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From humanism to scepticism: the independent traveller in the seventeenth century

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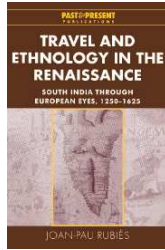
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South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625

Joan-Pau Rubiés

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10. *From humanism to scepticism: the independent traveller in the seventeenth century*

SAMUEL PURCHAS AND THE COSMOGRAPHICAL PILGRIMAGE

The English parson Samuel Purchas (1577–1626) is best known as the successor of Richard Hakluyt for the massive twenty books of his *Pilgrimes* (London, 1625), in which he collected the travel accounts of all times ‘not by one professing methodically to deliver the historie of nature according to rules of art, nor philosophically to discuss and dispute; but as in a way of discourse, by each traveller relating what in that kind he hath seene’.¹ The distinction between methodical exposition according to general analytical headings, and the original narratives of the travellers using their own words ‘in a way of discourse’, was one crucial to the culture of the late Renaissance, especially in England, and supported the new ideas of scientific method developed by contemporaries of Purchas like Francis Bacon.² Purchas himself explained this when he defined his travel collection as a kind of natural history: ‘As David prepared materials for Solomon’s temple; or (if that be too arrogant) as Alexander furnished Aristotle with huntsmen and observers of creatures to acquaint him with their diversified natures; or (if that also seeme too ambitious) as sense, by induction of particulars, yeeldeth the premisses to reasons syllogisticall arguing . . . so here Purchas and his pilgrimes minister individuall and sensible materials (as it were stones, bricks and mortar) to those universal speculators to their theoreticall structures’.³ The point was not simply to distinguish the empirical observations of the traveller and the general theories of the scholar, but rather to bring critical skills

¹ Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus posthumus; or, Purchas his pilgrimes* (London, 1625), ‘To the reader’.

² I have discussed this in ‘Instructions for travellers: teaching the eye to see’, pp. 139–90.

³ Purchas, *Hakluytus*, ‘To the reader’.

to the distance that separated them, under the guise of methodical awareness.

Unlike Bacon, Purchas was personally less interested in methodical awareness than in the shape of the temple he wished to build. Critics have often emphasized how imperfect were many of the summaries and translations of travel accounts which he laboriously prepared, especially in contrast with those of his predecessor Richard Hakluyt, who (possibly inspired by Ramusio's high standards of editorial fidelity) was careful to reproduce his documents word by word. Whilst Purchas has often been defended on the grounds that he made available much new material in print, what perhaps needs to be emphasized is that his project was more theoretical than empirical.⁴ Before being a collector of 'pilgrimes', he was a pilgrim himself – not one who physically travelled around the world, but rather a Cambridge-educated theologian who travelled by reading books from his study, with the aim of reaching that particular location expressed by his motto 'unus deus, una veritas'. Purchas's collection of 'sensible materials' was not therefore the primary focus of his work: of greater importance was the theological–geographical temple of the whole world which he had built in his mind. This found expression in his massive *Pilgrimage, or relations of the world and the religions observed in all ages and places discovered from the creation unto this present*. This earlier work (not to be confused with the *Pilgrimes*) was first published in 1613 and dedicated to the archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, a circumstance which secured for Purchas a chaplaincy to the archbishop, and shortly afterward a rectory in London.⁵

Purchas can be seen as a true successor to the author of the book by Sir John Mandeville – which helps explain why, suspending his critical faculties, he insisted on Mandeville's status as a great traveller. He was also the Protestant counterpart to Giovanni Botero (though probably not his emulator, since only the political sections of the *Relationi universali* were available in English when Purchas conceived his project). Purchas' *Pilgrimage* was essentially a universal cosmography based on all the travel literature he could lay his hands on, guided by the desire to define the place of newly discovered religious diversity in a Christian

⁴ The bibliography concerning Purchas is scarce. See, however, E. G. R. Taylor, *Late Tudor and early Stuart geography, 1583–1650* (London, 1934), pp. 53–66. The recent publication of *The Purchas Handbook*, edited by L. E. Pennington, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, 2 vols. (London, 1997), provides essential reference material and will help rectify a traditional historiographical neglect.

⁵ Published again with additions in 1614 and 1617. The fourth edition of the *Pilgrimage, or relations of the world* appeared in 1626 appended to the *Hakluytus posthumus*. It benefited from the papers collected by Hakluyt, which after his death Purchas managed to acquire despite Hakluyt's antipathy towards him.

framework, and supported by a world-historical perspective which inevitably rested on biblical and classical foundations. 'Religion is my more proper aime', he declared, and his theme was that whilst all men agreed 'that there should bee a Religion', they disagreed in their practice of it. He distinguished of course between the many heathen superstitions of Asia, Africa and America, and the 'true' religion of Christians alone – by which he meant the Protestants and especially those from Great Britain, who thus stood as a new Israel among pagans. Catholics Purchas rhetorically equated with gentile idolaters, and found standard arguments for this equation in the similarity he detected between popish rites and those of the ancient Chaldeans and Egyptians. Not only were Catholics drinking from the original fountains of paganism, they were also surpassed by the gentiles in their devotions (and here Purchas could quote the very Jesuits as witnesses to the asceticism of the devilish Indian yogis, thus taking the wind out of their own claims to sanctity).

Both Purchas's ideological stance and his method had important implications that are revealing of the tension between humanism and scepticism which characterized the seventeenth century. In this light Purchas in fact appears as a man of medieval aims and modern perspectives. The ideological implications are particularly obvious: in order to maintain his claims in favour of Christianity, Purchas needed both to cleanse it from any superstition which might be seen as idolatrous – as Protestants insisted when they criticized Catholics – and to justify his claims historically with a critical scrutiny of revelation. This could, however, only lead to the infinite search for an impossible point of ecclesiastical purity, a process which effectively condemned seventeenth-century Protestantism to further fragmentation, and to the ultimate disintegration of the authority of the Bible from an antiquarian critical perspective (which implied a historicization of the Jewish sources of Christian revelation). What made this process uncontrollable was not only the implicit challenge of authority which followed from any open act of reformation, but also the fact that the defence of the truth of Christianity necessitated the monogenistic assumption of the unity of mankind, expressed in Purchas's thesis that the religious instinct was universal. He needed to exclude atheism as an effective possibility. The empirical evidence of gentile idolatry was therefore an argument against scepticism, and justified the reader's journey through the ugly face of its multiplicity – but it could be challenged if Europeans declared themselves atheists, or if they successfully proved that gentiles in China were so. Arguments about natural religion and atheism, like the related arguments about the age of the world or about the origins of the American Indians, came to dominate the seventeenth century because of their theological

implications. There was nothing that men like Purchas could do to bury a debate that their own antiquarian perspective made inevitable, and which effectively led to the Socinian and vaguely deist beliefs of the Enlightenment.

In this ideological context, the importance of Purchas's work really lay in the method which he had proclaimed of giving the voice of truth to the individual travellers, and then trying to arrange their observations into a coherent whole. The often noted imperfections of Purchas's own laborious execution are really secondary. In the *Pilgrimage* the material was methodically organized in a massive synthesis so as to cover all places and then, within each place, to offer a full historical sequence organized according to the chronology of travellers' reports. Unfortunately, the staggering multiplicity of the sources, combined with Purchas's personal limitations, meant that in reality this universal history of religion was repetitious and often failed to maintain a steady chronological progression. The example of 'the kingdome of Narsinga and Bisnagar' is again perfectly illustrative.⁶ No writer before Purchas had assembled so much from so many writers about this kingdom – in this sense his account stands as the true culmination of the process started by Conti and Poggio 200 years earlier, when they joined together the authorities of empirical traveller and secular humanist to place 'Bizengalia' on the European map of the world. Purchas thus combined modern authors like Barros, Osório, Federici, Botero, Linschoten, Floris and Balbi, even Jesuit authorities like du Jarric, with older writers like Pordenone, Mandeville, Conti and Varthema. His account ranged from the earliest European reports of South Indian rites and customs to the latest Jesuit descriptions of the court of Venkata II or the nayakas of Gingee and Madurai. However, although he described the location of Bisnagar and the power of its kings, his aim was not to offer a proper history of the kingdom, but simply to describe its religion as idolatrous and cruel, to emphasize the power of brahmins as sectarian and ridicule their beliefs about the creation of the world, and to locate the Christian legend of Saint Thomas in this heathen landscape. He was essentially following the Jesuits here, and he even described Nobili's discoveries and disputations, not really aware of the controversial implications of his method.

Whilst Purchas failed in his attempt to synthesize his material effectively, he in fact returned the authority of discourse to the individual authors whose accounts he used, first within the structure of the *Pilgrimage*, and then, more clearly, in his continuation of Hakluyt's task with the *Pilgrimes*. That massive body of evidence, like the sixteenth-

⁶ Purchas, *Pilgrimage*, book V, chap. 11.

century collections which inspired him, and like those others which were published later in the seventeenth century (notably the *Relations de divers voyages curieux* by Melchisédech Thévenot in France), emerged now as a key instrument for the philosopher in Europe. In this way the historical perspective created by the antiquarian scholarship of humanist cosmographers and theologians fell increasingly into the hands of the rationalist philosopher, with his own secular approach to the questions of mankind's role in creation, of the very character of creation, and even of the anthropological nature of religious beliefs.

What is perhaps most important is that the humanist philosopher was not simply competing against the clerical authorities for the interpretation of merchant accounts and missionary letters, with their peculiar limitations of perspective: he was also often travelling to the East, as a merchant-humanist, as a gentleman-humanist or even as an educated adventurer. The legacy of the travel literature of the Renaissance to the seventeenth-century transformation of the European discourse on human diversity therefore needs to be analysed at two levels: as a change in the quality of the secular gaze of the authoritative observer, and as a change in the assumptions that governed the ethnological debate, from an essentially theological language towards a fully secular understanding of nature and history. In the following pages I shall seek to illustrate these two themes through the remarkable example of the Italian traveller Pietro della Valle (1586–1652). In his concrete ideological context, della Valle stands as a lay example of that Roman Catholic synthesis of the baroque age which, as we saw when discussing Nobili, unwittingly mediated between the chivalric piety of the Counter-Reformation and the corrosive distinctions of an increasingly analytical historical discourse. But as representative of a type, his significance is larger: he is also a counter-figure to the armchair cosmographer, Protestant or Catholic. By revealing the open-ended character of the antiquarian project by means of his own reflective gaze, the educated traveller eroded the authority of writers like Botero and Purchas, and especially their theological bias, in ways that would eventually elude the controls of any particular system of ideological censorship.

