

The Genetic Essence of Houses and People: History as Idealization and Appropriation of an Imagined Timelessness

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Abstract. Marina Fiorato's *The Glassblower of Murano* (2008) tells the story of Eleonora, a young woman who travels to Venice in search of her genealogical past and existential roots. Coming from London, Eleonora incarnates a “modern” outlook on what she assumes to be the timeless life and culture of Venice. At one point in the novel, admiring the old houses on the Canal Grande, Eleonora is “on fire with enthusiasm for this culture where the houses and the people kept their genetic essence so pure for millennia that they look the same now as in the Renaissance” (2008, 15). This discourse of pure origins and unbroken continuities is a fascinating fantasizing on characteristics that extend from the urban territory to the people who inhabit it. Within narratives centred on this notion, Italian culture, perceived as holding a privileged relation with history and the past, is often contrasted with the displacement and rootlessness that seem to characterize the modern places and people of England and North America. Through a discussion of two Anglo-American popular novels set in Italy, and several relocation narratives, this paper proposes an exploration of the notion according to which history is the force cementing the identities of societies perceived as less modern and frozen in a timeless dimension. From a point in time when the dialectics of history have been allegedly transcended, Anglo-American popular narratives observe Italy as a timeless, pre-modern other.

Keywords: taxonomy of cultures, Italy, temporal difference, tradition/modernity, popular literature.

Introduction

Reading contemporary popular novels and relocation narratives¹ on Italy, one understands how well-established the view is according to which Italians hold a privileged relation with history and the past; a notion which is often contrasted with the displacement and rootlessness of the modern places and people of England and North America.

This paper will discuss “history” as 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, which is not so much conceived of as a historical phase, but as the culmination of historical development, the highest possible peak of human progress. Traditional, pre-modern societies, on the contrary, still hold “history” as a powerful referent for moulding their identities and ways of life. This confers on the individuals who inhabit them a timeless wisdom, but also, at times, a stuck-in-time mentality that does not let them fully function in the present. This paper will analyse, in particular, two contemporary popular novels based on a conceptualization of Italy as a frozen in time world in discontinuity with modernity. In the second part of it, I will discuss several relocation narratives set in Italy that maintain a similar discourse and point of view.

The Glassblower of Murano

In *The Glassblower of Murano* (2008), Anglo-Italian author Marina Fiorato tells the story of Eleonora, a young woman who travels to Venice from London in search of her genealogical past and cultural roots, after an unexpected and painful divorce. The novel combines the contemporary established narrative pattern of a woman who abruptly finds herself in the condition of having to find a new purpose to life, with a historical tale. Eleonora will find guidance and inspiration in the life-story of her famous ancestor, Corradino Manin, a glassblower artist active in the eighteenth century and celebrated in Europe for his unparalleled skills in working with glass. Although the character of Corradino Manin is entirely fictional, the historical context is not: Fiorato makes Corradino meet Louis XIV of France, she intertwines Corradino’s story with the construction of the Palace of Versailles, and makes Corradino a member of the Manin family, a prominent historical Venetian clan.

1 A sub-genre of travel literature consisting of recent accounts of Italy written by financially privileged, highly educated cosmopolitan Anglo-American expatriates.

Coming from London, Eleonora incarnates a “modern” outlook that she brings to the timeless life and culture of Venice. In her quest for a job and a life away from England, Eleonora is guided by the need to anchor her own fleeting existence to something solid and unchanging: continuing genealogical ties, and a continuing line of work. Eleonora’s father is a recently deceased Venetian, but her most immediate and recent family relations do not interest her very much; she expects to find the key to her own identity in the distant past of Corradino’s time. Eventually, Eleonora will find her due place in the history of the city as a talented glassblower; she will discover herself to be the rightful heir to Corradino’s skills, and she will find continuity by giving birth to a child whom she will name Corradino.

At one point in the novel, admiring old houses on the Canal Grande, Eleonora is “on fire with enthusiasm for this culture where the houses and the people [sic!] kept their genetic essence so pure for millennia that they looked the same now as in the Renaissance” (2008, 15). This is a clear fantasy of pure origins and unbroken continuity that tells much of the way Italy is perceived in the European and global configuration of cultures. It is a fascinating conceptualization of a certain sort of fantasizing on characteristics that extend from the urban territory (the old houses) to the people. The idea of an essence preserved throughout the centuries is widely fantasized upon in contemporary popular literature on Italy.

Eleonora often has the impression of meeting people whose physical features are the same as those depicted in classic Italian paintings. References to Italians looking like timeless prototypes of Southern beauty are recurring throughout the novel. When Eleonora falls in love with Alessandro, an Italian man who “looks like he has stepped from a painting,” (2008, 41) he casually comments: “It’s common here. You see the same features walking around that have been here for hundreds of years. The same faces”² (2008, 114).

