

## ARTICLE

# Contemporary British Travel Writing on Italy and British Broadsheets: Tobias Jones, John Hooper and Tim Parks

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The objects of analysis here are recent, well-known texts about Italy by authors who work for broadsheet newspapers, and whose work, in turn, is promoted in those same broadsheets for a predominantly middle-class audience interested in, or most likely travelling to, Italy. The article aims to highlight the dangers of the symbiotic relationship between these texts and the British press, given that they tend to perpetuate over-simplifications and stereotypes about Italy versus Britain that have existed at least since the growth of tourism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The texts analysed here – *The Dark Heart of Italy* by Tobias Jones, *The Italians* by John Hooper and *Italian Neighbours* and *An Italian Education* by Tim Parks – were chosen due to their popularity and their authors' visibility as commentators on Italian issues. These authors tend to display a lack of awareness of (or desire to ignore) their positioning and the ways in which their work often promotes an agenda of northern European superiority that has evolved, but not significantly altered, in the last two hundred years or so. The article reveals an unsettling alliance between these British commentators on Italy and the newspapers that are supposed to provide accurate information on, and may shape policy towards, Italy.

At least since the era of the Grand Tour, Italy has been a particular source of fascination in the British imagination. In the nineteenth century, Schaff (2009) credits John Murray, author of the *Handbooks to Italy*, with inventing the genre of the modern guidebook, targeted at the travelling middle classes and incorporating the literary, Romantic visions of the peninsula of poets such as Byron and Shelley. According to Schaff, Murray created a hybrid genre that mixed literariness with useful tips and that 'would ennoble factual information and shape the tourist's perception according to the accepted cultural norms of the middle class' (2009: 109). Today, travel books aimed at a British middle-class readership that explore Italian life

and culture continue to thrive,<sup>1</sup> alongside numerous blogs and television programmes in a similar vein.<sup>2</sup> Despite increasing globalisation and the unprecedented availability of low-cost travel, travel writing is still a genre that is hugely popular and successful in terms of sales and visibility in the public arena, and this is no less true of British travel writing on Italy, as we shall see.

The objects of analysis in this article are recent, well-known texts about Italy: *The Dark Heart of Italy* by Tobias Jones, *The Italians* by John Hooper, and *Italian Neighbours* and *An Italian Education* by Tim Parks. These texts vary in tone, showing the elastic nature of travel writing as a genre; 'the beggar of literary forms: it borrows from the memoir, reportage and, most important, the novel' (Buford 1984: 7). All three of these authors offer their subjective experiences of Italy cloaked in the veneer of travel writing, a genre traditionally seen as more factual than other types of writing, based on the assumption that 'there is a single, incontrovertible reality awaiting documentation by travel writers, and each travelogue can be judged for how accurately it represents this reality' (Lisle 2006: 11). Particularly since the publication of Said's *Orientalism* (1978), scholarship has begun to question this truth status and to underline the imperial power dynamics present in travel writing (Pratt 2008). As Holland and Huggan state: 'Travel writing calls out [...] for a sustained critical analysis: one that looks at travel writers as retailers of mostly white, male, middle-class, heterosexual myths and prejudices, and at their readers as eager consumers of "exotic" – culturally "othered" – goods' (2000: viii). We shall certainly see these dynamics at work in the writers addressed here, who write from privileged positions to a largely privileged audience, and often promote an agenda of northern European superiority that has evolved, but not significantly altered, in the last two hundred years or so. We shall see traces of the centuries-old dichotomies that originated with the Romantic myth of Italy, particularly in the nineteenth century, espoused by British and more generally northern European writers, who reasserted their dominance over their southern European counterparts through what Luzzi has described as a 'cultural lexicon that employed such binary oppositions as male/female, living/dead, freedom/oppression, and Protestant/Catholic' (2002: 51).

A critical analysis will also reveal an unsettling alliance between these British writers on Italy and British broadsheet journalism. Jones, Hooper and Parks all write for broadsheet newspapers, and their work, in turn, is promoted in those same newspapers for a middle-class audience interested in, or perhaps travelling to, Italy. We shall see a circularity in the construction of Italy in these texts, as similar images are reproduced by similar writers, often writing about one another and for a similar – or the same – readership. Whilst these texts may have been promoted by broadsheets as holiday reading, their authors can be seen as influential commentators on Italian issues, being frequently called on to write about Italian cultural issues and politics in those same broadsheets, and, in the cases of Jones and Parks, their travel writing has undoubtedly given a considerable boost to their journalistic careers. I aim to highlight the dangers of the symbiotic relationship between these sorts of texts and newspapers that are supposed to provide accurate information on, and may shape policy towards, Italy.

<sup>1</sup> This includes writing on Italy by Italians that has been translated into English, such as *La Bella Figura: An Insider's Guide to the Italian Mind* (2007) by the Italian journalist Beppe Severgnini. Severgnini has also written on the British in *Inglese* (1990), which has been translated into English too; certainly, it is not only British writers that have engaged in the kind of travel writing that I examine here.

<sup>2</sup> For example, there is Kate Bailward's blog *Driving Like A Maniac: All About Living in Italy*, about being an Englishwoman in Sicily (<http://www.katebailward.com/drivinglikeamaniac/>) or Rachel Roddy's blog *Rachel Eats*, about Italian cuisine and her life in Rome (<https://racheleats.wordpress.com/>). Regarding television, the BBC series *Italy Unpacked* shows the British art critic Andrew Graham-Dixon travelling round Italy with the Italian chef Giorgio Locatelli, or there is Jamie Oliver's *Jamie's Italy*.

