

# ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

25/1 2016

## EDITOR

prof. dr hab. Grażyna Bystydzińska [g.bystydzienska@uw.edu.pl]

## ASSOCIATE EDITORS

dr hab. Marzena Sokołowska-Paryż [m.a.sokolowska-paryz@uw.edu.pl]

dr Anna Wojtyś [a.wojtys@uw.edu.pl]

## ASSISTANT EDITORS

dr Katarzyna Kociołek [kkociolek@uw.edu.pl]

dr Magdalena Kizeweter [m.kizeweter@uw.edu.pl]

## ADVISORY BOARD

Michael Bilynsky, University of Lviv  
Andrzej Bogusławski, University of Warsaw  
Mirosława Buchholtz, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń  
Xavier Dekeyser, University of Antwerp / KU Leuven  
Bernhard Diensberg, University of Bonn  
Edwin Duncan, Towson University, Towson, MD  
Jacek Fabiszak, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań  
Jacek Fisiak, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań  
Elzbieta Foeller-Pituch, Northwestern University, Evanston-Chicago  
Piotr Gąsiorowski, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań  
Keith Hanley, Lancaster University  
Christopher Knight, University of Montana, Missoula, MT  
Marcin Krygier, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań  
Krystyna Kujawińska-Courtney, University of Łódź  
Zbigniew Mazur, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin  
Rafał Molencki, University of Silesia, Sosnowiec  
John G. Newman, University of Texas at Brownsville  
Michał Jan Rozbicki, St. Louis University  
Jerzy Rubach, University of Iowa, Iowa City  
Piotr Ruskiewicz, Pedagogical University, Cracow  
Hans Sauer, University of Munich  
Merja Stenroos, University of Stavanger  
Krystyna Stamirowska, Jagiellonian University, Cracow  
Jeremy Tambling, University of Manchester  
Peter de Voogd, University of Utrecht  
Anna Walczuk, Jagiellonian University, Cracow  
Jean Ward, University of Gdańsk  
Jerzy Welna, University of Warsaw

## GUEST REVIEWERS

Dorota Babilas, University of Warsaw  
Teresa Bela, Jagiellonian University, Cracow  
Maria Błaszkwicz, University of Warsaw  
Anna Branach-Kallas, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń  
Teresa Bruś, University of Wrocław, Poland  
Francesca de Lucia, independent scholar  
Ilona Dobosiewicz, Opole University  
Andrew Gross, University of Göttingen  
Paweł Jędrzejko, University of Silesia, Sosnowiec  
Aniela Korzeniowska, University of Warsaw  
Andrzej Kowalczyk, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin  
Barbara Kowalik, University of Warsaw  
Ewa Luczak, University of Warsaw  
David Malcolm, University of Gdańsk  
Dominika Oramus, University of Warsaw  
Marek Paryż, University of Warsaw  
Anna Pochmara, University of Warsaw  
Paweł Rutkowski, University of Warsaw  
Agnieszka Setecka, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań  
Andrzej Wicher, University of Łódź  
Joanna Ziarkowska, University of Warsaw



UNIVERSITY  
OF WARSAW

Francesca Pierini  
University of Leuven

## Trading Rationality for Tomatoes: The Consolidation of Anglo-American National Identities in Popular Literary Representations of Italian Culture

---

### Abstract

In *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993), David Spurr analyzes journalistic discourse on the Third World and isolates a nucleus of rhetorical figures around which representations of the colonial and post-colonial other are articulated. In this paper, I will borrow, in particular, three of these rhetorical figures (naturalization, idealization, appropriation) and I will adapt them to the context of contemporary Anglo-American representations of Italian culture in popular literature. I will argue that a substantial number of contemporary works on Italy retains the basic assumption of a world ordered around a dichotomy between modern cultures and pre-modern ones, and makes of this taxonomy the basic spatiotemporal context for its narratives.

---

In *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993), David Spurr analyzes journalistic discourse on the Third World and isolates a nucleus of rhetorical figures around which representations of the colonial and post-colonial other are articulated. In this paper, I will borrow, in particular, three of these rhetorical figures (naturalization, idealization, appropriation) and I will adapt them to the context of contemporary Anglo-American representations of Italian culture in popular literature. I will argue that a substantial number of contemporary works on Italy retains the basic assumption of a world ordered around a dichotomy between modern cultures and pre-modern ones, and makes of this taxonomy the basic spatiotemporal context for its narratives. A large number of contemporary popular novels, memoirs, and relocation narratives, in spite of their clear vocation for a light and graceful sort of entertainment, classify Italy as the other of modern Europe through the *naturalization* of certain characteristics that from the territory extend to the people and get inscribed in the genetic code of Italians, the *idealization* of Italy in its relation to the past – its history is ready to be accessed and read as from an open book – and the *appropriation* of this imagined world of alleged continuity

with tradition from a distant modernity that has lost authenticity and romanticism along the way.

