


2017

Italy and the Violet Quill: A Conversation with Edmund White

Luca Lanzilotta
Dickinson College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.dickinson.edu/faculty_publications

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), and the [Place and Environment Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lanzilotta, Luca. "Italy and the Violet Quill: A Conversation with Edmund White." *Voices in Italian Americana* 28, no. 1 (2017): 47-61.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact scholar@dickinson.edu.

ITALY AND THE VIOLET QUILL: A CONVERSATION WITH EDMUND WHITE¹

Luca Lanzilotta
Dickinson College

In 1980, seven gay writers — Christopher Cox, Robert Ferro, Michael Grumley, Andrew Holleran, Felice Picano, Edmund White, and George Whitmore — formed a literary club in New York called the Violet Quill, with the goal of reading their works in progress to one another.² Although the group met only a handful of times, the Violet Quill deserves attention for providing its members with a support system at a time when writing gay novels was rare and courageous.

Living abroad was a common denominator for almost all the members of the Violet Quill, and Italy was by far the Quillians' favorite destination: four out of seven (Ferro, Grumley, Picano, and White) lived there at some point. In order to explore the connection between the Violet Quill and Italy, in the spring of 2015 I had the pleasure to interview Edmund White, who lived in Rome in 1970. Even though White lived in Italy for less than a year, he has included various episodes of his Italian stay in many of his writings, from his memoirs (*My Lives, City Boy, Inside a Pearl*) to his essays ("Fantasia on the Seventies"), to his novels (*The Farewell Symphony*). However, whenever White writes about his "Roman holiday,"³ he often has a negative recollection of his life in Italy and of the Roman gay scene.⁴ In this interview, White reminisces about his Italian experience, shares his perspective on what it was like to live in Rome as an openly gay American

¹ Many thanks to Edmund White for his availability and kindness. I would also like to thank James McMenamin and Leah Orr for their useful suggestions, and Fred Gardaphe for his positive feedback and support.

² Nobody seems to remember where the name "Violet Quill" originated. David Bergman writes in *The Violet Hour* that "there is a vague recollection that Ferro and Grumley had violet plumes made for the members as a token of membership" (3). However, it is not clear whether the violet plumes were the reason or the consequence for the club to be called the Violet Quill.

³ White refers to his Italian stay as his "Roman holiday" in "Fantasia on the Seventies" (38) and in *The Farewell Symphony* (125).

⁴ For example in *City Boy*, White describes his life in Rome as "useless" (72) and "compounded of worries about money, two mild hangovers a day (lunch and dinner) and lots of empty talk and not much sex" (72). And in "Fantasia on the Seventies," he calls the Roman gay scene at the time "pathetic" (73).

in 1970, and sheds light on what drew him and the other Quillians to Italy during the years of *La Dolce Vita*.⁵



Q: I am delighted that I have the opportunity to converse with you about your time in Italy. I would like to ask you first some questions about your recollection of Ferro's, Grumley's, and Picano's Italian experiences, followed by some questions about your time in Rome, and finally ask your opinion on the role that Italy in general played for the Violet Quill. My first question, though, is what the Violet Quill meant to you. I am asking particularly because I noticed that you did not even mention the Violet Quill in your autobiography *My Lives*.⁶

A: I might have mentioned the Violet Quill in another autobiographical work I wrote, which was called *City Boy*. *My Lives* was organized according to themes, like my blondes, my women, etc., so I didn't have a title for that. The Violet Quill was important to me and to all the members. It was the beginning of publishing gay fiction and even though we only met about seven times, we divided up the field, without ever talking about it explicitly. For example, Robert Ferro got the family as he and his partner Michael Grumley were trying to establish themselves as a gay couple in Ferro's Italian/American family, Andrew Holleran got Fire Island, I got childhood, and so on. In those meetings we sort of figured out how to divide up the turf.

Q: Let's talk about Robert Ferro. While reading Ferro's novels *The Family of Max Desir*, *The Blue Star*, and *Second Son*, I noticed that Italy heavily influenced his writing. As you may remember, Ferro used to spend a few months a year in Italy for many years, until he became too sick to travel. From what you can recall, what did Ferro say about his frequent trips to Italy?