PIETRO DELLA VALLE AND THE PILGRIMAGE OF HUMANIST WISDOM

I carried with me from Persia a great desire to go to Cambay because of what I had heard about it, having been told that in that city, which is one of the most ancient of India, the gentile people are very numerous and beyond measure observant of their rites, so that there

more than anywhere else I would be able to see many fine curiosities [*belle curiosità*] of these idolaters.⁷

With this unambiguous declaration of intellectual curiosity, the Roman aristocrat Pietro della Valle introduced in a letter of 1623 his expedition from the Dutch factory at Surat (where despite being Catholic he was kindly hosted as a gentleman-traveller) towards the mysterious customs, rites and temples of gentile India. Pietro della Valle was particularly aware of the diversity of oriental nations and religions, and of the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, since he had already spent more than eight years travelling in the dominions of the Ottoman Turks and at the court of the Persian Shah Abbas.⁸ He learnt

⁷ *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il pellegrino descritti da liu medesimo in lettere familiari all'erudito suo amico Mario Schipano. Parte terza, cioè l'India, co'l ritorno alla patria* (Rome, 1663), p. 36 (hereafter *India*). This is part of the first complete and more reliable edition of the *Viaggi*, published in Rome by Biagio Deversin between 1658 and 1663, including: part II concerning *Persia*, in two volumes (1658); a second edition of part I concerning *Turkey* (1662); finally part III concerning *India* (1663). The printers were Vitale Mascardi and (for the second printing) Iacomo Dragondelli. The first part, the letters from Turkey, had been previously published in 1650 by della Valle himself before his death. However, only the 1662 reprint also includes the life of della Valle by Giovan Pietro Bellori, and an engraving of the author (drawn during his lifetime). There is no modern critical edition of the Italian text, except for the first volume of the second part, concerning *Persia*, which was published as *I viaggi di Pietro della Valle. Lettere dalla Persia*, vol. I, ed. by F. Gaeta and L. Lockhart (Rome, 1972) (hereafter *Lettere dalla Persia*). I have used this superior text for quotations from this section. One of the contributions of this excellent edition is the restoration of passages suppressed by ecclesiastical censorship because they dealt with Christian theology or missionary policy, from the clean copy of the letters prepared for the publishers by della Valle, and now kept in the Società Geografica Italiana (as already noted in I. Ciampi, *Della vita e delle opera di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino* (Rome, 1880); however della Valle died before he could supervise the edition of the Indian letters). Even more valuable, however, is the original journal of della Valle covering the years 1616–26, from which he then wrote the letters which he sent to Mario Schipano in Naples, with small alterations. I have consulted this journal (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), Ms. Ottob. 3,382) for the sections on India, and have been able to ascertain that on the whole della Valle simply copied a chunk of his journal each time he wrote to Schipano, adding, however, an introductory paragraph, and including the marginalia. The journal includes words and inscriptions in oriental languages not found in the printed edition, but on the whole the published letters (excepting censored passages) represented the journal as he wrote it. In English there exists the generally reliable early translation by George Havers (1664), edited and annotated for the Hakluyt Society as *The travels of Pietro della Valle in India from the old English translation of 1664 by G. Havers*, ed. by E. Grey, 2 vols. (London, 1892). The modern version by George Bull (ed) *The pilgrim. The travels of Pietro della Valle* (London, 1990), improves Grey's translation but unfortunately is only an abridgement. I have benefited from these translations for my own and, as indicated, I have occasionally followed George Bull's.

⁸ Della Valle began his travels in 1614 as a pilgrim in order to forget a frustrated love. After visiting Constantinople and Egypt, he crossed Palestine towards Syria, fulfilling his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. However, instead of going back home he turned towards Baghdad in 1616, where he married. He went on to Isfahan, and spent the next six years in Persia (January 1617 to January 1623). He finally went on to Surat and then to Goa in

some Arabic and spoke Turkish and Persian fluently, copied ancient inscriptions, collected oriental manuscripts, dug up Egyptian mummies, researched Arabic science, translated or even composed Persian literature, and dressed according to the custom of each place. In Baghdad he had also fallen in love with and married Sitti Maani Joerida, a Syrian Christian woman (Arabic-speaking and Nestorian) from a well-established family. After her tragic death in Persia, he carried with him her embalmed body, in order to bury it later with due aristocratic pomp in his native Rome.⁹

There could be no doubt for the European reader of della Valle's fifty-four long and detailed letters, which were originally published in Italian in the middle of the seventeenth century, that he was an uncommon traveller.¹⁰ Self-styled 'the pilgrim', his pilgrimage was decisively a pilgrimage of curiosity. However, unlike the adventurer Varthema who had preceded him by over more than a century, he was not an obscure figure with unclear aims who had picked up his rhetoric of self-fashioning from echoes of humanist intellectual culture: rather, della Valle was a truly well-educated gentleman, with connections with the Roman court,

India, which he used as a base to visit the gentile petty courts of Ikkeri and Olala. In 1624 he began his return journey, reaching Rome in 1626 through the Middle East and southern Italy.

⁹ Della Valle met his 'Babylonian' bride in the autumn of 1616, when she was eighteen, and (although she was technically a Nestorian Christian) they married within a few weeks. In order to defeat his religious scruples della Valle noted that for Maani and her family Nestorianism was an ethnic identity rather than a doctrinal position, so that 'the biggest error found among them today may well be ignorance'. Her family followed della Valle and Maani to Persia, but the attempt to settle a Syrian-Catholic Christian community near Isfahan, under Rome's ecclesiastical authority, eventually failed. Having decided to leave Persia, in 1621, and on the way to Hormuz, Maani fell ill and died after a miscarriage. In order to transport her embalmed body, della Valle had to hide it from the crew of the English ship which took him to Surat. On his return to Rome he published an account of her magnificent Christian burial (*Nel funerale de Sitti Maani Gioerida sua consorte*, Rome, 1627). Soon afterwards he married (not without scandal in the Roman court) Mariuccia, an orphan girl adopted in Persia by his former wife, and who accompanied Pietro to India and Europe.

¹⁰ Della Valle's letters, divided into three parts, were published in Rome long after his return in 1626. In 1650 the eighteen letters from 'Turkey', including all the Ottoman dominions appeared, in 1658 the eighteen letters from Persia, in two volumes because they were longer, and in 1663, eighteen further letters from India, including the return home. Thus the Persian and Indian letters were all published after della Valle's death in 1652 by his sons. They suffered some cuts by the ecclesiastical censors. Originally della Valle had arranged to send the letters regularly to his Neapolitan friend Mario Schipano, who was supposed to edit them for publication (although he failed to do so). It is likely that it was in order to avoid the rigid ecclesiastical censorship of baroque Rome that della Valle, despite his social standing, delayed their publication on his return. The manuscript della Valle prepared for the publisher was generally a faithful reproduction of his letters, which themselves followed faithfully his journal with the mere addition of some introductory material.

and a man fully aware that he was creating his own myth as traveller from the social and religious values of the chivalric Renaissance and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. He did not hide behind his writing. His letters were in fact his carefully kept and extremely detailed journal, periodically dispatched to a friend in Europe in large chunks. With their publication, Europe was no longer being offered just another contribution to the growing number of books of travels written by merchants, missionaries and adventurers, which scholars like Botero and Purchas could then collect and summarize: della Valle gave the European reader an authoritative lay voice which not only observed, but also discoursed, about all the subjects of scientific curiosity of the age.¹¹ Politics, religion, manners, morality, music, food and dress, landscape, antiquities and natural history were all open to the traveller's scrutiny, whose insights into oriental matters were personal and, at the same time, informed by previous reading (della Valle did not hesitate to correct written authorities in the light of his experience for the benefit of the empirical record). Della Valle was both the recorder and the interpreter of the East: his ethnological language was no longer the spontaneous description of customs and rituals, nor was his religious discourse simply one of observation and condemnation. Instead, della Valle compared and researched, asked questions and listened to answers. Although he was not really a thinker, although he never hinted at any identity other than that of a Catholic Christian with a great deal of aristocratic self-importance, and although his linguistic skills and observations were often still limited (which led him to a number of superficial judgements), this self-styled pilgrim and citizen of the world opened his mind to both Europeans and non-Europeans, Christians and non-Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics.¹²

¹¹ Possibly the closest model were the Latin letters of the Flemish humanist Ogier of Busbecq, ambassador of Emperor Ferdinand to the Ottoman court in 1555–62, which were published through the 1580s as addressed to his friend Nicholas Michault (albeit in a fictionalized, rhetorically elaborated form). A full version appeared in Leyden in 1633. For the more recent scholarship see Z. R. W. M. von Martels, 'Augerius Gisenius Busbequius: leven en werk van de keizerlijke gezant aan het hof van Süleyman de Grote. Een biografische, literaire en historische studie met editie van onuitgegeven teksten' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Groningen, 1989). Della Valle, whose style is more spontaneous but less ironic, in effect belongs to a very different generation.

¹² I must therefore disagree with the judgement of J. D. Gurney, who in his otherwise excellent article 'Pietro della Valle and the limits of perception', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 49 (1986): 193–216, argues for della Valle's subservience to conventional Renaissance stereotypes. Focusing on della Valle's crucial six-year Persian experience, Gurney emphasizes the traveller's aristocratic self-fashioning as a reason for his profound ethnocentrism, despite all his efforts to learn languages, so that only his casual discovery of the heterodox and eclectic intellectual life of Lar in 1622 stands in opposition to a lack of cultural relativism in many of his previous observations. Gurney

Guided by his own religious belief in the universality of the human spirit, which he formulated in the Neoplatonic and Neostoic language of the late Renaissance, della Valle in effect tested the limits of humanity. His own marriage to an oriental Christian, a romantic rather than a purely practical action, stands as proof and metaphor for this attitude, but the example of a *sati* from Ikkeri in Karnataka is perhaps even more revealing: for della Valle a woman who was planning to throw herself into her husband's funeral pyre deserved more than just the stereotyped horror and compassion of the traditional European accounts. Thus breaking with a literary tradition which went back to the fourteenth century, he individualised her experience, recorded her words, and then composed for her a few sonnets.

In fact della Valle's conversation with Giaccamà, the Telugu *sati* of Ikkeri, was the culmination of a desire to penetrate gentile India as a peculiar cultural reality. This desire had formed in Persia, inspired by hearsay and occasional contact with Indian merchants, especially Gujarati Banians.¹³ It had been disciplined by the reading of ancient writers like Strabo and Herodotus, so that when della Valle initiated his intensive tour of the temples of Cambay from his base at Surat he was ready to develop a theory of Hinduism based on the allegorical analogy between Graeco-Egyptian and brahminical doctrines. A visit to a 'hospital of birds' was therefore not only an act of curiosity, but also illustrated the

is certainly right in stating that della Valle's idealized politics were still those of a crusader-missionary, and that his taste was fastidiously aristocratic according to Italian conventions (the fact that he could easily pay for his own travels over so many years is of course significant). However, it is inappropriate to stress 'thorough ethnocentrism' in someone who went as far as della Valle did in his attempt to understand sympathetically and with penetration people from different religious backgrounds, with very few real precedents in his own culture (Montaigne himself would have insisted that the evidence of cultural relativism was an argument for modestly keeping to one's own tradition, however flawed, rather than imagining that one could find better customs elsewhere). Obviously it was not a matter for della Valle to gratuitously drop his Catholic militancy altogether, nor to look at other cultures from assumptions other than his own – in this sense his ethnocentrism was inevitable, and any question about 'limits of perception', rather than 'logic of perception', is bound to produce this result. What della Valle did that was original was to often actually change his initial impressions through continuous contact and curious conversation, something remarkable because, whilst all cultures are self-centred, not all of them are open to learning from the other. Della Valle's 'classical and Christian' lenses through which he viewed oriental societies (to use Gurney's apt metaphor) did not blind him to the appreciation of diversity, because those lenses had a universalizing component as well as a parochial one. He sought for true nobility and true love among foreigners – and, by implication, for the universal contents of civilization and knowledge. It was not a matter of putting his European lenses aside, but rather of using them with an open mind, something which, from a comparative perspective, della Valle cannot really be accused of having failed to accomplish.

¹³ The Gujarati Banians (*Vanias*) were a very prominent elite group of Hindu and Jain merchants.

gentiles' rigorous observation of superstitions according to a universal system of idolatry: 'for as the Indian gentiles, along with Pythagoras and the ancient Egyptians (the first authors of this opinion, according to Herodotus), believe in the transmigration of souls, not only from man to man but also from man to brute beast, they account it no less a work of charity to do good to animals than to men'.¹⁴

As it turned out, della Valle's experience in Gujarat was only a prologue to his Indian experience. His analysis of Hinduism did not depend on a single methodical exposition, but instead grew through the spontaneous observations of his journal, which he continued in southern India. By following this progression we can ascertain that the traveller allowed new experiences to alter his views. Thus in Goa della Valle was confronted with the reality of an Indo-Portuguese society whose political decline, as he had begun to suspect in Persia, did not tally with the image created by historians like Barros. Instead, he described a society with few real Portuguese and many wretched naked slaves, a society whose ostentatious, xenophobic and prudish attitudes (whether originally Portuguese, or perhaps specifically Indo-Portuguese, this he could not fully judge) the Italian sometimes found more alien and distasteful than those of many oriental peoples.¹⁵ In contrast, his readiness to praise the Dutch for their kindness and humanity suggests that a European identity based on polite civility could be more powerful than one based on religious confession.¹⁶

Paradoxically, this alienation from the Catholic Europeans in India stimulated della Valle to attempt a more intimate, subtler understanding of the oriental gentile. Goa in effect was an opportunity for a more ambitious undertaking: to visit Indian gentiles in lands where their religion could be observed in a pure state. It is striking the extent to which della Valle formulated this as his particular desire, in his own words 'to see some land of the gentiles where they themselves have dominion and observe their rites without being subjected to Christians or

¹⁴ Bull (ed.) *The pilgrim*, p. 222.

