

**Tuscan Spaces: Literary Constructions of Space, by Silvia Ross, Italian Studies, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010, 224 pp. \$45 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 4426 3998 0**

Ross's study explores a cluster of modern and contemporary texts by Italian and Anglophone authors set, entirely or partly, in Tuscany. The focus of Ross's analysis is the multiple ways such narratives construe, construct, and represent "the spatiality of Tuscany," (p.8) and the ways the notion of "Tuscan space" intersects with the authors' encounters with otherness. Spanning a range of different genres, from the filmic to the narrative, from the novel to the memoir, the travelogue, and the short story, Ross explores the diverse responses showing the writers' sense of belonging and/or estrangement from the Tuscan places they choose to narrate.

The first three chapters of the study focus on a triptych of prominent Italian (and Tuscan) literary figures: Federigo Tozzi (1883-1920), Aldo Palazzeschi (1885-1974), and Vasco Pratolini (1913-1991). Federigo Tozzi was a novelist neglected for a long time and rediscovered by literary critics during the 1960s; he is now regarded as one of the most important representatives of Italian Modernism. Ross shows how depictions of space are central to Tozzi's descriptions of his characters' sense of alienation, a central theme of his poetic: urban and rural spaces summon, in Tozzi's writing, feelings of inadequacy, persecution and oppression. The Tozzian character's "sense of difference and marginalization" Ross argues, "can be read in his or her surroundings. Architecture frequently connotes sensations of oppression, as witnessed, for example, in Siena's conglomerations of houses, one piled up on top of the other to the extent that they seem on the verge of toppling." (p.24)

Of particular interest, to the present context, is Ross's parallel but constant comparative discussion of the differences between the perspectives of Italian and Anglophone authors on the Tuscan spaces that are represented in their writings. In particular, Ross makes a series of lateral but punctual comparative remarks on the "Italian narratives" (especially *A Room with a View* 1908) by E. M. Forster and narratives set in Tuscany by Italian authors. It is clear that Forster's Italian narratives represent an important term of evaluation by virtue of their complexity and ambiguity – they masterfully reflect, in fact, all the density and ambivalence of England's relations to Southern Europe and to Italian otherness in particular. For this reason, it is especially productive to read them, as Ross does, with an eye to detecting similar and/or contradictory patterns of representations between the Anglo-gaze and the native one.

In reference to Tozzi, for instance, Ross remarks on the scene the author sets in Piazza della Signoria in *Ricordi di un impiegato (Memories of a Clerk, 1927)*. By comparing it with the pivotal episode, set in the same square, of *A Room with a View*, Ross shows how Tozzi thoroughly neglects the works of art that populate the square in order to focus, instead, on the menacing ugliness of the people who occupy it. The narrative descriptive elements that Tozzi favours are not only simply prosaic and mundane; they are disturbing and disquieting for the protagonist of the novel and signal his sense of estrangement from the community, a community made up of real and upsetting presences:

I can still see so many eyes, so many gazes that made my soul tremble, striking fear in it! Then there was a man with deformed feet tuned inward who sat every day under the Loggia dei Lanzi. He would lean his crutches against the wall and would hang around there chatting with certain men...I remember three of them. One man, a bit hunched and with a black beard, another with a white moustache and tattooed arms; and another, rather short, with a black moustache and a suit which had turned green, always the same. The one with crutches who couldn't work always looked

at me in such a way that I had come to hate him. He looked at my legs as if he wanted to tear them off.” (pp.25-26)

Lucy Honeychurch, the young protagonist of *A Room with a View*, also experiences sensations of anguish, estrangement and alienation from the place, but these are symptomatic of an encounter with cultural difference, which will be, for her, deeply transformative, that takes place in a city that, in the novel, does not belong to its concrete inhabitants, nor to a specific historical time, but assumes the mythical traits of a timelessly beautiful, potentially dangerous and existentially transformative place. For Tozzi, on the contrary, the alterity is that of the protagonist who, describing a disturbing gallery of characters, conveys to the reader his alienation from the city and sense of persecution.

