of the Archbishop of le Mans and he had only the curiosity of a simple traveler, without worry or ambitions of any kind.

As he had hoped, it was only dances, banquets, and drinking bouts with the prelates and other Frenchmen like Maynard, Bourdelot, and Philibert de Lavardin which occupied him. Jeramec tries to imagine Scarron in this ambience:

> Le soir, à l'heure où la fraîcheur vivifiante tombait du ciel toujours pur, ils partaient enveloppés de grands manteaux sombres, coiffés de larges chapeaux dont les bords cachaient des physionomies par trop officielles. On sortait de

> Rome et l'on gagnait quelque villa aux jardins fleuris et hospitaliers. Là, de belles et légères Romaines, vêtues de voiles peu protecteurs, fournissaient aux visiteurs leurs frémissements chargés de tout le charme de la couleur locale. (Jéramec 41)

> "Comme on est loin ici," wrote Scarron, "des mesquineries lassantes de ces bourgeois à l'âme étriquée. Comme on sent bien dans ces petits hommes bruns à l'allure libre, aux gestes vifs, qui foulent glorieusement cette poussière dorée, les fils des athlètes en toge, aux cerveaux froids mais aux gestes puissants, qui se sont amusés à conquérir le monde pour le seul plaisir d'y expérimenter en grand leur jus civilis... Ces femmes aux chevilles fines, aux hanches mouvantes, toutes baignées de soleil doivent être des lyres d'amour délicieuses à faire vibrer." (Jéramec 38)

Scarron also met Nicolas Poussin in Rome. What a contrast, Jeramec writes, between these two persons who were friends for a while! Poussin was searching for the ancient models of the law of rational representation of nature, while Scarron's desire was to express his joy of life. Poussin guides him through Rome as if showing a painting. But Scarron, hating classical rules and conventional thought, reacted strongly against such things and wrote a poem describing the Latin capital in a burlesque manner:

> Superbes monuments de l'orgueil des humains
> Vieux palais ruinés, chefs-d'oeuvre des Romains,
> Par l'injure des ans vous êtes abolis,
> Ou du moins la plupart vous êtes démollis;
> Il n'est point de ciment que le temps ne dissoude.
> Si vos marbres si durs ont senti son pouvoir,
> Dois-je trouver mauvais qu'un méchant pourpoint noir
> Qui m'a duré deux ans soit percé par le coude?
> (Jéramec 44)

Another interesting case of a sojourn in Italy, obligatory this time, was the case of Marie Mancini. In her memoirs, she dedicates fifty pages to her voyage to Italy. She accompanied her husband, the Prince of Colonna, in 1675. Although she regretted leaving France because of the difference of customs, she spends most of the time describing her relationship with her husband and her pregnancies rather than Italy itself. This book however, gives a very good idea of how some noble travelers tried to amuse themselves and pass time. Again, Venice was the town chosen for such activities—its carnival was famous and much attended. Comedies, banquets, dances, walks, music concerts at night, and masquerades all added spice to a life of continuous entertainment. One day she decided to organize a masquarade for which Cardinal Colonna himself paid all the expenses! An example of her extravagance was the bed made for her when she was pregnant and sick, so that she could receive the cardinals and priests, princesses and other ladies of Rome "avec toutes les formalités requises." (Mémoires 126)

> C'était une espèce de coquille, qui semblait flotter au milieu d'une mer, si bien représentée, qu'on eût dit qu'il n'y avait rien de plus véritable, et dont les ondes lui servaient de soubassement. Elle était soutenue par la croupe de quatre chevaux marins, montés par autant de sirènes, les unes et les autres si bien taillés et d'une manière si propre et si brillante de l'or, qu'il n'y avait pas des yeux qui ne s'y fussent trompés et qui ne les crussent de ce précieux métal. Dix ou douze Cupidons étaient les amoureuses agraffes qui soutenaient les rideaux d'un brocard d'or très-riche, qu'ils laissaient prendre négligemment, pour ne laisser voir que ce qui méritait d'être vu de cet éclatant appareil, servant plutôt d'ornement que de voile. (126)

So it seems that for the French nobility, Italy was essentially a place to have fun. One has the impression, when we read these memoirs, that carnival was every day and that people did not know what to invent next to avoid boredom.

We should not think, even after such stories, however, that Italy was, in the French mind, only a place to seek pleasure and freedom. When we analyse the cultural context in which some writers lived, we notice a strong influence of Italian manners and style. According to Miss Elvire Samfiresco in her thesis *Ménage polémiste, philologue, poète*, "Malgré le cri d'alarme d'Henri Estienne, (dans *Dialogues du français italianisé*) tout le XVIIe siècle a été féru d'italien, langue qu'on avait presque le devoir de connaître, lorsqu'on appartenait à la bonne société." (23) This was because of the influence of Marini, who was more admired than Dante and Tasso. He introduced in France, at the court of Marie de Medicis, and after, at the Hotel of Rambouillet, "une littérature éphémère dont le sort fut d'amuser ses contemporains pendant quelque temps et de disparaître bientôt. Balzac, dans une de ses lettres, l'avait jugé avec trop de bienveillance en lui accordant la perfection dans l'imagination." (24) (Mme de Rambouillet was Italian by her mother, and was born in Rome during the ambassadorship of her father, the Marquis of Pisani).