### ***The Dark Heart of Italy* by Tobias Jones**

The most successful recent piece of travel writing by a British author about Italy in terms of sales is Tobias Jones's *The Dark Heart of Italy*, which, since its appearance in 2003, has been republished twice, and the three editions in total have sold approximately 100,000 copies in the United Kingdom alone.<sup>3</sup> The book charts Jones's experience of living in Parma for four years as a teacher and journalist, travelling the country and investigating various political developments around the time of Silvio Berlusconi's electoral landslide in 2001. As the book's title suggests, Jones never intends to give a balanced account, but rather his text is geared towards showing the negative aspects of the *bel paese*, aiming to counteract the traditional admiring gaze of the tourist by uncovering the unknown or unpleasant aspects of Italy from under the country's skin, to probe the title metaphor. It is worth pointing out that metaphors of darkness resurface in other recent travel books about Italy, as seen in Peter Robb's *Midnight in Sicily* (1996) or A.G.D. Maran's *Mafia: Inside the Dark Heart: The Rise and Fall of the Sicilian Mafia* (2010). These texts look at the country's corrupt or criminal side, rather than its sunny, tourist experience, suggesting another binary opposition to add to Luzzi's aforementioned list for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jones's (and Maran's) title also echoes that of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a key text expressing a northern, colonial vision of a southern other: in Conrad's case Africa, in Jones's Italy.

In a note at the beginning of *The Dark Heart of Italy*, Jones defines his book as being 'on the cusp' between history and memory (2013a: xi), and the way in which he moves between the two is seemingly inscribed in the text by the italicised 'factual' sections on recent history and politics being interspersed with more anecdotal, experiential, non-italicised narration in the first-person, although this separation is not as clear-cut as the changing typeface would suggest. Although a quote from the *Independent on Sunday* on the cover of the third edition proclaims the text to be '[i]ndispensable [...] should be packed in the travelling bags of all visitors to Italy' (Jones 2013a: front cover), Jones himself reveals in a postscript to the second edition that it tends away from subtle arguments towards hasty conclusions and, at times, inaccuracies, which caused a large amount of controversy when it first appeared; he admits: 'I do more sweeping than a full-time chimney cleaner; I often dust off 58 million Italians with a cute line. There are at least two factual errors and two dodgy translations' (2013a: 254).<sup>4</sup> In light of this, it is surprising that, as Jones tells us in the same postscript, the revised edition leaves what he refers to as his "'juvenilia'" untouched, aside from outlining some of the more positive aspects of Italian life in this postscript, in a putative attempt to balance the darkness

<sup>3</sup> As of 17 July 2015, they had sold 99,361 copies in total, according to information kindly provided by Nielsen. *The Dark Heart of Italy* has also been translated into Italian with an additional subtitle: *Il cuore scuro dell'Italia. Un viaggio tra odio e amore* (*The Dark Heart of Italy: A Journey between Hate and Love*) (Jones 2003b). As Maher points out, this subtitle 'presents the text as expressing a conflicted relationship with Italy, balancing out the negative (the "dark heart") with something positive ("love")' (2012: 181–2), which is not present in the wholly negative English title, perhaps due to a fear of offending an Italian audience. This fear can also be detected in the preface to the Italian version, where Jones refers to his work as containing a typically English sense of humour (2003b: 15).

<sup>4</sup> Certainly, there are sweeping statements and factual errors peppered throughout the text. To give just a couple of many possible examples: Jones states that 'despite the huge success of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, there are barely any other (comparatively recent) historical novels in Italy: the factual, true-life version simply couldn't be bettered' (2013a: 25). Yet, historical fiction in Italy is an extremely fertile and popular genre, as seen in well-known texts from the middle of the twentieth century to the present day by writers such as Anna Banti, Luther Blissett/Wu Ming, Vincenzo Consolo, Umberto Eco, Elsa Morante, Antonio Tabucchi and Sebastiano Vasalli. Jones also states, when discussing the coverage of the Miss Italia competition, that 'Italy is the land that feminism forgot' (2013a: 118), seeming to be unaware of the vibrant feminist movement that grew up in Italy after 1968. In terms of 'dodgy translations', Maher has shown that Jones 'offers over-literal translations and "false friends" that expressly highlight cultural differences' (2012: 187).

of his younger work with some light, 'to hint at other "hearts" which are more sunny and more admirable than the one I originally made the subject of this book' (2013a: 252). The third edition only adds another postscript updating his readers on subsequent developments in Italy since he first wrote the book ten years before.

