

Italy



Italy, where 'I shall come to die', Italy with the loveliest women in Europe, Italy 'the most beautiful of all lands anywhere' – Virginia Woolf's responses to Italy were, especially in later life, hyperbolic. Between 1904 and 1935 she went there seven times, not counting passage through the country by train from Greece and Turkey.



An Italian Journey *Journal, September 1908*

There is not much to be said of Milan; unless it be that we entered here into Italian life. We walked out in the busy noisy streets, & felt irresponsible; tramped in the roadway; looked about a great deal without thinking much – understood vaguely that the populace were of the same mood.

There are great flat houses painted some clear colour, & decorated with bright green squares, at intervals. Flower pots make a graceful festoon of leaves on some of the ledges. It is all a little dusty, very dramatic – yellow walls defined against green plumage of parks. You exclaim Oh – & Ah – at the corners – so different from an English town in the provinces. I liken it to a sketch in water colour, by some

spirited though not quite excellent master hand. It is much more sincere & sure of itself than we are, in our Brightons & Oxfords, as though done after some design, which the nature of colour & climate suggested.

We visited the Cathedral [of Siena], on the occasion of some festival. It is striped black & white, with rose colour & blue in the arches; golden knobs; a ceiling of azure; fruits, faces, beasts, carved on every pinnacle or angle. In the chapels there were glittering images, & candles; & the high altar had all its tiers of wax alight. There were gorgeous priests, ministering here, with their backs to us, from which yellow satins gold embroidered, hung in stiff squares. One had a white hat, like the petal of a cyclamen, on his head.

It was the feast of the Virgin, & a large crowd, in their Sunday dress, had come to worship. A strange worship compared with ours! Instead of rank of seats, movements all in order, & a service like a military performance, no single worshipper here knew what his neighbour did or seemed to attend to the clerical commands. The priests themselves were passing & repassing, forming into lines, changing vestments, & rapidly carrying on the ceremonials all the time, as though they were doing a mystic rite, not understood by the people. The people looked, wandered about, sank on their knees, & rose again; their faith seemed warm & private, not to be regulated by any common need. I fancied, however, that this very decorative performance did represent to them the sacred body of their religion; sealed within these yellow & inlaid casks – I supposed that all the glories of the Heavens had this tangible form for them – the more impressive because of all these mysterious weavings & symbols.

They smell the flowers that grew in the holy fields; imagine the Cross risen, & the body upon it; it is all yellow stained, splendid, & remote. Are these priests – or are they not rather people who were present at the scene themselves? The Bishop sat on his carved throne, with his

buckled shoes pompously displayed, his hands hid beneath his satin apron, & his face composed into a mask of rosy wax, smooth, & not a little contemptuous of earthly strife.

When you walk out of the front door here [Perugia] you find yourself apparently upon a parade, with the sea beneath. A blue vapour fills in the spaces between the white columns of the parapet; & the people are leaning & looking over, as they do at the sea side. But in truth it is dry land beneath, dropped down some distance; there are curved vineyards, groves of olives, & the hills which rise against the sky seem about on the level of our heads. At sunset, of course, there is a tremendous display; clouds of flamingo scarlet, & of the shape of curled feathers; spaces of crimson, with bars upon them; hills laid against the furnace so that their little fringe of trees is visible; but I like the foreground best with its soft green & brown, & its highest light the dull white enamel of the road.

After tea, instead of rummaging the streets after the fashion of our compatriots, we choose one of the roads which we can follow from our windows, & descend into the valley. Small paths branch at intervals, & lead between the vineyards. They are stony; lead past little square farms, washed salmon pink. Italian peasants are driving their ploughs through earth which has the appearance of extreme antiquity; it is so brown & dry that all the oil which holds the clods together must have been baked out of it. A pair of oxen, who are unwieldy & much given to contemplation, carry out this clumsy labour, & are of great value, for the sake of their creamy white colour, in the brown & grey landscape.