The second chapter is primarily dedicated to a discussion of Aldo Palazzeschi's most commercially successful novel: *Sorelle Materassi* (*Sisters Materassi*, 1934). Ross sets out to investigate Palazzeschi's constructions of space in the text as they are indicative, she maintains, of a “flexibly conceived sexuality:” (p.47)

for Palazzeschi gender is a liable concept, his characters rarely conform to normative heterosexist paradigms and display a wide range of sexual behaviours, breaking down culturally constricted parameters of femininity and masculinity. Space, be it internal or external, is illustrative of the writer's commitment to articulating difference and staging sexuality, and the locales portrayed encapsulate a sense of liminality. (p.45)

In particular, Ross focuses on Palazzeschi's preference of places that represent the in-between: the periphery of Florence, neither entirely urban nor entirely rural, and the architectural element of the window: a space, neither exterior nor interior, representing the in-between that is the habitual existential condition of the sister protagonists of the novel. The window epitomizes their suspended status between life and death; an opportunity for vicarious enjoyments, and the place that sees them waiting for the visits of their nephew, Remo. Remo, the object of the sisters' confused and immature sexual desire, and the cause of their eventual financial demise, is the very much alive presence that occasionally irrupts into the otherwise secluded existence the two sisters lead.

Ross's reflections on the architectural element of the window offer a telling example on the way she engages in the analysis of space as a method to approach the writers' poetics and the theme of identity/otherness in particular: “the window for Palazzeschi represents the liable quality of categorizations such as internal/external; private/public; reality/fantasy; male/female; country/city; containment/escape.” (p. 51) From this perspective, Ross makes interesting comparisons between Forster and Palazzeschi's homoerotic gaze and their respective substitutes in the novels.

Vasco Pratolini's early novels, such as, for instance, *Il Quartiere* (*A Tale of Santa Croce*, 1943), are set in historical Florence. Via del Corno, an historical road off Piazza della Signoria, is where one of Pratolini's most celebrated novels, *Cronache di poveri amanti* (*A Tale of Two Poor Lovers*, 1947), takes place. These novels, Ross observes, are characterized by a sense of belonging and rootedness into the city's past; their proletarian protagonists perform activities still anchored to a pre-industrial reality, as they are mostly artisans, vendors, and craft workers.

The third chapter of Ross's study is, however, dedicated to the analysis of one of Pratolini's later and less known novels: *La costanza della ragione* (*Bruno Santini. A Novel*, 1963) set in

the city's industrial area of Rifredi. The choice of representing industrial Florence, Ross reflects, brings Pratolini to explore places that most literature on the city generally ignores, "spaces of the factory, of the periphery, and of marginalization." (p.70) Pratolini's portrayal of industrial Florence establishes a stark contrast with his previous choice of places; it is a space in between the urban and the rural which reveals Pratolini's concern with "themes of socio-geographical exclusion [...], along with an even greater engagement with questions of alterity." (71) Ross observes that beside themes that are usually representative of Pratolini's poetic (such as youth/illness, death, memory and sexuality) there is, in the novel, a constant preoccupation with otherness, articulated in terms of gender, race, or sexuality.

Ross's own perception of the novel is that although Pratolini makes some courageous choices concerning its themes (adolescent and homoerotic sexuality, ethnic and sexual otherness), "close textual analysis of spatial configurations and the characters within them [...] reveals, in the end a not particularly evolved stance towards alterity." (p.89) Ross detects disturbing elements in Pratolini's treatment of his chosen topics, most notably a kind of "sub-textual fascism" (p.89) that resurfaces in spite of the author's anti-Fascist standpoint, a generally ambiguous ideological stance of the protagonist, and an often misogynistic view of women.