A. I think that he had met [his partner] Michael Grumley in *Regina Coeli* prison in Rome. They were both arrested for marijuana.⁷ I remember that

⁵The term "Dolce Vita" (literally, sweet life) refers to the period between the end of the fifties and the end of the sixties, when the Italian economy was booming and the city of Rome became a worldwide trend setter in terms of fashion and style. The term became famous worldwide thanks to Fellini's 1960 movie *La Dolce Vita*, which explored the glitzy lifestyle of the Italian capital in those years.

⁶The Violet Quill is mentioned in White's essay "Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf" (276), in *The Farewell Symphony* where the group is called "the All-Praise Club" (346), and in White's foreword to *The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction* (xv).

⁷David Bergman writes that Ferro and Grumley "met at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop [. . .] which they attended from September 1965 through June 1967" (*The Violet*

they used to call the prison “Sky Queen!” Both Ferro and Grumley loved the whole Italian way of life: the food, the arts. . . . All that was very important to them. [At this point White’s partner, Michael Carroll, who was in the room and was listening to our conversation, intervened and said that when he read Ferro’s novel *The Blue Star*, he thought that Ferro must have loved E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*, and that the “pensione” where Peter Conrad, the protagonist of Ferro’s novel, was staying in Florence was in a way his room with a view. Edmund White confirmed that Forster was very important to Ferro and that, just like Ferro, Forster had a typically British love affair with Florence.]

Q: In Ferro’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Family of Max Desir*, which he was writing when the Violet Quill meetings took place, he included many elements from his own Italian/American family. Do you remember whether Ferro ever talked about his Italian heritage or any Italian aspects of his family or upbringing?

A: Yes, he did. We were young and not terribly curious about it. Now, on the other hand, I would ask him a lot of questions! I remember that he would talk about his family as being almost like a Mafia family, in the sense of being very hierarchical and very oppressive. And yet he thought that they were fair.

Q: Did he portray himself as an Italian American? And was he openly proud of his heritage?

Hour 3). I contacted David Bergman, to ask him whether he thinks that it is possible that Ferro and Grumley had met in Rome before they went to Iowa. Bergman’s response was: “I heard of some trouble that the Ferro-Grumleys had with the police [in Italy], but I’m not sure that was how they met.” Bergman also suggested that I write to Andrew Holleran, who studied in Iowa with Ferro and Grumley and was close to them. So I wrote to Holleran, and this is what he responded to my inquiry: “I cannot say for sure, but if I had to bet, I think they met in Rome before the Workshop. Why do I say that? I don’t know. I know that there was a Roman past, when I met Robert in Iowa City. But in writing you now, I realize I have no firm foundation for knowing any of it. And now I’m curious!” In conclusion, the mystery remains unsolved, but since both Edmund White and Andrew Holleran seem to think that Ferro and Grumley met in Rome, I am inclined to believe that this is probably what happened. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the story that Edmund White recalls partially resembles what is narrated in Ferro’s semiautobiographical novel *The Family of Max Desir*, in which the main character Max meets his future partner Nick Flynn in an “old prison outside Arezzo, called La Stella Nera” (60). In the book, Max is “arrested by a plainclothesman whose passivity Max had misinterpreted” (60), while Nick was jailed for “dope” (63). Moreover, the fictional character of Nick Flynn shares many common traits with Michael Grumley: for example, both are from Iowa, graduated with a philosophy degree from CCNY, and worked at Cinecittà.

A: I think that he did consider himself Italian American. Throughout Ferro's life the emphasis on family was very strong. For instance, the house where all of Ferro's family would go on the beach was very important as a kind of nest. For the typical American from Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois, as soon as you leave college you say goodbye to your parents, you come to New York, you almost never see them anymore, and you very rarely talk to them. They don't give you any money, and you don't send them any letters. You just live your own life. That's very American. But for Ferro it was different. And I used to think: why did Robert Ferro want his family to accept him as a homosexual? Why did he need to have his and Michael's name into the family tree? Cut bait, be done with them! But that would have been the typical American view, as you don't want to mess with your family, after a certain point. He seemed to be very Italian in the sense of wanting to be part of the family. And yes, he was definitely proud of his heritage.