Jones employs some of the tropes of Romantic views of Italy, seeing the country as embodying tensions between beauty and corruption, and it is significant that he even quotes Byron's words about Italy when discussing Italian cinema: "*Italia, Oh Italia,*" wrote Byron, "*thou who has the fatal gift of beauty*" (2013a: 119).<sup>5</sup> These much-repeated lines begin one of Jones's more 'factual' italicised sections, suggesting caution as to how objective and empirically verifiable the information being presented in these sections is.<sup>6</sup> As in Byron's linking of danger and beauty in the above quotation, Jones's praise for Italy's good points goes hand-in-hand with alerting the reader to the country's shortcomings, as when reflections on its beauty bring Jones to observe, with characteristic over-statement, 'how is it that the country which has produced the greatest art in the Western world, which produced some of the best films of the twentieth century, now has the worst, most abysmal television on the planet?' (2013a: 108). There is also the requisite exploration of Catholicism, which is portrayed as superstitious and primitive, and more or less openly brought into relief with Jones's own Protestant culture, as when he states: 'Eating is, I realised with pleasure, Italian Catholics' answer to the "work ethic"' (2013a: 169). Later, he resorts to the age-old feminisation of Italy, quoting the nineteenth-century statesman Massimo D'Azeglio's comment that living in Italy is like falling in love with a prostitute: 'That, in fact, is precisely the feeling of living here: it is infuriating and endlessly irritating, but in the end it is almost impossible to pull yourself away. It's not just that everything is *troppo bello*, "too beautiful", or that food and conversation are so good. It's that life seems less exciting outside Italy, the emotions seem muted' (2013a: 241). As Luzzi has rightly argued of the Western world's attitude to Italy, 'the Romantic generalizations about Italy as a feminine, premodern, and sepulchral space whose present cannot escape the burden of its past persist. [...] The Western romance with Italy, tinged both with ideological overtones and with genuine affection, remains as complex today as that earlier *amour manqué* in Romantic Europe' (2002: 83).

Besides the postscript to the second edition, there are brief moments when Jones seems to be aware of the subjective nature of the picture that he is painting of Italy. The most striking of these is when he meets one of his ex-students in a bar and tells him that he is writing about the government, in response to which the student expresses his views about writers like Jones: "'You foreign journalists are so facetious and condescending. You only write about how terrible our country is [...]. You come here with your British patriotism and laugh at us peasants before going back home'" (2013a: 230). Jones acknowledges that the ex-student is right in that he does want to go back home but also believes that he can remedy this situation by discussing resistance to Berlusconi's government in Italy. This then provokes more binary oppositions: although he recognises that he might be focusing on 'a very nasty niche of the country [which] comes to obscure all else', he then simplifies his

<sup>5</sup> This comes from canto IV, stanza 42 of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: 'Italia! oh, Italia! thou who hast/The fatal gift of beauty, which became/A funeral dower of present woes and past,/On thy sweet brow is sorrow plough'd by shame,/And annals graved in characters of flame'.

<sup>6</sup> Not coincidentally, a book about the American student Amanda Knox and her trials alongside her Italian ex-boyfriend for the murder of the British student Meredith Kercher in Perugia is entitled *The Fatal Gift of Beauty* (Burleigh 2012). The famous case as it was portrayed in (at least) the British media seemed to have many of the same ingredients as stereotypical images of Italy: its corrupt and slow justice system was often commented on, as was the alleged underlying sexuality of the murder, said to be the result of a sex game gone wrong.

discussion: 'Italy is not a single entity but rather a country of two opposing sides' (2013a: 232). All of this comes briefly before the D'Azeglio prostitute metaphor. In the postscript, binaries are reiterated as he tries to outline what he characterises as the sunny side of Italy (2013a: 256), resorting again to familiar tropes of the peninsula, as he describes the friendliness of Italians and the relaxed pace of life they lead in contrast to Britain.

Whilst these are opinions that Jones is free to express, they are not framed in terms of a subjective account of his personal experience, and the book is not marketed as such – as seen by the above quotation on the book's cover about it being an essential item for travellers to Italy. In addition, although Jones worked as a journalist before and during the period depicted in *The Dark Heart of Italy*, the book's success undoubtedly led to his becoming a regular contributor to 'highbrow' broadsheet newspapers. He has commented on Italian politics for the *Guardian*, for example in pieces about Beppe Grillo (2012a), Mario Monti (2012b) and, of course, Silvio Berlusconi (2011b), whilst not shying away from reporting on more lurid topics such as Italian murder stories too (2011a, 2015a, 2016); he has also contributed to the *Financial Times*, writing about Italian television (2003a), and to the *Daily Telegraph*, writing about Berlusconi's ability to escape prosecution in Italian courts (2009b). These pieces are generally in the same vein as *The Dark Heart of Italy*, relying at times on unsubstantiated, anecdotal claims and containing similar stereotypes, and it is no coincidence that he has also contributed to the tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mail*, for instance discussing Berlusconi's infidelities to his now ex-wife Veronica Lario (Jones 2009a).<sup>7</sup> Whilst the tone of these pieces does not suggest neutrality – a prime example being a *Guardian* piece entitled, again in overstated style, 'Why is Italy still so racist?' (2013b) – his various contributions to these newspapers imply that he is seen by some as a mouthpiece for communicating Italian issues to a broadsheet readership that might expect accurate and informed reporting.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps most surprising in the case of the *Guardian*, which positions itself, and is generally seen as, a liberal and left-wing newspaper that (at least in theory) would be opposed to journalism that resorts to, and perpetuates, national stereotypes.

### ***The Italians* by John Hooper**

Jones also reviewed Hooper's 2015 text, *The Italians*, for the *Sunday Times* (2015b), once again suggesting a circular relationship, or an intertwining between these writers and a broadsheet readership that seems to be self-perpetuating, as Jones is seen as having the authority to assess the quality of another British text on Italy. However, Jones's review of Hooper's book is by no means positive. The criticisms that Jones levels at *The Italians* are on the whole justified, although they could equally be made of *The Dark Heart of Italy*. After commenting that writing on Italy 'is already a crowded field', Jones states that Hooper has not found new things to say: 'The territory he covers is painfully predictable: Italians' obsession with their beauty, their troubled attitude to the law, their attachment to family and *mamma*, their love of football, the existence of the mafia and so on. It is all incredibly familiar; not necessarily wrong or inaccurate, just very derivative' (2015b). This might also

<sup>7</sup> For example, when discussing Monti's tough approach to Italy's economy in contrast to that of Berlusconi, he makes an unsupported statement: 'That's perhaps why Monti seems so un-Italian to his countrymen. They say that his humour – calm but cutting – makes him appear very English' (2012b). In a piece about racism in Italy, he states that 'perhaps the most interesting explanation for racism comes from an Italian mate of mine who's an armchair anthropologist. He maintains that in a country that is famously lawless, in which rules are often wilfully ignored, everyone is oddly very conformist in other ways' (2013b). It is worth pointing out that these two articles for the *Guardian* did not appear in the print version of the newspaper but only on its website, where less measured and less rigorously researched comment pieces could be seen as so-called 'clickbait' to provoke readers and increase traffic to the site.