These fantasies of unbroken continuity tell us of an idea of the modern world (England in this case) as a place disconnected from its past. On the contrary, Italy’s perceived unbrokenness through time, visible in the culture, customs, architecture, and the physical features of its inhabitants is a common (mis)conception and a recurring theme of contemporary popular narratives. In a different instance of the same perception, while observing a historical parade in Orvieto, in which the participants wear medieval costumes, De Blasi comments:

2 A particularly interesting aspect of the novel is the fact that Italians seem to perceive themselves in the same way as the author does, as timeless prototypes made up of certain physical and emotional features. Sometimes they are even depicted as perceiving themselves through Shakespearean lenses, which is particularly amusing. Referring to *The Merchant of Venice*, Alessandro asks Eleonora “I live here. D’you think you can grow up in the city without knowing the story?” (2008, 115–116). The question is interesting because it takes for granted the universality of Shakespeare’s work as a literary referent of self-constitution and self-representation. There are obviously plenty of Venetians who do not know the Shakespearean story.

One begins to understand that these are not men masquerading as other men for the sake of a parade; rather, they are themselves bristling with the roots and fiber of their own blood and bones. Over and over again among the ranks, a spectator can see how a cape, a headdress, a posture can transform a man, change his twentieth-century face into a medieval one. How these people look like the portraits of their ancestors. And I wonder, How must it feel to march to the pounding of the pages' drums in the Sunday-morning light of the town where you were born, where your father and his father and ten generations of your fathers before them were born? (2007, 183)

Very few Italians can claim to know where the previous three generations of their ancestors lived, let alone the previous ten. The idea of an Italian past that continues unbroken and makes its timeless essence visible in the architecture as well as in people's physical features is a social collective fantasy. As such, it can certainly be a compelling narrative device, a fantastic conceptual premise to a fictional story. It is problematic, however, when this construction gets articulated in a pseudo-scientific (ethnographic) language and authoritative tone of voice that has, as one of its most obvious functions, that of distancing Italian culture and placing it in discontinuity with the modern world. This fantasy of unbroken ties with the past, a past that continues in the present, comes from a perspective that sees modernity as emanating from a circumscribed geographical space and fracturing the world into a "before" and an "after." Italy is seen as occupying a place in between, a "relatively undisturbed" space of tradition.

In *The Glassblower of Murano*, the architecture and the people are nonchalantly assimilated in the composition of this nostalgic image, and Eleonora's quest will be that of finding her rightful place in the eternally intact tissue of Italian society from her position of displaced and fragmented modern individuality. The myth of a privileged relation with the past pervades the novel: family lineages continue unbroken for centuries, preserving, along with their "genetic essences," not only their surnames, but also the same first names – which crop up regularly – characters, rivalries, and, inscribed in their bloodlines, the same tendencies towards good or evil.

This is a novel in which, in spite of its clear vocation for a light and graceful sort of entertainment, we see at work a number of themes that characterize contemporary representations of Italian culture in the English language: the general classification of Italy as the other of modern Europe, the *naturalization* of certain characteristics that extend from the territory 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 here, ready to be accessed and read as from an open book – and the *appropriation* of this imagined world from a distant modernity that has lost authenticity and continuity along the way. These rhetorical figures,

isolated and employed by David Spurr in his *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993), in which he analyses journalistic discourses on the Third World to shed light on its construction and representations of foreign cultures, apply to several instances of popular literature about Italy.

Eleonora wanders the streets of Venice and sees in it something beautiful, picturesque, and unchanged, a place she feels she belongs to but which she is also able to contemplate from a different position, and from a different time. As a Londoner, Eleonora enjoys the advantage of being “ahead in history,” and as the counterpart of Venice, London is implicitly represented as a place that has cut all its ties with the past, a city that because of its lack of historical traditions and relations with the past, is incapable of offering that “existential steadiness” that somehow naturally belongs to Italy. Italy’s backwardness has “saved” it, and made it forever different.

When Eleonora decides to look for work in Murano, this proves to be a difficult endeavour, but not for “contingent” reasons, related to the present-day political and economic situation. In the novel, Italy is never contextualized in the present-day world; it is an idealized piece of past set in the present. The Venetians’ glassblowing community, still made up entirely of male glassblowers, reveals itself to be as hostile, chauvinistic, closed, and distrustful of change as it used to be three centuries earlier. Archaic in character and caught-up in time, the community of glassblowers is essentially a present-day re-enactment of the same eighteenth-century organization.