Q: Ferro's partner Michael Grumley discovered Italy through Robert,⁸ but the fact that he was willing to spend several months a year in Italy with Ferro makes me believe that he enjoyed his time there just as much. Why do you think that living in Italy was such a positive experience for Ferro and Grumley?

A: To begin with, in those days it was cheaper to live in Italy than in America, because the dollar was very strong. But another reason is that if you are an American, always being a tourist in Europe is considered second rate, but Ferro and Grumley had a personal contact with that country, and they spoke some Italian. I never spoke Italian with them, but I know that they could speak it.

Q: What did Italy have that Ferro and Grumley could not find in the United States?

A: I think the answer is: "Dolce far niente!"⁹

Q: In David Bergman's book *The Violet Hour*, I read that Grumley worked at Cinecittà¹⁰ as an actor in low budget movies.¹¹ And when Picano was in

⁸As it turns out, this might not be true after all (see footnote 7).

⁹In English: pleasant relaxation in carefree idleness (literally, "sweet doing nothing").

¹⁰Founded in 1937 in Rome by Benito Mussolini, Cinecittà is to this day the largest film studio in Europe.

¹¹From *The Violet Hour*: "Grumley (like Picano) was involved in Italian moviemaking, having appeared in a few cheap spaghetti westerns and sword-and-sandal gladiator flicks churned out at Cinecittà (sic)" (Bergman 102).

Rome in 1966, he fell in love with a movie director who worked at Cinecittà and Picano worked for him. How was Cinecittà in those years and what did it mean for the Quillians?

A: The movies always seem kind of glamorous and Cinecittà was a way to make money if you were a foreigner and looked good. I had a roommate in Rome in 1970. He was blond, from Austria. He had almost no money, but he earned the little bit of money he had working as an extra in the movies. I remember that he had a little dog called Anzia, from the movie *The Battle of Anzio*, because he found the dog on the set!

Q: Other than your roommate, did you have any contacts with Cinecittà?

A: I had a friend, Aziz, who was Egyptian and worked for Cinecittà as a translator. For example, at Cinecittà they would hire a Swedish actress and a German actor, who didn't know what they were saying or what the plot of the movie was about. Aziz knew ten languages and his job was to do the rough translation for the actors into their native languages. And then I think that the Ferro-Grumleys¹² might have introduced me to a fairly successful movie director, Franco Brusati, who made a film about an Italian man going to Switzerland, called *Pane e cioccolata*.¹³ I spent many evenings with Franco when I was in Rome.

Q: Felice Picano is the third Quillian who lived in Italy. The year was 1966 and he spent about ten months in Rome. In the essay that Picano wrote in memory of Robert Ferro, I noticed a very different approach to life in Italy, compared to Ferro's. As a matter of fact, Picano states that while for Ferro and Grumley Rome became a second home, for Picano his time in Rome was just a "detour" ("Robert Ferro" 116). Did Picano ever bring up his time in Italy with you? And knowing him, did you think that his time in Italy was a detour?

A: Of course he is Italian American, but he never talked to me about his time in Italy, so I guess that he does not consider it important. To my knowledge the only other Italian thing that Picano did was work for the bookstore Rizzoli in New York, selling books.

¹²According to David Bergman, Robert Ferro and Michael Grumley used to be called "the Ferro-Grumleys" by their friends: "In the minds of the other members of the Violet Quill (and to others who knew them) they were a hyphenate — the Ferro-Grumleys" (*Violet Hour* 3).

¹³Franco Brusati (1922–1993) was an Italian screenwriter and movie director. Among his most famous movies are the comedy *Pane e Cioccolata* (1974) and the drama *Dimenticare Venezia* (1979), which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

Q: In Picano's essay "Growing up Un-Italian American," he writes that he grew up in a family that deliberately stifled their ethnicity to prove their integration into American society. When I read that, I thought that his aloofness and negative attitude toward Italy and toward his Italian journey must be connected to his family's disinterest in their Italian heritage. What is your opinion?

