

SILVIA ANTOSA

Frances Elliot and Italy. Writing Travel, Writing the Self

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Frances Elliot and Italy. Writing Travel, Writing the Self inaugurates the new series *AngloSophia. Studi di Letteratura e Cultura Inglese* edited by the volume's author, Silvia Antosa, and by Mariacconcetta Costantini, offering a ground-breaking study of Frances Minto Elliot (1820-1898). A Victorian traveller and writer, Elliot provides an interesting example of cultural inbetweenness and misalignment. The large theoretical scope of Antosa's research launches, in line with her previous critical work (Antosa 2012, Antosa 2008), interdisciplinary and cross-cultural themes which contribute to current critical studies of confluences, hybridizations and contacts.

The cover image *Victorian Woman Walking Down Path Way* (Duncan, 1890) is highly evocative of scenarios to which Elliot directs our attention: "There are cliques and sets at Rome, more varied and antagonistic in character than are often to be found in much larger and more populous cities. I have belonged a little to all, entirely to none" ([Elliot 1871] Antosa 2018, p. 118). This is one of the most explicit statements of Elliot's deeply felt sense of misalignment and un-belonging which Antosa puts at the core of her analysis. Despite and against the strict moral codes of her times, Frances Elliot went through a sensational divorce from her husband, accused of abuse and adultery; separated from her daughters at first, and socially stigmatized, she successfully fought for her own independence. Antosa explores the nexus between travel writing and biography in a patriarchal Victorian context, filling a critical gap in the evaluation of Elliot's writings, and in particular of her Italian diaries, to highlight the significance of Elliot's personal form of resistance and the role she played in the development of feminist travel literature.

In the "Introduction" the author builds on contemporary criticism of cultural representations, from Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zone" (Antosa 2018, p. 13) to feminist postcolonial theory in order to stress the intrinsic instability of such representations as constructs related to gender, class and race. Opting for a methodology which combines archive research and practices of "embodied memory" (p. 129), the author investigates Elliot's complex "misalignment", to use a notion developed by Sara Ahmed: an outsider both in Italy and at home, Elliot could however reorient herself through travel and experience "unexpected forms of inhabitation" (pp. 19-20).

The book is structured into four chapters. In the first chapter, "In the Travellers' Footsteps: Italy, Sicily and the Hybrid Spaces of Representation", a large historical and theoretical context for travel writing is provided through reference to traces of collective "archival memory" (Diana Taylor 2003; Antosa 2018, p.18), from the religious model of pilgrims' accounts through the nationalistic dimension of travel writing in the sixteenth century up to the satirical narratives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An important point is made of processes of stylistic hybridization: travel writing provides a pattern for first person narratives in the realistic novel, and establishes itself at the same time as *fictional*.

The experience of the Grand Tour is discussed, moreover, in its socio-political significance in order to highlight crucial steps in the English construction of Italy and the

South. Antosa considers British “Meridionism” (Manfred Pfister 1996; Antosa 2018, p. 49), which encodes processes of cultural expansion and colonization, and locates Elliot’s writings within a counter-tradition of women’s accounts that tend to deconstruct stereotypes and dichotomic visions of self vs other, national vs foreigner, rational vs irrational. In fact, although appropriated from an intrinsic imperialistic standpoint which exposes asymmetrical power relationships, Elliot’s Italy is read as a transformative space in which a new British female identity is shaped.

Chapter 2, “Frances Elliot: Heiress, Divorcée and Social Commentator”, focuses first on the sensational case of Elliot’s divorce in the context of Victorian society, and it later discusses her early writings. The narratives Elliot produces in the 1850s look back at her past, which she subjects to imaginative revisions triggering her subsequent research for existential alternatives. Chapter 3, “An Unconventional Traveller”, is centred on Elliot’s variegated articles on travel and on her cross-cultural reflections, as they are also expressed in the series “Polperro”, published in the difficult years 1854-55. Antosa focuses on the tensions between contrasting ideas of Italy, as well as on the interplay between stereotyped criticism and fresher individual observation.

Elliot’s visions of Italy become themselves a form of biographical writing, as the title of the final chapter clarifies: “Imagining Italy and Sicily: Frances Elliot Rewriting Herself”. Antosa carefully scrutinizes Elliot’s later works, *Diary of an Idle Woman in Italy* (1871) and *Diary of an Idle Woman in Sicily* (1881). As a cultural inbetweenner, Antosa argues, Elliot establishes in her diaries a more confident authorial voice drawing on experience rather than on education. The ‘polemical’ adjective *idle* becomes, in fact, a mark of literary authority subversive of hegemonic (male) discourses and styles. Antosa stresses the unusual relationship that Elliot establishes with the reader (compared to that encoded in touristic guides), the web of allusions and references that intersect her writings, the colonial subtext as well as the variety of tones and strategies informing her ambivalent reaction to Italian and southern geography, experienced as both an insider and an outsider. In addition to Rome and Tuscany, Sicily pushes further Elliot’s explorative female gaze. If negative visions of Rome and of Italy confirm her cross-cultural misalignment, Sicily offers an even less familiar physical and emotional space reflecting personal and cultural anxieties. In what Antosa defines “a transversal, imagined temporal dimension” (p. 130), Elliot constructs, however, her own textual empowerment, providing unconventional subjective insights into Italian otherness and into female identity.

The book sheds interesting light on the temporary freedom of an English woman traveller subjected to numerous ideological constraints; moreover, it validates contemporary theoretical approaches to the genre in interpreting Elliot’s travel writing as a significant expression of female misalignment and resistance that questions notions of gender and power, both on an individual and on a collective scale. The wide and specific bibliographical apparatus is also a merit of the volume, as it offers stimulating hints for further explorations of cross-cultural encounters experienced by British travellers in the Victorian past, encounters that assert their validity today for an understanding of the history of cultural representations as well as of contemporary experiences of cultural contact.

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