



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

(Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2018, 153 pp. ISBN 9788857548135)

by Serena Guarracino

Travel writing from Britain and the European North is not an exceptional topic in English studies produced in Italy; on the contrary, it boasts a long tradition, at least from Attilio Brilli's and Oriana Palusci's pioneering work in the mid-1990s to Luigi Cazzato's recent book exploring the British gaze on the Mediterranean. Silvia Antosa's *Frances Elliot and Italy* definitely continues this scholarly effort to map travel narratives on Italy by pushing it further South, to the Sicily which is also the writer's own geographical (and political) location; yet, as any meaningful addition to a corpus should do, it also challenges an established critical approach to an apparently well-known body of writing, illuminating new avenues into the analysis of past as well as present cultural productions and practices.

Antosa's book significantly expands the field of travel writing in Italy in two different, but deeply interrelated ways. It focuses on a writer that has been until now the subject of little critical attention, Victorian traveller and writer Frances Elliot; concurrently, it puts Sicily, a liminal region in the already liminal Italian landscape, firmly on the map of English travel writing. The marginality of these two spaces – Sicily and Elliot's writing – constantly echo each other: Elliot's texts may not be "examples of great literature" (p. 11) and Sicily may have been for a long time "off the beaten track and [...] largely unfamiliar both to travellers and readers at home [in Britain]" (39); yet Antosa's work proves how much both are central in tracing the complex dynamics of



power and subalternity at work throughout eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe.

The comprehensive account of the history of travel writing on Italy offered in the first chapter actively rewrites the place of Sicily on the British political and imaginary map. Not only does Antosa trace the vision of Sicily as “the edge of Southern Europe” (p. 29) back to Andrew Boorde, a physician at the court of Henry VIII, who visited Italy in the 1530s; she also highlights British political investment in Sicily as a strategic location in the Mediterranean since the Napoleonic wars, an element that reverberates in the imperialistic gaze informing Coleridge’s description of this land in his *Notebooks* as well as the later accounts and guidebooks published in Victorian times. Sicily thus, in its double marginality both within the European imagination and in the smaller scope of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies, emerges as what Iain Chambers defines a “laboratory of modernity”, where hegemonic narratives are constantly confronted with an irreducible residue against which cultural boundaries have to be constantly – sometimes obsessively – redrawn.

This liminal space therefore becomes a locus of possibility for the emergence of marginal subjectivities within the British and Victorian hegemonic discourse. As emerges first in the general portrait of the writer presented in the second chapter, and more evidently in the analysis of her writing that occupies the last two chapters of the book, Frances Elliott stands out not only among Victorian travellers, but also among women travellers. The details of her turbulent life – a press-covered divorce, including a charge of “cruelty, adultery, and unnatural acts” (p. 64) against her husband, Lieutenant John Edward Geils, and the subsequent estrangement and then reunion with her daughters – are not reported here to support a biographical reading of her work, and not even for the gusto of lingering on the scandalous details of an interesting life. On the contrary, Antosa argues that even before she started to write, Elliott was already the main character in a public narrative that included the law, the press, and the “gossip” which she would choose as title of her first travel writing, the “Gossip from Florence” she publishes in the *The New Monthly Magazine* in 1853. By putting this and later travel reports in continuity with her previous works, Antosa convincingly argues that Elliott’s writing “produce[s] a socially-constructed identity that has two main functions: it produces a performative, empowered (albeit fictional) self, and makes her ‘acceptable’ to contemporary society” (p. 72).

The use of the pen-name ‘Florentia’ firmly underlines the role played by travelling in this self-authorizing narrative, which shares with other similar writing of the time “the presence of openly racist statements alongside more sympathetic assumptions” (p. 97). Antosa clearly does not aim at conferring to Elliott’s writing a sharper political edge than what emerges from her own close reading; on the contrary, her analysis accurately traces its complicity with the British imperial, hegemonic gaze on Italy. However, by claiming the notoriously Italian stigma of idleness in the title of her collected volumes, *Diary of an Idle Woman*, Elliott both understates her authority – thus conforming to the appropriate writing woman *persona* of the time – and claims a dangerous contiguity with the lands and peoples she is supposed to navigate as a ‘superior’ British citizen: “in portraying herself as an idle traveller, Elliott ambiguously



locates herself as an outsider to dominant hegemonic discourses, and willingly assuming a subaltern role" (p. 106).

It is by exploring and marking this ambiguity that Antosa's work on Elliot emerges as a significant contribution not only to Italian research on travel writing, but more widely to studies on the literary text as privileged entry point to contemporary discourses on movement, tourism, and migration. This is due to the book's methodological framework, which conjoins two different but productively intersected fields. On the one hand, the reader can trace a solid derivation from literary analysis and genre studies, with particular attention to the specificities of travel writing as a polymorphous textuality, where the issue of authorship is haunted by previous narrations of the same spaces. Indeed, much space is devoted to Elliot's ability to undo the distinction between consolidated literary genres, and especially between fiction and autobiography, making space for her own agency in writing herself while writing space.

On the other, the introduction discusses Antosa's debt not only towards postcolonial theory, with reference to canonical thinkers such as Bhabha and Stoler, but also to the work on affective archives and embodied practices by Sedgwick, Pustianaz, and Ahmed. This framework allows Antosa to challenge the disciplinary limits of archival research (of which this book is however an excellent example) to highlight what the author names Elliot's "out-of-place-ness" (p. 20) both as a Victorian subject and as a travel (woman) writer; in particular, it makes room for the body of the writer to become an active signifier as it moves and weaves relationships in its movement. Hence, what is generally discussed as a disembodied practice – writing, including travel writing – becomes a material and embodied experience to which later reception, including scholarly analysis, needs to bear witness.

Read though intersectional discourses on class, race and gender – the founding triad of cultural studies – Elliot's writing emerges as a significant contribution to our understanding of Victorian imaginary on women writing and Southern Italy; as Antosa states in the closing lines of her introduction, her travel diaries "allow [...] her to materially and textually produce a personal affective repertoire of embodied resistance to Victorian sociocultural norms" (p. 23). Antosa, in her turn, pushes English studies to try new and different methodological grounds, devising an interesting framework for scholarship on travel writing about Italy.

---

**Serena Guarracino**

Università degli Studi dell'Aquila

[serena.guarracino@univaq.it](mailto:serena.guarracino@univaq.it)