<sup>8</sup> See Filmer's astute analysis of this in her article in this special issue.

seem 'incredibly familiar' after reading *The Dark Heart of Italy*. After drawing attention to some of Hooper's inaccuracies in the text,<sup>9</sup> Jones remarks:

He doesn't seem to have any brush that isn't broad [...] To be fair, we have all fallen into the trap of trying to make amusing generalisations about Italians, not realising that a good parlour game doesn't make for a good book. But when I wrote my first book about Italy, an impassioned polemic, I was in my twenties. I filed it under juvenilia long ago. Hooper is very different: in his sixties, he is rightly considered one of the finest foreign correspondents of his generation. (2015b)

Certainly, as he was Italy correspondent for *The Economist* and Southern Europe editor for the *Guardian* at the time of publishing *The Italians*, we might have high expectations as to the quality of Hooper's book that are not met on reading it, but Jones's assertion about the difference between it and his own work simply does not hold up. Even if he has 'filed it under juvenilia long ago', the second and third editions *The Dark Heart of Italy*, with their unchanged 'amusing generalisations', continue to be present in the crowded field of British writing on Italy, and Jones carries on using his own broad brush to paint Italy in newspaper articles as part of a journalistic career that is (at least partly) built on that book.

It could be argued, however, that what is concerning about Hooper's text is that it is framed as a more objective and more deeply researched study than the work of Jones, not only due to the status of its author but also because of the presence of extensive footnotes and an opening section that includes three detailed maps of the peninsula at different points in the past. This precedes a first chapter on Italy's history, again suggesting a work that is more academic study than travel writing. However, the front cover of the British edition rings alarm bells, relying as it does on a series of clichéd photographs spliced together, which features a glamorous female police officer on the phone, a dapper man in a suit with coiffed hair, what seems to be a group of *mafiosi*, a couple on the brink of a kiss, and a Virgin Mary painting.<sup>10</sup> This cover recalls a montage of images on a postcard, which Hom has likened to a 'travel glance': '[T]he montage postcard incarnates the same sort of visual overload that is experienced when one travels through landscape at high speed [... it is] an imaginary support for the fragmented and ephemeral perception of the tourist as subject' (2015: 77). Whilst we may expect to encounter more informed and critical analysis in *The Italians* than in Jones's text, which is not framed as historical and is given a clearly emotive title, the blur created by the fragmented series of images on the front cover of Hooper's book gives an indication of similar shortcomings. Indeed, as well as errors and contradictions, Hooper often resorts to anecdotal evidence, introduced by phrases such as 'I know from personal experience' (2015: 31), 'A foreign vet I knew said' (88), or 'I remember a magazine photo caption' (179).<sup>11</sup> In the book's acknowledgements, he tells us that it is 'built on a myriad of observations and impressions, rather as limestone is formed

<sup>9</sup> Jones points out that Hooper's observation that nobody has compared Italy and Japan is not true, as Richard J. Samuels has examined the two countries at length in his 2003 book *Macchiavelli's Children*.

<sup>10</sup> The US edition, on the other hand, is more measured and only shows an espresso coffee on the front cover.

<sup>11</sup> For example, he states that Italians 'embraced and endorsed' the abrupt change to a fascist regime under Mussolini (2015: 105), whereas recent scholarship continues to debate the extent of popular consent. Compare, for example, Paul Corner's *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* (2012) with Christopher Duggan's *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (2012). In terms of contradicting himself, when discussing the idea of the *vincolo esterno*, that is, taking into account non-Italian considerations when framing policy, Hooper gives the example of the Italian Communist party (PCI) obeying 'the latest doctrine adopted by the Kremlin' (30). Yet, only a few pages later, he mentions the PCI's leader, Togliatti, being 'the first of the Western communist leaders to distance himself from Moscow' after Khrushchev denounced Stalin in 1956 (38).

out of an infinitesimal number of tiny shells' (2015: xv). This suggests his awareness of the different types of writing that went into the construction of the text, which is clearly not an academic study, yet his comparison with limestone also implies that the result of this subjective amalgamation of ideas is a solid rock, rather than a more ephemeral travel glance.