The contemporary works I will analyse in the present study appropriate and uncritically maintain a particularly crude definition of modernity, thoroughly saturated with colonial discourse, which perpetuates the cultural dichotomies between an allegedly rational and technologically advanced Northern Europe (and America) and a less rational (therefore more sensual and “earthy”) Southern one. Since “modernity” is, in many of these works, commonly equated with “rationality,” the latter too becomes the exclusive privilege of a part of the world perceived to be at the vanguard of human history and development.

This translates itself, at the level of Anglo-American popular representations of Italian culture, into novels and memoirs which romanticize Italy as the locale of a backwardness and/or timelessness comprising both positive and negative connotations. This highly romanticized factor is often the reason why Italy is sought after as an ideal place of contemplation, regeneration, tranquility, and authenticity. However, through the depiction of Italy as a pre-modern other, Anglo-American authors manage to consolidate their national identities as thoroughly modern, rational, dynamic, and forward-looking.<sup>1</sup>

This study sets itself the goal of making certain similarities in the approach to the observation and description of Southern European cultures, and Italy in particular, recognizable across the work of contemporary Anglo-American authors who belong to different literary genres. I do not wish to argue that such authors are comparable in every respect, but I do wish, at the risk of incurring a certain degree of abstraction, to make the point that colonial discourse has survived the end of colonial rule, and expresses itself today, in the post-colonial world, in popular narratives (among other media) which exemplify, beyond their apparent vocation to light entertainment based on personal experience, an hegemonic attitude. They reference a world based on a taxonomy of concepts and values that can be observed and discussed. The deconstruction of this world of ideas, a world that is at the same time powerful and elusive, has, as its broad objective, not to identify ideologies as the expression of a conscious effort to somehow support and promote a specific hegemonic view of the world, but to see discourse as a basic expression of social practice, and to expose its many layers by “stirring up and dispersing the sedimented meanings dormant in texts” (Parry 17).

The conceptual starting point of the present study is that contemporary popular literature on Italy retains the basic dichotomy of modern/pre-modern and makes of it the basic spatiotemporal context for its narratives. It appropriates and uncritically maintains a particularly crude definition of modernity as:

A distinctive and superior period in the history of humanity [...]. As European power expanded, this sense of the superiority of the present over the past became translated

into a sense of superiority over those pre-modern societies and cultures that were ‘locked’ in the past—primitive and uncivilized people whose subjugation and ‘introduction’ into modernity became the right and obligation of European powers. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 130–131)

Spurr argues that the apparently straight-forward divide between more and less “modern” cultures serves to justify and reiterate a series of value judgements and ideologically charged assumptions, as well as “a rhetorical procedure by which Western writing generates an ideologically charged meaning from its perception of non-Western cultures” (62). If modernity is “the process which transforms a traditional, ‘pretechnological’ society into one marked by the technology and economy of the machine, rational and secular concepts of authority, and a high degree of differentiation within the social structure” (69), every form of social organization that features a different cluster of dominant characteristics is automatically the target of more or less authoritative remarks on its pre-modern, archaic, or undeveloped state. Consequently, as Spurr argues, “nations are classified as more or less developed forms of a single species that reaches its highest degree of refinement in the Western post-industrial state” (69–70).

In the present study, I move the focus of inquiry back from a journalistic to a literary context, and to the circumscribed domain of popular novels, memoirs, relocation narratives, and travel accounts written in the English language. If I do so, is because I am persuaded that this literary genre makes particularly visible the manufacturing of a temporal difference, a prolific producer of cultural difference and a powerful device for its constant reiteration. I employ Johannes Fabian’s seminal critique of anthropology *Time and the Other* (1983) and his notion of “denial of coevalness,” to argue that the authority of anthropology is employed (in a much diluted and popularized form) in numerous narratives to legitimize pseudo-scientific analyses of the other based on personal observation “in the field,” a process made possible by a series of assumptions on the intelligibility of certain practices seen as signifying and witnessing a previous stage of historical development.

## 1. Rationality and Tomatoes

Since “modernity” is commonly equated with “rationality,” the latter too becomes the exclusive privilege of a part of the world perceived to be at the vanguard of the modern. In *Italian Pleasures* (1996), a work co-authored with David Leavitt, Mark Mitchell writes: “Things taste like themselves here [in Italy] in a way that they do less and less in America, where rational thinking gives us the seedless (and bland) tomato, or a patented garlic that does not scent the breath” (97). I find this passage extremely interesting, because it explicitly contrasts rationality to the world of

nature, as they were two mutually exclusive domains. Being somewhere between a pre-modern and a fully modern condition, Italy is somehow closer to nature than the United States. This results in better tomatoes but also in a loss of rationality.

This mode of thinking thoughtlessly assigns rational thinking to a very limited Western geographical area. In this case the United States, that represent themselves as the most modern nation, the new centre of the global empire, have appropriated rationality and now own it almost exclusively. Italy still has the authenticity of nature and the sensorial pleasures which derive from it. Therefore, Italy is praised for its ability to produce fresh and tasty tomatoes over rational thinking.