A: First of all, Picano wasn't terribly close to his family, except to one brother. But I don't think that he had much to do with his parents and, from what I remember, they didn't like him very much. Also, it's typical of lower class immigrant families that they want to be American American and they won't even teach Italian to their children!

Q: Before we talk about your time in Italy, I would like to go back to the summer of 1962, when you had just moved to New York. In the biography that Stephen Barber wrote of you, he states that while you were walking around Greenwich Village at night you were "aware of a highly evident and vibrant community of gay men existing alongside the dominant but tolerant Italian population of the area" (*Edmund White* 28). Can you please elaborate on their tolerance, which surprised me a bit?

A: I think that Barber made that up. For instance, in 1962–63 I had a lover called Stanley Redfern. One day he went to visit a friend of ours who lived just three blocks south of us, in an area that was much more Italian, below Canal Street. He was beaten up by five Italian boys, I guess partly for being an outsider, but also because he looked too gay. He got a very bad disease because of that, and he almost died. So, no, they were not very tolerant.

Q: Let's now talk about your time in Italy. In *My Lives* you write that you lived in Rome for six months,¹⁴ but in the essay "Fantasia on the Seventies" you state that you were in Rome for ten months.¹⁵ How long were you there?

A: What I wrote in "Fantasia on the Seventies" was a lie! I think I was there from January to July.

¹⁴This is confirmed by what White writes in *City Boy*: "I stayed from January to June" (71) and in *The Farewell Symphony*: "my six months in Rome" (122).

¹⁵In "Fantasia on the Seventies" White states: "I returned ten months later to the United States" (38). A possible explanation of White's imaginary extension of his Italian stay can be found in *The Farewell Symphony*. In the novel, the first-person narrator says that, after returning to New York, his friends did not seem to care about his time in Italy; therefore, to magnify the importance of the event, he had expanded his trip into a whole year abroad: "I had found so little echo in New York of what I had now expanded into a whole 'year' in Rome" (131).

Q: What are the first things that come to mind when you reminisce about your stay in Rome in 1970? What were the highlights?

A: I was drunk most of the time with white wine and I didn't get as much work done as I hoped. However, I met some interesting people. For example, I had a female friend called Diana Arton, who was from an old, important Jewish family. One of her uncles had won the Noble Prize in physics and another uncle was a politician. Her family was related to the Bompianis too. I met Ginevra Bompiani, who is still a friend of mine.¹⁶ Her husband was Giorgio Agamben, who is an important Italian philosopher.¹⁷

Q: In *My Lives* you write: "[I] moved to Rome for half a year. I'd intended all along to settle in Paris but my two brief visits there had so thoroughly intimidated me that I veered off toward Italy" (138). Can you explain more in detail what made you decide to move to Italy, since it wasn't even your dream destination?

A: In the middle of the sixties I had gone to Rome, Venice, and Florence on a holiday and I had had a good time. When I had been in France in the same years for vacation, Paris was very anti-American, because of our war in Vietnam and because it was a very leftist country and there was a hostility to capitalism and America. So I decided to go to Rome instead.

Q: Do you remember the first moment when you decided to go to Italy?

A: I went to school in Michigan with Natalia Ginzburg's cousin, whose name was Vittorio Ginzburg.¹⁸ He had always said to me that he could have introduced me to his family (and that included Diana Arton), if I had gone to Italy. If you go to a foreign city and you know two or three people it makes a big difference.

Q: In *My Lives* you write that you were in Rome during "the last spasms of La Dolce Vita" (294). Considering that Italy has been in an economic repression for a few decades, how do you remember Italy at that time?

¹⁶The Bompianis are an important Italian family. Valentino Bompiani (1898–1992) founded in 1929 what would become one of the most renowned Italian publishing houses, Bompiani. Ginevra Bompiani, Valentino's daughter, is a writer and translator.

¹⁷Giorgio Agamben (1942) is an Italian philosopher. He currently teaches at the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio (Università della Svizzera Italiana).

¹⁸Natalia Ginzburg (1916–1991) was one of the most important Italian authors of the twentieth century.

A: It really was the end of the *Dolce Vita*. You would go to a night club where there would only be ten people and huge spaces, beautiful lighting, lots of champagne. . . . It was better than America!