It is perhaps because I compare Umbrian vineyards with English fields that I am slow to come at any picture of this place. The divisions at first seemed to me perplexing: I found no solitude & no wildness; there were no deep clumps of shade, no fields with long grasses. The ground is singularly bare, & stony; brittle looking granaries of old

pink brick, are dotted here & there, & perhaps there is an archway where women sit, handling maize. The snug circle of our farmyard does not exist. But the place is beautiful; the twisted little trees, now green, now black against the sky, are full of lines; lovely are the peaks in the distance, like a great encampment of tents of all sizes; here before us is Perugia on its hill, with all its long towers & square blocks massed in out line; there is no softness, nothing indistinct, but I begin to see that there is a character in this land, with its gnarled little trees, & its sharp outlines, which would soon make all other scenery insipid.

We spent the day at Assisi. It fronts us, on its hill top, some sixteen miles away, & between lies a perfectly flat space, lined with rows of trees, bearing the Tiber upon it. Assisi is another of these pyramid-shaped towns, which ascend with tier upon tier of whitish brown houses, till they culminate in a dome, or a long gallery of arches. Immense bare hills lie behind the town. When we had inspected the church we strolled through the streets. As usual, the houses are very high, & the streets narrow, so that if you laid a strip of roof across the top you would make a deep tunnel. In this instance the houses were rather splendid, with great windows & balconies, door ways fortified with stone, but all the shutters were up, or swung open idly, so that you could fancy great empty rooms within. The streets were deserted, save for a donkey cart, or an old woman squatted against the wall. The hills & the wide stretch of country visible beneath you at the end of every street seem to make these cities a little incongruous. They seem to cling peacefully to their hill top – to offer lodgment for besieged men & women, who no longer require it.

By 'the church' I take it Virginia means the double church in the Convent of St Francis, with its twenty-eight marvellous frescos by Giotto and his pupils – not often so summarily dismissed.

We are very leisurely travellers. We dip into one church or gallery in the morning, sit in our shaded rooms till it is time for tea, & the whole of our exercise consists of a gentle walk in the sunset . . . There are hills encircling us [in Umbria], which soon grow blue, though they rarely carry much weight of clouds upon them. The trees on our eminence glow, as though some yellow painters-medium were brushed over them. It is infinitely pleasant to sit & let the heat of the day recede, till a breeze springs, & it is time for dinner. There are flowers with voluminous yellow petals, in the gardens, & trees decorated as with red rosettes. They have few leaves to bear such splendour.

. . . The earth affords no shelter, no soft places, but every foot's space of it is laid bare to the eye. There are single roads, one suspects, leading from village to village. On every eminence a large white or brown villa has perched itself, so that the land, though so wild, is not lonely. No park, or clump of trees hide these naked places . . . You get the impression of an immensely old civilization; for the land everywhere is under the eyes of the cultivator, & no stretch of it is left alone.



Anglo-Italians

Although Virginia Woolf often thought of acquiring a home abroad, she had a keen cool eye for the characteristics of English expatriates, who abounded in Italy in the early years of the century.

One old lady, in particular, seems to have been sitting there [in the Brufani Palace Hotel, Perugia] since the early fifties of the last century. She has spent her life, so far as she will reveal it, in travelling & testing the merits of different pensions. She pronounces the table here the best in Italy. At the same time she shows no enthusiasm; the life of a lodger is one of perpetual hostility.

Poor, a spinster, who begins to grow old, to travel is

really her most agreeable life. I figure her the Aunt of large families of little country gentry; she has a certain distinction because she can talk of her travels. She professes to find English life lacking in colour, & sets off on these long rambling peregrinations, from one cheap pension to another, never leaving the hackneyed towns, or seeing much in them. She sits all day in a corner of the dining room, knitting, or writing in a fretful hand long letters to old friends; she waits for meals & watches the dish on its way round the table. Certain old gentilities forbid her to gobble openly, & in the pauses between the plates she discharges a vast amount of faded learning, savouring of the 60s, when she drove over the Apennines in a great sun bonnet. She knows nothing accurately, but arrogates to herself a certain authority because she first saw pictures fifty years ago . . .