¹⁵ Della Valle was upset in particular by the suspicion that fell over him for travelling with his Georgian foster-daughter Mariuccia, a girl of about thirteen years old in 1623. They were forced to live separately in Goa. He attributed this suspicion to the incestuous habits of the Portuguese (della Valle, *India*, p. 119). Della Valle would, however, later marry this same Mariuccia on his return to Rome, a decision which caused much suspicion and disapproval amongst his aristocratic peers. She added fourteen children to his already existing illegitimate issue.

¹⁶ For his praise of the Dutch see *ibid.*, p. 24. Despite his contempt for the Portuguese, della Valle made many friends in Goa, a number of them priests, and also acted as informer on Persian affairs to the viceroy, Don Francisco da Gama, who treated him courteously. But he found as much fault with the unwise policies of the Portuguese in India as with their unrefined manners.

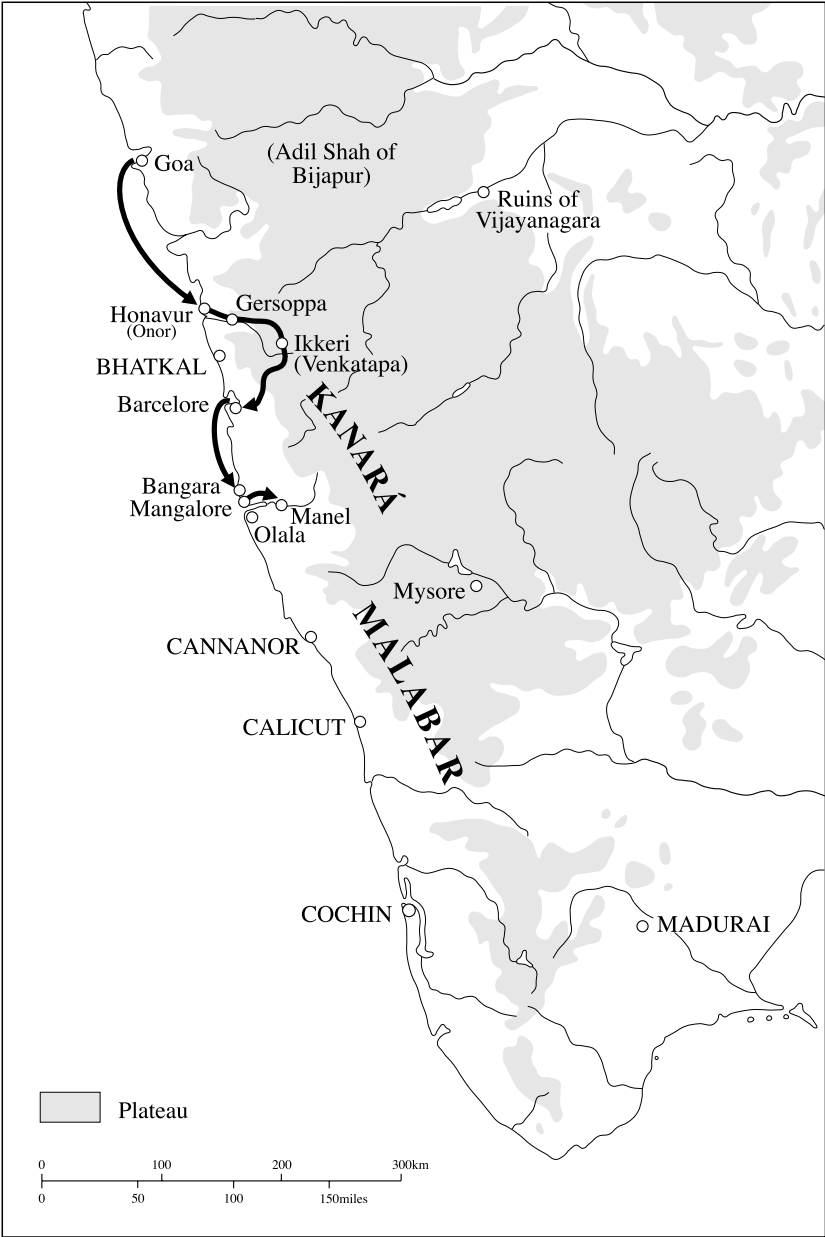
Muslims'.¹⁷ A Portuguese embassy to the ruler of Ikkeri, Venkatapa Nayaka, one of those military chiefs who had succeeded in establishing his power on the ruins of the fragmented authority of Vijayanagara, proved the perfect opportunity for an expedition upcountry from Honavur across the mountains of northern Karnataka.¹⁸ This trip, and the return through Mangalore in order to visit the queen of Olala (see map 2), allowed della Valle to have a number of dialogues with the petty kings and queens of southern India, pitching his now well-developed identity as a curious gentleman-traveller from Rome (in India he returned to wearing European garb) against the humanity of gentile idolaters.

I shall discuss three of these dialogues which are especially revealing of the distance that separated della Valle from the practical aims of sixteenth-century travellers. The first one is the encounter with Venkatapa. Although his growing influence above the Kanarese coast created problems for the Portuguese, the modesty of his court could hardly represent a model of gentile kingship for an aristocrat whose immediate European referents were the Papacy on the one hand and the Spanish monarchy on the other, and whose oriental experiences had allowed him closely to observe Ottoman and Persian grandeur in Constantinople and Isfahan. Della Valle's trip to Ikkeri thus constituted a confrontation with the new dimensions of South Indian kingship. In his letter written from Goa in October 1623, before departing, he introduced this Indian ruler as the local inheritor of Vijayanagara authority:

This prince Venkatapà Naieka used to be a vassal and minister of the great king of Vidià-Nagar [Vijayanagara], which the Portuguese improperly call Bisnagà. But after the fall of the king of Vidià-Nagar, who a few years ago, with his death, lost a great part of his state and was almost extinguished (which was caused by wars raised against him by his neighbours), Venkatapà Naieka, like many other nayakas who used to be his vassals and ministers, became absolute prince of that part of the state which he had under his care; which, because he is a good soldier, he has increased a great deal, occupying the lands of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁸ The embassy of 1623 was motivated by the recent expansion of Ikkeri to the Kanarese coast, where the Portuguese obtained much of their pepper in this period. Since 1569, exploiting the retreat of native power after the battle of Talikota, the Portuguese controlled the ports of Honavur, Barcelore and Mangalore. However, in 1618 their local allies (and some of their own troops) were defeated by the forces of Ikkeri. This forced the Portuguese to send an ambassador, a former horse-trader called João Fernandes Leitão, to seek an agreement with Venkatapa, who naturally wanted to sell the pepper at a higher price and exploit a monopoly in his lands. Della Valle had befriended Leitão and was therefore able to accompany him.



Map 2 Pietro della Valle's journey to Ikkeri and Olala

many other nayakas and petty princes who were his neighbours. With all this, his reputation has grown so much that, after also going to war against the Portuguese and giving them a good beating, now they not only treat him as friend, and try to keep his friendship, but in order to consolidate it they even send this embassy in the name of the king of Portugal.¹⁹

What is striking about della Valle's account of this embassy is that his contempt for the increasing weakness of the Portuguese (and their inflated chivalric rhetoric) was matched by his scepticism about Venkatapa's claims to kingship.²⁰ The native ruler possessed no monumental armies, cities or palaces, but only modest towns and small forts. In fact, the traveller's attention was increasingly diverted to the observation of the landscape, which impressed him for its pastoral beauty.²¹ Della Valle also explored with keen interest the temples and religious customs of the Virasaiva sect which predominated in those lands (the nayaka was himself a *lingayat*). Whilst the natural and social setting of southern India came to life in the pages of his journal, della Valle's judgement of the royal court became harsher:

I call him king because the Portuguese themselves and the Indians in imitation do so, but in truth Venkatapà Naieka does not deserve to be called king – not only because his predecessors were a few years ago vassals and simple Nayakas (that is feudatory princes, or rather provincial governors under the king of Vijayanagara), so that today he reigns as absolute ruler by usurpation, and in effect he is no more than a rebel . . . but also much more by reason of the small size of his territory, however great it may be in comparison with that held by other Indian gentile princes . . . In short, Venkatapà Naieka, although now absolute, should in my opinion be called a petty king rather than a king.²²

¹⁹ Della Valle, *India*, p. 138. At the time of della Valle's visit the eastern kingdom of Vijayanagara, caught in a war of succession, no longer exercised authority in Kanara.

²⁰ Despite the Portuguese tendency to portray their Asian opponents as kings and emperors, a tendency clearly reminiscent of chivalric romances, Venkatapa Nayaka had 'neither state, court nor appearance befitting a true king' (*ibid.*, p. 154).

²¹ The pastoral beauty of the landscape during the passage towards Gersoppa is admired as 'one of the most delightful journeys that I ever made in my life' (*ibid.*, p. 158). Climbing the Ghat, della Valle compares it favourably with the Italian Apennines, except for the fact that the latter are more urbanized and sumptuous, 'the Indian Ghat having no other beauty besides what nature, liberal yet unpolished, gives it' (p.160). Whilst the combination of 'city, lakes, fields and woods mingled together' made Ikkeri a very pleasant town, with its dark and smallish houses it was not a model of urban civilization.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 177–8. It is certainly the case that the dynasty of Keladi chiefs from which Venkatapa descended did appropriate the claims to kingship of the Vijayanagara tradition throughout the seventeenth century, as exemplified in the Sanskrit poem *Sivatattvaratnakara*, written c. 1709 by a member of the family, the Shaiva chief Keladi

The arrival at the capital, and the first ceremonial audience, would only confirm della Valle's ironic distance with respect to both the native ruler and the embassy's aims. The travellers were taken through successive gates to meet the king and his courtiers, towards a restricted space which was therefore symbolically defined as qualitatively superior. However, this message did not impress della Valle: 'all in all there were few people, a small show and little wealth, signs which demonstrated the smallness of this court and prince'.²³ His detailed description clearly 'decoded' the ceremonial exchange that followed as a symbolic interaction, involving the creation of a shared language of honour through which power was both used and acquired. The real negotiations, which took place behind the scenes, only confirmed what had been obvious through this ritual exchange: the Portuguese were being humiliated by an impudent Indian chief. Della Valle believed that it was in fact their own fault: they lacked true knowledge of politics, and royal ministers like the ambassador and former horse-trader Fernandes Leitão commonly looked at their own interest rather than the interest of their state. The portrait of native pettiness was in effect also a portrait of Portuguese decline.

But the fact that both partners of the exchange were undistinguished did not disentangle della Valle from his own obligation personally to behave according to a sophisticated sense of decorum. He carefully chose black silk for his garments, to mark discretely his personal mourning for his wife. If he willingly occupied the last place in the room (secretly laughing within) it was only because he wanted to indulge the vanity of the Portuguese. However, he made sure that his position as curious Roman traveller, who had been in the greatest courts of the East, was made known. In fact the attention of the journal shifts from the embassy itself to the fact that della Valle, with his superior intellectual standpoint, was observing native customs. He was able to determine the latitude of Ikkeri and place it in the scientific map of the world. He was also repeatedly invited to admire the dexterity of temple dancing girls (which he did, although deploring their movements as either extravagant or lascivious), and the court was even disappointed when he failed to attend a wrestling match. By the end of his stay of a few weeks in November

Basava (Krishnaswami Aiyangar, *Sources of Vijayanagara history*, pp. 194–202 and 337–64). Among other things, the poem described the construction of Ikkeri as a beautiful and magnificent capital, and Venkatapa as a great warrior and religious, even literary patron – in fact the perfect dharmic ruler. Modern historians accept that Venkatapa's rule (1602–29) was crucial for the consolidation of the royal claims of the new dynasty.

²³ Della Valle, *India*, pp. 183–4.

1623, the traveller had effectively transformed his marginality as neutral observer into a position of cultural authority, emerging as victor in a symbolic contest which transcended its local context. The kings of both India and Spain, despite all their ritual trappings, had been de-mystified by his gaze.