Eleonora is initially hired by the glassblowing enterprise as a potential economic asset on the basis of her blood relation to her famous ancestor Corradino. In the course of the story, she will discover to possess a real talent for the craft (a genetic legacy, of course) and, after various vicissitudes, she will be accepted within the community, bringing a fresh and modern perspective to the current state of affairs. At one point in the novel, Eleonora accepts to pose for an advertising campaign for the Murano glasswork. In the campaign, “her role was to bring modernity to the Antique end of Adelino’s [the owner of the glassblowing factory] business. In modern day dress she was placed in classic Venetian paintings which featured glasswork and mirrors” (2008, 159). In this symbolic representation, her young and modern presence is contrasted with the timeless life of Venice. This scene perfectly epitomizes the function of Eleonora’s presence in the story of the novel.

A widely-spread misconception according to which Italy is qualitatively different from Northern Europe and America by virtue of its supposed pre-modern character is at the basis of this kind of literary fantasies. In Fiorato’s novel, Italians deal with historical events of previous centuries as if they were urgent and pressing matters; as if, as Alessandro explains, they “happened only yesterday” (2008, 41). The novel’s characters are involved in old feuds, still fighting their ancestors’ fights. In the novel, modern-day Italian characters often

speak on behalf of their ancestors, and centuries-old news still make headlines in Italian local newspapers.

Below is an excerpt of an interview with author Marina Fiorato in which she reveals some of her intentions in writing the novel:

Venice is so unchanging; it's essentially the same place architecturally as it was in the seventeenth century. There are few places in the world about which one can say this, because most cities have changed to accommodate roads and sprawling suburbs. But because Venice as a "character" was the same then as now, I thought it would be really interesting to take a look at ideas of heritage and continuity of a particular Venetian family, with a peculiar creative genius. I was interested in whether or not a skill like glassblowing is passed down in the same way that, say, facial characteristics are. Is glassblowing in the Venetian DNA? Are these skills built into the Venetian genome, and how much does the city itself create artists by a kind of osmosis which has nothing to do with the century they are in? These are the kind of questions which interested me. ("A Conversation with Marina Fiorato" 5)

Fiorato assumes that Venice and the Venetians have preserved an unchanging "character" because its architecture has not changed during the last centuries. The author clearly does not admit the possibility of a place constantly changing in spite of its old buildings, and extends the quality of timelessness from the architecture to the people. At this point, she consigns this perceived timelessness and continuity of Venetian architecture, character and genius to genetic causes, to a DNA that gets transmitted throughout the centuries. In order for this to happen, Venice has to be construed as a time-capsule, a world of timeless isolation from the modern world and discontinuous with it. In other words, in the novel, Venice is presented as a "self-contained ecosystem" in which people share the same genetic essence as the houses in which they live. Eleonora momentarily disrupts this continuity only to get absorbed by it at the end of the story.

Juliet

Another instance of a fictional narrative that presents several similar characteristics – the young (this time American) heroine who comes to the old world in search of her long-lost (and preferably noble) origins, the intertwining of two stories, one in the past, one in the present – is *Juliet*, written by Anne Fortier in 2010. The novel tells the (quite intricate) story of a young girl, Juliet, who decides, following the death of her aunt, to go to Siena and solve the mystery that has always surrounded her real identity. Juliet discovers to be the descendant of no

one other than Giulietta Tolomei, the noble woman who inspired the literary creation of the Shakespearean heroine. Once in Siena, she predictably falls in love with the descendant of the nobleman Romeo. The family feuds that held sway in the city during the Middle Ages are still rampant in present-day Siena, and Juliet, just like Eleonora, will discover her destiny to be indissolubly linked to that of the city, its history, and its culture.

Italians are, on the one hand, clearly historically pre-determined, with their never-ending rivalries and written (Shakespearean) destinies. They are also incapable of interpreting their own past and clearly need someone coming from the new world to help them uncover and understand their history. In the course of the story, for instance, Juliet will be able to unearth nothing less than the tomb of Romeo and Giulietta, buried underneath Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, at the heart of the city. The tomb, forgotten there for centuries and unknown to Italians, is easily unearthed by a young American girl during the time of a short holiday.

The novel's Siena is self-enclosed and mysterious, still anchored to a medieval past. Unlike in the real modern-day Siena, *contradas* still hold political and juridical power.³ This magical city offers valuable teachings for Juliet, who will learn to treat the past as a force very much alive in the present: "Don't underestimate the power of events that happened a long time ago" an older American woman warns Juliet "that is the tragic flaw of modern man. I advise you, as someone from the New World: listen more, and speak less. This is where your soul was born" (2010, 30). The quotation could hardly make more explicit the difference between the postulated modernity of Americans and the archaic character of Italy. Modern American men and women come to Italy from the new world to learn about the lost origin of their souls; what they can learn from Italy pertains to a peculiar existential register, an unsubstantial and mystical one, not to the concrete and utilitarian modern world.