Nobody doubts the sincerity with which the author appreciates and pays a compliment to what Italy has to offer. At the same time, I do not think it is particularly controversial to argue that modern societies generally assign a higher value on rational thinking than on tomatoes. Therefore, the negative and condescending value of the judgement comes from a pre-ordered arrangement of cultural values (taxonomy) which endows the most modern countries with a higher capacity to judge the things of nature, because supposedly, things natural, being the signs of a pre-modern condition, have been overcome and left behind. Or, better said, having rationality, the American traveller can understand the value of tomatoes objectively, whereas Italians are locked in their own sensuousness, lacking consciousness of their position in the global cultural scenario.

In *Journey to the South: A Calabrian Homecoming* (2005), Annie Hawes teases an Italian friend for being possibly interested in Kabbalah. Hawes first equates Kabbalah to witchcraft and superstition in general; she then opposes such practices to “civilization,” that she describes as a fragile layer of veneer covering the pre-modern essence of her Italian friend. Such essence is bound to reveal itself in Calabria, a southern place within Italian borders that both women (the writer/narrator and her Italian friend), perceive as backward: “Learn what? Witchcraft? I point out to Marisa that she’s hardly been here [in Calabria] an hour and already the superstitious paganism in her wild Calabrian blood is beginning to show: the veneer of civilization is breaking down” (2005, 88).

In both instances, there is the suggestion of Italian life and culture being ruled by an order of values different from the rational modern. In the first instance there is nature; in the second, the anti-rational element is inscribed in the “wild Calabrian blood,” responsible for the Italian propensity towards pre-modern religious forms (kabbalah, witchcraft, superstition), associated by Hawes with one another and competing against civilization, of which Hawes is clearly a representative.

## 2. Naturalization: The Romantic Pursuit of Primitivism

Furthermore, I believe is possible to detect, in Mitchell’s statement, an echo of those climatologic ideas that have been largely employed during the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries, in Europe, to rationalize, theorize, and ultimately consolidate the East/West divide and, within European borders, the North/South divide: the north has rationality, the South a natural propensity for pleasures. In *Europe (in Theory)* (2007), Roberto M. Dainotto surveys such theorizations and individuates, in the works of Charles de Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, two opposite yet complementary views of the south of Europe that reappear in contemporary descriptions of Italy. One is the just mentioned alleged lack of rationality. According to this view, Italy is not the place for it, but the place for a sensual/pagan enjoyment of existence that is seen and construed as the very opposite of rationality and made to be the effect of a warm climate. The second outlook, derived from Rousseau, posits this sensual sphere as positive, and sometimes as even superior, but, in actual fact, it maintains the dichotomies between the rational and the sensual, the modern and the pre-modern, perfectly intact.<sup>2</sup>

In her recent doctoral dissertation, Lynn Ann Mastellotto analyzes “relocation narratives” and stories, that is to say recent accounts of Italy written by financially privileged, highly educated cosmopolitan Anglo-American expatriates.<sup>3</sup> Such narratives, she argues, typically depict individuals “fleeing from the frenzy of modern life to places that hold out the promise of a better quality of life, often places in the sun and/or the countryside, and of finding personal fulfilment by living along simpler lines, closer to nature and in convivial communities” (17). Mastellotto points out that:

This pastoral flight from the complications and corruptions of ordinary life into a green world that offers refuge and reconciliation is a literary trope with a long tradition of antecedents [...]. Contemporary relocation writing re-enacts the Romantic rejection of the modern and pursuit of primitivism and organicism through a flight from the city to the countryside in search of the good life, defined as a “simple” life, and a nostalgic revaluing of the past and of traditional practices. (17)

The romantic pursuit of primitivism and organicism on Italian soil makes several authors extend their observations on a country that they perceive as simpler and closer to nature, to its inhabitants. I have found numerous instances of such a pattern: Italians are assimilated to the territory, and made the object of remarks on their closeness to a natural and simpler rural world.<sup>4</sup>

In a greatly successful relocation novel, Frances Mayes’ *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996), an American divorcee decides to settle in Italy. In the passage below, taken from the novel, I see Italians portrayed in their familiarity to humble and essential (pre-modern) values that cause them to behave “naturally,” free from the (too) many social conditionings and superstructures of the properly modern world. The polar opposite of the Italian lifestyle is the American one, and the protagonist is, once again, caught up between the two:

A friend says Italy is getting to be just like everywhere else – homogenized and Americanized, she says disparagingly. I want to drag her here and stand her in this doorway. The men have the look of their lives – perhaps we all do. Hard work, their faces and bodies affirm. All are lean, not a pound of extra fat anywhere. They look cured by the sun, so deeply tan they probably never go pale in winter. Their country clothes are serviceable, rough – they don't "dress," they just get dressed. They wear as well a natural dignity. Surely some are cunning, crusty, cruel, but they totally look present, unhidden, and alive. Some are missing teeth but they smile widely, without embarrassment. I look in one's man eyes; the left one is white with milky blue veins like those in an exploded marble. The other is black at the center of a sunflower. A retarded boy wanders among them, neither catered to, nor ignored. He is just there, living his life like the rest of us. (1996, 111)

In the passage above, Italians are praised for the modesty of their lifestyle, and for their capacity to live in harmony with nature. A "natural" dignity belongs to them, which seems to be a consequence of the closeness to the land and of a daily routine of work under the sun. Mayes' observation, for instance, on Italians "getting dressed," as opposed to "dressing," is meant, I believe, to convey a sign of a natural approach to life, differentiated from a more "cultural" one: "getting dressed" obeys a practical need, whereas "dressing" involves discernment and familiarity with modern social rules and codes.

