

The voyages to Italy constituted a considerable phenomenon of the European culture. This cultural tradition gradually created a rich corpus of peculiar literature. Every now and then, a travel journal or a traveller's correspondence comes out that has not been published before, there are many exhibitions of the artists that sought their inspiration beyond the Alps and it was because of the rich Italian art that Italy became the final destination of the Grand Tour.

Apart from the Englishmen, the French were the most numerous group of travellers on the Apennine Peninsula. Even the political situation contributed to the impact of the Italian culture on the French one, especially the Great Italian Wars and the subsequent presence of the Medici family on the French throne.

Four texts were chosen from the plenitude of French works dedicated to the voyage to Italy: the travelogues of Montaigne, Montesquieu, Sade and Stendhal. The choice of such eminent personalities, who got famous, in the first place, through other works than those depicting the journeys over the Alps, made it possible to focus on the way this voyage influenced their further oeuvre. In their perception of Italy, both the distinct eras of cultural development to which they belonged and their diverse personalities are reflected: Montaigne's journey took place during the late Renaissance era and his Journal is an example of humanistic thought; the breadth of Montesquieu's interests makes him a fine representative of the cosmopolitan eighteenth century; Sade took a critical stance towards the Baroque architecture of Naples, but his fascination by the wild nature shows his affiliation with the aesthetics of the forthcoming end of the eighteenth century; the vehemence of Stendhal's account displays the arrival of Romanticism.

The recurring topic of the analyses of the travelogues is the Italian art. As it is one of the main motifs in the texts of Montesquieu, Sade and Stendhal, it represents an optimal basis for comparison. Stendhal and Montesquieu stand for two antipoles: Stendhal grows fascinated by the piece of art wholly and immediately, while Montesquieu scrutinizes it, detail by detail, and the criterion for his artistic judgment is his desire for precision.