Q: In Rome you wrote a screenplay¹⁹ that you said “no one liked” (*My Lives* 295) and in *City Boy* you tell this episode: “In 1970, when I met Carlo Ponti, who was [Sophia] Loren’s husband, he pushed my hundred-page film script aside” (20).²⁰ I imagine that you were talking about the same script. Whatever happened to that script? Did you ever try to have it read again?

A: The screenplay must be somewhere in my archives, and no, I never had it read again. Let me tell you the story behind that script. One of the students of my Italian teacher was Farley Granger,²¹ an actor who had been the star in the movie *Senso*.²² After that, in America he had become an alcoholic and his career was ruined, but then he had a nice lover who sobered him up and brought him back to Italy, thinking that maybe he could launch his career again. I was excited to meet him because he was a childhood hero of mine (he had been in the Hitchcock movie *Strangers on a Train*), so I thought that I would write the script for him. My movie was about an American man who falls in love with an Italian girl, but they don’t speak to each other very well, because they don’t know each other’s language. They have lots of sex, but not too much conversation. Then the man goes back to America on business and he dies there. When he dies, there is a postal strike, a *sciopero* [strike], in Italy. When the *sciopero* is finally finished and the woman is almost over him, she starts receiving letters that he had written to her from America before he died, and they are all very romantic. So then she goes to America trying to understand this strange man. My one hundred page script was very detailed and precise, with all the camera movements. Somebody I knew knew Carlo Ponti,²³ so I thought that it would be a package deal, but nothing worked. An American writer, better known than me (I was not known at all at that point), whose name was Leonard Melfi, was living in Rome at the time.²⁴ He wrote a three-page script for Carlo Ponti, called *La Mortadella*, about an

¹⁹In his biography of Edmund White, Stephen Barber writes: “White worked intermittently on the manuscript of a film screenplay, entitled *Cipriana*, which he hoped would succeed in relaunching the career of a popular Hollywood actor of the 1950s named Farley Granger whom White had met briefly in Rome, where Granger was then living after his American career had collapsed” (*Edmund White* 43).

²⁰This episode is also mentioned in *The Farewell Symphony* (White 115–16).

²¹Farley Granger (1925–2011) was an American actor. His most important roles were in Hitchcock’s movies *Rope* (1948) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

²²*Senso* (1954) is a movie by Italian director Luchino Visconti.

²³Carlo Ponti (1912–2007) was an Italian film producer.

²⁴Leonard Melfi (1932–2001) was an American playwright and actor.

Italian woman who wants to get into America carrying a huge mortadella, and Sophia Loren made it into a movie. Carlo Ponti said to me: why can't you do something like the great Leonard Melfi? Just write a three page script! Who wants a one hundred page script?!

Q: Do you think that your stay in Rome would have lasted longer had your screenplay been produced?

A: Yes, if I had had some money! I went to Rome with seven thousand dollars and I spent it all in six months. I would invite twenty people out to dinner, we would eat on Piazza Navona, and I would pay for everyone, because it seemed like everybody I knew was poor! Those were the days when Italian boys would walk through Piazza Navona swinging Maserati keys, but they had no car, only the keys. . . .

Q: Besides writing the script, did you do anything else workwise while in Rome?

A: I don't think so or at least not that I can remember.

Q: In *City Boy* you write that you "took Italian lessons in New York for a month" (70) before moving to Italy.²⁵ Did you learn enough Italian to get by at the beginning of your stay?

A: Not really, but originally I could. *Posso parlare italiano anche adesso, ma ho dimenticato molto.* [I can speak Italian even now, but I have forgotten a lot.]

Q: In *My Lives* you write that in Rome you "took Italian lessons three times a week" (188).²⁶ How was your Italian at the end of your Italian stay?

A: It was pretty good, because my girlfriend Diana didn't speak very good English. Her mother had spoken English to her when she was a child, but she died when Diana was six years old, so she knew a lot of nursery words, like "don't dawdle" or things like that, but not grown-up words.

Q: Did your efforts to learn the language have a positive impact on your time in Rome? How so?

