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Antosa, Silvia. *Frances Elliot and Italy: Writing Travel, Writing the Self*. Milan: Mimesis, 2018.

153 pages.

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<1>The first book in Silvia Antosa and Mariaconcetta Costantini's new Anglosophia series, this monograph makes the welcome intervention of drawing attention to Frances Elliot as a popular but now marginalised author. Putting Elliot's historical novels to one side, Antosa takes Elliot's travel writing as her subject, specifically focusing on her large body of work on Italy. Disappointingly, however, Elliot's literary significance as a travel writer is somewhat diminished in the Introduction, little justifying this single author study to the uninitiated reader.

<2>Echoing the prefatory apologia common in nineteenth-century women's travel writing, Antosa asserts that Elliot's extensive oeuvre is not "great literature" but that her travel accounts are "crucial cultural documents which have much to tell us about women's self-narration and their self-positioning in relation to the British patriarchal society of the day" (11). In doing so, Antosa follows a critical tradition instated in the 1970s of viewing travel writing as a cultural practice. However, as Barbara Korte recognises, this approach contributes to the wider neglect (or in this case, denial) of its "literariness" as a genre.¹ In the process, the humour, controversialism, and experimentalism of Elliot's travel writing are submerged, although they resurface sporadically in the course of Antosa's discussion.

<3>Elliot's commercial success is also somewhat understated. Antosa mentions in a footnote how Tauchnitz exploited the lack of international copyright over Elliot's work to produce several posthumous editions of her travel books (10). Perhaps it would have been worth exploring what this means in terms of Elliot's longevity, especially considering that she was writing in a genre with a notoriously short shelf-life. Similarly, Chapter 4 – undoubtedly the

¹ Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*, trans. Caroline Matthias (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 2.

strongest in the monograph – describes how Elliot recycled many of her travel articles from the 1850s in her *Diary of an Idle Woman in Italy* (1871). However, there is no recognition here of Elliot’s commercial acumen in managing to repackage an outdated travel account despite this twenty-year gap.

<4>Elliot’s connections to famous literary travellers in Italy – Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Anthony Trollope – are briefly discussed in Chapter 3 and help to widen her appeal to Victorianists. Antosa does not engage with the recent critical interest in expatriate networks in Anglo-Italian scholarship here, which might have broadened her potential readership further.² The influence of Dickens on Elliot’s periodical travel writing goes unexplored, although Antosa suggests a link between the title of Elliot’s travel books and *The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* (1857) serial, which Dickens and Collins co-authored (105). However, less direct influences on Elliot’s style are considered, such as the comparison of Elliot’s societal debut in *Bentley’s Miscellany* to Jane Austen’s social commentaries (74, 76).

<5>The discussion of Elliot’s periodical contributions to *Bentley’s Miscellany* (Chapter 2) and her serial travel writing for the *New Monthly Magazine* and *Art Journal* (Chapter 3) throughout the 1850s brings her lesser known corpus of work to light. Regrettably, though, no effort is made to engage with theoretical frameworks from periodical studies. The impact of economic factors, the temporal lapses between instalments, and the editorial policy of particular periodicals on the representation of the travelling self goes unexamined. Such theoretical engagement could probe further the “oscillat[ion] between positive and negative impressions in a rather ambiguous manner” (94) that Antosa rightly observes in Elliot’s travel articles. More descriptive than analytical in approach, these chapters serve better as an introduction to, rather than a critical discussion of, this vast body of work.

<6>In considering the relationship between travel writing and the self, Antosa’s diffuse conceptual focus is a limitation. The connecting thread between Elliot’s representation of Catholicism, her proto-feminism and selfhood is sometimes lost in the process. The various identity markers discussed are in need of clearer signposting to help navigate the reader towards the significance of many of her interesting observations.