Similar analyses may be applied to della Valle's encounters with the queen of Olala and the king of Calicut. Any idea that the king was the centre of a religious and political system – the idea which had sustained both native and foreign descriptions of Vijayanagara from the Middle Ages – was abandoned, and the figures in the landscape instead became humanized. The meeting with the queen of Olala is of particular importance because of the significance that della Valle attached to female figures as inspiration for his romantic vision across cultures. Della Valle was especially interested in codes of honour.²⁴ Although he understood that kingship in India was often through matrilineal succession, he did not believe this to be in itself dishonourable (in fact he acknowledged that the reason the natives gave, that matrilineal succession was more secure, was surely correct). However, the strict observation of specific caste rules he found less acceptable: in Calicut nayar women had as many men as they pleased, in Ikkeri the king was expected to have various wives, and everywhere temple dancing girls were also public prostitutes.²⁵

The queen of Olala represented another chance to meet an interesting figure, one about whom he had already read in Portuguese chronicles when he was in Persia, and made special because she was both a female sovereign, 'something extraordinary in other countries', and gentile in religion (see plate 11). Her main exploits consisted of having divorced her husband and neighbour, the king of Banguel, and then resisted him and his allies the Portuguese with a decisive victory in 1618, with the help of Venkatapa Nayaka (although the price she had to pay was increasing submission to her new protector). Della Valle went especially to a remote village where the queen was staying and accosted her in the street, immediately establishing his prerogative as traveller-observer:

we saw from afar the queen of Olala coming towards us, on foot, alone without any other woman, only accompanied by four or six foot soldiers before her, all naked after their manner except a cloth over

²⁴ In this trip he also reported stories about the 'base' behaviour of the queen of Gersoppa, who accepted a low-caste man as her champion, and the 'dignified' example of Venkatapa's wife, who refused to have intercourse with him after he had slept with a Moorish woman.

²⁵ For della Valle's brief observations about matrilineal succession and the nayar women see, *India*, pp. 274 and 285–6.



Plate 11 Pietro della Valle meets the queen of Olala, as depicted (imaginatively) in the German edition of his letters, *Reiss-Beschreibung in unterschiedliche theile der welt* (Geneva, 1674). The Swiss-German editor actually used the engravings from the Dutch edition. *Der voortreffelkyke reizen van Pietro della Valle* (Amsterdam, 1664–5), with slight variations (especially in the facial expressions). It is remarkable how rapidly the Dutch, French, English and German translations followed the complete original Italian.

their shame, and another like a sheet worn across the shoulders as a cape. Each had a sword in his hand, or at most a sword and buckler. There were also as many behind her of the same sort, one of them carrying a rather ordinary umbrella made of palm-leaves over her. She was as black as a natural Ethiopian [African], fat and broad-waisted, but not heavy, for she walked rather nimbly. Her age, it seemed to me, was about forty, although the Portuguese had described her to me as being much older. She was clothed, or rather covered from the waist down, with a plain piece of coarse white cotton, and her feet were bare as is usual among gentile Indian women, whichever their social condition . . . Above the waist the queen was naked, but with a similar cloth tied round her head and falling over her breasts and shoulders. In brief, her aspect and habit were, to tell the truth, more those of a kitchen wench or laundress than a delicate and noble queen.²⁶

Della Valle was not, however, attempting to deride the idea of feminine majesty. The queen, Abag-Devi, showed her royal quality 'in her speech rather than her presence', with her graceful voice and judicious words. Even though her corpulence (della Valle noted) was a bit too obvious below her waist, as a result of the Indian custom of wearing the cotton garb quite tight, she must have been beautiful when she was young. Della Valle – this is what matters – considered a conversation with her no less curious and interesting than one with Shah Abbas. He was quick to distance himself from the discredited image of the Portuguese by stating his Roman identity, before explaining that, after travelling the world for ten years he had been moved by the fame of the queen's qualities to come and offer his service to her. It is difficult to believe that the queen was much impressed by this pompous introduction (on a later occasion she refused to receive della Valle again), and there was perhaps some sarcasm in her asking what the traveller wished to see in those woods of hers if, as he claimed, he had already seen the courts of the Great Turk, the Persian, the Mughal, and her immediate overlord Venkatapa Nayaka.

In fact, the queen (who was busy supervising some irrigation system) had been forewarned of the visit of the extravagant gentleman. She asked him about his health whilst travelling in so many countries, and whether he had left home for some love or similar tragic cause. She had actually hit upon the original cause of della Valle's pilgrimage, his desire to recover from a woman's disfavour, and yet (as he writes) 'I concealed my first misfortunes and told the queen that I had not left my country for any such reason, but only out of a desire to see divers countries and

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

customs, and to learn many things which are learnt by travelling the world.²⁷ The significance of della Valle's lie was not any sense of superiority, but rather the need to support the Ulysses-like persona which he had acquired throughout his travels. This persona required that others identified him for what he had become in order to establish an aristocracy of polite curiosity across cultural barriers. However humble the Indian gentiles, however mistaken their worship, a simple detail could sustain the universality of both female and royal dignities. He thus considered that he honoured the wench-looking queen by keeping his head uncovered whilst talking to her.

Perhaps the encounter which best exemplifies della Valle's quest for a positive and universal human quality behind cultural and religious differences is the dialogue with the *sati* Giaccamà, with whom he conversed during his stay at Ikkeri. When he first saw her performing a ritual procession of despair, he immediately drew a distinction between the cruel and barbarous custom of the country, and the generosity and virtue of its victim. He then conceived the idea of 'honouring her funeral' with his compassionate affection.²⁸ Four days later della Valle sought the woman at home, and found her surrounded by drummers (her husband himself used to be a drummer) 'in very good humour, talking and laughing in conversation as a bride would have done in our countries'.²⁹ They then had a long conversation concerning his curiosity and her sacrifice. It became apparent that two older, less generous wives did not want to die and preferred to look after their children, but that Giaccamà (then scarcely thirty years old) was willing to leave her children in the care of others in order to die. She insisted that she was acting unconstrained and of her own free will, for the sake of the glory of herself and her family (although her relatives also explained that this principle was not always observed among the wealthy). Finally, and this was Giaccamà's gift to the traveller, and a justification of his visit, 'she regarded herself very fortunate that I had gone to see her, and very honoured by my visit and presence, as well as by the fame I would carry of her to my country'. Della Valle, seeing that it was impossible to dissuade her, instead promised 'that in the world her name would remain immortal'.³⁰

Della Valle's three sonnets to Giaccamà, which have survived in a manuscript now at the Vatican Library, do not constitute a literary masterpiece, but they convey what is perhaps most novel in this most

²⁷ Ibid., p. 229: 'solo per desiderio di veder terre e costumi diversi, e per apprendere molte cose che peregrinando'l mondo si apprendono'.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 194.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 201.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 203.

moving passage of the pilgrim's *Viaggi*: della Valle celebrated human virtue within a non-Christian system of beliefs and behaviour with more emphasis than he condemned the cruel customs of a gentile nation. The three sonnets explore three aspects of the event: the deserving virtue of the widow, the contrast between her faithfulness and the falsity of her religion, and della Valle's own parallel sadness for the loss of his wife, although met, properly, with Christian and Stoic resignation.³¹ Since della Valle's original pilgrimage was in itself a denial of the temptation of suicide caused by a woman's rejection of his love, Giaccamà's choice re-enacted his own dilemma, creating a sympathy of feeling made even more dramatic by the contrast of religious doctrines. This of course entailed a lamentation for the barbarity of the gentile custom, but only to make female virtue the more outstanding. In a passage of his original diary (which the ecclesiastical censors later suppressed) the traveller even added that 'this made me laugh of our women, who take it as a great thing to go and enclose themselves forever in a monastery, which is so much less of a sacrifice than dying'.³² However unfair the comment – it was in fact more a criticism of religious hypocrisy than an endorsement of female oppression – it did imply a self-reflective gaze. As is apparent from della Valle's previous discussion of *sati*, based on hearsay, in the letter written from Surat nine months earlier, the traveller's curiosity for this custom was in fact more concerned with the psychology of the freedom and will of the widow than with any religious or sociological explanation. Della Valle wondered whether the will of the widow was really free or conditioned by social pressure, much as the will of women who married in Europe was often sadly conditioned by their relatives

³¹ I have transcribed these sonnets, hitherto unpublished, in an appendix. Kate Teltscher, who has recently emphasized how della Valle's literary recreation of the *sati* as a tragic figure exemplifies the ambivalent attitude of European travellers towards Indian women, is thus incorrect in assuming the sonnet's non-existence: K. Teltscher, *India inscribed. European and British writing on India 1600–1800* (New Delhi, 1997), pp. 56–9. Strangely, Teltscher concludes her discussion of the literary treatment of *sati* in the travel literature of this period with a return to the very Saidian position which much of her valuable analysis of diversity and ambivalence seemed previously to undermine: 'the Indian woman becomes the focus of male European desires and fears: a body to be veiled, revealed or consumed in flames. An ambivalent compound of chastity, sexual appetite, and the death wish, she is a fantasy woman in an imaginary land' (*ibid.*, p. 68). In most cases, and certainly in the case of della Valle, the projection of the fears and desires of the European male traveller is compatible with an empiricism which equals or even surpasses the recording of ordinary observation (male or female) in Europe.

³² BAV, Ottob. 3,382, f. 217r: 'me licentiai da lei, assai più mesto[?] della sua morte ch'ella stesso, maledicendo il costume dell'India, che con le donne è tanto spietato, e burlandomi delle donne nostre, che hanno per grande actione l'andarsi a rinchiado per sempre in un monasterio, che del morire e tanto manco'.

when they chose a husband, so that 'though apparently not forced', in effect they were 'compelled into the decision by the pressure of circumstances'.³³ Della Valle sought spiritual equality in a world of cultural differences, rather than an explanation of reasons for cultural differences which might serve to either justify the European Christians as superior, or to question their superiority. This (a mark of liberal Catholicism) in fact set him apart from the sceptical analysis of *sati* as mainly evidence of religious superstition and clerical abuse which characterized a number of seventeenth-century independent travellers, like the French doctor and disciple of Gassendi, François Bernier (see plate 12).³⁴

Encounters with women allowed della Valle to elaborate the powerful western idea of love, Platonic and chivalric, as basis for a trans-cultural synthesis. Marrying an oriental Christian opened the door to the project of a restored unity between East and West under Catholic patronage; feeling compassion for an Indian *sati* allowed the traveller to rescue virtue from the trappings of devilish idolatry. This was a romantic as well as an aristocratic solution to the problem of cultural diversity, one inspired by Renaissance Platonism, which made it possible to associate the hypothesis of a primitive philosophical truth behind the universal system of idolatry uncovered by antiquarian research with the direct evidence of virtuous behaviour among gentiles. But this solution stood among others in seventeenth-century Europe, in the same way that della Valle stood as one among many travellers. The most far-reaching seventeenth century response to the problem of cultural diversity in general, and the virtue of the gentiles in particular, was sceptical in the tradition of Montaigne and the *libertins*, in opposition to a confessional Christian position, whether Protestant or Catholic.³⁵ It is therefore of particular importance briefly to analyse the way della Valle dealt with gentile religion from his apparently never questioned Catholic identity.

³³ Della Valle, *India*, p. 65.

³⁴ For Bernier's account of *sati* see F. Bernier, *Voyage dans les etats du Grand Mogol*, ed. F. B. Hattacharya (Fayard, 1981), pp. 232–40. Teltscher, *India*, p. 67, notes that Bernier, unlike della Valle, succeeded in dissuading a *sati* from her sacrifice by invoking her children's destitution (in fact he threatened her with making sure that the Muslim Agah, who was his, as well as her former husband's, employer, would not provide a pension for her orphans if she burnt herself). This intervention, Teltscher concludes, only enhances the traveller's sense of western superiority: 'Bernier steals the widow's glory to become the hero himself'.

³⁵ For this topic, E. G. O'Flaherty, 'Relativism and criticism in seventeenth-century French thought' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1987), is of particular value. See also S. Zoli, *L'Europa libertina tra controriforma e illuminismo. L'Oriente dei libertini e le origini dell'illuminismo* (Bologna, 1989).



Plate 12 An Indian sati, with François Bernier (dressed in French costume) watching from the right side (*Voyages de François Bernier . . . contenant la description des Etats du Grand Mogol*, 2 vols. Amsterdam, 1709). In reality, Bernier was not a passive observer – he engaged with the widow and put enormous pressure on her so that she would desist from her undertaking. Bernier would also have been dressed in oriental garb.