²⁵This is also narrated in *The Farewell Symphony*, but the details are slightly different: "During the two months before my departure I'd taken private Italian lessons" (White 78).

²⁶This is also mentioned in *The Farewell Symphony* (White 87).

A: Yes, because I would pick boys up (usually they were soldiers, *bersaglieri*,²⁷ all these cute boys . . .), and I could talk to them!

Q: Your description of gay life in Italy in 1970 is very negative and in “Fantasia on the Seventies” you state: “by the end of my Roman holiday [. . .] I was even drifting into the national sport of cruising women” (38). What was so negative about gay life in Italy, compared to New York, that it was almost affecting your sexual orientation?

A: It was very strange. We would all go to the Colosseum, which was open at night in those days. We would go in there and meet people, but usually they would be foreigners. For example, I had a boyfriend whom I met there who was from Romania. There was one movie theater, on the Corso, where you would go and there would be married men sitting with their rain coats. That was the other big sex scene. Unfortunately there was no sauna. There were two gay bars: one was called the Pipistrello, while the other one was called the St. James, and was located near the old walls. That was a bar where you would go wearing a velvet jacket and a tie. You would order one drink and it would cost ten dollars. And then you would just sit there with that one drink all evening, because it was so expensive. What else did people do? I remember once, the night that Italy beat Germany in the World Cup semifinal, my roommate, who was Austrian but spoke perfect Italian, said to me: this is a good time to pick up boys! So we went wandering around and we picked up this boy who had never been with a man before, but he was so excited about Italy’s win that he came with us.

Q: I find it fascinating that you went to Italy more or less at the same time as Ferro and Picano, and yet the image of gay life in Italy that they portray is very different from yours. In Ferro’s semi-autobiographical novel, *The Family of Max Desir*, the main character Max has his first sexual experiences in Italy, and lots of them, before falling in love with a fellow American. And in Picano’s autobiographical novel, *Men Who Loved Me*, Felice falls in love in Rome for the first time. Instead you write: “The gay scene in Rome at that time was pathetic” (*City Boy* 73). Both Ferro and Picano were in their early twenties in those trips, while you were almost ten years older, having just turned thirty. Do you think that the age difference and different life experiences were the reason for such opposite perceptions of gay life in Italy?

A: Maybe, or maybe they were just better looking than me, especially Ferro, who had long hair and was very glamorous. I had one friend who was a

²⁷“I bersaglieri” are a corps of the Italian Army.

composer. He was beautiful: blond, with blue eyes, and he had enormous success in Italy, because he was what everybody wanted. Even men who were married and thought that they were straight were excited about him, because he was beautiful and very exotic. I was just average looking and older, so I didn't have so much luck.

Q: When you returned to New York, the city had changed profoundly as a consequence of the Stone Wall riots and gay liberation. In *The Farewell Symphony* you write: "where before there had been a few gay boys hanging out on a stoop along Christopher Street, now there were armies of men marching in every direction off Sheridan Square" (122). Could gay liberation be the reason for your dismissal of gay life in Rome?

A: Partly, because I think that people in Rome were mostly ashamed of being homosexual and you never met a couple who were together. Men would live with their mothers until they got married. There was a lot of *vergogna* [shame], and not too much activity that was visible. Maybe there were cousins having sex with each other, but you didn't see it. And then I came back to New York and it was all a big festival!

Q: Besides your being disappointed about gay life, whenever you write about your stay in Rome, it is hard not to notice that your experience in the Italian capital was not a very positive one. For example, in *Inside a Pearl* you write that you recreated your "New York life in Rome but in an inferior version" (21). What were your expectations about living in Italy and why were you let down when you were confronted with the reality of Italian life?

A: Americans have a myth about Italians. They think that they are very free, very liberated, and sort of pagan. There are many movies that show Italians being abandoned and sexually free, whereas I think they are not that way. In fact, they are almost the opposite! I remember once I went to a male bordello in Barcelona and I said to the guy: who are your customers? And he said: mainly Italians, because we look like Italians, but they are too neurotic to have sex with each other, so they come here and they meet us.

Q: When I read the chapter from *The Farewell Symphony* dedicated to your time in Rome, I had the impression that you did not have any desire to be there at all. For example, you call Rome "repressed" (117) and "provincial" (117). Why didn't you leave sooner?