² See for example Alison Chapman, *Networking the Nation: British and American Women’s Poetry and Italy, 1840-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<7>In her Introduction, Antosa outlines some useful frameworks through which to approach Elliot's travel writing, although these are not further developed in her analysis. For instance, she introduces the concept of the "third space": a hybrid space somewhere between material circumstances and imagined representations of place that "exposes practices of exclusion while offering possibilities for liberation" (14). However, she subtly argues that this can be both politically progressive and/or utilised for "capital accumulation" (14). This framework enables a nuanced understanding of the ambivalence and instability that characterises Elliot's travel writing.

<8>Some of these frameworks, however, seem more tangentially relevant, such as the deployment of queer theory on the grounds that Victorian women's travel accounts were "'misaligned' with the cultural context in which they were produced" (20) as well as the new geographical contexts they were encountering. This *out-of-placedness* is somewhat overstated in light of the proliferation of female-authored travel books on Italy in the period. At such moments, the single-author focus occludes a wider understanding of the function and form of contemporaneous travel writing. For example, Antosa consequently asserts that Elliot not only "seek[s] out [...] hybrid spaces, but she also hybridises the literary forms she uses" (21). As such, she lends an exceptionalism to Elliot as a woman traveller when such generic hybridity was, in fact, characteristic of the form.

<9>There is a tendency to make gendered distinctions about Elliot's approach that are either unsubstantiated or over-generalised, such as the assertion that her construction of an embodied reader in her travel writing is "not enabled by most male-authored guides" (107). While the most popular guidebooks were male-authored, this suggests a discrepancy between male and female constructions of the reader that does not hold up. Tom Mole discusses how Byron establishes this same "hermeneutic of intimacy" with the reader and sees this as a strategy especially adapted to the periodical economy, rather than a question of gender.³ Nevertheless, Antosa's specific textual analysis of proto-feminist discourses in Elliot's periodical travel writing is incisive.

³ See Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

<10>The contextual positioning of Elliot's travel accounts in relation to her forbears and contemporaries is the main weakness of the monograph. The potted history of travel writing from Mandeville to Defoe provided in Chapter 1 bears little relevance to the generic features under discussion in the later chapters on Elliot's oeuvre. There is no engagement with the evolution of the form into the Victorian period and no real effort is made to situate Elliot's work geographically in relation to contemporaneous travel writing on Northern Italy. This is an unfortunate oversight given Antosa's recognition that nineteenth-century travellers' Italianate accounts are "never individual works" but always include a "collective dimension" through their intertextuality (49). The discussion of Sicily both as a real place and imagined geography is much more effective, with the majority of Sections 1.2 and 1.3 being devoted to this. However, this emphasis feels disproportionate given that Elliot spent most of her time abroad in Tuscany and Rome and that only part of Chapter 4 focuses on her time in Sicily, as documented in her second travel book.

<11>For those already familiar with Elliot's work, this book opens up several potentially fruitful avenues for further investigation. Antosa is clear that her work does not attempt "a definitive reconstruction" of Elliot's travel experiences, instead deploying the framework of the "affective archive[...]" as one that is necessarily incomplete or unstable, being "characterised by movement, contamination, evolution, constant mutability and change" (17-18). This emphasis on embodied performances rather than material traces is arguably well suited to travel writing, as a form concerned with mobility and transition. At the same time, one of the chief strengths of this book, that will readily be acknowledged by Elliot scholars, is its utilisation of archival research to add texture to Elliot's biography and illuminate shadier aspects of her history, such as her separation from Edward Geils (Chapter 2).

<12>Although the significance of Antosa's argument is less accessible to a more general readership, her monograph will be a useful aide to Elliot scholars. The product of rigorous primary research, it provides a comprehensive overview of her Italianate corpus, introducing the reader to areas for potential further investigation, as well as containing some original insights. Anglo-Italianate scholars will benefit from engaging with the identification of geographically specific representational strategies regarding Elliot's Sicilian travels. Antosa's conceptualisation of the spatial politics of female mobility also potentially has wider

application for women's travel studies. The decision to give Elliot sustained attention is timely and it is hoped, will encourage other scholars to investigate her works further.