In the novel, the people of present-day Siena habitually wear medieval dresses at parties, women address one another as "monna,"⁴ contemporary painters descend from famous artists of the past. Everyone in Siena seems to have a long, unbroken, and thoroughly traceable family history. Everyone knows exactly who their ancestors were and what they were doing at any given time. The real identity of all the contemporary characters we meet in the novel is preserved in the past, within the walls of the city. Moreover, people in the novel recognize each other by looking at the facial features of one another's ancestors as portrayed in frescos. Newborn children, in the 1970s, receive their baptism in the public fountain of

3 A *contrada* is a district, a ward. Siena retains a ward-centric structure from medieval times. The city is divided into wards, each represented by a mascot, usually an animal. Originally instituted as battalions in defense of the city, current *contradas* do not hold any form of administrative or juridical power. *Contradas* compete against each other every year at the Palio.

4 "Monna" was a formal way of addressing married women in the Middle Ages. It comes from the contraction of the word "Madonna."

their own *contrada*. The novel depicts a contemporary Italy in which superstition is rampant, current members of the clergy descend from the Shakespearean Fra' Lorenzo and perform wedding rituals, in private castles, in the medieval fashion.

The novel presents the reader with a pastiche that stretches its boundaries enough to comprehend the Palio, historical families from Siena (the Tolomeis and the Salimbenis), Romeo and Juliet, the mafia, Charlemagne, a curse that has been in place for centuries but gets broken by Juliet in the course of a few weeks, the magical water of a fountain that makes one lose their mental faculties... Clearly the novel does not aim at being a realistic depiction of life in modern-day Siena, but at the same time, the imagined character of this fantasy offers numerous clues on the self-perception of Americans on Italian soil.

In the novel, American lives are given a sense of history and purpose by the Italian way of life, that the author romanticizes – and this is the particularity of the narrative – not as a present-day instantiation of the Italian Middle-Ages, or of the Renaissance period, but as a reproduction of a Shakespearean interpretation of Italy, to which the Italian characters wholeheartedly adhere, and which incarnates values opposite to those of American modernity. It is not merely the fact that Italians demonstrate, at any given moment, a great familiarity with Shakespeare's works. More importantly, they recognize to them the inescapable power to shape their own characters and personalities in real life. In other words, they effortlessly perceive themselves as contemporary avatars of Shakespearean characters. The result is the creation of a fictional Italy, devoid of any sign of sheer plausibility, in which traditional stereotypes concerning Italian culture and traditions find a place in a larger pseudo-Shakespearean structure.

The projection that the author makes is of a kind that proceeds from a perceived universal centre and expects its periphery not only to share in the same game of references, but to truly identify with its creations. It is certainly true that the status of the Shakespearean canon has acquired a global value (Shakespeare is not a local cultural phenomenon), but this body of works is certainly not constitutive of all national literary and cultural histories in the same way. Throughout the novel, Italy (past and present) is made to emulate a Shakespearean interpretation of it, a fantasy constructed in a romantic opposition to what the author perceives as modern-day American culture. I could maybe clarify my point by advancing the hypothesis of an Italian contemporary author writing contemporary stories set in Malaysia and depicting Malay people as perceiving themselves as variations of characters created by Emilio Salgari.⁵ It could certainly be an entertaining idea, but there should be, I believe, some awareness of the artificial (and possibly

5 Emilio Salgari (1862–1911) was an Italian author of adventure books. He wrote extensively and his books have been extremely popular, not only in Italy, but also in Spain, Portugal, and South-America. Many of his most popular novels have been transformed into comic books, children books, films, and animated films.

controversial) nature of the operation. In Fortier's novel, on the other hand, there is no sign of irony, not the weakest reference to the author's awareness of the contrived (and ideologically charged) character of her literary expedients.

In both *The Glassblower of Murano* and *Juliet*, a modern-day heroine goes to the South of Europe to find herself and start anew. In both novels she ends up reconnecting to her past and finding a whole existential collocation that she did not have at the beginning of the story. Italy has the role of providing displaced and fragmented Anglo-American souls with continuity and purpose. In return, Italians get just a little emancipated by the new world outlook, realizing their sometimes excessive clinging to the past. In both novels, the Italian present (Italy's present-day political, social, and cultural situation) is not at all acknowledged, and in *Juliet* Italian history is subsumed in the two historical phases of the Middle Ages, still in a way on-going, and the Renaissance, just not the Italian one, but the Shakespearean one, that provides present-day Italian people with the opportunity to fulfil their predetermined destinies.