A: I don't know. I kept thinking that there was something I didn't understand. But it was also kind of fascinating to be there, because it was a different language, a different culture . . . everything was different. For instance, I would go with my roommate to a restaurant and we would

celebrate his birthday. And then we would get the bill and it was correct, they had added everything up, but my roommate, who was very Italian, very assimilated (even though he was from Austria), would say to the restaurant owner: we are your regular customers, we always come here, how can you charge us so much? And then the guy would cut the bill in half. To an American that seemed so crazy! Oh, and here's another funny story: one time they turned off the electricity in our apartment, because my roommate had not paid the bills. And so I was going to pay, but my roommate said: no, no, no, we will go there and tell them that our father is sick. And so he made up this whole story about how we lived with our father and he was very sick. And it worked! That's the way Italy used to be. It's rationalized now, like the rest of Europe, but you used to tell your story, and everything would come out all right.

Q: In *My Lives* and in *The Farewell Symphony* you also write about your first summer in Venice in the early seventies, when you visited a friend who spent the summer there.²⁸ You seemed to have a much better time in Venice than in Rome. For example, this is how you describe your Venetian experience in *The Farewell Symphony*: "It was such a pleasure to live in a historic city, the most beautiful in the world" (279). Venice can be a fickle city: some Americans love it and others hate it. What did Venice have that Rome did not? Surely it wasn't the abundance of sex that made a difference, since you admit that in Venice you "hadn't had sex more than four times in two months . . ." (*The Farewell Symphony* 293).

A: The friend I would go visit, David Kalstone, was my best friend. He knew hundreds of people, like Peggy Guggenheim,²⁹ and so we had a real social life. Every day David went to the Cipriani swimming pool³⁰ and sometimes he would invite me, but not every day, because it cost money. It was fun to be in Venice. For example, we knew a woman called Maria Teresa Rubin, who was the head of the Save Venice committee, and she always had parties. I also love the city itself, because once you leave San Marco, the tourists are all behind you and it's really Venetian.

²⁸In *The Farewell Symphony* the friend's name is Joshua; this fictional character was inspired by Edmund White's friend David Kalstone.

²⁹Marguerite "Peggy" Guggenheim (1898–1979) was an American art collector related to the family of the American museum (her uncle Solomon Guggenheim established the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York). Peggy Guggenheim moved to Venice after World War II and opened the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, one of Italy's most important museums.

³⁰The swimming pool that Edmund White is referring to is part of The Belmond Hotel Cipriani (formerly called The Hotel Cipriani), which is one of the most expensive hotels in the world.

Q: Do you think that you made a mistake moving to Rome in 1970 and that you should have relocated to Venice instead?

A: No, because Venice in the winter is very sinister. And even though I complained about Rome being a village, I met a lot of people I liked there and it is a beautiful city.

Q: Traveling abroad played an important role for most members of the Violet Quill. Was it a common topic of conversation during the Violet Quill gatherings?

A: We all pretended to be very sophisticated. We were only thirty or forty years old, and we were all quite poor. Like a lot of artists, we made believe that we were really an elite, intellectually and culturally, to make up for the fact that we were so poor. It was sort of understood that we were sophisticated, and had traveled, at a time when not so many Americans used to travel.

Q: Why do you think that many Quillians felt a need to go abroad?

A: They had a myth that Europeans would be more tolerant of homosexuality.

Q: From the information I have gathered, Italy was by far the most popular travel destination for the Quillians. Why Italy?

A: Maybe they knew a little Italian, and even though I say bad things about Rome, really it was very glamorous. For example, I had a friend who lived in a *palazzo* [apartment building] that was carved out of an ancient Roman *anfiteatro* [amphitheater]. In the Renaissance these people had taken the walls of the *anfiteatro* to build their palace: it was incredible! And one of the nice things about being a foreigner is that sometimes people think that you are more important than you really are. In your own country you are a *Pinco Pallino*,³¹ but when you go to Rome suddenly they think that you are an intellectual, or a famous writer. And so you go up the ladder a little bit.

