



JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE: ITALIAN JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Italian Journey," one of the most important travelogues in German literature. Goethe traveled through Italy from 1786 to 1788 and described his experiences in this book. "Italian Journey" combines personal experiences with observations of art and studies of nature. The work became a model for generations of German travelers to Italy and had a lasting influence on German culture.

"Italian Journey" is a travelogue by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the most important German poet of his time. Goethe lived from 1749 to 1832 and wrote novels, dramas, and poems. His most famous work is "Faust." In September 1786, Goethe secretly left his hometown of Weimar and traveled to Italy. He stayed there for almost two years, from September 1786 to April 1788. After his return, he was a changed man. The Italian journey fundamentally altered his life and his art. Interestingly, Goethe didn't publish the book until much later. "Italian Journey" appeared in 1816-1817, almost 30 years after the actual trip. The book is based on diaries and letters Goethe wrote during the journey but was later extensively revised and embellished.

Goethe had several reasons for his Italian journey. In Weimar, he was very busy and unhappy. He worked as a minister for the Duke of Weimar and had to attend to politics, administration, and other duties. This work tired him out and left him no time to write. Goethe felt trapped by his obligations and longed for freedom. Italy seemed like a dream, a paradise where he could finally be an artist again. On September 3, 1786, he secretly fled Weimar. No one knew where he went. He traveled under the assumed name "Herr Möller" to remain unrecognized. This secrecy reveals his desperate need for change.

Besides escaping his everyday life, Goethe also had a cultural reason for the journey. He wanted to see ancient art and architecture with his own eyes. Italy boasted Roman ruins, Greek temples, and Renaissance masterpieces. For educated people of the 18th century, Italy was the land of culture and beauty, the center of European civilization. Goethe had dreamed of Italy his entire life. He knew Italian art only from books and pictures, but now he wanted to experience it all firsthand. Furthermore, Goethe was searching for himself. He was 37 years old and dissatisfied with his life. In Italy, he hoped to find answers and to grow as both an artist and a person. "Even I am in Arcadia!" he



wrote enthusiastically. Arcadia was a paradise in ancient mythology, and Goethe felt he had finally arrived at the right place.

Goethe's journey began with a trip across the Alps to northern Italy. He traveled by carriage from Weimar via Munich to the south, crossing the Alps, which was an exciting and also dangerous experience at the time. The towering mountains greatly impressed him. The first major Italian city he visited was Verona, where he toured the Roman amphitheater. He then went to Vicenza, where he saw the buildings of the architect Palladio. This clear, harmonious architecture fascinated him and influenced his aesthetic thinking. At the beginning of October, he reached Venice, the city on the water. Goethe spent two weeks in Venice and was captivated by this unique city. He visited museums and churches and strolled through the narrow streets and across the many bridges.

At the end of October 1786, Goethe arrived in Rome, the center of his journey and his main destination. He wrote with great enthusiasm: "At last I have arrived in this capital of the world!" Goethe stayed in Rome for several months. He lived in a small apartment and led a simple life. Every day he visited ruins, museums, and churches. He studied ancient sculptures in the Vatican and other museums, explored Roman ruins such as the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, and the Baths of Caracalla, admired Renaissance art by Raphael and Michelangelo, and analyzed the architecture of churches, palaces, and fountains. Goethe also met other artists in Rome, as many German painters lived there in an artistic community. He learned to draw and tried his hand at painting, but soon realized he would not become a great artist. This realization was important for him, as it helped him focus on his true strength: writing.

In February 1787, Goethe traveled further south. Naples was a vibrant, chaotic city that fascinated him with its energy and colorful bustle. The completely different atmosphere of life in the south impressed him. He even climbed Mount Vesuvius, an active volcano, which was dangerous but one of the most exciting moments of his trip. From Naples, Goethe traveled by ship to Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean. There he visited Palermo, the capital, as well as the ancient Greek temples in Segesta and Agrigento. In Taormina, he saw an ancient theater with a spectacular view of the sea and Mount Etna. Sicily was particularly important for Goethe because here he could see ancient Greek temples in their original state. He felt that he now truly understood the ancient culture, which he had previously only known from books.