CATHOLIC IDEALISM AND THE SCEPTICAL CHALLENGE

It may seem surprising that neither della Valle nor the ecclesiastical censors (who carefully removed from the published letters any opinion bearing upon Catholic theology or politics) acknowledged an intellectual threat in the antiquarian analysis of Hinduism. This intellectual optimism was in reality a gamble rather than a consistent tradition, and responded to the climate in Rome during the first decades of the seventeenth century under popes Paul V, Gregory XV and Urban VIII. This climate was conditioned by the need to meet the secular thinking of the late Renaissance (scientific, political and historical) on its own grounds, and supported by the comprehensive edifice built by Counter-Reformation writers in the previous decades. It was not really a free-thinking

environment because the Inquisition was a very real presence, but at the same time learned academies such as the Umoristi, to which della Valle belonged, were popular amongst the social elite, and both human history and natural science were believed to be necessarily supportive of Catholicism within a broad universalist encyclopaedia.³⁶

Della Valle confronted the problem of gentile religions early on in Persia. While the ancient local religion of the Gauris (Parsis) was difficult to research, his conversations with Gujarati merchants in Isfahan allowed him to write a long dissertation about Indian idolatry, which could supersede modern authorities like Botero in the light of his new philological enquiries.³⁷ This initial research allowed him to obtain some basic notions about caste divisions and about popular mythologies, in particular the Indian epic of the *Ramayana*. Above all, it allowed him to formulate a preliminary hypothesis about the meaning of idolatry, which he understood as the divinization of human kings and heroes 'as it also happened in our countries with Jupiter, Mars and others'.³⁸ Della Valle never ceased to revise his views in the light of new discoveries. Thus a few years later, still in Combrù on the Persian coast, he exploited new opportunities to extend his enquiries, observing a religious festival, learning from an ascetic brahmin about the existence of the Sanskrit language, and asking about the meaning of the *lingam* (which quite surprisingly, although repeatedly described and even drawn in his journal, he never identified as a phallic representation).³⁹ By the time della Valle left Persia he had even started a collection of Sanskrit and other Indian manuscripts which he could not then read, but which he planned to have translated in Europe as the occasion arose. (In Ikkeri he also requested and obtained a small book in Kannada, the local language, from the ambassador of Venkatapa.)

It is quite clear that his method was antiquarian and philological,

³⁶ The complexity of the subject makes it difficult to refer to an acceptable synthesis of the intellectual life in Italy in the crucial period between 1580 and 1640, and in particular the role of history and science, despite the existence of a great deal of excellent monographic material on outstanding figures like Sarpi and Galileo. Certainly della Valle participated, through personal connections and dilettante interest, in the Italian system of learning, patronage and debate, which between 1600 and 1620 had in Rome perhaps its main centre. For example, after his ceremony of departure celebrated in Naples in 1614, della Valle was accompanied by his friend Mario Schipano, a humanist doctor, and Marcello Giustiniani and his wife Caterina Bocalini, daughter of the recently deceased Traiano Bocalini. Della Valle took Bocalini's *Ragguagli di Parnaso* (1612) on his travels, along with a small library on Turkey and the Near East.

³⁷ Della Valle, *Lettere dalla Persia*, ed. by Gaeta and Lockhart, pp. 68–77 (letter from Isfahan, December 1617).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁹ Della Valle, *Persia*, vol. II, pp. 505–11 (November 1622).

backed by conversations with brahmins and direct observation: he would ask for the meaning of particular names, draw plans of temples, learn to identify the different gods and their attributes, and copy Sanskrit spellings. He would also carefully observe popular festivals. However, the frame of reference was always comparison with ancient idolatry as described in classical texts, and he relied especially on writers of history and geography like Diodorus Siculus or Strabo. It is probably from these readings that he developed his view that specific, rather than structural, similarities between different kinds of idolatry had to be explained by assuming an Egyptian genealogical primacy, 'since the Egyptians, who were descended from Cham, son of Noah, were extremely ancient peoples', and 'it is known that there always was navigation and commerce between Egypt and India by the Southern sea'.⁴⁰ Della Valle was not alone in formulating this diffusionist hypothesis concerning the ancient history of idolatry in these dates, but it would be rash to conclude that he simply borrowed it from his contemporaries like Lorenzo Pignoria: rather, we seem to be finding here a typical instance of the parallel development of a theory by two contemporaries who are looking at new evidence from similar assumptions. The antiquarian culture of the early seventeenth century, based on ancient Greek sources, pursued through philological methods, and constrained by biblical authority, made the idea of Egyptian origins a logical possibility.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Della Valle, *India*, p. 57. The diffusionist model was explicitly suggested by Diodorus Siculus, who identified the Greek Dionysus with the Egyptian Osiris: Della Valle, *Lettere dalla Persia*, p. 76. In Arrian and Strabo, Dionysus was also said to have travelled to India.

⁴¹ Lorenzo Pignoria's *Le vere e nove imagini de gli dei dell' antichi . . . et un discorso intorno le deità dell' Indie orientali et occidentali* (Padua, 1615) was an illustrated and updated edition of Vincenzo Cartari's standard iconographical classical pantheon (Venice, 1556). Annotated with antiquarian observations, Pignoria's edition included an additional discourse, 'Imagini degli dei Indiani', concerning the analogies and relationship between Egyptian, Mexican and Indian idols, observing, for instance, that the figure with an elephant head described by the Jesuit Luis Fróis in 1560, 'Ganissone' (Ganesh), obviously followed the Egyptian tendency to combine human and animal features (p. XXVII). However, this treatise was published after della Valle left Europe in 1614. The traveller certainly kept in close correspondence with Europeans and it is not impossible that he learnt about the book's novel hypothesis in Constantinople or Persia. He actually refers to Vincenzo Cartari's *Imagini degle dei* in a letter from Isfahan of May 1619 (della Valle, *Lettere dalla Persia*, p. 345), although he may have been using an earlier edition. Della Valle could also have known some of the arguments discussed by Pignoria in his previous Egyptological work, the *Vestustissimae tabulae Aeneae explicatio* (Venice, 1605). However, della Valle does not mention any of Pignoria's works – for instance when he casually suggests for the first time the similarity between the Indian worship of the cow as sacred and the Egyptian cult of Apis, in his early letter from Isfahan of December 1617 (della Valle, *Lettere dalla Persia*, p. 73). His analysis is generally fuller than Pignoria's. Above all, what is crucial is that ancient Egypt was the logical starting point for any antiquarian analysis of idolatry, because ancient Greek

Interestingly, della Valle's theory was challenged by a brahmin from Gujarat, who claimed that some of his books had been written by the Greek philosopher Pythagoras, 'something which agrees with what Philostratus says that Iarcha [the brahmin] told Apollonius [the Greek traveller], namely, that concerning the soul the Indians believed that which Pythagoras had taught them, and which they then had taught the Egyptians'.⁴² In effect, for reasons of his own, Philostratus had completely reversed the traditional order within the diffusionist model.⁴³ Della Valle, however, was able to maintain his original theory by appealing to the authority of another Greek author, Diogenes Laertius, whose biography of Pythagoras did not include any journey to India. When, therefore, the brahmin went on to insist that Brahma was himself Pythagoras, della Valle was ready to dismiss the whole idea:

This would be interesting news indeed, and perhaps unheard in Europe, that Pythagoras is worshipped stupidly as God in India; but without wanting to offend Becà Azarg [the brahmin], I do not believe it. Either he did not say this and I misunderstood him for lack of a better interpreter, or if he said that, he was here wrong, because he heard some other European talk about Pythagoras as the author of the foolish opinion [*stolta opinione*] of the transmigration of the souls.⁴⁴

writers pointed to Egypt as the ultimate source of Greek culture. In Italy, as early as the end of the fifteenth century, there had been a great deal of interest in circles of Platonist humanists and artists in discovering mystical or Hermetic interpretations of Egyptian religion, positing a 'prisca theologia' whose core was both retrievable (through the Hermetic-Pythagorean corpus) and partially valid (since it had served as basis for Mosaic law). Although antiquarians like the Calvinist Isaac Casaubon demolished the Hermetic core of the Egyptian paradigm by proving the late Greek origin of the corpus (as part of his 1614 attack on Baronius's Catholic history of the early Church), thirty and forty years later Athanasius Kircher still maintained his laborious Hermetic Egyptological research with the help of della Valle's Coptic manuscripts and a great deal of absurd etymologies. On this topic in general see E. Iversen, *The myth of Egypt and its hieroglyphs in European tradition* (Copenhagen, 1961).

⁴² Della Valle, *India*, p. 58.

⁴³ Della Valle read Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* without realizing that it was essentially a fictional text. Although it reversed the diffusionist tendency by giving primacy to India, Philostratus' story supported the idea of an ancient common core of rational pagan wisdom behind the multiplicity of idolatrous cults.

⁴⁴ Della Valle, *India*, p. 58. The idea that a brahmin's idea of the origins of Hinduism could have been prompted by interaction with a western traveller is not absurd, however strange it may seem if we simply assume that brahmins were the authoritative repositories of their own tradition and identity. The English chaplain at Surat, Henry Lord, in his polemic against the brahmins, and in order to weaken their high moral ground in favour of the Christian revelation, insisted that their abstinence from flesh and wine was borrowed from Pythagoras. His important *Display of two forraigne sects in the East Indies* (i.e. Banians and Parsis), the first printed account of Hinduism to appear in Europe, was published in London in 1630, but Lord was in Gujarat in the latter half of the 1620s, closely following della Valle's visit. We may be wise to conclude that traditions are often reactive to articulate foreign observers.

In effect, and this was conclusive, both Egyptian and brahminical doctrines appeared, from Greek references, to be more ancient than Pythagoras.

This passage shows quite clearly both the depth and flexibility of della Valle's antiquarian opinions, and his use of a classical framework in order to criticize and evaluate native authorities. His position was essentially open: he could contemplate both the possibility of a diversity of idols emerging from separate human models, or the transformation of the same hero-king according to diffusion and linguistic diversity. He was also able to distinguish the 'atheistic' philosophy of the Japanese Buddhists (which he learnt from a Christian Japanese who was on his way to Rome) from the basically deistic idolatry of India. However, on the other hand, della Valle's use of the chronological tables of the Jesuit theologian Roberto Bellarmino (and not, significantly, the more far-reaching work of Joseph Scaliger) allowed him to pursue this reconstruction of ancient idolatry without departing from the biblical framework which he was bound to accept.⁴⁵ Della Valle belonged to a generation which, having received the new authorities of the Italian Counter-Reformation like the same Bellarmino, Cesare Baronius or Antonio Possevino, could trust history to clarify, rather than challenge, Catholic orthodoxy.⁴⁶ Whilst della Valle was not *a priori* trying to question Indian authorities (rather the contrary), all his curiosity was never used to question the fundamental assumption that idolatry was both devilish and irrational. In this sense, there is a delicate balance between the relativism of his analysis of customs and his scrupulous observance of religious orthodoxy, one which mirrors the tension between his sympathy for the *sati*'s personal virtue

⁴⁵ Della Valle's mention of Bellarmino's work must refer to his *Brevi chronologia ab orbe condito usque ad annum 1612* which accompanied his *De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis liber unus* (1612). The Calvinist Scaliger's *Opus novus de emendatione temporum* had been published in 1583, and immediately transformed the Renaissance science of chronology (inevitably based on the Bible) into a systematic antiquarian discipline, through a better understanding of classical and oriental sources, and with the crucial aid of mathematical astronomy. If not earlier, della Valle would have become acquainted with the figure of Scaliger – and of his interest in Samaritan traditions – during his antiquarian correspondence with Peiresc in the late 1620s, after his return to Rome (see P. Miller, 'A philologist, a traveller and an antiquary rediscover the Samaritans in seventeenth-century Paris, Rome and Aix', in H. Zedelmaier and M. Mulsow (eds.), *Gelehrsamkeit als Praxis: Arbeitsweisen, Funktionen, Grenzgebiete* (forthcoming)). Della Valle, like Peiresc, believed that in matters of civility and scholarship Europeans should cooperate with each other, even if they did not share religious convictions. Through civil conversation, in fact, Catholics could attract intelligent Protestants to their faith.