The present paper aims at problematizing precisely the notion of Italy as a world in discontinuity with modernity, a partially "magical" place capable of illuminating a novel aspect of the self. It has become commonplace to "expect" from Italy a revelation, the possibility of self-discovery, of existential change. Travelers do not only expect "to be dazzled," but they hope for "enlightenment, for relaxation, transformation" (Mayes 2010, 142). Instead of taking this notion for granted by attributing it to the place itself, as David Leavitt does in the following passage about Florence:

The promise of a destiny, verging on the erotic on one side and the artistic on the other, seems always to have attached itself to Florence in the imagination of the Foreigner, drawing him to the city not merely so that he can *see* but so that he can be or become something more than he is. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that in Florence he hopes to retrieve a quality endemic to himself the expression of which the atmosphere of home has stifled. (2002, 31)

I wish to problematize it and, within the larger scope of my inquiries, look for its emergence and current meaning in the contemporary taxonomy of cultures. Far from being an idea that has "always been there," it is in fact a modern construct, a notion that has been and is always subject to change.

Relocation Narratives

Let us now discuss a few memoirs and relocation narratives that picture Italy as presenting an actual margin, temporal and existential, with the rest of the

world (especially the rest of Europe) without taking sufficiently into account the projections and expectations that continuously reproduce such difference.

In the memoir *Every Day in Tuscany* (2010), while contemplating the sight of a few students gathering for a graduation celebration, Mayes observes:

On one boy, I spot a Dante nose. The red-gold hair of one girl falls in Botticelli curls. They look as charming, classical poets reincarnated and walking among us. The lovely La Primavera's friend suddenly laughs, mouth wide open, head back. I can see his molars. How they talk with their bodies! They bond, gesture, smack each other on the back. Their responsive faces are lit. What's that spark in the DNA and why don't other cultures have it? If I had another life, I'd definitely want to be an Italian student with that Renaissance hair. (2010, 35)

These present-day avatars of medieval poets and Renaissance characters carry a spark in their DNA (a genetic legacy) that makes them open, responsive, alert, and at ease in their bodies. Mayes makes repeatedly, in her memoir, similar observations in which she compares the Italians she sees in the streets of Cortona, the town where she lives for a part of every year, to ancient Romans and saints: "Albano could only be Italian. His profile looks like a Roman senator on a medallion" (2010, 111); "He looks like one of the saints in Luca's paintings, only he's constantly in motion"⁶ (2010, 113); "I always look at his paintings and recognize people I see in the piazza. I trace the cast-down eyes of the pizza server to an exalted Annunciation Mary, and the rippled curls and short legs of a local antiques dealer to the flagellated Christ" (2010, 157).

A sort of continuity of modern Italy with the ancient world is constantly sought after: sometimes with the people of the Middle Ages, sometimes with the Romans, and sometimes with the Etruscans. Throughout this kind of reflections on fundamentally unchanged ways of life is visible the effort to look for the fundamental traits of today's Italian lifestyle and cultural traits in the distant past: "Since the Etruscans, and maybe before, food in this hill town has been the daily focus of 99 percent of the population. Those tomb frescoes show people feasting even after death. They shimmy among the olive trees. And so it continues" (Mayes 2010, 243).

Mayes is not the only contemporary popular author to fantasize on the Italian supposedly unchanging genetic legacy. References to recurring traits in Italian features and their resemblance with works of art are persistent in contemporary popular literature in the English language. In *Lost Hearts in Italy* (2007), for instance, Mira, the protagonist of the novel, takes a walk in Rome and observes "the casual resonance between art and life. Botticelli angels in groups of high school girls, young Caravaggio toughs doing wheelies in suburban squares" (Lee 2007, 68).

6 Luca Signorelli, celebrated artist of the Renaissance.

This “reassuring spectacle of sameness” and cyclical instantiations is, on the one hand, aesthetically attractive for the spectator, but, on the other hand, the Italian “privileged connection” to the past carries within it the disadvantage of tying Italians to an essential passivity and backwardness when dealing with present-day matters.