Perceiving her own culture as at the same time more corrupted by modernity and more advanced than rural Italy, the author can contemplate, from a distance, a picturesque tableau of humanity depicting a previous stage of human advancement. This nostalgic and indulgent contemplation of a lifestyle which is foreign, not only because it belongs to a foreign place, but to a previous stage of human history (therefore to a different time), is a constant trait in numerous narratives set in Italy.

In another work by Mayes, the memoir "In Tuscany" (2000), observations and memories are collected over a long period of time spent in the Italian region. Anthropologically connoted remarks on the nature and character of Tuscans figure prominently in the work:

Tuscans are ribald and sharp in their humor, fatalistic, private, and fazed by nothing. Symbiosis with the land runs deep. Meet even the slickest fashion designer or magazine reporter or video cameraman and the talk soon reveals a passion for the way food and wine are made: a homing instinct toward the land. I always find a fierce territorial attachment in Italians. In the country, the connection is vital. The constant gift-giving is an exchange of bounty from the garden. Italy is a world leader in the number of ecological, organic farmers. This springs not from a recent Greenpeace promotion, but from a natural feeling for the right way to grow things, the way Virgil and Cato and Varro knew. (2000, 33)



In the passage above, there are references to the Tuscan proximity to nature (symbiosis with the land), and a posited opposition between modernity (epitomised by the urban world and the media) and the pre-modernity of a culture that values the products of the land. Both aspects (the modern and the pre-modern) are present in Italian culture, but the passage seems to suggest that underneath a superficial coat of modern attitudes, Italians are still strongly determined by the environment and the territory. In conclusion to the passage, there is a fantasy of continuity with the ancient Roman world and the thread that links the two distant worlds (modern Italy and ancient Rome) is a “natural feeling of the right way to grow things,” an instinct inherited from past generations that grounds present-day Italians to an ancient sameness in discontinuity with modernity and confers on them a timeless wisdom.

There is at work, I believe, an imagined relation between the land and its people that is frequently used by Mayes to reiterate a dichotomy between the modern world (California) and the pre-modern one (Italy): “When I’m back in California, my life is radically different from that of these anciently landed people” (2000, 33). This fantasy of unbroken origins leads Mayes to imagine continuity when its presence is at the very least highly improbable. During a trip to Volterra, for instance, Mayes assumes the present-day alabaster craftsmen working in the city to be the “distant descendants of the Etruscan alabaster craftsmen, whose designs, on display at the museum, still inspire the local art” (2000, 75).

I find that the thoughts and observations that are expressed in this work connect the main theme of the current segment of this article to that of the next. Italians are determined by their territory at the same time as they are determined by their history and traditions. The passages that I have chosen to report highlight a link between historical determinism and closeness to nature. Italians, being determined by both, have not transcended this doubly-connoted pre-modern condition that sets them apart from modernity (they *still* have history; they *still* have nature) and enables them to live in a world fundamentally “other” with respect to modernity, and yet a world which is in unbroken continuity with its own past.

Describing Etruscan art, for instance, Mayes explains: “The art frequently depicts olive trees, meadows, fish, birds, horses, even wild boars, revealing how closely they lived in connection with nature, another legacy that still lives” (2000, 75). A statement such as this one makes the connection between art and nature appear as a characteristic peculiar to Italic cultures. It also implies unbroken continuity by assuming an out-of-the-ordinary relationship, still continuing into the present, with the natural world. More importantly, by presenting the connection between art and the natural world as a trait specific to Italic cultures, Mayes implies the possibility of a complete emancipation (allegedly realized in modernity) of art and culture from the natural world.

The alleged proximity of Italians to nature is sometimes at the centre of entertaining scenes staged for the amusement of the modern visitor. David Leavitt, for instance, witnesses an argument at the post office between a man and a woman



in contemporary Italy. A minor, every-day event is made to appear as an instance of “primitive” national character: “Something primal, historical, was being fought out here. Perhaps he was Guelf, she Ghibelline; he black, she white. It occurred to me that argument could be a form of intimacy, a ritual as elaborate as the mating dances performed by exotic birds” (18). Two people arguing in present-day Italy are made to appear as somehow continuing a dispute started in The Middle Ages. The quarrel is “historical,” with its ties in medieval times (the historical reference is to the opposite factions of Guelfs and Ghibellines in XII-XIV Century Florence). Italians are assimilated to birds, and, as animals, arguing comes natural to them. Aggressive feelings and impulses are unmediated and straight-forwardly expressed by bodily gestures. This performance, this “exotic dance,” is available as a spectacle for the observer, who is not able to understand the language but can nevertheless recognize it as an expression of a previous stage of human life.

