



Silvia Antosa, *Frances Elliot and Italy. Writing Travel, Writing the Self*. Series “AngloSophia. Studies in English Literature and Culture”, Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2018, 153 pp.
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As a body of work often forgotten by the literary canon, Victorian popular writings have not always received the critical attention they deserve. This is particularly true of the works of women writers, who grew in number and reputation in the course of the nineteenth century. Both their fictions and non-fictions, including the many travelogues produced in the “Golden Age” of British travel writing, need to be reconsidered in light of the significant role they played within their cultural milieu.

Silvia Antosa’s monograph *Frances Elliot and Italy. Writing Travel, Writing the Self* (2018) arrives as a welcome contribution to the recent line of scholarly work attempting to redress such unbalance. Focusing on the work of Frances Minto Elliot, an unconventional Victorian female author and tireless traveller, Antosa’s book offers the first sustained analysis of her oeuvre. Although Elliot was very popular in the Victorian period and interacted with famous writers like Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, and despite the fame she enjoyed both in Britain and North America up until the 1930s, her production has not been extensively studied so far, except for a number of scattered essays. Bringing her works to critical attention also allows Antosa to demonstrate Elliot’s central role in what can be considered an “emerging feminist strand of travel literature” (11). In particular, Antosa’s reading sheds light on the way in which the experience of travelling – in this case especially through Italy – was crucial to Victorian women writers in order to carve for themselves an identity and an authorial persona that was at least in part independent from the constraints of British patriarchal society. As a woman who had gone through a violent marriage and a much-stigmatized divorce, Elliot found in Italy “a space of ‘otherness’ with a disturbing but also an enriching and empowering potential” and one in which she “managed to find her own voice as a woman writer” (11).

One of Antosa’s merits is that of pointing out to what extent travel writing was for Elliot as much an effort at self-narration and at experimental re-fashioning of one’s life, as it was, in the classic travelogue tradition, a way to offer new perspectives on the world and help readers to orientate themselves in it. The volume convincingly demonstrates that Elliot’s choice of a first-person narrative voice in her early fiction, as well as in her journal articles and travel

accounts, was a strategy of empowerment used to assert her embodied subjectivity: by infusing her writings with her physical sensations and ever-present irony, Elliot managed to give shape to an alternative fictional persona that could mediate her tense relationship with her native society.

Antosa's methodology proves innovative in that, following critiques of traditional notions of the archive (Cvetkovich 2003; Taylor 2003; Pustianaz 2007), it shows the benefits of researching individual lives not only through the socio-cultural elements preserved in traditional archives but also through the relational and affective connections emerging from embodied repertoires. The volume integrates archival research on Elliot's textual production with an investigation of the material and embodied traces visible throughout her writings. Antosa is thus able to apply Sara Ahmed's (2006) insights through queer phenomenology and orientation to the Victorian author's embodied experience: Elliot's situation appears "misaligned" with respect to both the British and the Italian societies of her times, and her writing practice is read as a personal attempt at "reorientation." Such a rich theoretical framework also allows Antosa to further push for an opening of the literary canon. As the Introduction clarifies, it is precisely by "discovering and investigating the work of lesser-known authors [that] we can – at least partially – restore and regain through their writings what we might call an affective archive" (18).

Besides putting Elliot's work into the context of the long history of British travel writing, the volume examines its relations with the specific, often patronizing, cultural memory of Italy and its southern regions, a memory built in centuries of British travel accounts grounded in an imperialistic spirit. The rich and well-researched first chapter offers an interesting comparison of the traditional stereotyping of Italians as irrational and culturally inferior with the particular position of British women travellers and writers. The latter undoubtedly drew on their male predecessors, but they also managed to undermine the received cultural dichotomies opposing "civilized" English explorers to "barbaric" Italians, Protestants to Catholics, upper to lower classes, and males to females. In particular, they complemented the usual descriptions of Italy's open spaces with somewhat unconventional accounts of more private dimensions, which allowed them to establish direct contacts with the local inhabitants and thus to emphasize cultural encounters over cultural differences.

The subsequent three chapters are dedicated to an in-depth analysis of Elliot's textual production. Her early writings are the focus of Chapter 2, a section of the book in which Elliot's socio-cultural position as a famous divorced woman and a gossip target in her society of origin is discussed in order to illuminate the significance of her choice to write. Her earlier experiments with fictional and non-fictional texts are analysed by Antosa as instances of a self-healing practice which, through the fashioning of an alternative, empowered fictional persona, ensures a temporary liberation from the constraints of Victorian patriarchal discourses. In particular, her almost immediate choice of a first-person narrative voice is interpreted as a way of reclaiming her embodied subjectivity and a form of resistance to British asphyxiating social codes.

Elliot's considerable journalistic work is the main focus of Chapter 3. This section of the book is particularly interesting in that it calls attention to the peculiar hybridity of the author's work, which "switch[es] constantly between topics and registers" (101). Such hybridity parallels that of Elliot's encounter with Italy, which she finds a fascinating yet disquieting space where she can move more freely than in her native England. Antosa points out the contradictions inherent in Elliot's journalistic accounts of Italy, which often dwell in classist stereotypes and cultural difference (for example with regard to Italian men's supposed "effeminacy" in respect to their English counterparts). While revealing the asymmetric power relations between English culture and a country constructed as politically and culturally inferior

by most travellers, such accounts are also proof of Elliot's own "differences" from both her native society and the societies she encountered in her travels.

The fourth and last chapter focuses on Elliot's seminal texts *Diary of an Idle Woman in Italy* (1871) and *Diary of an Idle Woman in Sicily* (1881). Antosa's critical attention is here directed at Elliot's appropriation and subversion of the well-established British stereotype about the supposed "idleness" of Italians and, especially, of Sicilians. By adopting the narrative *persona* of the "idle woman" traveller, Elliot manages ironically to set herself apart from the more conventional authority of traditional male travellers. At the same time, she willingly occupies the subaltern position usually assigned to Italians, thus enacting a paradoxical yet liberating performance of the self. In Antosa's view, it is "by taking on a role of outsider that [Elliot] manages to explore Italy as a "contact zone" – that is, a space where different people, cultures, languages and communities meet and clash, by revealing tensions and conflicts that unveil unbalanced relationships of power" (107). This chapter also emphasizes how in her "Idle Woman" diaries, Elliot seems to describe a more intense cultural in-betweenness that allows for more irony and control in Rome yet proves more troubling and unsettling in Sicily. Elliot's embodied repertoire of physical sensations – especially abjection – is also discussed here as something through which she is able to establish a more direct contact with the reader, and which at the same time is articulated through rich intertextual references (such as those to Dante's *Inferno* or to Gothic literature) that further validate her authorial *persona*.

In sum, Antosa's monograph offers a thorough examination of the works of a lesser-known yet deserving Victorian author, who influenced several generations of English-speaking readers, setting an example for other women travellers and writers. In this sense, *Frances Elliot and Italy* gives a timely contribution to the on-going debate on the need to widen the literary canon, and on the necessity to reconsider nineteenth-century popular fictions and non-fictions as well as more established bodies of works. Antosa expertly demonstrates the relevance of embodied and affective practices of writing in order to better understand the complexities of modern and contemporary societies. Furthermore, by revealing the way in which a variously "misaligned" woman found in writing her "orientational device," Antosa points out the empowering value of embodied textual practices for traditionally marginalized and stigmatized subjects. Her monograph is particularly useful for scholars working on travel accounts and travel-inspired literature, as well as for all those interested in the gendered nature of cross-cultural contact and in the resistance strategies enabled by writing.

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