It is due to this influence that Italian continued to be learned and studied in France. Ménage was very fond of the language: he wrote letters and even poetry in it. He was a member of the Academy of La Crusca, famous for its publication, in 1612, of a vocabulary of the Italian language, with several reprints in 1625, 1691, 1702 and 1738. He wrote a book on the origins of Italian. If he wrote poetry in Italian, it was because this was fashionable, and very useful, due to its finesse, in praising his loves. "Il faut le dire", writes Samfiresco, "l'italien l'inspire beaucoup mieux que le français, ses madrigaux sont d'un assez joli tour. La forme raffinée de l'italien s'allie à merveille au raffinement de la pensée." (497-498) Costar, an Italian friend of Ménage, did not hesitate to write:

> Vos poésies italiennes ont été lues dans la petite famille, ça a été avec un plaisir sensible. Si je m'y connais, il n'est rien de plus pur et de plus chaste que votre élocution; rien de plus fin et de plus subtil que vos pensées; et rien de plus harmonieux

> que la structure de vos vers. Vous inventez très heureusement, vous imitez avec un pareil succès. (498)

Even Voltaire thought that Ménage proved "qu'il est plus aisé de faire des vers en italien qu'en français, ses vers italiens sont estimés même en Italie." (499) However, it is also true that Voltaire, in another context, spoke about "les bavardages italiens" of Ménage. (499)

When we know that Ménage, a grammarian, was the master of Mme de Sévigné and of Mme de Lafayette, we can easily understand why the letters of Mme de Sévigné, for example, are full of Italian references. Mme de Sévigné did not travel to Italy, but she followed very attentively the voyage of the Duke of Chaulnes who was designated by the King in 1685 to be his ambassador in Rome for the election of a new Pope, after the death of Innocent XI. Coulanges, a cousin of Mme de Sévigné, accompanied the Duke of Chaulnes, and had visited Italy earlier, in 1657 and 1658. Coulanges corresponded with Mme de Sévigné. He had been her childhood companion and called her "the mother of beauty." In his letters, we discover that he appreciated Italy and Italians a great deal. When he was in Milan, he wrote letters praising the manners of the inhabitants of this town and their dwellings.

As to Mme de Sévigné, despite the fact that she had her stereotypes about Italy and Italians, each of her letters refers in one way or another to Italian culture and style. About M. de Chaulnes, she wrote:

> Nous avons fait conter à M. de Chaulnes tous ses voyages de Rome. Nous lui avons trouvé un si bon esprit, et tellement propre aux négociations de ce pays-là, où il est encore adoré, que nous avons approuvé l'ordre de sa Majesté. (III, 668)

She often uses Italian expressions in her letters to add spice to her style and to express her feelings when they needed to be more passionate or emphatic. It seems that

this use was *à la mode*. It set the tone, it was in relationship with the music of the language and its expressiveness, the opera! Poetry was most important for her (see Ménage), because Mme de Sévigné wrote one day, "Ma fille, je n'aime point la prose «italienne»." (III, 808) About herself, for example, she writes: "Je me promène beaucoup, je lis, je n'ai rien à faire et pour n'être point paresseuse de profession, personne n'est plus touchée que moi du *far niente* des Italiens." (II, 396) In another text she writes, "Je sens que je suis de cet heureux tempérament: *e me ne pregio*, (and I am proud of that!) comme disent les Italiens." (III, 254) Somewhere else, "Les Italiens disent sagement: "*Non ti l'invidio, no, ma piango il mio.*" (I am not jealous of your fate, but I complain about mine!" (III, 304) When she met a handsome man: "C'est un homme de 28 ans, dont le visage est le plus beau et le plus charmant que j'ai jamais vu... Il est Italien, et parle italien comme vous pouvez penser." (II, 284) She is severe about Italy only when it concerns religion. For example, she attended once, in France, a ceremony of the Corpus Christi feast, and considered it rather profane. But she was not astonished anymore when she learned that the bishop who allowed the ceremony was from Italy! (I, 274)

