

Silvia Antosa
Frances Elliot and Italy.
Writing Travel, Writing the Self

Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2018, 153 pp.

Travel literature is by nature a genre characterized by a high degree of hybridity, difficult to place within rigid or predefined categories: it weaves together numerous issues related to the historical moment, to the socio-cultural origin of the author, to the destination, to the literary influences, to the objectives of the journey. The same subject who writes during or after the experience of the travel is at the centre of a field of tensions in contact with the culture, the places, the history, and the populations of the destination country. All of these factors modify the focus, the style, and the choice of literary references.

Framing the travel production of Frances Elliot (1820-1898) means, first of all, addressing this set of issues actualised by the experience both of the journey and of its writing. The dialectic between these two poles, as seen in the subtitle – *Writing Travel, Writing the Self* – is central to this volume, which insists on the two-fold value of Elliot's work: her writings were meant not only as an instrument of exploration and discovery of the Italian reality, but, at the same time, as an instrument of liberation and empowerment for herself and her readers, in particular women.

The key thesis of Antosa's book is the idea of the construction, by means of travel writing, of «new 'orientation devices' with which Elliot can forge new ways of narrating, perceiving and constructing an empowered identity for herself» (87).

A rich heiress of the British upper class, divorced after a long trial for mistreatment, remarried and mother of four daughters, Elliot had

experienced different forms of «“misalignment”» (19): using the definition offered by Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Antosa describes the condition of the author before and during her travels in Italy as «the feeling of uncomfortable disorientation experienced and narrated by queer subjectivities in a heteronormative system» (*ibid.*). Even if for most women of the upper class, travels in Europe were in fact devoid of cultural and professional purposes, it is in this experience of misalignment that it is possible to find one of the central motivations of Elliot’s journey and stay in Italy. Her works express her search for a personal space of representation, free from social constraints. This is especially the case for the writings concerning the most unsettling and unusual destination for a woman: Sicily, for its contradictions – the contemporary social and cultural degradation and its fascinating past–, for the monstrous beauty of Mount Etna difficult for her to define, is the place where she had «the opportunity to explore the liberating potential offered by writing» (129).

Antosa focuses on Elliot’s writings on Italy, as it is here that Elliot spent most of her life, and approaches them through a multiplicity of questions and analytical perspectives. Antosa prefaces her analysis with a rich introduction that frames her works both with respect to the genre of travel literature, and within the critical-theoretical debate. Particularly central to Antosa’s methodological approach is the concept of a «contact zone» (13) elaborated by Mary Louise Pratt (1991; 1992) which allows Antosa to reconcile the two tracks on which this study moves: writing travel and writing the identity.

Another focal point in the first part of the book is that of women writing travel. After tracing a history of travel narrative, the creation of cultural memory around Italy, and the ways in which Southern Italy in particular has been «conceptualized in relation to the “web of intertextual references and allusions” left by the British over the centuries»(26), the scholar offers an overview of Elliot’s women predecessors, emphasizing, too, the way in which her approach to travel and writing is detached from these models.

Elliot’s early work, even before her travel writing, was marked by a polemical and anti-Catholic thread as well as an ironic tone and a sense

of disenchantment. This returns in her writings on Italy, along with the recurrent motif of disappointment with respect to expectations. Here, for instance, the visit to Rome confirms the sense of performativity of the Catholic Church's rituals, aimed at attracting the masses. The critical attitude towards the hypocrisy of the surrounding society is the same that she adopts also in relation to the literary models of reference, often parodied.

The narrative strategies highlighted over the course of this study corroborate Antosa's basic thesis, which claims that writing and research for a new identity are closely interrelated in Elliot's work, aimed at building a mobile self and overcoming trauma and stigma. It is in fact with the writings on Italy and from Italy that the Victorian author manages to complete the process of reinvention and reorientation of her "misaligned" self. Despite Elliot's ambivalent relationship with Italy – a relationship encompassing both detached judgment and ecstatic admiration – the journeys through Tuscany, Rome and Sicily represent for the Victorian author the opening of «a different space and temporal zone» (120) in which she is free to follow desires and ambitions, in contrast with the Victorian social norm.

This path through Elliot's writings on Italy – travelogues, social stories, and articles – is at the same time a path of development towards a new self-awareness: «through writing» – Antosa affirms – «she started to transform her embodied feelings of uncomfortable 'disorientation' and 'misalignment' with the sociocultural context in which she lived [...] in order to pave the way for different [...] forms of inhabitation» (77).

Silvia Antosa's book certainly has the merit of being the first book to offer a critical analysis of Elliot's work: her archival work brings to light an author very well-known in her own time but forgotten during the twentieth century, and who with her writing has not only offered a cross-section of Italian society of the second half of the nineteenth century, but has also enriched contemporary gender studies on Victorian women writing.

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