⁴⁶ Bellarmino insisted in his own chronological work that anachronism was often a sign of heresy. The key historical and antiquarian works of the Counter-Reformation were published in Italy in the 1580s and 90s, including Baronius' *Annales ecclesiasticae* (1588–) and Possevino's critical catalogue, the *Apparatus ad omnium gentium historiarum* (1597).

and his criticism of the cruel customs which she upheld. The contemptuous words which disqualified the worship of any gods other than the true God, or the doctrine of transmigration of the souls, were only a ritual reminder that the issue here was history, not religion.

In a number of passages della Valle makes this fundamental understanding of the devilish contents of idolatry clear. Certainly, behind the extravagant cults which evolved due to the vanity of kings and heroes there existed a theistic belief, but the use of oracles was not simply a question of human vanity and ignorance, revealing instead a serious intercourse with the devil. Thus della Valle did not question the veracity of his Gujarati informer Natù when he asserted that the oracles did indeed predict the future, because, as was the case with many of his own European witch-hunting contemporaries, a humanist education did not exclude a firm belief in the reality of the devil. It was logically simple to transform Christian exclusiveness into charitable contempt: 'The baniani know the devil to be a very evil thing, but the poor wretches do not imagine the extent to which they are under his influence.'⁴⁷ This belief emerged even more forcefully when he was given a chance to study closely the naked yogis of Cambay, and in this case (perhaps because they refused to befriend him) without any charitable undertones: their unworldliness was studied arrogance, their chastity probably hypocritical, 'since it is known that in secret many of them do vile acts when they have an opportunity', and above all their books and exercises, whether spiritual or erudite, 'consist in nothing but the arts of divination, the secrets of herbs and other things of nature, and magic and spells'. The conclusion was clear: 'by way of such exercises, prayers, fastings and such similar superstitions, they arrive (it seems to them) at revelations, which in effect are nothing other than commerce with the devil'.⁴⁸

The intense South Indian journey, and in particular the opportunity to study closely Shaiva worship in Kanara, with its explicitly sexual themes, only offered further arguments to sustain this interpretation: 'indeed, the greatest part of their worship of their gods consists in nothing but music, songs and dances, not only pleasant but in effect lascivious, and in serving their idols as if they were living persons'. This idolatrous sensualism stood directly in contrast with an intellectual religion based on learning, which is the aspect that della Valle valued most.

I once asked an old priest who was held more knowing than others, grey and clad all in white, carrying a staff like a shepherd's crook in his

⁴⁷ Della Valle, *Lettere dalla Persia*, p. 75.

⁴⁸ Della Valle, *India*, pp. 80–1. These yogis were seen by della Valle on 3 March 1623 at a Vaishnava temple outside Cambay, in the village of Causary.

hand, what books he had read and what had he studied? adding that I myself delighted in reading, and that if he would speak to me about anything I would answer him. He told me that all books were made only that men might with them know God; but if God were known, what was the purpose of books? as if he knew God very well. I replied that all thought they knew God, but few knew him properly, and therefore he should beware that himself was not one of those.⁴⁹

This remarkable passage shows not only della Valle's desire for religious dialogue and the Indian's capacity to reply with intelligence, but also the fact that the independent traveller of the seventeenth century, by seeking to analyse diversity from an intellectual viewpoint, was actually undermining European popular religion. Would della Valle have expected Italian peasants and *lazzaroni* to read books in order to learn true religion? Or was religious truth only for the few? In fact, his position was contradictory, because the Counter-Reformation elites not only expected Catholic ritual to sustain popular belief, they in fact often participated with enthusiasm. Della Valle's happiness at the news of the canonization of Philip Neri and Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier, was unrestrained, as his diary of the events of 1623 attests, and he willingly joined the festivities in Goa in honour of Saint Teresa (a favourite of his), participating in the baroque masquerade with his Arabian dress, and even creating a multi-lingual emblem in honour of her twelve virtues.⁵⁰ Della Valle's religious confidence, it may even be argued, was the foundation of his remarkably relaxed dialogue with the Christian heretic, with the Muslim and with the gentile.

Ultimately, this dialogue with non-Christians rested upon the same dualistic level of belief in the devil which we encountered in earlier travellers like Marco Polo and Ludovico de Varthema. The traveller was simply a committed agent and witness of a struggle between God and his rival. When, on occasion, della Valle spat upon a statue in a private chapel of the queen of Olala, not a common idol from the established brahminic pantheon, but rather a 'devil' (as his interpreter explained) which the people feared for its power, his action was spontaneous and certainly not just there for the benefit of the European readers.⁵¹ In fact,

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 127. Della Valle later re-used the idea of this emblem (with epitaphs in twelve languages describing twelve virtues) for the sepulchre which he commissioned for the solemn funeral of Sitti Maani in Rome. She was buried in the family chapel of Saint Paul of Aracoeli.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 253–4. However, the statue (della Valle noted) did not look like the devil in European representations: rather he was a handsome young man with four hands and wearing a diadem, with a knife in his hand and riding upon another man. It was not therefore the image itself which prompted della Valle to a ritual act of defiance, but

della Valle was for all his curiosity and politeness profoundly imbued with a crusading ideology, which had taken him to participate in anti-corsair skirmishes in North Africa in 1611, and which through his travels found expression in his hatred for the Ottoman Turks, seen as relentless oppressors of Christians (in sharp contrast with the more cynical Shah Abbas of Persia, whom della Valle believed could be turned into an ally, so much so that soon after reaching Persia he offered to fight in his army against the Turks).⁵² Della Valle liked to think of himself as a gentleman-warrior no less than poet, musician and lover, following the Renaissance model of a courtier who was equally able to use the sword and the pen.

However, despite all these marks of traditionalism, what really distinguished the new traveller's persona was his intellectualism: not only his desire to discuss customs and beliefs with the local people, and especially the better educated amongst them, but above all his decision, unprecedented from a lay perspective, to explore gentile religion from a historical and antiquarian perspective. This went beyond the mere elevation of the Renaissance courtier into a genuinely cosmopolitan setting. His curiosity was methodical, even though his analysis evolved spontaneously and appears rather dispersed throughout his letters. This curiosity was also intellectually courageous. It is thus significant that he planned to have translated into Italian 'for the sake of the curious' a book of Indian divination, obtained from those very yogis whose practice he had just defined as outright commerce with the devil.⁵³ This was more far-reaching than just writing a Turkish grammar or collecting a couple of mummies. The wide range of della Valle's orientalist research was sustained by a supreme confidence, reminiscent of Ramon Llull's more primitive version of Christian rationalism, that linguistic and antiquarian expertise could only help sustain the traditional system of mission and crusade.

rather the fearful belief of the local inhabitants (as he interpreted it). Concerning the origins and importance of these local warrior gods, worshipped (like the queen of Olala's) in small shrines around trees, see Bayly, *Saints, goddesses and kings*, pp. 28–32.

⁵² Della Valle explains this decision to stay in Persia to fight the Turks in detail in his letter of December 1617 (della Valle, *Lettere dalla Persia*, pp. 91–6). At his most aggressive he wrote that 'even at night, while sleeping, I dream about the greatest harm that I may cause to the Turks, our common enemies'. His pet crusading project consisted of forging an anti-Ottoman alliance between Persia and the Cossacks from the kingdom of Poland. But his plan had also a constructive aspect: to create a 'New Rome' in Persia, a self-governing city of oriental and Latin Christians (specifically including his relatives from Baghdad) under Shah Abbas and Roman Catholic sponsorship. Both plans – crusade and mission – failed.

⁵³ Della Valle, *India*, p. 82: 'procurerò anco che possa vedersi un giorno da'curiosi in nostra lingua'. He had obtained a Persian version of the book for that purpose.

What della Valle was able to do which was new in European ethnology was to interpret a variety of forms of social behaviour in the light of a variety of religious and scientific beliefs, and to discuss some of these beliefs, without collapsing one dimension into the other. In this sense della Valle shared the Thomist distinction developed by the Jesuits between valid civil customs which were relative to place and time, and a universal religious truth which could only be Christian. He showed awareness of the contemporary debate within the Jesuit order caused by Nobili's experiments, but although he discussed some of the criticisms and counter-arguments in a letter from Surat, he prudently declined to suggest a conclusion, or to add anything in his letters from Goa, where the issue was burning in the expectation of a papal decision.⁵⁴ But della Valle was quite decisive in his use of the distinction when discussing Hindu customs from personal observation. The use of cow dung to varnish the pavements of houses, for instance, 'I took for a superstitious rite of religion, but since I better understand that it is used only for elegance and ornament [*per pulitezza e per ornamento*]',⁵⁵ In fact, not only did the Portuguese use the custom in Goa, but della Valle would also try it in Italy, since it was said that these pavements were good against the plague. This was a practical solution to the lack of better pavements, unlike the caste prohibitions of the gentile elite, which used the same cow dung to purify a room before eating there 'out of superstition'.

These distinctions marked both the quality and the limitation of della Valle's relativism. The essential mark of his cultural analysis was the confidence in the rational value of his own religion. He could distance himself from the beliefs of the prince of Olala by pointing out that 'the purity of my religion does not depend on eating things or touching others, but on doing good or bad works' – but he never applied a sceptical analysis of religion that might be turned against Catholic doctrine.⁵⁶ In this sense della Valle stands very far from the scepticism of later travellers like François Bernier, whose pitiless assault on Hinduism in his *Lettre a Monsieur Chapelain* of 1667, because it was a secular analysis, was dangerously capable of simply being turned back against Christianity.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Della Valle discusses in particular the debate about the status of the brahminical thread in his letter from Surat: *ibid.*, pp. 67–9. Although in Persia della Valle was close to the Portuguese Augustinians, rivals of the Jesuits, in Goa he befriended the latter.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 239. This prince was the queen's adolescent son, who entertained della Valle with a meal and asked him many questions about Europe.

⁵⁷ For Bernier's discussion of Hinduism see Bernier, *Voyage*, pp. 227–65. For a discussion of his attitudes towards India, see S. Murr, 'La politique 'au Mogol' selon Bernier:

The profoundly different nature of this French traveller's attitude merits some illustration. The scepticism of Bernier's analysis of Hinduism resided in the irony with which his anti-religious and anti-clerical diatribe was reserved for gentile beliefs and the role of the brahmins, but not for Christians. The fact that his discussion of religion as superstition excluded the agency of the devil and focused instead on social indoctrination implied a secularizing reversal of the missionary condemnation of the idolaters as manipulators of a natural religious instinct. This, of course, opened the way for more disturbing possibilities of self-reflection, made explicit by the refusal to accept any explanations of extraordinary events other than natural ones. In this sense the first paragraph of the letter on Hinduism gives an important key to an understanding of what follows, by stressing the fundamental comparability of European and non-European belief systems: Bernier compares the childish terror of the common people of France in reaction to an eclipse in 1654 to the superstitious beliefs of the Indian gentiles in reaction to another eclipse in 1666. Both are dismissed as ridiculous in front of the scientific truth of naturalistic astronomer-philosophers. Similarly, Bernier's attack on the Indian idea of reincarnation also involved a direct attack on western Platonism, referring for instance to Gassendi's atomist criticism of the alchemical and animist science of Robert Fludd.⁵⁸

As with Nobili, the paradox of della Valle's position lies in the way he contributed to the emergence of this sceptical outlook he never endorsed. If he is far from Bernier, he stands even further from the irreverent attitude towards biblical authority developed by Pierre Bayle in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1696), both rejecting the validity of allegorical readings, and deploring the moral coherence of literal ones. This attitude (whose tenor was revolutionary whatever we choose to believe about Bayle's private beliefs) was to a large extent sustained by the antiquarian scholarship and travel literature of the seventeenth century, to which della Valle's oriental manuscripts and letters had contributed so much.⁵⁹

appareil conceptuel, rhétorique stratégique, philosophie morale', in J. Pouchepadass and H. Stern, *De la royauté à l'état. Anthropologie et histoire du politique dans le monde indien* (Paris, 1991), pp. 239–311, and P. Burke, 'The philosopher as traveller: Bernier's Orient', in J. Elsner and J. P. Rubiés (eds.) *Voyages and visions. Towards a cultural history of travel* (London, 1999), pp. 124–37.