Hooper assigns himself the role of translator, commenting extensively on Italian vocabulary and its translation, as does Jones, which is interesting in the light of Polezzi's observation that '[I]ike translation, travel writing is constantly tempted to embrace the myth of faithfulness' (2001: 208). Hooper and Jones cover remarkably similar ground, such as the words *bello* and *dietrologia*, and these reflections on lexis are then related to similar points about the country, such as Italy's endless bureaucracy, its corruption and the importance of appearances.<sup>12</sup> However, there are some modulations in these writers' translation choices that call attention to the contingency of their texts. Whilst Jones only chooses the more negative translations of *furbo*, as 'cunning' or 'sly' (2013a: 17), before going on to talk about Machiavelli and corruption, Hooper notes that *furbo* 'covers a range of meanings that in English go from "smart" to "cunning" and from "crafty" to "sly"' (2015: 33). When translating the word *menefreghismo*, Jones opts for "'I don't carism'" (2013a: 17), whereas Hooper chooses a more negative translation: 'not caring a damn about other people' (2015: 86). The large number of words that are left in their original Italian (as we see even more frequently in Parks's *An Italian Education*) also have a foreignising effect on the texts.<sup>13</sup> As Cronin states of this common feature of travel writing, 'the words operate as signs of the untranslatable but in a *space of translation* [...] foreign words remain as witting or unwitting reminders of how fraught the process of translation is in the first place. Lexical exoticism is a palpable written trace of the foreign for the reader' (2000: 41, emphasis in original). These words remind us that these books in themselves are 'translations' of another culture, and their authors keep distinct or foreign elements within them in order to illustrate, and arguably reinforce, perceived cultural contrasts. Cronin's fraught process of translation is demonstrated both by Jones's 'dodgy translations' (2013a: 254) and by the differences in translation between these texts, highlighting the slippery and subjective nature of the knowledge of both a language and of a national culture.<sup>14</sup>

Although he does not openly set out to examine the 'dark side' of Italy as Jones does, and tends to be more measured in his observations, Hooper too has a tendency to 'read' Italy

<sup>12</sup> Jones moves on from his discussion of corruption to note: 'Linguistically, as in so much else, the country is based upon aesthetics rather than ethics. The judgement words most used are not good or bad, but rather beautiful (*bello*) or ugly (*brutto*). [...] Thus immorality is less frowned upon than inelegance' (2013a: 18). Hooper discusses translations of *bello* in very similar terms: 'In Britain and the US, beauty is thought of as something almost entirely separate from virtue. But in Italy the two concepts overlap. *Bello* (*bella* in the feminine) translates as "beautiful", "pretty" or "handsome". But it also means nice, fine – and good' (2015: 83). Although he states in a footnote that '[t]his point can be overstressed' (2015: 83), he includes his observations about the word *bello* in a similar discussion to Jones about the importance of appearances in Italy. In terms of *dietrologia*, Jones explains that it 'means literally "behindology", or the attempt to trump even the most fanciful and contorted conspiracy theory [...] It's an indispensable sport for a society in which appearance very rarely begets reality' (2013a: 24). He then quotes Stendhal's observation in *The Charterhouse of Parma* on the active imaginations of Italians, which is another example of linking back to a centuries-old vision of Italy from another northern European counterpart, before discussing various mysteries from Italy's recent past. Hooper gives his discussion of *dietrologia* a more obvious moral slant, before reaching a similar conclusion to Jones about the deception of appearances in Italy: 'The essence of *dietrologia* is that it dismisses the notion that anyone could act purely for reasons of moral conviction. But then it Italy what you get is seldom what you see – or hear' (2015: 68).

<sup>13</sup> Parks says in the author's note of *An Italian Education*: 'My editor is concerned that I may have used too many Italian words in this book', but then he argues that these words are not easily translatable (1996).

<sup>14</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the role of translation in understanding recent Italian politics and culture in the context of British journalism, see Filmer 2015.

in a negative way. For example: 'Imprecision is, on the whole, highly prized. Definition and categorisation are, by contrast, suspect' (39). This imprecision could be seen positively as flexibility, but Hooper includes it in order to critique Italy's legal system and media. This disapproval of what he sees as an Italian rejection of objective truth in favour of various, and possibly contradicting, truths rings hollow when we consider the kind of 'truth' that he is putting forward in this book – the kind of rigid definitions and categorisations that such travel writing unself-critically resorts to. There is also a lack of reflection on Britain in comparison to Italy, as when Hooper expresses his amazement that the Italian press scrutinise the dress sense of politicians, including foreign politicians and their wives, claiming that such scrutiny in 'any British paper' is 'inconceivable' (72). He seems to be unaware that this is also present in the British press, and not only in the tabloids: His own newspaper, the *Guardian*, comments not only on the fashion sense of British politicians (Fox 2014) and their wives (Chilvers 2010) but also on that of the wives of foreign politicians, such as Michelle Obama (Holpuch and Yuhás 2015) and Sheikha Moza (Chilvers 2011), showing that looks, and particularly women's looks, are seen to be important in places outside of Italy as well.

Furthermore, Hooper lacks awareness of his privileged position as a well-paid, well-respected, British journalist. In one anecdote about his neighbourhood in Rome, he tells us: 'The count and countess who lived in the flat next door had a Sri Lankan manservant' (2015: 275). As Jones states in his review: 'The tone of the book is measured and genteel, urbane and well-connected. We're told about dinner-party conversations and reactions to Hooper's pink tie and what happens when his assistant makes some phone calls on his behalf. Gradually you get the impression that this isn't someone who goes off the beaten track and gets his hands dirty' (2015b). Whilst this last sentence seems to tap into a travel writing tradition – or fallacy – of being able to find an 'authentic' side to a country by going beyond the tourist's experience and then communicating this discovered 'truth' to readers, it is fair to say that Hooper undoubtedly has a certain status and an approach to Italy that affects the nature of the observations that constitute his text.