In June 1787, Goethe returned to Rome and stayed there for almost another year. This second Roman period was quieter and more productive than the first. He worked intensively on his literary works. He revised his drama "Iphigenia in Tauris" and gave it its final classical form. He wrote "Egmont" and completed other projects. At the same time, he continued to study art and architecture and deepened his understanding of classical ideals. In April 1788, Goethe finally left Rome and returned to Germany. This departure was very difficult for him because he had grown to love Italy and knew that he would never return.

In his book, Goethe describes various aspects of his journey. A large part deals with art and architecture. Goethe describes in detail the paintings and sculptures he saw in museums, analyzes architectural details of churches and palaces, and develops his



theories about beauty and art. For modern readers, these sections are sometimes difficult to read because Goethe writes in great detail about specific works of art, and one needs to be familiar with these works to understand everything. But these passages show how intensively Goethe studied art and how important it was for his own artistic development.

Goethe was not only a poet but also a natural scientist, and this is evident in his descriptions of nature and landscape. He studied geology and examined rocks and volcanoes, especially during his visit to Mount Vesuvius. He was interested in botany and carefully observed the plants of Italy. He even searched for the "original plant," a theoretical basic form from which all plant species were thought to have evolved. He also described the climate, the weather, and above all, the unique light conditions in Italy. His descriptions of nature are both poetic and precise, demonstrating his ability to combine scientific observation with literary expression.

The book contains not only art and nature but also vivid descriptions of everyday life in Italy. Goethe closely observed how people lived, what they ate, the festivals and customs they observed, and how they dressed and behaved. He was an attentive observer of daily life. At times, he was critical, especially when the Italians seemed too chaotic or too loud to him. But most of the time, he was filled with admiration for their zest for life and their natural way of being. These ethnographic observations make the book a valuable historical document, showing how people lived in late 18th-century Italy.

Finally, "Italian Journey" is also an autobiography. Goethe writes openly about his feelings and moods, his artistic insights, and his personal development. He reflects extensively on his life, his art, and his place in the world. These personal passages make the book particularly moving because we can witness a great poet on his journey of self-discovery. We experience his doubts, his enthusiasm, his disappointments, and his triumphs. This openness and honesty make "Italian Journey" more than just an ordinary travelogue.

Several important themes run throughout the entire book. The central theme is education and self-discovery. For Goethe, the Italian journey was a classic educational journey in the German tradition. He traveled not only for pleasure, but to learn and grow as a person. In Italy, Goethe found himself and became calmer and more mature. The journey was like a rebirth, a transformation from an unhappy minister to a self-assured artist. He wrote: "I too am a man, therefore I am a king in Arcadia." This line reveals his newfound self-confidence and his joy in life.

Another central theme is the search for classical ideals. In Italy, Goethe sought classical beauty as exemplified by the art of antiquity and the Renaissance. This art demonstrated harmony, proportion, and clarity, and Goethe wanted to incorporate these ideals into his own art. After returning from Italy, Goethe's style changed fundamentally. His works became more classical, clearer in form, and more balanced in tone. The wild emotionality of his youthful works, such as "The Sorrows of Young Werther," gave way to a mature serenity. Goethe's "classical" phase is said to have resulted directly from his experience in Italy.

Nature also played a central role in Goethe's Italian experience. For Goethe, nature was a great teacher. In Italy, he studied plants, rocks, and landscapes and believed that



nature operates according to certain laws. Understanding these laws, he believed, is the key to understanding the world. "Nature must be felt," he wrote, emphasizing that nature cannot be grasped solely with the intellect but must also be experienced with the senses. This holistic view of nature was typical of Goethe and distinguished him from purely rationalistic scientists of his time.

