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‘Under British Eyes’: Italy in Addison’s and Smollett’s Travel Writing

This essay explores the different ways in which Italy and its art, culture, customs, and traditions are depicted and commented upon in two British travelogues of the eighteenth century: Joseph Addison’s Remarks upon Several Parts of Italy (1705) and Tobias Smollett’s Travels through France and Italy (1766). By dealing with various aspects of Italian life – from classical to popular culture, from landscape to art works, from places to people – these accounts contribute to the consolidation of the idea of Italy and the Italians as ‘Other’, firmly grounded on centuries-old prejudices and stereotypes about the Bel Paese. At the same time, however, the experience of travelling inevitably triggers a process of re-negotiation of the Self, whose essential features are modified in the passage from the first to the second half of the century due to a remarkable change in the way travelling itself is conceived and recorded, as well as in the traveller’s attitudes towards outward reality and personal experience.

The aim of the present paper is to explore and compare two English travel books of the eighteenth century in order to delineate the different ways in which a country like Italy was approached and experienced by English travellers of that period. The choice of the two books I will focus my attention on – Joseph Addison’s Remarks upon Several Parts of Italy (1705) and Tobias Smollett’s Travels through France and Italy (1766) was inspired by the work of another eighteenth-century author, Laurence Sterne. In both Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey, Sterne engaged with the then vogue for travel writing, aiming to establish a new approach to it through his own idiosyncratic critique of other authors who had tackled the same narrative experience.

Joseph Addison: A Classicist on the Grand Tour

In volume VII, chapter 4 of Tristram Shandy, for instance, Sterne introduces Joseph Addison as the epitome of the Grand Tourist of the beginnings of the century, the learned Classicist whose journey to Italy marks the crowning of a long period of juvenile studies and who is eager to find confirmation in reality of his virtual experiences in books. Sterne portrays Addison writing while galloping, ‘with his satchel of school-books hanging at his a – and
galling his beast’s crupper at every stroke'.¹ He is here evidently mocking the assumption which was at the very basis of the Grand Tourist’s experience, that is the dissembling tendency to observe and judge contemporary reality through the lens of the past, which Sterne manifestly decreed a distorting one.

In fact, Addison’s book, published in November 1705,² might be considered a sort of watershed in the literature of the Grand Tour, marking at the same time its apex and the beginning of a new period for travel writing. On the one hand, Addison certainly espoused the spirit of the Grand Tour, by his times a well established practice among young English aristocrats whose period abroad was meant to round off their education by improving their knowledge of foreign languages, governments and customs. On the other hand, however, his point of view was that of a young middle class man volunteering for a leading role in the political and cultural panorama of early eighteenth-century England, and the record of his continental travels actually discloses a new attention to particular aspects of Italian politics and society. Even in his attitude towards Italian nature, moreover, Addison reveals himself as a liminal figure, suspended between a typically seventeenth-century scientific approach to natural phenomena, and a new sensibility aroused by such landscapes as those offered by the Alps or the Apennines, anticipating later eighteenth-century theories of the picturesque and the sublime.

One should immediately notice that Addison’s book is far from being a travel guide: as a matter of fact, the author hardly takes any interest in the description of inns, standing posts, or other practical aspects of travelling. In the preface, he clearly states his intention to distinguish himself from previous travel writers and to do this he proposes either to set things in a new light or to accompany his descriptions with reflections different to those that have gone before. He also points out that, before leaving England, he decided to refresh his memory ‘among the classical authors’ in order to be better able ‘to compare the natural face of the country with the

² The book probably circulated in manuscript among the author’s friends before publication, as one may easily infer from Addison’s reference to ‘my book of travails’ in a letter written at The Hague in September 1703 and addressed to a certain Mr Wood: ‘I have lately receiv’d my book of travails from Mr. Fisher. It has taken a larger Tour than its authour since it went out of your hands, and made a greater voyage than that which it describes. But after having pass’d through Switzerland, Germany, Holland, and made a trip into England it is at last sent me to the Hague’. The Letters of Joseph Addison, ed. Walter Graham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 47.