Spurr argues that twentieth century representations of the other, and of the primitive savage in particular, were indications of uneasiness with the current utilitarian ways of conceiving the world. Numerous authors voiced their concerns in regard to the values which society promoted at the time, and towards the social changes that modernity was bringing about. As Southern Europe was experiencing these changes at a slower pace, it offered the opportunity for *idealization* as a piece of past history surviving into the present. Southern Europe was also figuratively *appropriated*, by making of it an opportunity for a reconnection of modern man with his roots and identity. These particular aspects of idealization and appropriation in relation to history and tradition can also be detected, I find, in contemporary popular literature, and will be further discussed in the following section.

### **3. Idealization and Appropriation: History as a Timeless Dimension**

As seen in the instance above, history is the force cementing the identities of “less modern” societies, freezing them in a timeless dimension. In this perspective, history is equated with tradition and made to belong to the past. Fully modern societies, and their inhabitants, having overcome history, live in the present, not conceived of as an historical phase, but as the culmination of history, the highest possible peak of human progress and development. Traditional, pre-modern societies still hold history as a powerful referent moulding their identity and ways of life. This confers on them, alternatively, a superior wisdom, but also a stuck-in-time mentality which does not let them fully function in the present. One of the most important consequences of dividing individuals into those who still rely on tradition and those who have supposedly emancipated themselves from it, is that the second category of human beings has a capacity for self-determination that is allegedly (at least) partially unknown to the first. This is a fundamental point, as it sets the theoretical validation for more or less ambitious, anthropologically-oriented, idealized, and

romanticized descriptions of Italian people, the “Italian character,” the “Southern mentality,” and so on, as objects of study, removed in space and time.

The texts that will be discussed in the following section will further clarify such dichotomy. Let me reiterate, one last time, that I employ Spurr’s rhetorical category of “idealization” to illustrate the romanticized depiction of Italy’s relation with its past, and the category of “appropriation” to designate the possibility that several authors associate with Italy, of a reconnection between the modern fragmented self and an existence grounded in timeless traditional values.

#### 4. Internal Determinism

The genetics of being Italian, albeit not explicitly and very probably not even consciously, is often weighed against the British and American ways of being and living, which, being more “modern,” are much less defined by genetic factors, and much more by common sense and reason. There are a number of instances that illustrate this view.

*Italian Neighbours* (1992) is an autobiographical novel described by its British author Tim Parks as an “arrival book,” meaning by this an account of the process of finding a home (Italy) away from home (England). This novel is therefore the story of Parks’ gradual adjustment to Italy and Italians. Every-day events in the life of Parks and his family are accompanied by thoughtful reflections on Italian culture. At one point in the book, Parks reflects on the fact that Italians carry within them centuries of peasant culture, an historical fact at the basis of their alleged uneasiness with gardening:

The truth is that the modern Italian has problems with his garden. He is not at ease yet as the Englishman is. Behind him he has centuries of a peasant culture, which ended, if it has ended, not a hundred years ago, but yesterday. For him the ground means crops, the vines, the towering corn plants, tobacco, fruit trees, tomatoes. Quite simply, he has this in his blood. (55)

However, when Parks’ Italian neighbours expect the author to be knowledgeable in lawns up-keeping on the assumption that all English people must know a great deal about gardening, Parks comments amusingly and ironically: “As if such knowledge were carried in the genes” (60). A double standard is thus established by Parks: the attitude towards gardening of Italians is determined by their genetics, while that of the British is a matter of free choice.

In short, Italians are predetermined whereas English people are self-determined and free to be who they choose to be. As a consequence of being self-determined, the modern individual is also unrestricted, as he can freely move past national cultural constraints and stereotypes that do not concern him as an individual; the

individual who is not yet completely modern, on the other hand, has to deal with a higher amount of restrictions and pre-determined cultural forces. Simply put, Italians are a product of their environment and history; the British are self-grounded and self-defined.

A similar dichotomizing discourse between the alleged autonomy of modern individuals and the pre-determination of pre-modern ones is made in the novel *An Italian Affair* (2001), by Laura Fraser, the story of a young woman who leaves for Italy on an impulse, after a painful divorce. On the Italian island of Ischia, she meets an older man, a professor. The professor's peculiar charm comes from being half Arab and half Italian, and therefore, as the author puts it, from being "an Oriental":

He [the Professor] explains that it's understood in his household that, once a year, he needs his solitude. He has to get away from Paris and just sit on an island and *far niente*, do nothing, so that he can be his Mediterranean self for a while. He needs to be able to relax completely, which is impossible to do in Paris. He is in part Italian and part Arab, and he has to spend some time being an Oriental man, living where the days are warmer and slower. It's in his blood. (37)

In this case, his "Italian half" seems to contribute and add to his Oriental character. "Arab-ness" and "Italian-ness" are here casually associated (just a more recent literary instance of the assimilation of Southern Europe to the "Orient") on the basis not only of their perceived similarity as instances of a "Mediterranean nature," but, more importantly, on the basis of their perceived distance from the modern world. All this is, once again, naturalized, that is to say inborn and carried in the Professor's blood.