Now & then, excited by an eddy of life, she ventures out into the full current of general talk – & volunteers some correction or theory of her own – at which we can only be silent, or perhaps, trusting her infirmities, smile in secret; she flounders deep, suspects some hostility, flushes, becomes emphatic – & tries to overawe us with a tremulous flourish, or venerable authorities. Poor old Lady! This venture was unsuccessful, & she retires to mumble peevishly, but her brain sinks into torpor once more. Food consoles her.

Journal, September 1908

The worst of distinguished old ladies, who have known everyone and lived an independent life, is that they become brusque and imperious without sufficient wits to alleviate the manner. Mrs Ross lives in a great villa, is the daughter of distinguished parents; the friend of writers, and the character of the country side. She sells things off her walls. She is emphatic, forcible, fixes you with her straight grey eye as though it were an honour to occupy, even for a moment, its attention. The head is massive, it is held high; the mouth is coarse and the upper lip haired. Such old

women like men, and have a number of unreasonable traditions. Pride of birth, I thought I detected; certainly she has that other pride, the pride which comes to those who have lived among the chosen spirits of the time. A word of family, and her wits were at work at once.

I know not why, but this type . . . does not much attract me. Only one position is possible if you are a young woman: you must let them adopt queenly airs, with a touch of the maternal. She summons you to sit beside her, lays her hand for a moment on yours, dismisses you the next, to make room for some weakly young man. She has them to stay with her for months – likes them best when they are big and strong but will tolerate weakness for the sake of the sex. She has led a bold life, managing for herself, and an Englishwoman who dictates to peasants is apt to become domineering. However, there can be no question of her spirit – many portraits showed the intent indomitable face, in youth and middle age, it is still the same, beneath white hair. It proved her power that her drawing room filled with guests. She seemed to enjoy sweeping them about, without much ceremony. Parties were bidden to admire the garden: young men were commanded to hand cake.

Diary, 25 April 1909

Janet Ross (1842–1927), who lived at Settignano, outside Florence, was the daughter of the formidably unconventional writer and adventurer Lucie Duff-Gordon: but she had not ‘by any means’ (says Lady Duff-Gordon’s biographer, Gordon Waterfield), ‘as wide a range of interests and sympathy’ as her mother.



In Syracuse

Letter to Vanessa Bell, 14 April 1927

We got here last night, and who should we meet driving from the station, but Osbert Sitwell, who stopped the cab and was very friendly, but he is lodged in a grand hotel out-

side the town, whereas we lodge in a cheap Italian inn, where no one speaks English, and we get delicious food, and there are only Italian officers and widows, and thank God, no Germans – so I don't suppose we shall see Osbert. There is a courtyard, with two cats in a basket, a waiter varnishing a table and an old woman picking over mattresses: I am rapidly falling in love with Italy. I think it is much more congenial than France – All the men must be womanisers. The old innkeeper cooks an omelette specially for me . . .

Last night we explored Syracuse by moonlight. But how am I to describe without boring you, particularly as you won't have drunk a bottle of wine, and be half tipsy as I was – the bay, the schooners, the blue sky, with the white pillars, like paper, and clouds crossing, and people sauntering, and a man on stilts – no it can't be done . . . I should like to go on travelling from town to town all my life, rambling about ruins and watching schooners come in, and falling in love with Italian girls.



Venice

Virginia Woolf went three times to Venice, in 1904 with a family party of five, in 1912 on her honeymoon, and in 1932 with her husband, their friend Roger Fry and his sister Margery.