Mayes experiences the downside of Italians being supposedly connected to an older order of things when she finds a stripped grenade at her door, a threatening gesture in response to her protest against the construction of a swimming pool nearby her house. As a part-time resident of the small city of Cortona, Mayes naturally feels she has the right to voice her opinions, openly protest, and support a petition to try and stop the works at the building site. However, she is not supported in her battles by the locals who do not wish to come forward and object to the project. Mayes does not attribute this, as usual, to contingent reasons. It cannot be, for instance, that the Cortonese, living in a small community all year long, are simply more careful about their relationships with their fellow citizens and are therefore prepared to go a longer distance than Mayes to avoid conflict. The reasons for their passivity in this and other matters will have to be found back in time, into the old battles and feuds that still supposedly motivate the present-day behaviour of the Cortonese. Mayes even individuates the cause of such behaviour in the Italian “collective brain” (2010, 88) that she sees duplicated in the design of the city:

We were called into tiny shops, spoken to in doorways, smiles on the faces seemingly speaking everyday greetings but really recounting an uncle’s dealings with a certain unsavoury person, World War II grudges from when someone turned in a partisan, dreams of revenge over a broken rental agreement. Bewildering. “Ed maybe it’s the architecture of the town – all the steep, dark *vicoli* [tiny streets] leading off the main street, winding into nether Cortona.”

“Really. The city as a metaphor for the collective brain.” (2010, 88)

All the conversations entertained with the locals do not speak to Mayes of the pettiness of every-day life in a small town, of how difficult it is to up-keep civilized relations in spite of personal antipathies, of events in the past... some of the Cortonese were probably trying to explain to Mayes the reasons why they could not adopt the outspoken sort of behaviour she was expecting from them. But Mayes only sees the immobility of the “collective Italian brain,” as sturdy, shady, and convoluted as the small city streets.

The only fellow-citizen who is as outspoken as Mayes is an “Italian friend who has lived his adult life in America” (2010, 91). Mayes feels that her friend’s support helped her in introducing to the Cortonese community the previously

unknown notion that “you can speak up” (2010, 91). It does not cross Mayes’s mind that this option might already be known among the locals, who might have ruled it out, not for reasons coming from the distant past, or for some inherent flaws of their “collective brain,” but for current motives. Maybe most Cortonese simply do not care enough about the cause, maybe they select their battles differently, or maybe they do not want to overstep social boundaries that are not even visible to Mayes. But no, if they do not protest and voice their concern, it is because they do not know how to do so, having not lived their adult lives in America. Bewildering, indeed.

Tradition is somehow schizophrenically seen, within the space of a few pages, as (1) an ideal but stagnant existential dimension, a nostalgic model, a paradise lost; (2) a limitation on personal freedoms that are, on the contrary, highly valued in and by “modern” cultures. In other words, there is a romantic exaltation of tradition at the same time as there is contempt towards it. In this perspective, tradition and modernity are perceived as opposite realms and both attitudes towards tradition are reflected in descriptions of Italians.

Italians can be picturesque, by aesthetically or culturally revealing their supposedly unbroken “genetic connections” to the past eras. It is certainly fine to look like a Renaissance Primavera, to be at ease with one’s physicality, to be responsive and open. The pleasantly exotic is welcome: the medieval noses, the olive oil, cooking without recipes... It is fine to be determined by history and genetics in this way, when all is finally reduced to a pleasant and unthreatening spectacle set up for the foreign gaze.

This timeless way of being and living, however, does not allow Italians to be really modern, because modernity is supposedly opposed to tradition. If Italians do not speak up, do not react, and do not seem to know their rights, it is because they still live in the past; it cannot be because *in spite of living in the present* they have elaborated different ways and different strategies in dealing with everyday matters. In other words, protesting is the universal and transparent mark of emancipation whereas not doing so is the (universal and transparent) sign of backwardness.

In the end, Mayes will resolve to a kind of behaviour that many people, Italian or not, would without hesitation label as “mafioso.” By talking to “a few influential people around town” (2010, 91–92), she will manage to stop the works in course. This is morally acceptable, however, because Mayes adapted to “the local ways” of doing things after having tried the properly emancipated and modern ones. Nowhere in her narrative is acknowledged the possibility of a doubt, or two actually: that (1) one cannot simply “export” a way of thinking and doing things in a different culture and complain for the lack of positive responsiveness, and, more importantly in this context, (2) her ways are traditional too, just of a different tradition. She seems to really believe that her ways are “modern” and “free” from

the reasons of the past, they are “the” reasonable ways, the ways Italians would adopt too if they only understood them, and she does not see that this attitude is perfectly traditional, belonging as it does to a tradition of thought that in so far as it equates “tradition” with “backwardness,” and with all that comes before modernity, remains distrustful, *a-priori*, of traditional ways.