In the following passage, taken from de Blasi's *The Lady in the Palazzo* (2007), a relocation narrative set in Umbria, an Italian woman selling fruits and vegetables at the market hesitates to give a loud and brash American tourist her family recipe for cooking artichokes. She justifies her choice as follows:

"We don't have recipes. We cook from memories. We watched and listened to our mothers and our mothers' mothers, just as all the other women in a family had watched and listened before them. Rather than learn how to cook, we *inherit* the way we cook and bake, our methods being birthrights, like the color of a father's eyes, the jut of a mother's chin. Like the past itself, which nourishes us at least as much as the food. And the rest is instinct. There is not much left of life that is inviolable, but I'd say that how we cook still is. Stuck in history like a sword in a rock. Grazie a Dio. But how could I tell a man like that about *instinct*?" (165, original emphasis)

In the excerpt, knowledge is thoroughly naturalized and made genetic. Italians passively receive it as one of the few things in life that remain sacred. Tradition

is not only inherited through the emulation of one's elders, but becomes internalized in the Italian blood. One inherits one's mother's recipe just as one inherits a facial feature. The analogy of the chin suggests that in Italy, tradition (in this case the culinary tradition) simply cannot be rejected, since it is an integral part of the self. Instead of recipes, the Italian has instincts enabling him or her to manifest a tradition that is genetically encoded from within.

There is no autonomy, rationality, or self-determination involved. Moreover, this kind of insider's knowledge cannot be simply shared with anyone, but only with those outsiders who are open-minded enough to appreciate the value of tradition as a genetic legacy. Therefore, the author does not only distance Italians from the present-day way of living by placing them in a discontinuous realm ruled by timeless traditions, a realm in which knowledge is not commodified, but she also distances herself from those modern individuals who are not capable of understanding what Italy has to offer to them.

Finally, in the passage, history is an unmoving repository for all things that have happened (stuck in history like a sword in a rock), a fixed source of information on the past. Since the past plays such an important role in present-day Italy, Italians seem to have a privileged relation with history.

## 5. External Determinism

In the already cited *Italian Neighbours*, Parks insists on the ritualistic character of Italian society and many of its customs. By emphasizing the ritualistic aspect of Italian culture, Parks makes the point that Italians are confined to a highly codified and traditional way of doing things, which is, ultimately, opposed to the modern one, while British individuals are unconstrained by this irrational form of behaviour. There are numerous references, in Parks' novel, to the love of Italians for the ritualistic. "Italians are more ritualistic about death than romantic," (143) he argues, for instance, in reference to Italian practices of burial and disposal. In the following passage, Parks summarizes the rituals, that mainly pertain to the worlds of food and religious life, punctuating the average Italian life:

Life is so carefully controlled here in Veneto, so attractively wrapped up: *cappuccino* till ten, then *espresso*; *aperitivo* after twelve; your pasta, your meat, your *dolce* in bright packaging; light white wine, strong red wine, *prosecco*; baptism, first communion, marriage, funeral; *loculo*, *lumino*, exhumation. (149, original emphasis)

The ritualistic, in the common ways of understanding and sensing the world today, is likely to evoke a world of unbroken traditions and a number of quintessentially pre-modern values, such as religion, superstition, and a reliance on past and outdated ways of life. As one of the symptoms of a pre-modern mentality and way

of life, a negative connotation has been ascribed to the term “over a series of long days and long nights” (Fanon 201) in the context of the divide between a secular modernity and a ritualistic and superstitious pre-modernity. The adjective “ritualistic” is layered with judgement on the role of religion and superstition in organized societies. Therefore, every time ritualism is brought forward, it is inevitably linked to a series of other terms and to a world of reference that sees the ritualistic, the superstitious, and the traditional, as opposed to the modern, the rational, and the functional.

In the passage, the use of the words “controlled” and “wrapped up” suggests a lack of freedom, a life set in its own well-established ways. There is also, I believe, a relation between the daily rituals and the rituals that punctuate a lifetime, suggesting that Italian life is not only determined in its superficial minute details, but also in its whole trajectory (from birth to death).

Not seeing ritualism as a feature pertaining to all cultures, including his own (how is consuming a beer on Friday night at the local pub different than drinking espresso at the local bar?), Parks assigns it to Italy as an odd element, a strange remnant of an archaic past. In other words, Parks seems to conceive of rituals as specifically pertaining to the Italian lifestyle, without considering that a large number of social practices anywhere in the world (including England) could be reasonably described as ritualistic.