In spite of these shortcomings, however, Ross believes that Pratolini's portrayal of suburban Florence "provide[s] a vivid and thought-provoking contrast to standard visions of the historic centre." (p.89) Set at the time of the "miracolo economico" (economic boom), the novel offers a very original view on the quintessential Renaissance city, one that is thoroughly projected towards the future, disenchanted and dissatisfied with the monuments and symbols of its past. Bruno, the protagonist of the novel, perceives Florence's architectonic and artistic riches as static and dead: "In a rejection of the typically aestheticized gaze, Brunelleschi's dome, the object of so much admiration by tourists and scholars alike, is disparagingly compared to an egg by the narrator/protagonist, and Florence's city centre is likened to a cemetery" (p.77) In a telling passage of the novel, Bruno deliberates on this point:

Florence, for me who follows its events like any other Italian from an Italian city, is to be found in those places where its progressive culture is located, where it is secular, in the universities and in the major presses and above all in the small ones because they are new. It's in the area of Rifredi and the universe of its labourers, obviously: where there is no longer 'Florentinism': everything that I – with the means at my disposal – have attempted to consign to history by narrating it so that it can be rejected even. (p.88-89)

"Florentinism" is very much present in the texts (literary and filmic) that Ross analyses and discusses in the fourth chapter. In this chapter, *A Room with a View* occupies a central place; Ross analyses the narrative as well as its film adaptation by James Ivory (1985). Ross chooses to read both texts through the lens of the Stendhal syndrome (or Florentine syndrome), a state of mental confusion, distress and fear caused by an overexposure to art, tracing fascinating connections between Forster's poetic, his idea of the sublime, and the emancipatory potential of this disorder.

As it is well-known, and as Ross reminds us, Forster's characters strive for insight (and self-knowledge). In the novel under discussion, Lucy, the young female protagonist, progressively acquires knowledge of the self at the same time as she learns to trust herself and her instincts when it comes to life (and art). Autonomy of the spirit as well as intellectual and sexual emancipation are achieved by Lucy through contact with cultural otherness. Italian culture exerts a powerful influence on Lucy, especially by virtue of its natural and architectural

beauty, its often erotically connoted artistic riches, and its perceived predilection for uncontrived and unmediated social norms.

In this perspective, Piazza della Signoria, where Lucy's awakening will take place, is depicted by Forster as "under a spell: [the square] has acquired a quality of otherworldliness." (p.100) Florence provokes powerful sensations in Lucy, all brimming with sexual suggestions - both the phallus (symbolized by the Arnolfo Tower) and the womb (symbolized by the loggia) are present in the square and in the scene. Lucy displays a strong psychosomatic reaction to the charms of Florence that can only partially be attributed, Ross maintains, to her distress at the sight of blood. In Lucy's surrender there is "an underlying erotic-spiritual current" (p.103) that in the film gets very much stressed, and the scene of the murder seems to introduce Lucy to a world of masculine sensuality through violence. Piazza della Signoria is vividly represented by Ivory as a sublimely beautiful but disquieting scenario and Lucy's fainting occurs because she is "overwhelmed by the whole environment that surrounds her." (p.108)

The fifth and sixth chapters of the work are dedicated to the contemporary era. The middle 1990s witnessed the blooming of a sub-genre of travel literature that proposes, according to an identifiable formula, the account of a relocating to Tuscany and subsequent assimilation to the local culture, by a usually Anglo-American, highly educated and financially privileged traveller/writer. The genre follows in the footprints of Peter Mayle's books set in Provence and focuses on the pleasures of adapting to a new (bucolic) environment while facing the challenges entailed in restoring an old house. There is, therefore, a double re-fashioning occurring in the genre which is both a reinvention of the self and a house restoration: "the house becomes an integral spatial figure in the writer's construction (literal and figurative) of his or her new 'Italianate' self." (p.123)

