

Luisa Pèrcopo

Creative Words: Imagining Italy through Contemporary Australian Travellers

Roberta Trapè. 2011. *Imagining Italy: Through the Eyes of Contemporary Australian Travellers (1990-2010)*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 118. £34.99, ISBN 978-1-4438-3197-0

Australia has had a consistent and intense relationship with Italy since the beginning of the twentieth century. Travelling to Italy in particular used to be an important component of the middle-class-Australian-coming-of-age-Grand Tour-experience, and an essential one for artists in search of broadening their aesthetic and creative horizons. Presently, it is the experience of 'variety' that is the chief motivation behind most Australians' travelling to Italy, as Roberta Trapè suggests in this latest, informative addition to Australia's relationship with Italy. If 'Italy tugs at the corners of the Australian imagination through film, art and literature', as Bruce Bennett famously put it, today's 'cappuccino culture' has exponentially increased the depth of the field of reference to include fashion, style, design, food and 'the art of posh living'.

Trapè's *Imagining Italy* examines the reasons behind this 'perennial attraction' in the lives and works of four contemporary Australian artists: painter Jeffrey Smart (b.1921), and writers Shirley Hazzard (b.1931), Robert Dessaix (b. 1944) and Peter Robb (b.1946). Trapè takes into consideration both the artists' experiences in and travels to Italy together with the works in their corpus in which Italy plays an important role, juxtaposing and comparing the perspective from both positions: the expatriate/traveller and the artist. One of the strengths of the book is Trapè's access to unpublished private material by both Dessaix and Robb, such as personal letters, notebooks and interviews, this way adding a new dimension to her critical reading of the texts. Artists, according to Trapè,

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“are the ones who usually leave the most articulate and eloquent records of their travel experiences” (1) and Trapè meticulously reveals these records along with their engrossing images by providing extensive passages from the original works.

Artists no longer represent the majority of Australians visiting Italy today – the sheer numbers of backpackers and the average middle-class, middle-aged Australians having surpassed them by far - but their endless interest in and fascination with Italy resonates in their works in such a way that it still ensures that “travel in Italy remains a phenomenon of great significance” in Australian literature (16). Trapè's point of departure is Roslyn Pesman's extensive study of Australians' travels abroad from the 1850s up to the 1990s. Trapè's work focuses on the last two decades, from 1990 to 2010. The scope of such a close and narrow span of time is the identification of possible new trends in the relationship Australian writers have with Italy.

If Italy and Italians have always represented a beacon for Australian writers and artists, the ‘irresistible’ and, for many, ‘perennial’ attraction to il Bel Paese has materialised in many different forms and shapes in their works. This complex and heterogeneous layer of images is also tangible in Trapè's analysis and her choice of the texts from the many published in these two decades provide interesting contrasts between them. She approaches each author methodically by giving an account of their travels to Italy, their impressions of the country as they appear on private unpublished accounts such as letters and diaries, the influence that the culture has had on their work and finally how it transpires in their works.

The book is divided into three sections, diachronically separating painter and artist Jeffrey Smart's autobiography *Not Quite Straight* (1996) and Shirley Hazzard's novels *Greene on Capri* (2000) and *The Ancient Shore: Dispatches from Naples* (2008) from the two younger writers. Robert Dessaix's *Night Letters* (1996) and Peter Robb's *Midnight in Sicily* (1996) constitute the second and third

sections of the book respectively. Trapè considers these four to be the most interesting examples of contemporary Australian artists' continuing fascination with Italy. Interestingly, Hazzard and Robb chose the South of Italy rather than Tuscany, the Italian region selected by the majority of Australians, as their home, attracted by the sensuality and the full-on emotional exposure they felt this region provided in abundance. Her analysis could have been further enhanced by a brief comparison of these artists with other Australian writers who lived in Italy and published during this decade – among which Paul Carter, David Malouf, Robert Hughes, Gough Whitlam stand out – as it would have provided a broader and richer sense of the present relationship between the two countries.

The first part, consisting of the first three chapters, is devoted to Jeffrey Smart's and Shirley Hazzard's relationship with, and vision of, Italy. The renowned painter and the novelist of international fame belong to the epoch of Australian expatriate travels and artist-communities abroad. Lacking new critical material, this is the least innovative section in the book though the inclusions of the beautiful reproductions of Jeffrey Smart's paintings engross us. Travelling between the 1950s and 1960s, Smart and Hazzard fit in with what Pesman (and Trapè after her) identifies as the third phase of Australian travels to Italy. Like many other intellectuals and artists who felt dissatisfied with the provincialism and bigotry of their home country, they eventually settled in Italy. Hazzard's love affair with Il Bel Paese began with the improbable finding of a slim volume of Leopardi's translated poems in New Zealand, and her UN assignment in Naples in 1956 during the Suez Canal crisis was to become the threshold to her new life as a writer. Conversely, Smart's encounter with Italy was carefully planned as a result of wanting to experience art in a real environment rather than within the pages of a book. For both, Italy became their home and the inspiration for their work. Smart, in particular, who still lives near Arezzo, confesses in his autobiography to having felt a 'warm feeling of familiarity' on his very first trip to Italy and visiting the Archaeological museum in Naples to see Pompei's frescoes