In the memoir *Notes from an Italian Garden* (2000), by Joan Marble, the relocation adventure of Marble and her artist husband in the Roman countryside during the 1960s, there is the following long description of ancient physical traits returning in the features of contemporary Italians who are, in the passage, explicitly described as embodiments of timeless “ghosts.” This sort of fantasizing usually happens in the course of folkloristic festivals or historical re-enactments. Just as in the passage by de Blasi reported above, and in the passage by Mayes, who sees the students wearing graduation crowns made of laurel, the mere fact of seeing Italians de-contextualized from the world of today, dressed in historical clothing, and marching within ancient walls, ignites in the mind of the author(s) a play of juxtapositions and historical periods in which Italians appear as instantiations of the same immutable genetic essence. In this case, the author is describing a young man dressed in Renaissance clothes who is taking part in the celebration. This event makes her fantasize on the resemblance of Italians to ancient Etruscans:

One figure who caught my eye was a young man holding a flaming torch, which he would use to light the festival bonfire. He was wearing a green velvet tunic and beige tights and he marched ahead of five other youths who were carrying bundles of branches for the fire. It was his profile that attracted my attention. The line from the forehead ran almost straight to the nose with barely a dent at the bridge. The eyes were large and almond-shaped and the mouth turned up at the edges in a faintly self-mocking smile. The face seemed familiar to me and then I realized that I had seen a profile very like it on the wall of an Etruscan tomb at Tarquinia. These ghosts from the past flicker into your consciousness whenever you wander through the scrabbly little towns of central Italy – when a farm lady setting down her basket of eggs at the market in Barbarano has her black hair curled like the dancer’s ringlets on an Etruscan chalice, or when a mason’s helper limbs on to a roof balancing a load of cement on his shoulder, his back perfectly straight and his legs showing the over-developed calf just below the knee that is so typically Etruscan. (2000, 20)

At another point in the memoir, Marble notices that “in almost every building crew there would be one youngster who had the strong profile and muscular legs of a figure of an Etruscan vase” (2000, 73).

This type of fantasizing, which is by now familiar, and pivots on the gesture of making present-day Italians appear as current instantiations of historical figures, characterizes Marble's relation with Italians throughout the book. Marble perceives herself and her husband as "representatives of the modern world" on a visit to Italy:

Another thing we didn't realize was that we would be the first modern settlers in this rough and forbidding area. No one had lived in the open countryside below Canale for decades, perhaps even centuries, so amenities such as water, electricity, television, postal services, refuse collection and police protection were absent. (2000, 39)

The "rough and forbidding" area Marble is talking about is just over one hour drive away from Rome. If Italians do not, by definition, qualify as "modern," then it is very possible that Marble and her husband had been among the first (modern) foreigners to settle in the area during the 1960s, but this kind of reasoning is only possible if one imagines the land and the people as elements of the same changeless landscape, a world of pre-modern availability for those "modern settlers" brave enough to venture outside of Tuscany.

Marble does not consider it problematic to state, at the beginning of her memoir, that, over her years in Italy, she has learnt a great deal "[a]bout the flora and fauna of the place and about its sturdy inhabitants who have remained surprisingly resilient, even buoyant, despite the fact that their area of southern Etruria remained virtually frozen in a feudal system until the dawn of the twentieth century" (2000, 15). Etrurians are assimilated to the flora and fauna of the territory, a third natural realm treated as an object of study. Marble seems to assume that since the feudal system has been in place for centuries, Etrurian life has not changed either. This is a little like thinking that life in China has not changed from the Qin dynasty until 1911 because the Imperial dynastic system has been in place from 221 BC until that very year.

At times, therefore, these "modern settlers" feel invested with the responsibility to "witness history" before the disruptive advent of modernity. Persuaded that history is nothing more than an unbroken long tradition of past habits and customs that modernity is about to shatter away, they feel responsible for being the representatives of this unsettling event in a territory that they paradoxically perceive as yet untouched by the historical events of the present: "I will always be happy that we found the area when we did, in 1964, while it was still an unknown backwater, for we were able to catch – just before it began to disappear – a way of life that had gone on virtually unchanged since the Dark Ages, and sometimes much longer" (2000, 25).

Thinking that people's way of living has not changed in Italy from the Middle Ages tells us of a mythical construction of history as simply divided between a "before" and an "after" modernity. One of the most significant and interesting aspects, from the point of view of this study, is that these remarks about a fabled continuity are offered in a tone and a style that aspire to some kind of ethnographic credibility. This is quite explicitly stated in Marble's presentation of her book, in which she describes it as also "a study of the rugged people of southern Etruria."⁷

Marble formulates authoritative comments of a pseudo-anthropological kind such as the following: "[The] twin compulsions to resist authority but also to scoop up its benefits have fostered a complex, not to say schizophrenic, personality among the citizens of southern Etruria" (2000, 24). "When Italians feel guilty or embarrassed they always raise their voices" (2000, 38). And the remark below, articulated in terms of an analogy with Darwinian theories: "Just as giraffes developed long necks to reach the tops of trees, so Canale women have, over the centuries, developed voices strong enough to reach their menfolk in the fields" (2000, 50).