Goethe was particularly fascinated by the light of the South. The Italian light was brighter and clearer than in Germany, and this light fundamentally changed his perception. Colors were more intense, contours were sharper, and everything appeared more distinct and three-dimensional. The southern light became a symbol of clarity and insight for him. In Germany, he had lived in fog and darkness, both literally and metaphorically. In Italy, he found the light that helped him see and think clearly.

The genesis of the book itself is an interesting story. During his travels, Goethe kept diaries with notes about his daily experiences. These entries were spontaneous and immediate. He also wrote regular letters, primarily to his friend Charlotte von Stein in Weimar. These letters were more personal and emotional than the diaries. These texts were fresh and captured immediate impressions, but they were not yet literary works. Almost 30 years later, between 1813 and 1817, when Goethe was an old man, he reworked these earlier texts into a book. He revised much of it, making the language more literary, adding philosophical and aesthetic reflections, and reorganizing the material. The finished book is therefore not a direct documentation of the journey, but a literary reconstruction from memory. This means that the book is more subjective and stylized than an authentic travel diary.

Goethe's language in "Italian Journey" is vivid, poetic, and reflective all at once. He describes things so precisely and vividly that the reader can picture the places before them. He uses beautiful, evocative expressions typical of his poetry. At the same time, he constantly reflects on what he sees, combining description with interpretation. The text shifts between different forms. Sometimes it consists of diary entries with precise dates, then letters to friends, and finally essay-like sections on art, nature, or philosophical questions. This mixture makes the book lively and diverse, prevents monotony, and appeals to a variety of readers' interests.

The impact and significance of Goethe's "Italian Journey" on German culture can hardly be overstated. The book made Italy the dream destination for Germans for the next two centuries. It shaped the image of Italy for several generations of Germans and became a model for countless other travelogues. Following Goethe's example, thousands of Germans traveled to Italy to see the same places he had described. They wanted to experience the same things as their great poet. Italy became a symbol of beauty and art, of freedom and joie de vivre, of culture and education. Even today, many Germans travel to Italy with Goethe's words in mind. The German longing for Italy has its literary origins here.

For Goethe himself, the Italian Journey was the most important moment of his life, one that fundamentally changed him. After Italy, his artistic style became more classical. His later works are formally more balanced, thematically more universal, and stylistically clearer than his early works. The emotional intensity of his early texts gave way to a



mature serenity. Personally, Goethe matured and grew up in Italy. He found inner peace and self-confidence. The chaotic emotions of his youth, which had often tormented him, subsided. He learned to accept himself and find his place in the world. In Italy, Goethe further developed his scientific interests. He studied botany, geology, and later optics. These studies accompanied him throughout his life and led to important scientific works, some of which remain relevant today.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's "Italian Journey" is therefore far more than an ordinary travelogue. It is a literary masterpiece that masterfully blends various genres. It is a document of personal development and self-discovery, demonstrating how travel can transform a person. It is a testament to the enduring German longing for Italy. And it is an important text of Weimar Classicism, marking Goethe's transition from his Sturm und Drang to Classicism. The book's strengths lie in its beautiful, vivid language, the successful integration of personal and cultural themes, the detailed descriptions of art and nature, and its honest self-reflection. Its weaknesses include its occasional over-detailing for modern readers, its idealized portrayal of Italy, its elitist perspective, and its lack of complete authenticity due to later stylization. Despite these limitations, "Italian Journey" remains a magnificent work that illustrates how travel educates and transforms. Goethe went to Italy as a dissatisfied minister and returned as a mature classicist. His experiences inspired generations of readers to travel to Italy themselves, seeking beauty, culture, and themselves. The famous line "Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom?" from Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister" perfectly encapsulates the German longing for Italy, and "Italian Journey" is the literary fulfillment of this longing in book form.

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