There never was such an amusing and beautiful place. We have a room here right at the top just at the side of the Grand Canal: beneath all the gondolas are moored, and the gondoliers make such a noise I can't think coherently. It was the strangest dream to step out into our gondola after those two days of train . . . I can't believe it is a real place yet and I wander about open-mouthed . . . We walked all down the [Riva degli] Schiavoni last night – where the buildings looked cut out of marble, and a great gondola hung with coloured lamps floated by. But I can't find words yet . . .

Letter to Violet Dickinson, 4 April 1904

Their rooms were at the Grand Hotel on the Grand Canal. It occupied the Palazzo Fini, now government offices but next door to the Gritti Palace. Virginia called it 'a horrible big hotel', and after ten days her Venetian euphoria had worn off – she felt 'like a Bird in a Cage'. But as she said, five was too many for a visit to Venice, just as one was too few: she never forgot seeing, during her honeymoon there, a friend forlornly all alone in the Piazza.

One picture I saw – Phil Burne Jones [Sir Philip Burne-Jones] sitting in the square of St Mark's, in evening dress, alone one August night in 1912 . . . He looked dissipated & lonely, like a pierrot who had grown old & rather peevish. He wore a light overcoat & sat, his foolish nervous white face looking aged & set unhappy & eager & disillusioned, alone at a little marble table, while everyone else paraded or chattered & the band played – he had no companion – none of his smart ladies – nobody to chatter to, in his affected exaggerated voice . . .

Diary, 22 August 1929

On her third visit, en route to Greece, Virginia 'only had time for 3 churches and part of the Academia' – a night and half a day.

We take a gondola for one hour, & so cross to San Giorgio: & see the miraculous apse, & peer; & climb; & smooth our soles on the red yellow rosy pavement, raying out like the sea, with inlaid flowers: & Venetian light is pale & bright . . . Out after the play, in the theatre slung with green glass beads, onto the black tossing water, so silent, so swaying: & the poor people asked us not to overpay the traghetto [public ferry]; & there were cactuses; & a man singing in the morning; and R. [Roger] & I went to the Tiepolo church [probably the Gesuati]; & the thick yellow service with the priests weaving a web in incantation, & the little boys & the reverence & secularity & ancientness made us say This is the magic we want: & magic there must be; so long as magic keeps its place.

Diary, 18 April 1932

To Tuscany, 1933

In the early summer of 1933 Virginia and Leonard Woolf drove through France and down the Italian Riviera to Tuscany, half-thinking as they travelled that they might settle somewhere along the route.

. . . We don't like the French Riviera, or the Italian much; but if it has to be, Rapallo does it best: its bay stretched with gold silk this evening, humming scented villas; all orange blossom. Quiet women reading to children, little boats, high cliffs; a sauntering indolent luxurious evening place, where one might spend ones last penny; grown old . . .

But we don't wish to live here, shredding out our days, in these scented villas, sauntering around the harbour.

Diary, 11 May

Max Beerbohm, who in later years did not much care for Virginia's diaries, had been living and sauntering in Rapallo since 1910. In the summer of 1992 the town seemed to me a perfect nightmare of congestion, as the holiday traffic crawled and sweltered by nose to tail for Portofino.

Yes Shelley chose better than Max Beerbohm. He chose a harbour [at Lerici]: a bay; & his home, with a balcony, on which Mary stood, looks out across the sea. Sloping sailed boats were coming in this morning – a windy little town, of high pink & yellow Southern houses, not much changed I suppose; very full of the breaking of waves, very much open to the sea; & the rather desolate house standing with the sea just in front. Shelley, I suppose, bathed, walked sat on the beach there; and Mary & Mrs Williams had their coffee on the balcony. I daresay the clothes & the people were much the same. At any rate, a very good great man's house in its way . . .

Shelley's house waiting by the sea, & Shelley not coming, & Mary & Mrs Williams watching from the balcony &

then Trelawney coming from Pisa & burning the body on the shore – thats in my mind.