The "denial of coevalness" (Fabian 1983) that separates Italy from the fully rational world is culturally charged, a device for the construction of identities based on essential dichotomies. It is possible for American authors to recognize the "traditional elements" of Italian culture because they contemplate it from a more advanced historical phase of rationality and scientific progress.

Some people in Umbria light a fire to keep warm while eating outside and celebrating the festivity of Sant'Antonio:

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. (De Blasi 2007, 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

7 Italians are, in Marble's pages, as pre-modern and "rough" as the jobs they have: builders, farmers, market-people, well-diggers, cleaners, helpers, house painters, all with their "archaic" (2000, 72) working methods.

an excess of projections on the “primal” and “ritualistic” character of Italian collective 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.

This kind of genetic determinism associated with the Italian individual is, I believe, related to the self-grounding myth of modernity translated into everyday discourses of cultural distinction and classification. By “self-grounding myth of modernity,” I mean a certain notion which implies that transcending tradition and choosing freely one’s way of life is a possible option for truly modern individuals. In his article on the notion of tradition, Yaacov Yadgar discusses this modern myth in the following terms:

Accepting the dichotomous distinction between ‘modern’ [...] and ‘traditional’ as a paradigmatic axiom of the scientific study of society (part of the more comprehensive narrative of secularization and modernization), a dominant self-image of the modern, liberal West has tended to discount tradition as a matter of the bygone past. Viewing the Modern, rational, epistemologically secular individuals as sovereign over their pasts, these social sciences tended to view tradition as a taken-for-granted, authoritatively unchallenged, and rather unambiguous element of the ‘pre-modern’ (indeed, ‘*traditional*’) socio-cultural setting. They thus tended to view tradition as a restraint on individual liberty, on rationality and on reflectivity. The liberation from tradition thus became a precondition of one’s ability to view reality in an unbiased, truthful, rational manner. (2013, 454)

In a way, therefore, several of the narratives I discuss in the present paper represent a romantic opposition to this myth, in the sense that they represent Italian closeness to tradition as, in most cases, positive. Nevertheless, although this perspective questions the rejection of tradition in modernity, it does so preserving the dichotomy (tradition/modernity) whole.

If instances of this outlook in contemporary popular literature in English are too numerous to list here, it is because although in academic discourses the notion of tradition as a diametrically opposed dimension to modernity has been seriously questioned for over half a century, it has also thoroughly saturated common sense and penetrated everyday discourses and practices. An eminent example of such questioning is encapsulated in the following observation by Hans-Georg Gadamer: “Tradition is not simply a pre-condition into which we come, but we produce it ourselves, inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition and hence further determine it ourselves” (1979, 261).

Therefore, instead of recognizing to tradition an “on-going” character, comments of the kind that have been so far discussed, see it as a residue of and a

clinging to a by-gone past. After describing a religious tradition which has been taking place in Bologna for a long time, Joel Backman, the protagonist of John Grisham's *The Broker* (2005), takes it as evidence of an unchanging continuation of the past into the present and confidently proclaims about the city: "It's a real city, with people living where they work. It's safe and clean, timeless. Things haven't changed much over the last centuries" (2005, 231).

Concluding Remarks

Most of the novels and memoirs that have been under scrutiny in the present paper, assume a neat break between an era characterized by traditional values and the present day; most of the authors of such narratives simply do not seem to conceive of the present as a historical time informing their perspective, but as a "place" from which one can observe reality from an "objective" position, a locus free of perspective (a view from nowhere, as it were). After giving modernity the positive connotation of a time beyond history that transcended tradition, it becomes possible to speculate on the aspects that align Italy with the present era and those that place them in discontinuity with it, making of Italy a time-capsule outside of the present-day, a perpetual spectacle of sameness. I have argued that assumption produces highly deluded and serialized accounts, often camouflaged as ironic ethnography.

Narratives that construe Italy as having a privileged relation with history depict, on the one hand, Italians as able to access their own past without mediation, and, on the other hand, see history as having such a dominant role in Italian culture and society, that it ends up epitomizing its very essence. As a result, Italy is often depicted as caged, isolated, and static; permanently caught in a pre-modern dimension.

In this manner, Italy is idealized and appropriated at the same time. It is idealized in its relationship to history and its own past, and appropriated as a place capable to restore a certain degree of existential steadiness and meaningfulness to modern fragmented souls visiting in a quest for balance and authenticity.

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