⁵⁸ Bernier, *Voyage*, pp. 227 and 263.

⁵⁹ Through the mediation of Nicholas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, della Valle's Samaritan manuscripts contributed to the research behind the 1645 Parisian polyglot Bible by the Oratorian priest Jean Morin. On this issue see P. Miller, 'An antiquary between philology and history. Peiresc and the Samaritans', in D. Kelley (ed.) *History and the disciplines. The reclassification of knowledge in early modern Europe* (Rochester and London, 1997), as well as Miller, 'A philologist, a traveller and an antiquary'. For evidence of the impact

In his persona as independent observer as well as in his antiquarian research, the Italian traveller was pointing towards a future of cultural self-criticism in which he would have refused to participate, one perhaps best represented by Giovanni Paolo Marana's Turkish spy, whose apocryphal letters were published in French and English at the end of the century, inaugurating the genre that would lead to Montesquieu's *Persian letters*.⁶⁰ Mahmut the Turk, piously Muslim but anti-dogmatic in the face of European culture, was no more than a reversal of della Valle the rationalist Catholic observer. In order fully to criticize European civil and religious assumptions the figure of an outsider – an oriental traveller, or a savage from Canada – provided a rhetorical voice which made relativism obvious and criticism ambiguous (this ambiguity was of course necessary under Louis XIV's censorship: the real voice of Mahmut was in reality Cartesian rather than strictly Muslim). But this figure needed a convincing form and gaze – and both the form and the gaze of this intelligent traveller were in the first place the creation of Europeans like della Valle.

It is the force and depth with which della Valle transformed empirical observation into antiquarian research and speculation which also sets him apart from late sixteenth-century travellers in southern India, foreign witnesses of the decline of Portuguese Goa like the Dutch Jan Huyghen van Linschoten,⁶¹ the Florentine Francesco Carletti,⁶² the

of this correspondence in the later seventeenth century see also the *Antiquitates ecclesiae orientalis* (London 1682) edited by the English biblical scholar Richard Simon. Not insignificantly, Simon was the key figure behind Pierre Bayle's biblical scepticism. In his 1683 *Pensées sur la comète*, Bayle repeatedly based thoughts on the observations of recent travellers, including della Valle (in this he was no different from Montaigne, except that Montaigne relied on Léry, Osório and Gómara, rather than Bernier, Tavernier or Rycaut). On the other hand, della Valle's Coptic manuscripts were used by Athanasius Kircher in his epoch-making *Lingua Aegyptiaca restituta* (Rome, 1644). On della Valle's oriental manuscripts and poetry see E. Rossi, 'Versi Turchi e altri scritti inediti di Pietro della Valle', *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 22 (1947): 92–8, and 'Poesie inedite in Persiano di Pietro della Valle', *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 28 (1953): 108–17. More generally on his contribution to orientalism, see P. G. Bietenholz, *Pietro della Valle (1586–1652). Studien zur Geschichte der Orientkenntnis und des Orientbildes im Abendlande* (Stuttgart, 1962).

⁶⁰ First published in French in 1684, an expanded version of the letters (with seven more volumes) appeared in English as *Letters writ by a Turkish spy* between 1691 and 1694. This expansion is of uncertain authorship, but carried the same spirit as the original.

⁶¹ Linschoten's *Itinerario. Voyage ofte schipvaert van J. H. V. L. naar Oost ofte Portugals Indien* was first published in Dutch in 1595–6, and was soon translated into English (1598) and Latin (1599). I have used the modern edition of the old English version: Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, *The voyage to the East Indies, from the English translation of 1598*, ed. by A. C. Burnell and P. A. Tiele, 2 vols. (London, 1885), with critical annotation.

⁶² Carletti visited Goa on his westward return trip to Europe from an improvised tour of the world from 1594 to 1602. He delivered his six 'ragionamenti' (oral discourses) to the

Frenchman François Pyrard de Laval,⁶³ or the Flemish Jacques de Coutre.⁶⁴ The more systematic and influential of these writers was Linschoten, who had worked within the Iberian system throughout the 1580s but then, on returning home in 1592, immediately joined the Dutch rebels as the supreme spy.⁶⁵ He thus produced an encyclopaedic regional account of Portuguese India – one which distinguished different ethnic groups and castes, and which was especially detailed and accurate when describing the society of Goa and its trade.⁶⁶ The importance of Linschoten's *Itinerario* was clearly related to the information which it offered the Dutch, an emphasis which was far from the personal, erudite and speculative qualities of della Valle's *Viaggi*. Similarly, whilst Jacques de Coutre – another Netherlander in Portuguese India, but one whose family remained faithful to the Spanish monarchy and to Catholicism – was the exceptional witness of the conditions in the interior of the southern peninsula, and in particular the fragmentation of political authority in the second decade of the seventeenth century, his excursions into history, and many of his judgements on politics or religion, were often remarkably superficial.⁶⁷ For example, Coutre's version of the

Grand Duke of Tuscany in 1606, although they were not published until 1701, and only in a summarized version. For a better manuscript, the basis for all critical editions, see F. Carletti, *Ragionamento del mio viaggio intorno al mondo*, ed. by G. Silvestro (Turin, 1958).

⁶³ There is a recent edition of the *Voyage de François Pyrard de Laval aux Indes orientales (1601–11)*, ed. by Xavier de Castro, 2 vols. (Paris, 1998). The first three editions were published in 1611, 1615 and 1619.

⁶⁴ Coutre's account of his life and adventures in southern India and other parts of the Portuguese and Spanish empires between 1592 and 1623 was never published. It was written or perhaps dictated in Portuguese by Jacques and translated into Castilian by his Goa-born son Estevan in 1640, shortly after Jacques' death. For further particulars see the recent edition (which is also the first), Jacques de Coutre, *Andanzas asiáticas*, ed. by E. Stols, B. Teensma and J. Werberckmoes (Madrid, 1991).

⁶⁵ Linschoten's family connections in Seville allowed him to enter the service of the new archbishop of Goa Vicente de Fonseca, who obviously did not expect him to eventually turn Protestant and decisively break the Portuguese and Italian control of primary information on the East.

⁶⁶ Linschoten, *The voyage*, vol. I, pp. 175–222. The Portuguese emerged here, as in della Valle's account twenty years later, or as in Francesco Carletti's 'ragionamento' of his stay in the city in 1600–1 during his journey around the world, as an 'other', with their predominant *mestiço* population, their pompous and punctilious codes of honour, and their inflated stories of sexual jealousies, infidelities and poisonings. Although Carletti's account of India – the fourth 'ragionamento' – is very entertaining, information about actual conditions in India is unreliable except for Malabar, Goa and its environs.

⁶⁷ Like many Flemish traders and skilled workers, Coutre's family saw the Iberian Peninsula as an area of economic opportunity. Thus their fortune was made through the exploitation of the declining Hispanic colonial system from inside rather than by challenging it from outside (Jacques and his brother even married Indo-Portuguese women in Goa). Coutre's account of his life was written after his expulsion from India in 1623, where all foreigners increasingly became suspected of performing Linschoten's

history of Vijayanagara (which confuses the circumstances of the fall of the capital city with the much older history of the Bahmani dynasty of the Deccan) is a typical example of badly understood, or badly remembered, popular hearsay, despite the fact that as a privileged foreign merchant dealing with luxury commodities, Coutre had actually met many nayaka lords and even the king of Vijayanagara in Vellore.⁶⁸ He was certainly able to offer his European readers dramatic images of exotic customs and tell lively stories drawn from local life, describing, for example, the harsh conditions of work in the diamond mines of the southern Deccan.⁶⁹ However, in his judgements he did not go beyond deploring the ‘barbarism’ of idolatrous sacrifices like hook-swinging, *sati* and *lingayat* burials.

What is crucial is that none of these travellers, who were essentially independent merchants with a taste for adventure, emerges as an antiquarian.⁷⁰ They all wrote in order to sell information and, secondarily, entertainment, but they rarely confronted intellectual issues. We may only find a genuine precedent to della Valle’s erudite attitudes in the letters of the Florentine Filippo Sasseti, also a merchant who, whilst trying to recover his family’s fortunes as agent of the Rovellasca commercial interests in the spice monopoly, still participated in a circle of humanist correspondents, including the Grand Duke of Tuscany and the *Accademia degli Alterati* in Florence.⁷¹ He thus used his wide readings

spying role, and was conventionally addressed to Philip III as a justification and promise of service to the crown.

⁶⁸ See Coutre, *Andanzas*, pp. 245–8. On this trip to the interior Coutre often resided with the Jesuits, including Gonzalo Fernandes and Roberto de Nobili in Madurai, but he makes many little mistakes. Thus he wrongly names Fernandes and Nobili ‘Pero’ and ‘Andrés’, and Venkata II of Vijayanagara, ‘Rama’. He wrongly suggests that the Jesuit bishop of the Saint Thomas Christians was Italian (Francesc Ros was Catalan). He is correct when he declares that the mission of Vijayanagara was temporarily deserted in 1611 for lack of results and because the Dutch were now trading with the king, although he was naturally unaware that Philip III had also ordered the interruption of the mission due to the scandal of Fontebona’s supposedly erotic paintings (Coutre met Fontebona in Madurai). All this, and many other details, suggest that Coutre did not invent this and subsequent expeditions, but rather that he wrote, or dictated, from memory and without notes, many years after the events.

⁶⁹ Coutre’s first expedition to the diamond mines of southern India (*ibid.*, pp. 237–57) took him from Cochin, across the Ghats inhabited by the Christians of Saint Thomas, to Madurai and then Vellore and Chandragiri in Vijayanagara. From there he visited Tirupati and reached the mines in Nandial.

⁷⁰ François Pyrard de Laval’s account of Goa, Malabar and the Maldives is a special case, since the successive editions of the text were edited and extensively augmented by Pierre Bergeron, an erudite canon working with Pyrard. But this could not transform the merchant’s simple observations – it rather meant that much was taken from Linschoten in order to give the account a more encyclopaedic character.

⁷¹ For the more recent and reliable edition of these letters see F. Sasseti, *Lettere di vari paesi*, ed. by V. Bramanti (Milan, 1970). Garcia da Orta’s humanist dialogues, the

of classical and modern authors to scrutinize India, exploring natural and human history in the light of his personal experience in the coasts of Malabar and Kanará between 1583 and 1588. He noted the decline in power of the gentiles and the progressive triumph of Muslim rulers, analysed the caste system, identified the Indian brahmins with Pliny's ancient *Bracmenes*, speculated about the natural causes for differences in colour among humans (dismissing a crude climatic determinism), learnt about Sanskrit language and literature, and compared the Indians' admirable knowledge of mathematics (which, he was ready to suggest, ante-dated that of the Arabs) with what he understood as their confused use of Aristotelian philosophical concepts.⁷² In fact Sasseti preceded della Valle and other seventeenth-century travellers in many specific ways, speculating about the Egyptian and ancient Mediterranean origins of Indian idolatry, and showing contempt for the vanity of gentile superstition on the basis of western rationalistic values.⁷³ With remarkable insight and originality, he defined the unity of India through its common religious tradition (of course idolatrous) despite political, ethnic or even caste divisions, and interpreted the instability of southern Indian monarchies as being a result of the feudal system which prevailed in Vijayanagara and the Deccan.⁷⁴

Obviously in this case the merchant fully participated in the erudite, humanist culture of the aristocracy. Albeit lacking the immediacy of della Valle's style as a writer, and visited by death before he could return to Italy to see the publication of his letters, Sasseti was nevertheless able to establish a relationship with the modern authority of the travel collectors Ramusio and Thévet which foreshadowed della Valle's position with respect to his contemporaries Botero and Purchas: his lay voice

Coloquios dos simples e drogas exceptionally published in Goa in 1563, might be seen as another example of erudite travel writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, but Orta's medical interests meant that he mainly discussed medical botany, precluding a wider discussion of ethnological themes.

⁷² The key letters discussing Indian religion and culture are those sent from Cochin to Francesco Valori (December 1583), Pier Vettori (January 1585), Lorenzo Canigiano (January 1585) and Ferdinand of Medici (February 1585). Sasseti, *Lettere*, nos. 95, 103, 106 and 107.