*The Italians* often toes a similar line to Hooper's employers *The Economist* and also to its former editor, Bill Emmott, whom is thanked by Hooper in the acknowledgements (2015: xv), then mentioned again later when Hooper refers to an article by Emmott on the myths circulating in Italy about the economy (48). *The Economist*, in recent years, has particularly focused on criticising Berlusconi, with front covers picturing the Italian prime minister and proclaiming: 'Why Silvio Berlusconi is unfit to lead Italy' (26 April 2001), 'Basta: Time for Italy to sack Berlusconi' (6 April 2006) and 'The man who screwed an entire country' (9 June 2011), as well as dubbing Italy 'the real sick man of Europe' (19 May 2005). The title of Emmott's text *Good Italy, Bad Italy: Why Italy Must Conquer Its Demons to Face the Future* (2012), which attempts to trace Italy's economic decline and to suggest a way forward, recalls the simplified dichotomy of Jones's dark and sunny sides of Italy. Emmott has also made a documentary based on this book with Annalisa Piras, entitled *Girlfriend in a Coma*, which evokes once again the feminised Italy of the Romantics (see Bassi in this special issue). In *The Dark Heart of Italy*, Jones too refers to *The Economist* in relation to the 2001 elections when he quotes from the leader in the issue, 'Why Silvio Berlusconi is unfit to lead Italy' (Jones 2013a: 180):

In any self-respecting democracy it would be unthinkable that the man assumed to be on the verge of being elected prime minister would recently have come under investigation for, among other things, money-laundering, complicity in murder,

connections with the Mafia, tax evasion and the bribing of politicians, judges and the tax police. But the country is Italy and the man is Silvio Berlusconi.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from the superiority of tone in the opening words of this quotation, from Jones's reference to *The Economist*, combined with Hooper's references to Emmott and his professional connections to that same weekly, there is also a sense that there was a nucleus of British opinion being formed around its approach to Italy as the 'sick man of Europe' during the years of Berlusconi's government. Those holding and promoting this opinion may have been justified in their critique of Berlusconi's behaviour and media control, but this sense of a shared agenda designed to shape British opinion whilst simultaneously employing age-old clichés that suggest British superiority over her southern European counterpart creates a feeling of discomfort too.

### ***Italian Neighbours and An Italian Education* by Tim Parks**

Jones reviewed Hooper's text and, in turn, Hooper recommended Parks's work in a top-ten list of books about Italy for the *Guardian* (2015b). This list was most probably part of the publicity for Hooper's *The Italians*, which had just been published at the time. Hooper ranked Parks's *An Italian Education* at number two, stating that it 'does more than any other book I know to explain how Italians become Italians' (2015b); and he is not the only British broadsheet journalist to promote Parks's work, as shown by its appearance on a list of holiday reading in the *Daily Telegraph* the previous year (Kerr 2014).<sup>16</sup> Aside from his novels, essays and journalism, Parks has written a series of 'non-fiction' books about his experience of living in Italy. Here I shall focus particularly on Parks's *Italian Neighbours: An Englishman in Verona* (1992), about his first years living in the village of Montecchio near Verona, and *An Italian Education* (1996), about bringing up his children there, as these are probably his most widely read and well-known Italian texts.<sup>17</sup> His other 'non-fiction' texts on Italy, despite sometimes including elements of travel writing, focus on specific interests – translation, football, the Italian train system, literature – rather than being more general travelogues.<sup>18</sup>

Parks's texts are different in tone from both Jones's and Hooper's, as they do not purport to engage in political or historical analysis of Italy but are focused on his experience of living and raising a family in the country. They are written from the point of view of a 'permanent visitor', and do not use footnotes, quote from reference works or give much attention to the political situation. These texts encapsulate what Nathan Heller, in a review in the *New Yorker* of Michael Booth's 2014 text *The Almost Nearly Perfect People: Behind the Myth of the Scandinavian Utopia*, has termed Euro-exotical:

<sup>15</sup> See the leader: 'Fit to run Italy?', *The Economist* (26 April 2006), <http://www.economist.com/node/593654> (accessed 01.03.17). Jones changes the last sentence to 'But this country is Italy' and stops the quotation there.

<sup>16</sup> This list was updated in 2016 with the addition of more recent texts, including Parks's *Italian Ways* and also Hooper's *The Italians* (Kerr 2016).

<sup>17</sup> In addition to being translated into Italian, *Italian Neighbours* has been translated into Dutch, German, Japanese and Korean (Fenwick 2003: 59), and *An Italian Education* has been translated into Dutch, German and Korean (Fenwick 2003: 67). For a fascinating analysis of how *Italian Neighbours* was translated into Italian, see Maher (2012), and for commentary on the translation of *An Italian Education*, see Fenwick (2003: 66).

<sup>18</sup> Parks has written an academic study about his translation work from Italian into English, entitled *Translating Style* (1998), and a book about his local Italian football team, *A Season with Verona* (2002). More recently, he published *Italian Ways: On and Off the Rails from Milan to Palermo* (2013) about his experiences of the Italian train system and *A Literary Tour of Italy* (2015), a collection of essays on Italian literature.