Q: Do you feel like you, Ferro, Picano and Grumley shared a special camaraderie among the Quillians, since the four of you had lived in Rome? If not, why?

³¹“Pinco Pallino” is an Italian invented first and last name used to communicate an unspecified and unimportant person, similar to “the average Joe” in English. In this sense, Edmund White meant to convey “a nobody.”

A: There were other ties among us. Ferro, Holleran and Grumley had gone to the University of Iowa, so that was a real bond. And I had been lover with George Whitmore and Chris Cox. We all liked each other, but those were the strongest ties.³²

Q: Over forty years have passed from your time in Rome. In *My Lives* you mention that over the years you have traveled to Italy several other times. How have you seen Rome and Italy change? Do you still enjoy it?

A: It's changed quite a bit and I do still enjoy it. About six years ago, [my lover] Michael and I swapped apartments with a couple in Trastevere,³³ a man and a woman. They came to New York and we went there for a month. It was in June and a lot of gay bars had taken over the area near the pyramid where Keats is buried, and they had a gay summer festival. There were hundreds of gay people there and they seemed extremely friendly to us. That was very different!

Q: Clearly your life has been affected by your many years in Paris. However, even though you lived in Italy for less than a year, Rome was your first experience living abroad. Looking back, do you feel like your "Roman holiday" left any mark on your life?

A: Yes, I do. I think that it's always good to get outside of your language and to meet people with different customs. And the customs were so much more different in those days than they are now. Now everybody is globalized. For instance, I was giving you the examples of when we persuaded the electric people to turn the lights back on, or the *sconto*.³⁴ It was such a different world! For example, gay men lived with their mothers until they got married, and then in those days straight people couldn't get divorced, so many of my friends who were writers lived with their mistresses like husband and wife, because they had left the old wife behind, but couldn't get married to the new one. All that was interesting, not to

³²David Bergman echoes this social structure in *The Violet Hour*: "The Violet Quill itself fell roughly into two smaller alliances: on one side stood Robert Ferro, Michael Grumley, and Andrew Holleran, and on the other side, Edmund White, Christopher Cox, and George Whitmore. Felice Picano tried to balance himself between the two. This divide was not ideological or artistic — the Violet Quill never developed any coherent doctrine; rather, these divisions grew out of bonds of friendship and sex: when and how the participants had met each other, with whom and how long they had slept together" (2–3).

³³Trastevere is a neighborhood in Rome.

³⁴In English: discount. Here Edmund White is making reference to the episode that he narrated before, when his roommate demanded (and obtained) that their restaurant bill be cut in half because White and he were regular customers.

mention the beautiful architecture and art, that you remember you had studied in school and then you could visit in person.

Works Cited

- Barber, Stephen. *Edmund White: The Burning World*. London: Picador, 1999.
- Bergman, David. *The Violet Hour: The Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004.
- Ferro, Robert. *The Blue Star*. New York: Dutton, 1985.
- _____. *The Family of Max Desir*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.
- _____. *The Others*. New York: Scribner, 1977.
- _____. *Second Son: A Novel*. New York: Crown, 1988.
- Forster, Edward Morgan. *A Room with a View*. London: E. Arnold, 1908.
- Picano, Felice. "Growing Up Un-Italian-American." *Our Naked Lives: Essays from Gay Italian American Men*. Ed. Joseph A. LoGiudice and Michael Carosone. New York: Bordighera Press, 2013. 122-32.
- _____. *Men Who Loved Me: A Memoir in the Form of a Novel*. New York: New American Library, 1989.
- _____. "Robert Ferro." *Loss Within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS*. Ed. Edmund White. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2001: 113-30.
- White, Edmund. *City Boy: My Life in New York during the 1960s and '70s*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- _____. *The Farewell Symphony: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1997.
- _____. "Fantasia on the Seventies." *The Burning Library: Essays*. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Knopf, 1994: 38-42.
- _____. "Foreword." *The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction*. Ed. Edmund White. London: Faber and Faber, 1991: ix-xvii.
- _____. *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- _____. *My Lives*. New York: Ecco, 2006.
- _____. "Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf." *The Burning Library: Essays*. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Knopf, 1994: 271-83.