⁷³ See especially *ibid.*, pp. 422–3, from the letter to Pier Vettori.

⁷⁴ 'Fu questo Zamalucco [Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar], di casta moro, uno de' quatro capitani che si ribellarono al re del Canará . . . le quali mutazioni seguono e seguiranno sempre in questi parti, per dare questi principi carichi di capitani dieci, dodici, undici e ventimila cavalli, non pure a vita d'un uomo, ma traspassa el grado nella successione, in maniera che quella gente non riconosce più il suo signore vero, se non come un suddito de' feudatari riconoscono il primo signore del feudo, o meno' (*ibid.*, p. 522). Here Sasseti was speaking generally and somewhat inaccurately of the Deccan and southern India as a political unity, conflating the Bahmani kingdom and Vijayanagara. Unlike Coutre, he had to rely on informants from Goa and Cochin.

could be used to question the empirical and ideological validity of a cosmographical synthesis, not only because his authority as observer was enhanced by social position and education, but also through his direct participation in erudite debates.

The actual impact of della Valle's orientalist research in seventeenth-century European antiquarianism was greater and on the whole notable, especially through his correspondence with men like Peiresc and Kircher, previous to the publication of his *Viaggi*. It is clear that his desire to interpret his findings and to make his discoveries public preceded his international contacts, but it was the intense flowering of orientalist projects in Rome, Paris and Vienna in the decades following his return to Rome which effectively ensured that his Samaritan and Coptic manuscripts were published and their significance (ultimately theological) discussed by Catholic and Protestant scholars alike.⁷⁵ However, the ecumenism of this antiquarian effort did not in the short term dissolve the theological and political differences that separated confessional camps. Della Valle did not therefore abandon his conventional perspectives on an anti-Ottoman alliance with Persia, or his pet project of a Catholic mission to Georgia. In the latter project he was particularly successful, first by offering the Barberini Pope Urban VIII (who for this reason made him chamberlain of honour) an optimistic account of the prospects in Georgia based on his observations from Persia, and afterwards, under the umbrella of the Propaganda Fide, by providing regular diplomatic advice for the rather incompetent Theatine missionaries who had been sent. (The Theatines, pious, conservative and inexperienced, were an odd choice for the job, but understandable as the Propaganda's attempt to avoid the controversial and overly influential Jesuits; della Valle's more sensible recommendation had been to send Jesuits from Europe, or the discalced Carmelites already in Persia.)⁷⁶

There is, however, evidence in della Valle's journal and letters of these Roman years that after a long period of cosmopolitan independence the Roman atmosphere proved stifling, even under the leadership of a

⁷⁵ See note 59 above.

⁷⁶ *Informazione della Georgia* (1626) was only published, in France, by Melchisédech Thévenot in 1663. I have consulted the original seventeenth-century Italian manuscript in BAV, Barberini Lat. 5,181; della Valle's correspondence with the Theatine fathers led by Father Avitabile has been published by F. Andreu, 'Carteggio inedito di Pietro della Valle col P. Avitabile e i missionari Teatini della Georgia', *Regnum Dei*, 23–4 (1950): 57–99; 25 (1951): 19–50; 26–7 (1951): 118–38. Della Valle was aware that the Georgians followed the Greek rite, but he was naively optimistic about their willingness to follow the Roman rite, because they were not 'people of letters'. Rather, they were seen as a freedom-loving martial nation, able to create quite a lot of trouble for both Persians and Turks.

liberal-minded Pope who was also surrounded by some of della Valle's erudite friends. One instance of this disappointment was the poor reception of his encomiastic portrait of Shah Abbas, published in 1628 and dedicated in fact to the Pope's nephew, Cardinal Francesco Barberini. The Roman censorship refused to allow the distribution of the book because the portrayal of an infidel ruler as a heroic and prudent king, and the justification of his policies towards Christians as no worse than Christian policies towards Jews and infidels, was ideologically disturbing in the context of the current debate about reason of state. The official Catholic position was that true religion was a requisite for truly great politics, and that no real parallel existed between Christians and non-Christians. For della Valle, the demystification of petty South Indian kings did not involve a general condemnation of oriental despotism: it resulted from the stark contrast presented by Shah Abbas, who stood as a prudent, rather than tyrannical, king, fulfilling reason-of-state ideals above religious definitions.⁷⁷ Effectively, with his separation of true religion from political rationality, della Valle entered the world of men like Galileo, who similarly sought to constrain clerical authority to strictly religious matters in order to give free rein to rational enquiry. They both suffered (although della Valle certainly suffered less) under the superficially liberal regime of the baroque Papacy, on account of their imaginative understanding of what was possible for a lay gaze within the Counter-Reformation.

This is why the real challenge – the real flowering of sceptical seeds towards the Enlightenment – would have to come from the Netherlands, England and France. Due to censorship, the orientalist projects in which della Valle's manuscripts played such an important role – especially the polyglot Bible – actually developed in France rather than in Rome. Although the literature in Italian concerning oriental courts (such as Constantinople) remained important, the critical mass of independent travellers whose accounts after 1650 contributed so much to the crystallization of notions of oriental despotism, natural religion, and the relativity of human customs, was mainly French and, to a lesser extent,

⁷⁷ Della Valle wanted to publish the book in Rome but, unable to do so, tried in Venice, pretending, however, that the initiative was the publisher Francesco Baba's. Despite the prohibition the work actually circulated among European erudites through personal gifts. I have consulted a copy of *Delle condizioni di Abbas, Re di Persia* (Venice, 1628) in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (R. I. iv. 84) which has valuable marginalia by a contemporary critic, who seems to have known della Valle as well as the circumstances of the book's prohibition. This reader (perhaps the recipient of the book, Cardinal Barberini) associated oriental tyranny with the incommensurability between Christianity and other religions, whilst della Valle implied that moral and political systems were essentially comparable from a rational perspective, whatever the quality of the religion.

English. Writing within a few years of each other, and often feeding into a public debate, Bernier and Tavernier, Thévenot and Chardin, Rycout and Galland, had a larger impact than any isolated traveller like della Valle could have achieved (in effect the long-term impact of the *Viaggi* was related to their incorporation into this northern European cultural horizon). In effect della Valle stood in the same position with regards to François Bernier as his contemporary Nobili in relation to the author of the philosophical preface to Rogerius' *Open door*: they were both outstandingly sophisticated products of a Roman world which was suddenly retreating from the confident Catholic assertion of the turn of the seventeenth century (however tinged by compromise with reason of state, cultural adaptation and antiquarian perspectives), to increasing dependence on the emerging French-dominated culture of *libertins* and deists which would set the tone in Europe after 1650.⁷⁸ One was a world that sanctified Ignatius of Loyola but could not take Copernicanism; the other was scandalized by, but also welcomed, the new philosophy of Gassendi and Descartes.

Thus, even at his most radical, della Valle's philosophy was Platonic and Neostoic rather than *libertin*. This is evident in the humanist oration concerning his travels which he delivered to the Academy of the Umoristi on his return, which after reviewing the diversity of the world and its changeability concluded that 'virtue alone is worth our esteem'.⁷⁹ This opposition between universal vanity and universal virtue was of course previous to any experience as traveller: the world simply served to illustrate a philosophical truth which belonged to della Valle's education in the humanism of the late Renaissance. A similar judgement could be made about the issues raised in the fuller description of della Valle's philosophical wisdom offered by his first biographer, Bellori, in the 1662 edition of the *Viaggi*:

He used to say, concerning human customs, that vices and virtues can be found in all places, and that the good and the bad are disseminated all over; he had not found anything better, or worse, than mankind;

⁷⁸ For a classic assessment of the shape and significance of this cultural climate, and of its reliance on travel literature, see Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne*, still important today, although confining the phenomenon rather arbitrarily to the period 1680–1715.

⁷⁹ 'La virtù sola conchiudo esser degna di stima', from 'Oratione del sig. Pietro della Valle recitata in Roma nella Accademia degli Humoristi, nella quale restringe tutte o le maggiori parti delle cose più degne da lui osservate ne suoi viaggi' (BAV, Barberini Lat. 5,206). This (quite different from the oration that he had drafted in Persia) remains unpublished. I am planning to edit it. We know from Bellori's biography that della Valle's oration was offered as a response to a previous oration on the utility of voyages by Angelo Filatrello – a subject conventional in this period.

opinion and custom are extremely powerful; all profess to know, but ignorance is common; misfortunes are many, and successful outcomes few; those are always ready, these rarely happen to us; nature in all lands is a common mother: it distributes her gifts to all, and where some are missing others compensate; however, only few among the mortals know how to use these gifts, and the majority abuse them to their own harm. Finally, he used to say that among all the things he had seen, one alone he had vainly searched for and not found, through all his travels, for many years, in many places, in the midst of humble, high and royal fortunes. This was that he had never encountered a man who was entirely happy; rather the contrary, he had found many, without number, who were extremely unhappy.⁸⁰

Here again the traveller's experience could tinge his moral philosophy with a certain scepticism, and even a naturalistic relativism, congenial to Lipsius and Montaigne, without openly addressing any theological issues. This remained in seventeenth-century Rome the key formal limitation to a self-proclaimed citizenship of the world.

Della Valle therefore exemplifies a particular version of the integration of the empirical traveller and the humanist-educated philosopher and antiquarian. Analysed alongside other well-known seventeenth-century independent travellers in the Orient like Bernier, La Boullaye, Tavernier, Chardin, Thévenot and Rycaut, creators of what was perhaps the key component of the ethnological reading-list of the early Enlightenment, what is most distinguishable is della Valle's fashioning of a persona of pious learned curiosity whose romance of tragic love and triumph of human wisdom were staged in a universal theatre, for posterity no less than for his own times. If we can judge from the circulation of his work in Italian, French, Dutch, English and German in quick succession over less than fifteen years, his own correspondence with the international network of antiquarians of the seventeenth century, his participation in the life of learned academies like the 'Umoristi' of Rome, and finally, the existence of no less than two biographies of his life (like Bellori's) which soon prefaced the Italian edition of his letters, it is clear that della Valle's self-fashioning as a curious and cosmopolitan pilgrim was socially re-fashioned, and found a niche in the intellectual gallery of baroque Europe.

Della Valle's unpremeditated style, unconventional, fresh and direct, dominated by the idea of making accessible the naked truth in unadorned language, can be seen as a literary equivalent of Caravaggio's contemporary radical naturalism, equally pious but also sharing a considerable

⁸⁰ Della Valle, *Turquia* (1662), 'Vita di Pietro della Valle il pellegrino'.

potential for overt sensuality and thus moral scandal.⁸¹ What della Valle accomplished was to institutionalize a new model of historical prose which inherited Renaissance ideals of truthfulness, participated in an erudite, humanistic antiquarianism, and (through the accident of Mario Schipano's failure to perform his commission) went beyond restrictive conventions of rhetorical order and propriety. Thus della Valle's legacy pointed towards the Enlightenment in two fundamental ways: by participating in a sophisticated manner in the creation of the persona of the gentleman-traveller of the Grand Tour, and by proposing a philosophical discourse concerning human diversity which encompassed both civil and religious themes – a discourse effectively sustained by a practice of naturalistic observation and enquiry which might have been best defined as scientific, had della Valle's personal experience not been so whimsical. But much as he was a predecessor, della Valle was also an inheritor, and for this reason can serve us as epilogue for our analysis of the evolution of the travel literature of the Renaissance.

⁸¹ It would of course be exaggerating, and also unnecessary, to suggest that della Valle's style was directly inspired by Caravaggio's naturalism. On the other hand, he was certainly aware of the dispute about Caravaggio's style, since it dominated the academies of Rome during the years of della Valle's formation, before disappointment in love and war drove him to assume the pilgrim's garb in 1614. Eventually Caravaggio and della Valle would share the same biographer, Giovan Pietro Bellori. Della Valle's interest in painting is well attested, and when he left for Turkey, Egypt and the Holy Land he took along, in his pay, a young Flemish painter called John (who had previously been working in Naples). John accompanied him to Persia too. Unfortunately his paintings appear to have been lost. Although the editor of the *Viaggi* Biagio Deversin had planned a full fourth part with illustrations, he could only find a few schematic drawings of temples and palaces in India.