

André Pieyre de Mandiargues : The Fantastic Aesthetics of Italy

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This study on the 20th-century French fantasy author André Pieyre de Mandiargues (1909-1991) explores the relation between his early works on the 1950s and ‘Italy’—a subject that has been neglected by previous studies on Mandiargues. This study chooses to focus on the 1950s because this is the period during which he visited Italy most frequently, and it became his new base for creation; furthermore, this was the period when the decisive subject of Mandiargues’s fantastic world—that of a conflict between ‘the geometric space’ and ‘the baroque eros’—was discovered and established.

Mandiargues published three books on the theme of Italy in the 1950s: *Marble* (novel [1953]), *The Lily of sea* (novel [1956]), and *The Monsters of Bomarzo* (essay [1957]). Focusing on these three pieces of work, this study reveals how he structured the contrasts between geometry and baroque as a subject in his fantastic worlds; thus, it investigates Mandiargues’s ‘Italianity’.

In the introduction, we will first review the history of fantastic theory in France and the position of the fantastic in the literature of the 20th century. Next, we will describe Mandiargues’s distinctive views on the fantastic, which connect traditional fantastic theory to the concept of *surréalisme*’s ‘marvel’ and to the scientific methodology of *Nouveau Roman* and form—the ‘modern fantastic’, so to speak. Finally, exploring his life until the 1950s, we will disclose how Mandiargues’s artistic nature was formed in connection with Italy; we will also explore his friendship before his debut into the literary world soon after World War II.

In the first part of this paper, we will study his creation process from the end of the war to the first half of the 1950s, a period that overlapped with the period during which he wrote and published *Marble*. Already, before World War II, Mandiargues showed early signs of his aesthetic of contrasts by creating a geometric city plan based on the ‘pentagon’ of Ferrara and developing baroque landscapes in Venice or in the suburbs of Milan. That was also how he began to notice that Italian culture holds the conflict between classicism

and baroque. Additionally, he received a crucial revelation in Puglia, which he visited in 1951. On the basis of the memories of this trip, Mandiargues published an essay, 'Puglia's little Cicero', in 1957. The itinerary he chose for this essay starts with a description of the Castel del Monte, a medieval octagonal fortress, and ends at the city of Alberobello, which was known for its traditional architecture called 'Trulli'. The monuments he described are indeed famous sightseeing spots, but this essay revealed a new vision of them by disclosing their structure in reference to the sense of 'depaysement'; this further innovated the author's fantastic concept.

Introducing this new methodology of fantasy, Mandiargues wrote his first work, *Marble* (1953). All six chapters of this novel (except the second titled 'Vocabulary', which had been conceived as an independent short story) were written after his trip to Puglia. In particular, the third chapter, 'Platonic corps', and the fifth chapter, 'Theater of death', are modelled on the Castel del Monte and Alberobello, respectively, thus tracing the itinerary of his trip to Puglia. The third chapter structures the story itself as a process of initiating the protagonist, Ferreol, through two thematic strategies: first, the analogic image between the symmetric geometry of Castel del Monte and a colossus of Hermaphrodite surrounded by five platonic geometric solids; and, second, the alchemic implications of the philosopher's stone and psychological androgyny as a sign of the integration of opposites. Furthermore, the fifth chapter describes a fictional geometric circular city, Borgorotondo, in the centre of which an old woman achieves her death on a stage—surrounded by male audiences who orgasm as they witness her end. In this situation, Ferreol experiences a mysterious epiphany that eros and death intersect in a geometric space.

In the second part, we survey the latter half of the 1950s and clarify how Mandiargues's original themes of fantasy, which he obtained with *Marble*, sublimate as his aesthetic methodology by means of a novel and an essay. In the novel *The lily of sea* (1957), which was written on the basis of two tours to Sardinia, the heroine, Vanina, undergoes a baroque theatrical trial with bloodshed when she loses her virginity; this event occurs within the isolated space of Sardinia, which is geometrically ordered by the four elements that make up the universe. Based on the contrast between Sardinian nature

and theatrically ritualised artificiality, alchemic images and hermaphroditic themes are inserted into the story, thus emphasising that the sexual experience of the heroine is a process of initiation. Thus, all the subjects developed experimentally in *Marble bloom* as rich images in this novel, which places the concept of contrast between geometry and eros at its core.

Next, we consider the essay *The Monsters of Bomarzo* (1957). This essay on the 16th century's mannerist garden was written on the basis of his impression of actually visiting in 1954. In this essay, Mandiargues defines the essence of 'modern beauty' in this garden, quoting the surrealistic image, that is, the 'relationship between the monument and the environment surrounding it'. The concept affected Mandiargues deeply, and he constructed his own theory that a monster considered as a 'divinity' lurking in the human unconscious is expressed as a 'mask' that projects the inner face of a human being; then, it becomes 'modern myth', which concerns personal religious feelings. Furthermore, the structure of this garden, which has love's initiation as its theme, agrees with the theme that is consistently explored in his works from *Marble* to *The Lily of sea*—the exploration of androgyny as a 'universal body of love' in which the sacred love and the vulgar love are integrated; thus, it becomes possible to find the point of contact between Italian history and Mandiargues's literature beyond the gap of the three centuries in this 'holy forest' in Bomarzo.

On the basis of the abovementioned considerations, we conclude that the intellectual '(re)discovery' of Italy in the 1950s made a significant impression on the writing career of Mandiargues, thus suggesting all the necessary methodologies to build his own style.