Parks is certainly not alone in detecting a strong present of the ritualistic element in Italian culture. Annie Hawes’ memoir *Extra Virgin: Among the Olive Groves of Liguria* (2001), set in the small rural town of San Pietro, derives much of its dramatic and comic content from the confrontation between Hawes’ cosmopolitan ways and mind-set and the old farmers’ habits and customs. Hawes has obviously built, over many years in Italy, personal and long-lasting ties with the people of the community; this world has obviously become part of her own life, and her intentions of treating the people she describes with sympathy and respect are apparent throughout. On the other hand, her intentions, I find, are undercut by a fundamental misinterpretation: the denial of coevalness that is always premised in her writing and makes the locals (and the old farmers especially) appear as museum exhibits, hetero-determined “good old people” who do not belong to the present-day world.

There is a point, in Hawes’ memoir, in which she seems to realize that the old farmers she has befriended in Italy, during the course of her stay, are more complex than they appear to be. Their war tales make Hawes understand that their lives have not been changeless, and that the familiar places of the Ligurian countryside have once been the scenario of tragedy and struggles for survival. I find this passage particularly telling, because, maybe for the first time in the memoir, Hawes sees the people who surround her as having lived and still living a life of their own, not just as being there to entertain her, amuse her, or remind her of the world as it used to be:

As usually happens when I get told these war stories, I've gone all sniffy. These cheerful matter-of-fact folk living with another, parallel vision of these safe and familiar streets and hillsides, one filled with death and danger, hunger and fear. Cautious old peasant folk who seem as solid and unchanging as their stony landscape, rooted in centuries old tradition, but who've lived through more upheavals and earthshaking changes than I can begin to imagine, and whose stories send everything into double exposure. (2001, 208)

Unfortunately, this realization does not last long; one really wishes that Hawes would take more time to observe reality in this double exposure, but Hawes must give us a pseudo-ethnographic interpretation of the character of these old farmers to fit into recognisable categories. Instead of "staying with the recognition" that it is simply not true that change has not occurred, Hawes decides to "tame" this revelation into the worn-out categories of ritual and tradition:

No wonder the old folk around here are all so fussily in love with the security of their daily routines, their carefully ordered meals at carefully ordered times, the endless picky rules and regulations about their food and drink, health and safety, the web of customs and habits, all the amulets and charms designed to ensure survival and continuity, to magically stave off any new outbreak of chaos and incomprehensibility. (2001, 208)

I wonder if old people in the very small towns of England usually live their lives improvising and experimenting the new at all times; I wonder if they might not eat something different and exotic every day, taking their meals every day at different times. Are old English people not usually fastidious about their tea-habits? Or do they take a different quality of tea at different hours of the day? Maybe, creating a "web of customs and habits" is more of a human activity than one that depends on national belonging. Of course, believing herself to come from a time that has transcended tradition, Hawes, as Parks in the previous example, is incapable of perceiving the traditions, customs, and routines of her own culture.

Lastly, I wonder why it should not suffice to say that these small-town farmers are often very much set in their ways and routines without recurring to words such as "amulets," "charms," "magically"; the type of vocabulary to which we refer to in order to indicate a discontinuity with modernity and the fundamental adherence of a place to an ancient and obsolete order of things. In the already mentioned Umbrian memoir, de Blasi describes a rural celebration for the festivity of Sant'Antonio. Some people light a fire to keep warm while eating outdoor:

Trenchers of oak, split and drenched in benzine, piled one atop another; it is a totem, primitive and dreadful, that they set alight. Sixty feet high it is, but higher still it seems the flames licking now, gasping in a rampage up and over the oily black skin of the wood. The crowd sways in a primal thrall and, save a sacrificial lamb or a pale-skinned virgin, the ritual flames are barely removed from those of the ancients. In a single brazen voice, they are a pagan tribe saying psalms in the red smoke of Saint Anthony's fire. (11)

De Blasi, who, at the very least, is reading too much into the event, imagines what she sees as a present-day instantiation of old ritual practices. By making use of words such as: "totem," "primitive," "primal," "sacrificial," "ritual," "ancients," "pagan," she invests a twenty-first century festivity with an aura of timeless pre-modernity. There is such a gap between the unpretentiousness of the event and how de Blasi reads it: a country celebration is invested with an excess of projections on the primal and ritualistic character of Italian social events. Probably this is exclusively due to the fact that the event takes place in the countryside *and* in Italy, the combination being enough to ignite an overabundance of primitivistic images.

## Conclusion

Arguably, those writers who have access to a large readership could help questioning, deconstructing, and re-inventing the established descriptive patterns rather than perpetuating the age-old tradition of thought which sees the world as neatly split between rational/modern places and pre-modern ones. As David Spurr points out in reference to the world of the media and journalism: "Although writers can hardly break free from the basic cultural presuppositions that give their work meaning, there are nonetheless ways of writing that resist the imposition of value inherent in any colonizing discourse" (189). Avoiding this reiteration of imperialist categories is simply not a concern of the authors; the majority of them simply restate them at every turn, in complete obliviousness of their history.