Booth's project is essentially observational; it aspires to a comic genre that might be called Euro-exotica. The form was well established by the time Twain published *The Innocents Abroad*, in 1869, and it has been carried through the twentieth century by writers as varied as S. J. Perelman and Peter Mayle. It usually involves a witty, stumbling narrator simultaneously charmed and bemused by the foreign nation he encounters. [...] Euro-exotica is generally poured in a confectionery mold, light and tart, but its core is an assertion of the narrator's cultural power. Change the balance of the recipe slightly – make it, say, about the bumbling adventures of a Guatemalan farmer in Florence – and the cookie hardens. Can you *believe* how these people do things? the Euro-exoticist asks, with the courage of his own convictions. In this sense, Booth's book is as much about Anglo-American power as it is about the Nordic way. (Heller 2015)

Certainly, Heller's observations can be detected in the travelogues by Parks. In an author's note at the beginning of *Italian Neighbours*, Parks states that the book is 'a gesture, a mood, a posture', written by 'a busy but inexpert fellow' running round with a net, trying, with difficulty, to catch 'Will-o'-the-wisps' like 'national character, a sense of place, the feeling people, place and weather generate [...] obviously this is not a man you'll be able to trust on such imponderables as documentary authenticity' (1994). Parks's 'busy but inexpert fellow' (1994), like Heller's description above of 'a witty, stumbling narrator' (2015), taps into a travel writing tradition of what Holland and Huggan call the 'gentleman traveller', who does not take himself or life too seriously, a characterisation of the author that 'provides a useful alibi for their cultural gaffes and, at times, their arrogance' (2000: 6). Indeed, Parks's short author's note seems to be designed to guard against any objections to the subsequent account, whilst also casting his often critical observations in a benign light. Interestingly, the preface to the Italian edition of *Italian Neighbours* is more apologetic in tone, as Parks seems to be retroactively concerned about offending his Italian readership.<sup>19</sup>

In his later text, *An Italian Education*, Parks's concerns about giving offence are also present near the beginning of the narrative, when he describes his reasons for writing another book about Italy despite the market being crowded: 'The truth is I have always been suspicious of travel writing, of attempts to establish that elusive element which might or might not be national character, to say in sweeping and general terms, this place is like this, that place is like that' (1996: 18). There is an awareness of the pitfalls of such writing, even if he does not avoid these pitfalls. Indeed, in the same passage, he goes on to assert that 'a substrate of national character does exist' (19), and that he believes that he circumvents falling into cliché or reiterating what people already know by focusing on the people and places that he knows: 'my neighbours, my street, my village' (19). Yet, this sense of his work being based on a small, local experience of the country is contradicted by the universality of the titles of his texts. Whilst he does focus on a small area in the more affluent, northern Veneto region, these books claim to be telling us about what it is to be Italian,<sup>20</sup> and, throughout, Parks tends to extrapolate wider points about Italy versus Britain from his local experience.

As in the texts by Jones and Hooper, Parks's observations about national character reassert age-old power dynamics between Italy and Britain. Whilst Parks claims that Italy

<sup>19</sup> For example, Parks asks his Italian readers to be generous enough forgive what he calls 'punzecchiatura' or teasing (2004: 2), which is similar to Jones's comments in the preface to the Italian edition of *The Dark Heart of Italy* (see note 3).

<sup>20</sup> Even the subtitle of *Italian Neighbours: An Englishman in Verona*, whilst it seems to narrow the text down to a more specific geographical location, is misleading, given that Parks writes about his street and neighbours in Montecchio. Perhaps the editors could not resist the Shakespearean connotations of this subtitle.

is his home at the end of *Italian Neighbours* – ‘rather than a travel book, perhaps if there were such a category in the libraries, I should call this an arrival book. For by the end, this small square handkerchief of Italy I live in has become home for me’ (328) – and elsewhere insists that he finds Italian culture preferable to that of Britain, we can certainly detect a sense of superiority, often expressed through Luzzi’s cultural lexicon, mentioned earlier.<sup>21</sup> Parks repeatedly refers to Italy’s ‘peasant culture’ (1994: 63, 70, 72, 185), or its ‘peasant past’ (1996: 31), or ‘peasant, Catholic, superstitious Italy’ (1996: 71), or ‘today’s anal post-peasant Italy’ (1996: 389), not to mention his Italian mother-in-law’s ‘obsessive peasant parsimony’ (1996: 142). This ‘peasant culture’ is just one aspect of Italy’s backwardness as it is portrayed by Parks: elsewhere, for example, he describes what he sees as Italy’s lateness in discovering concepts such as gender equality, gay rights and recycling, which he condescendingly notes that Italians then practice ‘with the eagerness of the neophyte’ (1996: 66–7). In *An Italian Education*, Parks brings into relief his own Protestant childhood in England as the son of an evangelical vicar with his children’s upbringing in Italy, calling on familiar dichotomies: The comfort and sensual heat of an Italian summer are compared to character-building English summers spent braving the elements (1996: 3–4); Parks describes parenting in Italy as mainly left to mothers in the chapter ‘Mamma’ (222–33), whilst describing himself as ‘making the protestant effort to get involved and be a good father’ (12); we see ‘the old world of Latin sentiment and immeasurable affection’ towards new-born children in Italy (78) in contrast to strict British parenting which enforces bedtimes (85); he observes the positive connotations of Italian children being admiringly told they are a *spettacolo*, whilst Parks’s own mother ‘always used to say: “Tim, for heaven’s sake, don’t make a spectacle of yourself!”’ (97). Whilst Parks often employs these contrasts in an attempt to emphasise the advantages to a childhood in Italy, as opposed to one in Britain, they contain underlying ideas about Protestant efficiency and abiding by the rules versus Catholic passion and laxness that strongly recall the visions of British travellers to Italy years before.