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confirmed his vocation as an “anti-abstractionist painter” (26). In a very parochial way one could say both Smart’s and Hazzard’s artistic vocations were ‘made in Italy’, shaped by an Italian sense of aesthetics and way of life. Both fell in love with the authenticity and picturesque atmosphere of a post-war Italy, but are very aware of the major irreversible changes undergone by the Mediterranean country in less than a century and are still enchanted and enthusiastic about it. If the influence of Italian culture is self-evident in Smart’s work – who writes of an imaginative post-modern Italy, sketched in a realistic style infused with the technical and compositional techniques of the Renaissance Italian painters – it is less so in Hazzard’s, though Italy is a “continuous interest” for her and “her published work offers plenty of images of the Italy she has known best, Naples, Capri and Tuscany” (43). Italy not only becomes the setting of her short stories collected in *Cliffs of Fall and Other Stories* (1963) and of her two short novels *The Evening of the Holiday* (1966) and *The Bay of Noon* (1970), but also a catalyst and a revelatory space in which self-discovery and self-acceptance is an easier process to carry through often against the solidity and security of the eternal landscape of Italy. The idyllic Tuscan countryside, the “centuried city of Naples” all “tend to take on a symbolic power to reveal the character’s emotions” (49). The powerful and overwhelming beauty of Nature is one of the attractions Italian landscape has on her work and Leopardi’s strong poetic affinity with nature is translated into one of Hazzard’s main thematic subjects. Italy, and Capri in particular, is rich in “that powerful beauty-engendering factor which derives from the blending of natural and artificial elements” (66).

The other two parts of the book deal with the next generation of Australian writers: Robert Dessaix and Peter Robb, whose relationship with Italy is, for generational reasons, very different from that of Hazzard and Smart, as well as from each other’s. These two sections are the most significant ones in the book as Trapè’s close reading includes Dessaix’s unpublished ‘Italian notebooks’

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and interviews she conducted with both writers. Interestingly the notebooks Dessaix kept while travelling through Italy in 1991 and 1995 present a very denigratory and disenchanted image of the country. The landscape is experienced from the train and the reception of it is a cerebral rather than a sensual one: Dessaix constantly reiterates how his Protestant frame of mind could not accommodate the Catholic one. However, his experiences on the train to Italy and his visits to Venice, Padua and Vicenza, become the raw material for his best-selling epistolary novel *Night Letters* (1996). Written six months after being diagnosed with HIV, *Night Letters* is a book about the “awareness of death” in which the engagement with Italy is a “retrospective” and a “long-distance” one (87). Nevertheless, it reveals itself to be a significant one. Through a close analysis of the text, supported by Genette’s critical theory, Trapè shows how Dessaix’s sketchy, hasty, and very volatile comments from the notebooks are transformed into the text itself. Through steady references to the *Divina Commedia* Dessaix’s journey into Italy parallels Dante’s own journey into Hell, and if Italy is described as a “place of encounter and movement: railway stations, train carriages and ferry terminals” (110), all linked to negative connotations, anguish and metaphors of death for Dessaix, eventually it is also perceived as a return to a nourishing source (82), a reconciliation with the sensuous side of his personality, a place in which “he also experiences some, if rare, sudden rapturous moments, feeling ‘almost tumultuously alive’” (110). Italy in Dessaix’s poetics stands as a warning to live one’s life in full but also “awakens an awareness of the inescapable condition of mortality” (107).

The last section of the book on Peter Robb is probably the most intriguing as Trapè seems to respond with great liveliness to his work and personality. Robb lived in Italy during the 80s and is the author of many books set there, two of which have been best-sellers in all English-speaking countries: *Midnight in Sicily* (1996) and *M* (1998). The latter is the biography of the Italian Renaissance painter Caravaggio, the former a work of “first-rate investigative journalism” on

the Sicilian Mafia disguised as travel narrative (133). *Midnight in Sicily* in particular deals with cityscapes rather than landscapes and Robb underlines the force of 'popular urban life' on his imagination in the powerfully evocative descriptions he makes of the working class districts and markets in both Palermo and Naples. Notwithstanding the corruption and the tangible presence of the criminal organizations, Robb is 'enchanted' by these two towns, Naples in particular, where he lived for most of his time in Italy. Contrary to the other artists selected by Trapè, who are attracted by the Italian landscape and all it evokes culturally and historically, Robb is deeply fascinated by the Italian people and, in particular, the ones belonging to the working class. Here Trapè does not analyse in-depth Robb's patronizing attitude towards "poor and happy" Italians, preferring to underline the importance of his willingness to "understand and make the reader understand one of the thorny entanglements of recent Italian history", a feat, according to Trapè, he undertakes out of "sincere respect for the country and its people" (160). Robb's level of passionate admiration for Italy and Italians, while also being extremely critical of its present neglected conditions, sets his work apart from the other three Australian artists.

A source of aesthetic experience, a home, a place in which to experience sensuality, spontaneity and humanity, and a space for rebirth, Italy continues to fascinate Australian artists who still want to travel to its shores. Trapè's analysis of Robb's and Dessaix's work indicates also how changes in post-war Australian cultural life have affected the way Australian artists perceive Italy today, and sets new parameters of observations that Trapè considers to be forerunners to the fourth phase in the history of Australian artists travelling to Italy.

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