

Travel to Italy

Ruth Baettig travelled for two months through Italy with a camper (Pfeifer Mobil) donated by the Pfeifer Foundation. She produced three works:

- “*Auch ich in Arkadien*”: tracing Goethe’s journey to Italy, a series of repeated pictures on postcards to which a character dressed in white has been added, the recurring figure in Baettig’s performative works for many years.
- “*Souvenirs*”: all the postcards that are not used for the photographic work are punched with a 2cm hole and stamped with the inscription “*Mi sono perso*”, and then sent to friends and art centers.
- “*Mi sono perso*”: 15 brass plates hung on the wall along the return journey from Sicily to the Swiss border. “*Mi sono perso*” is written on the plates, together with the date, in Roman numerals – the 15 “odd” days of September 2010. The selected locations are roads whose names are particularly inspiring, and worthy of experiencing.

«*Auch ich in Arkadien* (Me too in Arcadia): that is the goal and the subtitle of Goethe’s *Italian Journey*. Nothing but the proper formulation of the tourist attitude existing still nowadays: validating a preconceived image – for Goethe the image of Greek and Roman antiquity, of classicism – filling a box already there in order to say later in one’s own inner forum, “I’ve been there!” But hunting for treasures of public domain, with the aim of not feeling excluded from History and Culture, often results in a collection of clichés which is a collection of postcards. The postcards imitate the pictures of the tourist who reads tourist guides, and the pictures of the tourist imitate the postcards. And, under closer scrutiny, postcards speak less of Italy and of Italians, and more of a monumental history of art and of an “italianity” that has a precise date of birth: Goethe’s eighteenth century. After the British and the French probed the picturesque in the Italian *Grand Tour*, the Germans afforded it the consciousness and science. In this manner, they ultimately created and crystallized all those common places characterizing Italy and Italians which still constitute the backbone of Italian tourism even today. An assemblage of foreign looks, German looks, mostly gathered in Rome: from that, paradoxically, came the renowned “italianity.”

Today, a journey to Italy cannot escape this cumbersome reality of tourism, now largely mass tourism. Therefore, the “truest” path through Italy cannot but follow Goethe’s footsteps to the tip of the peninsula, and imitate the tourist attitude, sliding at every step into the postcards and shouting at every moment “me too!” Thanks to this imitation, doomed to be ironic and self-ironic, we have the opportunity to gain distance, a critical stance which deconstructs the cliché from the inside.

But Goethe’s journey, that started as a tour searching for knowledge and images to bring back home, indeed became veritable travelling. His account in *Italian Journey* describes an increasing openness to the reality he discovered in Italy. From the preconceived *images*, Goethe opens himself more and more to the *experience* of what happens to him along his road towards the heart of the Mediterranean.

Thus a journey to Italy in Goethe’s footsteps today means to underline the difference and the distance between the attitude of tourism and the attitude of travel. If at the tourist’s horizon there is the coming back home where she can pile up the captured images, at the traveller’s horizon there is only the present experience to which she entirely commits herself. The world of the tourist is basically a world of images; the world of the traveller is a world of facts and situations: her only dogma is the experience. The traveller gives herself up, abandons herself to the experience, in the experience she gets lost.

There is a critical moment of “conversion” from tourist to traveller: the moment of getting lost. In this moment the cliché falls to pieces, the postcard is punched, the image is broken down to the present reality. This is why a hole-punched postcard is the “souvenir” to send to friends far away: it is not used properly as a souvenir, but as a memento for an experience impossible to capture.

“Mi sono perso” is the paradoxical motto for the traveller, “mi sono perso” is the announcement of the capitulation in the face of reality.

When we get lost, actually, we lose only the direction of a pre-established North, we lose the organisation of the planned journey, we lose the tourist guide, we lose the predicted future. The future of the traveller regains its proper interrogative form. So the present is not already projected towards a prearranged goal, but rather regains the flesh of life. It becomes certain and tangible, thereby assuming the form of a statement inscribed on enduring metal: precisely “Mi sono perso.”

When we get lost, in reality, we are not “lost”, we are not at all desperate, but rather we rediscover the most proper sense of the “here” and “now,” and therefore the hope for the “after” too – an “after” freed from constraints, free to be explored. When we get lost, this is the opportunity to really discover what is around us at that moment, and to walk into our near future, the opportunity to *have an experience*. That happens in via Siracusa, but the suggestive play of names can help us: Corte degli Angeli, Sabbiadoro, Paradiso, Amore; then up through the peninsula, rediscovered by the traveller: Miracoli, S. Fortuna, Luce, Cerchi, Limbo, too, and Stella, Prosecco, Zuccherò, Abbondanza and Semplicità. These are the new roads when we lose the pre-conceived road. Names like the *fil rouge* of a new map. A map that does not draw the line of our path, but that our path draws as we walk».

Giuseppe Di Salvatore