Diary. 12 May

Lerici is the most serene of the Italian Riviera resorts, and Shelley's house on the waterfront is desolate no longer. A plaque upon it records the tragedy of the poet's drowning, and Mary's poignant watch upon the balcony. Shelley's body was burnt on the beach at Viareggio, some twenty-five miles to the south, where it had been washed ashore.

Undoubtedly Tuscany beyond Siena is the most beautiful of all lands anywhere – it is, at the moment, every inch of it laden with flowers: then there are nightingales: but it is the hills, – no, I will not describe for your annoyance. what is to me the loveliest, the most sympathetic, and I may say Virgillian of countries: for its years since we read Virgil together and you very properly told me not to write a word about landscape or art either.

And the peasants are infinitely the nicest of our kind – oh how much preferable to the Sands, the Smyths, the Logans! My Italian lands me in all kinds of wayside conversations, as we generally lunch under olives, beside streams with frogs barking. Why didn't you come? I should have thought the pictures very good at Siena – and then I like the old maids one meets: but the truth is this is only a discovery – we must come and settle at Fabbria [in Tuscany], a little farm we found, for ever and ever. . . . Yesterday we went to a place where I shall be buried, if bones can walk – that is, Monte Oliveto; oh oh oh – Cypressess, square tanks, oxen, and not big bony hills, little velvety hills – and the monastery: and as hot as August. But I wont deny that we've had some very cold days, and some violent tempests, one at Volterra for example – all because a peasant woman whose vines were perishing, came in and offered 2 candles for rain – which promptly came.

Letter to Vanessa Bell, 17 May

Monte Oliveto Maggiore, the fourteenth-century Benedictine monastery near Siena, is now one of Tuscany's great tourist destinations, but apart from the oxen (long tractorised) has changed very little. When in 1992 I told some English pilgrims there that I was following in the footsteps of Virginia Woolf, one of them said that those Bloomsbury sort of people should not have been allowed inside.

Today [near Siena] we saw the most beautiful of views & the melancholy man. The view was like a line of poetry that makes itself; the shaped hill, all flushed with reds & greens; the elongated lines, cultivated every inch; old, wild, perfectly said, once & for all: & I walked up to a group & said What is that village? It called itself [. . .]; & the woman with the blue eyes said wont you come to my house & drink? She was famished for talk. Four or five of them buzzed round us, & I made a Ciceronian speech, about the beauty of the country. But I have no money to travel with, she said, wringing her hands. We would not go to her house – or cottage on the side of the hill, & shook hands; hers were dusty; she wanted to keep them from me; but we all shook hands, & I wished we had gone to her house, in the loveliest of all landscapes. Then, lunching by the river among the ants, we met the melancholy man. He had five or six little fish in his hands, which he had caught in his hands. We said it was very beautiful country; & he said no, he preferred the town. He had been to Florence; no, he did not like the country. He wanted to travel, but had no money; worked at some village; no he did not like the country, he repeated, with his gentle cultivated voice; no theatres, no pictures, only perfect beauty. I gave him 2 cigarettes; at first he refused, then offered us his 6 or 7 little fish. But we could not cook them at Siena, we said. No, he agreed; & so we parted.

Diary, 13 May

This should be all description – I mean of the little pointed green hills; & the white oxen, & the poplars, & the cypresses, & the sculptured shaped infinitely musical, flushed green land from here [Siena] to Abbazia [Abbey of Sant' Antimo] – that is where we went today; & couldn't find it, & asked one after another of the charming tired peasants, but none had been 4 miles beyond their range, until we came to the stone breaker, & he knew. He could not stop work to come with us, because the inspector was coming tomorrow. And he was alone, alone, all day with no one to talk to. So was the aged Maria at the Abbazio. And she mumbled & slipped her words, as she showed us into the huge bare stone building; mumbled & mumbled, about the English – how beautiful they were. Are you a Contessa? she asked me. But she didn't like Italian country either. They seem stunted, dried up; like grasshoppers, & with the manners of impoverished gentle people; sad, wise, tolerant, humorous. There was the man with the mule. He let the mule gallop away down the road. We are welcome, because we might talk; they draw round & discuss us after we're gone. Crowds of gentle kindly boys & girls always come about us, & wave & touch their hats. And nobody looks at the view – except us – at the Euganean, bone white, this evening; then there's a ruddy red farm or two; & light islands swimming here & there in the sea of shadow – for it was very showery – then there are the black stripes of cypresses round the farms; like fur ridges; & the poplars, & the streams & the nightingales singing & sudden gusts of orange blossom; & white alabaster oxen, with swinging chins – great flaps of white leather hanging under their noses – & infinite emptiness, loneliness, silence: never a new house, or a village; but only the vineyards & the olive trees, where they have always been. The hills go pale blue, washed very sharp & soft on the sky; hill after hill . . .