As stated above, politics tends to lie on the peripheries of Parks’s narratives, only referenced in brief remarks, as in the brief allusion to the *Tangentopoli* scandals of the early 1990s in *An Italian Education* (1996: 240), which are not fully explained. In the same text, we can see, in Heller’s terms, Parks’s cookie hardening when he shows awareness of, but little interest in, the concurrent Yugoslavian conflict that is happening on his doorstep. He speaks of ‘Gianluca’s Serbian babysitter, who arrived to escape the war’ (129), then a man called Hristo camps out in the basement of their apartment building, which annoys the adult residents but fascinates their children: ‘The Yugoslavia they had vaguely seen on the TV had come to our basement’ (211). Gianluca’s babysitter and Hristo – as well as the allusion to the *marocchini* selling carpets door-to-door in *Italian Neighbours*, who are rumoured to be sleeping rough in the cemetery (1994: 225), or the Chinese man that Parks comes across in *Italian Ways*, who must have been thrown out of a truck after being smuggled into the country (2013: 37) – highlight the other side of the coin to the mobility of a middle-class travel writer such as Parks. Whilst Parks can comfortably escape to Italy ‘to underachieve in peace’, as he states on his website, these figures on the edges of his narratives remind us of another type of travel that is not chosen, that may be dangerous and desperate.<sup>22</sup> Parks does not reflect on his own subjectivity, on who travels and why and how.

<sup>21</sup> In *Italian Neighbours*, for example, he states that the only area of domestic civilisation where the British win over the Italians is gardening (64), and he expresses surprise that Italians see Britain to be a fairer, more open-minded and efficient nation (87), although it could easily be argued that this is his underlying belief too, as seen in his various discussions of inefficiency in Italy throughout his travelogues.

<sup>22</sup> See <http://tim-parks.com/non-fiction/italian-neighbours/> (accessed 01.03.17).

Whilst Parks says in *An Italian Education* that he aims 'never to stray into the territory of the journalist' (1996: 19), he occupies that territory outside of these texts, like Jones and Hooper. In common with Jones, Parks's travel writing must have contributed in no small way to his career as a broadsheet journalist commentating on Italy. He has written on Berlusconi and Italian politics for the *Daily Telegraph* – 'Are the bunga bunga nights nearly over?' (2011a), 'Time to say *ciao* to Silvio Berlusconi' (2011b) – and the *Guardian* – 'European politics are impotent, moribund and in need of life support' (2012) – as well as writing for the *New York Times* (2013b). Moreover, whilst Jones may have caused controversy with *The Dark Heart of Italy*, and negatively reviewed Hooper's *The Italians*, Parks's work tends to be met with positive reviews in the British and American press.<sup>23</sup> Fenwick describes Parks as 'a man of letters' in the vein of George Orwell or Thomas Carlyle, 'Anachronistic though it may be' (2003: 1), which gives a sense of the authority and respect that he has been afforded by some, problematic though it may be in the light of his unself-reflexive travel writing on Italy.

Parks, Hooper and Jones all fail to flag up or problematise their specific and privileged positioning as British middle-class men, writing for, and talking to, a largely middle-class audience. They do not bring to the fore their subjective, partial, even exoticising gaze, instead often perpetuating the Romantic myth of Italy and other, negative visions of the peninsula, their accounts supposedly authenticated by lived experience. Whilst there are hints and extra-textual comments that allude to the limited ontological value of these accounts of Italy, these remain peripheral and underemphasised. Travel writing, as I stated in the introduction to this chapter, has traditionally been seen as a genre that corresponds with reality, and this truth status is underlined in the cases of the writers I have discussed here by their work as broadsheet journalists, conveyors of supposedly accurate information to help readers decipher reality. Lisle argues that 'a travelogue can be judged as "good" to the extent that it acknowledges, addresses and engages with its ethical and political responsibility to the other' (2006: 265). Responsibility in these writers seems to be lacking, as they put themselves forward to 'read' Italy for their middle-class audience, whose opinions of the country are both reflected in, and shaped by, these texts, which in turn also reinforce one another.

How influential can a travel writer really be in terms of international politics? Campbell describes the way in which travel writing on Bosnia (that place on the edges of Parks's consciousness in *An Italian Education*) influenced American policy in the early 1990s: 'Rebecca West's pre-World War II *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* influenced in both style and substance Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*, which in turn was read by President Clinton and others at a critical juncture in 1993 and helped make possible – because of the story of ancient and violent animosities it told – the American reluctance to take action' (1999: 321).<sup>24</sup> This example helps to illustrate that, as Campbell puts it, 'the narrativisation of events into stories with moral purposes partake in the constitution of realities that have political effects, even as those narratives claim the status of dispassionate and descriptive observer' (1999: 321). The political effects of their narratives are intensified in the cases of Jones, Parks and Hooper, who are not only travel writers but also journalists who regularly contribute to

<sup>23</sup> His recent text, *Italian Ways*, despite containing many of the same shortcomings as the books I have focused on here, received positive reviews from the *Guardian* (Lezard 2014), *Observer* (Martin 2013) and the *Daily Telegraph* (Wright 2013), as well as the *New Yorker* (Lee 2013). Lezard in the *Guardian* suggests that Tim Parks might be the new Paul Theroux, 'a new laureate of international railways' (2014), which is perhaps appropriate, given that recent scholarship has reassessed Theroux's work as continuing a colonial tradition of superiority (Lisle 2006: 7).

<sup>24</sup> I borrowed this example from Lisle (2006: 33).

broadsheet newspapers to comment on political events in Italy. By perpetuating stereotypes, lacking self-reflexivity and inhabiting positions of authority on the cultural scene, these three British writers are entering into a dangerous game, possibly affecting the ways in which politics plays out, or has already played out, on an international stage.

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