Mme de Sévigné strongly admired Italian culture because of its distinction. We cannot say the same for Tallemant des Réaux, who is not tender toward anything, anyway. Tallemant went to Italy in 1638 when he was 18 years old, accompanying the Abbot of Retz who was visiting Florence, Venice and Rome. There, he met Voiture and Quillet (doctor and secretary of the French ambassador). But what do we learn from this experience? That homosexuality was an integral aspect of Italian customs, (I, 1017) or that it is from Venice that the expression "Secretary to the Ambassador" evolved, because "for each foreign ambassador to the Republic of Venice, there was a Venician noble charged to confer with him." (I, 1182) We learn of many private anecdotes from his *Historiettes*, such as the doctor who was asked where was the Pope's kitchen in the Vatican and who answered with a smile, that it was in purgatory. "One wanted to put him to the Inquisition," Tallemant commented, "but it was not

dared when it was known who he was" (the doctor of M. de Créqui). (I, 12) About Des Barreaux, a "Conseiller de France" visiting Venice, he wrote:

> Il estoit insolent et yvroigne. A Venise, il alla lever la couverture d'une gondole, qui est un crime en ce pays de liberté; aussy fut-il bien battu. Il dit qu'il estoit conseiller de France, et ce fut en cette rencontre-là, à ce qu'on dit, que pour la première fois on dit en Italie: *O povera Francia, mal consigliata*! (Poor France, so poorly advised!) (II, 30)

According to Tallemant, it was fashionable to send young men, either betrothed or newly married, to Italy as a trial to test their fidelity to their wife or fiancée. When he was in Florence, he saw The Grand Duchess-Mother:

> La Grande-Duchesse estoit une des plus [belles] personnes d'Italie, mais elle avoit affaire à un pauvre mary: il avait cinq ou six calottes l'une sur l'autre, et en ostoit et en mettoit selon que son thermometre l'ordonnoit. Quand il se couchoit avec elle, tout l'Estat de Toscane estoit en priere; cela n'arrivait pas souvent. Je pense qu'enfin elle a eu un héritier. (II, 311)

Lastly, concerning the Ambassador of France who was asked one day to visit an alum mine: "Nous partismes, comme s'il eust esté question de quelque chose d'importance, par une fort grosse pluye, et les Italiens disoient: *«Questo e partir a la francese»*." (II, 311)

Despite what one usually thinks, "Italy had lost little of its glamour for the Seventeenth Century traveller", as Lacy Collison-Morley wrote in *Italy After the Renaissance*:

> The Antiquities came first, for the classics were the foundation of all education and it was the ambition of every scholar to see Rome; and was not Rome also the capital of the Pope? But, decadent though it might be, Italy, about 1600, still led the

> way in civilisation, in war and trade and the arts, while Venice was the mirror of civil government, with a constitution that aroused universal enthusiasm. In courtesy, tact and knowledge of the world, who could compete with a Venetian Ambassador or Senator? (I, 7)

To conclude, we could agree with what Collison-Morley wrote in *Italy After the Renaissance*—that the Antiquities came first... However, we could probably be even more precise if we try to extract the deeper meaning from the facts and anecdotes mentioned in this article. It seems that at this time, the French under consideration—writers, artists, intellectuals and politicians, had a superiority complex as well as an inferiority complex vis à vis the Italians. (These complexes always seem to exist together.)

Of course there was a great interest in the Antiquities, but the desire to go to Italy may not have been mere curiosity, but the need to understand the basis of Classicism from a more solid footing than the French imagination, inspired as it may have been, could in fact provide. And it must not be forgotten that travel to Rome was for the most part conducted for well-known political reasons. Italy had not only the Pope, but a wealth of libraries containing rare books little-known if at all in France. Why such an interest a this time in early theology, if not because of the consciousness of a certain void to fill? Spiritually, the end of the XVIIth Century found itself in a kind of impasse with the clash between activism and quietism. A new path had to be found and Italian resources were looked to for new insight. As to the interest in Venice, apart from the fun and obvious pleasures, it reflected the deep crisis encountered in France by the nobles unable to bear the heavy burden of "la Monarchie Absolue," in contrast to the dream of a country ruled by aristocrats, as was the Republic of Venice. All these interests and political dreams may have their continuation in the political movement which ended in Montesquieu's *Esprit de Lois*, which demonstrates, indirectly, that Italy continued to influence French thought

at the beginning of the XVIIIth Century. Though the French felt they were superior intellectually, they were discontented; they believed their liberty—artistic, literary, moral, philosophical and political—was somewhat restrained. Was this not, in the end, one of the most basic motivations for their travels?

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Note

[1]The only recent work where these voyages are mentioned is *La France et l'Italie au temps de Mazarin*, PUF 1986, *Textes recueillis et publiés par Jean Serroy.* (See the articles of Emmanuele Kanceff, "Le problème critique du voyage en Italie au grand siècle," p. 173, of Venanzio Amoroso, "Les sources pour l'étude du voyage français en Italie au XVII siècle," p. 177, and of Guglielmo Scaramellini, "Textes de voyage et géographie.") At the time of the writing of this article we were not able to consult the contents of these works. However, they deal more with generalities while our intention is to present more qualitative and anecdotal aspects of the subject.

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