Diary, 15 May

Virginia had been reading too much Shelley ('Many a green isle needs must lie/ In the deep wide sea of misery'); the Euganean

Hills are 150 miles away, near Padua. The 'huge bare' Romanesque Abbey of Sant' Antimo, in its exquisite valley near Montalcino, has been sympathetically brought to life again, and now houses five Benedictine monks, besides a multitude of swallows, pigeons and hooded crows nesting in its brickwork.



Scenes of Rome, 1927

I am sure Rome is the city where I shall come to die – a few months before death however, for obviously the country round it is far the loveliest in the world. I don't myself care so much for the melodramatic mountains here, which go the colour of picture postcards at sunset; but outside Rome it is perfection – smooth, suave, flowing, classical, with the sea on one side, hills on the other, a flock of sheep here, and an olive grove. There I shall come to die.

Letter to Vanessa Bell, 9 April

Undoubtedly I shall settle here – it surpasses all my expectations: It is a holiday today and all sights are shut so we have done nothing but sit in the gardens and stroll over to St Peters. I don't know why one feels it to be so much superior to other cities – partly the colour I suppose. It is a perfect day; all the flowers are just out, there are great bushes of azalea set in the paths; Judas trees, cypresses, lawns, statues, among which go wandering the Italian nurses in their primrose and pink silks with their veils and laces and instead of being able to read Proust, as I had meant . . . I find myself undulating like a fish in and out of leaves and flowers and swimming round a vast earthenware jar which changes from orange red to leaf green – It is incredibly beautiful – oh and there's St Peters in the distance; and people sitting on the parapet, all very distinguished, the loveliest women in Europe, with little proud heads; – but you will not attach any sense to all this.

Letter to Vanessa Bell, 21 April

We rambled over the Campagna on Sunday. I suppose France is all right, and England is all right, but I have never seen anything so beautiful as this is. Figure us sitting in hot sunshine on the doorstep of a Roman ruin in a field with hawk coloured archways against a clear green grape coloured sky, silvery with mountains in the back ground. Then on the other side nothing but the Campagna, blue and green, with an almond coloured farm, with oxen and sheep, and more ruined arches, and blocks of marble fallen on the grass, and immense sword like aloes, and lovers curled up among the broken pots. Nemi perhaps you have seen. We lunched at a restaurant hung above the lake, which is almost round, very deep, with Roman ships sunk in it, and of the colour first of olive trees and then of emeralds. It was rather cloudy so the colour was always changing very slowly, and round the lake was a little path with horses and goats. We went down after lunch and found wild cyclamen and marble lapped by the water. Dear, dear, and then one goes and sits in a basement in Bloomsbury!

Letter to Vanessa Bell, 26 April

In the following year the lake at Nemi was temporarily drained, and the two ceremonial galleys found on its bottom were recovered, restored and housed in a museum: but they were destroyed by fire in 1944, allegedly by soldiers of the retreating German Army. Otherwise almost everything Virginia says about Rome will be recognisable to visitors today – and they can still stay at the luxurious hotel, the Hassler at the top of the Spanish Steps (in those days called the Hassler-New York) in which she and Leonard indulged themselves.