The core argument of the present essay has been the long-lasting endurance of certain kinds of fantasies about Italy, and their prominence in popular narrative and imagination. I have tried to demonstrate how a segment of an interiorized and ideologically charged hierarchy of cultural values is still at work in Anglo-American representations of southern Europe. I have used and adapted David Spurr's categories of naturalization, idealization, and appropriation, to analyze contemporary popular novels which place at the center of their conception of Italy an element of backwardness and/or timelessness which serves to accommodate observations of a more or less nostalgic, condescending, or celebratory nature. The preferred mode of description, in these novels, seems to be a personal chronicle punctuated by observations which aspire to a sort of "friendly" anthropology, so to speak.



Such observations strive not to come across as overly severe, but largely rely on a repertoire of images, rhetorical figures, and taken-for-granted dichotomies which end up reiterating an age-old classification of cultural values deeply rooted in a colonial and imperialistic conception of the world.

According to a monolithic and one-dimensional definition of it, modernity resides in, and emanates from, one part of the world before expanding to the rest. This part of the world can adopt a more or less open, “democratic,” and honest attitude, trying to avoid the pitfalls of past models of appreciation of foreign cultures that were too hostile, condescending, or politically involved, but in any case, this remains the part of the world that names, assigns, and categorizes from the vantage point of “modernity.” It is this “anthropological” attitude – in the sense that the observer is said to be positioned within and yet above the observed – that undergoes a make-over of irony and wit in contemporary Anglophone accounts of Italy, but its basic assumptions are never truly questioned. As I have tried to argue in this article, it appears that instead of seizing the opportunity, in their writings, to emancipate intellectual and artistic discourses from the utopic idea of a detached and objective point of observation, many contemporary authors, longing for the authoritative role of position-less interpreters and translators of the other, posit Italy in the past by manufacturing and constantly reiterating a cultural difference that is, first and foremost, the corollary of an imagined temporal one.

## Notes

- 1 The processes through which we are constructed as subjects are, for the most part, gradual constructions, fabricated realities, made-up in political, cultural, and everyday discourses and practices. A recent work that has certainly made this perspective clear is Annemarie McAllister’s *John Bull’s Italian Snakes and Ladders: English Attitudes to Italy in the mid-nineteenth Century* (2007). The study demonstrates how a certain imagined notion of “Italian-ness” has contributed to the formation of British modern identities. By exploring British representation of Italian culture at the end of the nineteenth century, and showing how a certain notion of “Italian-ness” has entered British cultural and literary traditions taking the form of a reservoir for all that was deemed discordant to the making of the British individual, collective, and national identities, McAllister illustrates how self-representations and narratives of national consolidation took place not only in opposition to the Orient, but to others within Europe as well.
- 2 In other words, Rousseau’s perspective, apparently in disagreement with most intellectuals of his time, gave positive connotations to, but fundamentally maintained, that dichotomy according to which France was objectively more advanced than the south of Europe on the path towards modernity: “In

Rousseau as in Montesquieu, the south remained a distant fantasy of primitivism against which modern and northern Europe, with nostalgia or with pride, could still theorize itself. It remained the antithesis- nature; the past- posited by the spirit of a modern north eager not only to define itself but also to overcome its own discontents in some superior synthesis, or in a return to a hypothetical origin” (Dainotto 101).

- 3 Relocation narratives are a sub-genre of travel memoirs initiated by the books, set in Provence, by Peter Mayle.
- 4 Mastellotto argues that Italy, and other places that serve a similar literary and existential purpose, “may objectively conform to [the authors’] corresponding typologies or may not; what is important is that they are perceived to and are, consequently, constructed as idyllic places which satisfy the personal preferences of those searching for a better quality of life” (31). I regret not having the possibility to present and discuss, in the present article, a larger array of instances of this idyllic construction of Italy, its territory and culture.

## References

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 2000. *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge.
- Dainotto, Roberto Maria. 2007. *Europe (in Theory)*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- De Blasi, Marlena. 2007. *The Lady in the Palazzo: An Umbrian Love Story*. Chapel Hill, NC and New York City: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York City: Grove Press.
- Fraser, Laura. 2001. *An Italian Affair*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Hawes, Annie. 2001. *Extra Virgin, Amongst the Olive Groves of Liguria*. London: Penguin Books.
- . 2005. *Journey to the South: A Calabrian Homecoming*. London: Penguin Books.
- Leavitt, David, and Mark Mitchell. 1996. *Italian Pleasures*. San Francisco: Chronicle.
- Mastellotto, Lynn Ann. 2013. “Self and Place in Late Twentieth Century Travel Writing,” PhD diss., University of East Anglia.
- Mayes, Frances. 1996. *Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- . 2000. *In Tuscany*. New York and London: Random House.
- McAllister, Annemarie. 2007. *John Bull’s Italian Snakes and Ladders: English Attitudes to Italy in the Mid-nineteenth Century*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- Parks, Tim. 1992. *Italian Neighbours or a Lapsed Anglo-Saxon in Verona*. New York: Grove Press.
- Parry, Benita. 2004. *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*. London: Routledge.
- Spurr, David. 1993. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham: Duke University Press.