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Laura Olcelli, *Questions of Authority: Italian and Australian narratives of the Long Nineteenth Century*

London and New York, Routledge, 2018

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Laura Olcelli, *Questions of Authority: Italian and Australian narratives of the Long Nineteenth Century*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, pp. 225, paperback £ 36.99, e-book £ 33.29.

- 1 This welcome study into the narratives of some known and many neglected writers commences by addressing theoretical works pertaining to travel writing and providing a sketch of Italian history and political identity before unification.
- 2 The main text is based on the consideration of two sets of travellers who write about their experiences in a foreign land: Italians in Australia and, vice versa, Australians in Italy. The analyses of their accounts cover many areas, but the connecting thread in the work is the issue of authority. Olcelli argues that «Italian writers to (sic) Australia lose their authority-in the context of British colonial supremacy. Similarly Australian visitors to Italy initially mimic the British Grand Tour [...] subsequently their imitative travels devolve into even less convincing tourism» (p. 18).
- 3 Some questions immediately come to mind; where does the authority reside? Is it an objective attainment, or is it granted by the reader or the critic? Does it refer to the personage of the travelling writer, or to the narrator created by the writer? The impression I gain is that the «authority to grant authority» has been presumed to belong to the critic and that the authority granted depends on whether the author finds the narrator's account convincing or satisfactory. However, sometimes the lack of authority depends on the individual's failure to realise objectives. The failure of the

- writer Pietro Munari lies in the fact that he did not successfully promote socialism, or that he lacked power because he was an alien and in the employ of another one (p. 110).
- 4 James Matra, a midshipman on Captain Cook's voyage on the Endeavour (1768-1771), lived his entire life outside Italy, so had little more than DNA to make him count as «an Italian presence» in explorations (p. 43). Since Matra was suspected by Cook of being involved in an assault on another crew member, it is no surprise that Cook defined him as the type of gentleman who «could be spared» from his crew (p.43). This is a tenuous basis for suggesting that Cook's remarks resonate «with the notion that Italians (or embryonic Italy) might be spared from the British imperial narrative» (p. 43).
 - 5 The analysis of gold seeker Raffaello Carboni provides interesting insights. Carboni's publications were financed by his gold finds, which presumably diminishes his authority as a «published author» to which Olcelli refers (p.93). Carboni uses the term «yellow-boy» to refer to his first gold find. Olcelli reads it as a personification bearing illicit implications, a «male Asian object of love» (p. 87), which seems to me excessive, since «yellow boy» was common English slang for gold coins in that period (OED).
 - 6 Olcelli raises the question of why Pietro Munari, a socialist worker and writer, left Italy in 1891. It would be unsurprising if, as a political activist in the early 1890s, shortly before the drastic action taken against the «fasci siciliani», he had no respite from police harassment in Genoa. One recalls Jessie White Mario's accusation that in the 1880s visitors to Mazzini's tomb in that city were spied on and obstructed (*Della Vita di Giuseppe Mazzini*, Sonzogno, 1885, p. XII).
 - 7 The second part of the book deals with Australians in Italy: two men and four women. They are a diverse set of individuals in terms of age and qualifications. Included are a teenage girl (Grace Leadbetter), a lady of independent means (Sophia Jennings), a teacher in her forties (Ida Chomley), two male writers and a 34-year-old artist, Louise Riggall, who had previously studied for two years in Paris. The women have largely eluded academic scrutiny and are well worth the attention Olcelli's study gives them. After consideration of the various accounts – diaries, letters and books – various definitions are eventually applied to these Australians: Grand Tourists, Australian Grand Tourists, Anti-Tourists, Travellers, Flaneurs. The two chapters in the section are respectively titled «From Travel to Tourism» and «Touristic and Artistic Journeys», reflecting Olcelli's argument for an evolutionary trend during the century towards «a less curious outlook and, in contrast a more leisure-oriented attitude» (p.155).
 - 8 The fifteen-year-old Australian Grace Leadbetter wrote a detailed travel diary of her 1852 experiences. Olcelli finds that the imposing traces left by travel diaries of the past, as well as negotiation with more recent travel guides, have negative consequences and that «in the process of reporting her voyage (sic) she fails to find a voice» (p. 140).
 - 9 In contrast, Olcelli criticises the under-informed Ida Chomley, who arrived in Venice in 1903 without knowing in advance that her arrival date was the feast day of San Marco. Chomley, a university graduate, visited many countries before she reached Venice. Olcelli sees her as a different person in Italy. In a week in Rome, she had visited the Lateran, the Forum and St Peter's. She strolled around various streets and visited the Capuchin Church (p. 165). Her activities and descriptions meet with stricture: «she has the typical superficiality of the (anti)-tourist» (p. 168).
 - 10 The issue of identifying the intended reader – both imagined or found – of the travellers' writings, could be given more attention in the discussion of authority. One

wonders, for example, whether Cholmeley's reader would have willingly accepted an account of Italy imbued in some way with authority. On the other hand, Olcelli certainly illustrates some disagreeable manifestations of nascent Australian nationalism in other writers, who evidently were taking their readers' tastes into account.

- 11 As far as idiom is concerned, the text needed editorial attention. It contains numerous Italianisms, mistaken collocations, and inappropriate choices of register. Despite these reservations, it is a fine work of broad scope. Its author is up to date in her information and draws on a comprehensive bibliography to conduct a series of intelligent and engaging discussions.