Ross discusses, in particular, *Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy*, 1996, by Frances Mayes, and *In Maremma: Life and a House in Southern Tuscany*, 2000, by David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell, in order to argue that, within the conventions of this specific genre, Italians are usually depicted as others, and, more specifically, as representatives of "a more genuine way of life" (p. 123) that, being presented as alternative to the modern, urbanized, Anglo-American one, is also often perceived and portrayed as pre-modern and backwards. This conflicting discursive pattern of representation generates several problems: often these writers do not see as problematic, for instance, writing pseudo-anthropological accounts of the Italian way of life without knowing the language. Moreover, these narratives often adopt *allochronic* techniques, that is to say strategies that allow the writers of this genre to depict Italians as belonging to a pre-modern time that they contemplate from the vantage point of modernity.

Italians are therefore often placed within the context of a timeless past; their habits, customs and behaviours are explained in terms of the modern Italian's "genetic" connection to his/her Etruscan or Roman past, perceived as an unbroken legacy. In these texts, therefore, is often detectable the double gesture of relegating Italians into the past while longing for an appropriation of what the authors perceive as their sense of rootedness and belonging. Through the process of (pseudo)assimilation to Italian culture, the author manages to appropriate his/her long-lost historical origins and to be re-absorbed by the timeless fabric of Italian society, while at the same time preserving his/her own vantage point that allows for sometimes sympathetic, sometimes condescending remarks.

The only elements these texts seem to share with Forster's are a vision of Italy that is fundamentally abstract and symbolic, and the scarcity of references to the political and social contingencies of Italian culture, "with the result that the books portray primarily the authorial perceptions of the foreign culture and operate in a kind of vacuum as far as current affairs are concerned." (p. 141)

Ross believes that an interesting alternative to the kind of self-centeredness that relocation narratives usually promote is represented by the work of Elena Gianini Belotti, an Italian writer and essayist who is especially recognized for her pedagogical works (*Dalla parte delle bambine*, 1973). In 2001, Belotti wrote *Voli (Flights)*, a memoir set in Tuscany that primarily focuses on its zoological and botanical life, and on the life of birds in particular. In the text, while voicing her ecological and eco-feminist concerns, Belotti shows a socially and politically engaged standpoint when it comes to the representation of rural life in Tuscany. Rather than engaging in a self-celebratory and "self-promoting advertisement for her house and garden," (p.162) Belotti shows knowledge and awareness of "the visible signs of hardship etched in the house and reflects on their significance, [displaying] sensitivity and class consciousness [that] lead to more reflective and informed comments on the house's structure and its origins." (p.146)

*Tuscan Spaces* is a thought-through, personal piece of research that offers numerous clues for further analysis and investigation. Ross's study does, in particular, a good work of observing how depictions of space intersect with the authors' conceptions of otherness. However, sometimes one has the impression that the main subject of Ross's' analysis shifts, touching on (too?) many fascinating topics that would deserve further development: sometimes the notion of place/space is central to her analysis, sometimes this centre shifts to the construction of otherness, the Stendhal syndrome, or the sense of self-entitlement and consumerist logic behind much of contemporary Anglo-American literature on Tuscany.

Ross's preoccupation with the Anglo-American construction of Italian otherness, in particular, places her work within a constellation of recent academic books and articles that explore the topic in different contexts and from different angles: the British construction of Italian-ness at the time of the Risorgimento (Annemarie McAllister's *John Bull's Italian Snakes and Ladders: English Attitudes to Italy in the Mid-nineteenth Century*, 2007); the filmic representation of Italian-ness (Elisabetta Girelli's *Beauty and the Beast: Italian-ness in British Cinema*, 2009); the representation of Italian culture in popular Anglophone texts (my own "Trading Rationality for Tomatoes: The Consolidation of Anglo-American Identities in Popular Literary Representations of Italian Culture," 2016 and "The Genetic Essence of Houses and People: History as Idealization and Appropriation of an Imagined Timelessness," 2016). Ross's exploration of the topic from the point of view of space adds a fascinating novel perspective to this emerging field of research.

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