INTRODUCTION: ANAMORPHOSIS—THE JOURNEY TO ROME

La donc, Francoys, marchez courageusement vers cete superbe cité Romaine: & des serves depouilles d'elle (comme vous avez fait plus d'une fois) ornez voz temples & autelz.

(Du Bellay, Deffence, ‘Conclusion’)

In his essay of 1872 on Joachim Du Bellay (c. 1523–60) the aesthetic critic, and Oxford Classics don Walter Pater wrote of the French Renaissance poet’s journey to Rome and celebrated stay there (1553–57) in the service of his kinsman the Cardinal Jean Du Bellay:

... that journey to Italy, which he deplored as the greatest misfortune of his life, put him in full possession of his talent, and brought out all his originality.¹

Pater’s judgment here was at once both very right and very wrong. Wrong firstly, because Pater seems to have been thinking of Du Bellay more or less exclusively as the author of the Roman sonnet collection Les Regrets (January 1558), in order to ascribe to him, somewhat anachronistically, an originality derived directly from intense autobiographical experience and manifested artistically in an aesthetic of enhanced sincerity and spontaneity. No doubt he was encouraged, as the Parisian readership of 1558 might have been, by Du Bellay’s ambiguous presentation of this elegiac and satirical sonnet sequence as a kind of disillusioned journal de voyage to Rome (and back) under the further guise of Ovidian exile. Yet this was also to underestimate the importance and diverse nature of Du Bellay’s three other, generically very different, major Roman collections published in Paris on his return: in French, his Divers Jeux rustiques (January 1558) and grandiose Antiquitez de Rome ... plus un Songe (March 1558); in Latin, his four books of Poemata [Elegia, Epigrammata, Amores, Tumuli] (September 1558). Above all, Pater was wrong to imply an essential discontinuity between the artistic and philosophical preoccupations of the French poet’s Roman productions, already mentioned, and those of the Parisian ones published prior to his departure in 1553—principally,


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the pioneering Petrarchist sonnet sequence *L'Olive* (1549; 1550) and the associated Horatian *Vers lyriques*, as well as the highly polemical literary manifesto *La Deffence et illustration de la langue francoyse* (1549) which preaced them, and so also launched the Pléiade school of poets. Pater was very right, however, to see across Du Bellay’s whole oeuvre, in the poet’s abandonment of Paris for Rome, an enabling change, a radical shift of perspective that may aptly be described as a kind of cultural anamorphosis.

In fact, Du Bellay’s fundamental journey to Rome begins well before he even leaves Paris physically—in the paradoxical pages of his assertively patriotic yet reverentially humanistic *Deffence*. In that famous tract he exhorts his compatriots to ‘illustrate’ the French vernacular and its literature through imitation, not of national writers and genres, but rather of the historically, linguistically and culturally distinct literatures of ancient Greece and Rome, or even of modern Italy. Significantly, in his ‘Conclusion’, this enthusiasm for what is ‘other’ is envisaged metaphorically as an enthusiastic march on Rome and Greece, the profane pillage of antiquities being presented there as but a manifestation of the highest admiration and the precondition for triumphal return and embellishment of the French patria.

A recent critic has rightly stressed that ‘the voyage to Rome was both a rhetorical figure and a cultural paradigm for the French Renaissance’, for we find an interplay between the literal, geographic journey thither and the literary, intellectual or imaginative one in several writers of the period—most notably, Michel de Montaigne. Of the French poets who visited Rome and used their presence in the Eternal City as matter for their writing, Du Bellay was easily the foremost and probably the most subtle. Throughout his Roman collections we see reorganized and transformed the preoccupations, aspirations and fruitful tensions of his earlier Parisian poetry, literary *Deffence* and other prefatory texts. The perspective is no longer that of a French humanist poet of Paris exiled in time and space from the cultural patria of ancient Rome, as well as in time (alone) from the future ideal state of his nation’s and of his own poetry and language. Rather, the perspective shifts to that of the French poet still searching through time for an idealized Rome of the past, but now located on the privileged yet ruined—even banalized—site of Rome itself, whilst he is geographically as well as temporally exiled from the now similarly idealized patria of France: the patria of his native Anjou, and of his former humanistic studies and innovative literary activities in Paris.

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2 On the *Deffence*’s significant contradictions and oscillations between France and Rome, see Margaret W. Ferguson, ‘The Exile’s Defense: Du Bellay’s *La Deffence et illustration de la langue françoysé*, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 93 (1978), 275–89.
