

Leonardo Buonomo

HENRY P. LELAND'S *AMERICANS IN ROME* (1863):
THE "POPULAR" FACE OF THE ETERNAL CITY
ACCORDING TO THE AMERICAN
"ARTIST/ETHNOGRAPHER"

In Chapter II of Henry P. Leland's novel *Americans in Rome* (1863)¹, the painters Rocjan and Caper, decide to play a joke on the latter's uncle, Mr William Brown of St Louis, who has recently arrived in Europe. They tell him that they will accompany him to a grand ball given by the Prince Nicolo (sic) di Giacinti, a ball that will be attended by the best Roman nobility. Once there, Mr Brown is pleasantly surprised by the enormous affability and good-naturedness of the illustrious guests. Apparently, they enjoy nothing more than drinking large quantities of red wine and dancing energetically in brightly-colored costumes. As it turns out, the men and women introduced to Mr Brown as Princes, Princesses, Marquises, and Countesses are not the real thing. As Caper reveals to his uncle the morning after the party, the people with whom they drank and danced were actually models: members of the lower classes who, for a fee, turn themselves into aristocrats, gladiators, shepherds, or whatever is required by the artist who hires them.

For the Italian reader of *Americans in Rome* (doubtlessly not the author's intended interlocutor), it is as if that ball did not end with the close of the chapter. What is meant by Leland (1828-68) as a truthful portrayal of Italian manners, is likely to strike us for its unnatural quality. The scenes of Roman life described in the book give often the impression of being inhabited by masks, by performers, rather than by ordinary individuals. And it may be hard to reconcile such theatrical effect with the terms in which Leland describes his work in the preface to the novel, with its being "almost to the minutest details true in spirit", because the fruit of "observation" (p. 4)².

¹ The book was originally serialized in the *Continental Monthly* in 1862-63 as *Macaroni and Canvas*.

² All quotations are from the 1863 Charles T. Evans edition (New York) of *Americans in Rome*.

The difference between intentions and results, however, appears less marked if one focuses on Leland's specific definition of his field of investigation. The Philadelphia-born author informs us in fact, in the same preface, that during his stay in Rome and her surroundings (between the Falls of 1857 and 1858) he noted down "carefully many curious characteristics of popular life and humor" (p. 4). The word "curious" defines the author's gaze as selective. We may assume that in portraying Rome's popular life, he illuminated peculiarity and quaintness rather than ordinariness. Interestingly enough, the characters chosen as representative of that life are not only "natives", but also "strangers who adapted themselves to native customs" (p. 4). The gallery of grotesques (for such are most of Leland's creations) one encounters in *Americans in Rome* is indeed made as much of Italians as of citizens of several European countries, and of course, the United States. But Leland's reference to a phenomenon of adaptation to local customs is slightly misleading. It may appear to suggest that the peculiarity of certain characters is the result of their Roman sojourn (they have "absorbed" the otherness of Rome). Quite to the contrary, national traits in *Americans in Rome* are seen as intensified and brought into bold relief by the atmosphere of the city.

With its insistence on seriousness of method and instructive purpose, the author's preface to *Americans in Rome* "hardly prepares" for the "irreverent" book that follows¹. Anticipating Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad*² (1869), Leland's novel subverts in fact some of the most solid conventions of travel books on Italy. To be explored in the novel is not, for a change, the significance of an artistic pilgrimage, but rather the satiric potential of a foreigner's immersion into Italian life. In the very first chapter we discover, for instance, that although James Caper, the protagonist and fictional alter-ego of the author, is an artist³, art is by no means his chief concern in Rome.

My mission in this great city is not that of a picture peddler or art student. I come to investigate the eating, drinking, sleeping arrangements of the Eternal City – its wine more than its vinegar, its pretty girls more than its galleries, its cafes more than its churches (pp. 12-13).

¹ WILLIAM VANCE, *America's Rome* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), vol. 2, p. 147.

² MARK TWAIN, *The Innocents Abroad* (New York: Viking Press, 1984).

³ While in Rome Henry P. Leland studied art at the British Academy but he did not become a professional artist.

The same is also true of Caper's closest friend and colleague Rocjan (an "Americanized" Frenchman, who has lived in Boston for several years), as well as, in general, of the whole artistic community of Rome. Doubtless, we are very far from the traditional figure of the artist visiting Italy in search of inspiration, of direct contact with the works of the masters. As in Chapter XV ("An Aesthetic Company") of *The Marble Faun* (1860)⁶, the target of the author's satire in *Americans in Rome* is the romantic aura of spirituality and purity that is part of that characterization. If Hawthorne subtly undermines that image commenting on the banal human weaknesses of painters and sculptors (petty jealousies and rivalries in glaring contrast to their "noble" vocation), Leland destroys it altogether by showing his characters as chiefly absorbed by the most prosaic aspects of life.

Even the very meaning and function of traditional forms of art are called into question in the novel. The author has Rocjan theorize, at some point, on the superiority of useful, practical objects over what is represented on canvas or in marble. The way Rocjan phrases his argument, stressing the relation between form and function, echoes the mid-nineteenth-century debate over the organic principle in art. In particular, we are reminded of Horatio Greenough's views on "functional beauty", of his conviction that those objects are beautiful whose structure is the result of an adaptation to the needs of ordinary life⁷.

Art applied solely to sculpture and painting, is dead; it will not rise again in these our times. But art, the fairy-fingered beautifier of all that surrounds our homes and daily walks, save paintings and statuary, never breathed so fully, clearly, nobly, as now; ... The rough-handed artisan, who, slowly dreaming of the beautiful, at last turns out a stove that will beautify and adorn a room, instead of rendering it hideous, has done for this practical generation what he of an earlier theoretical age did for his contemporaries, when he carved the imperial Venus of Milos (p. 40).

To claim the status of art for the production of household equipments is also, of course, a way to ennoble a field in which America is felt to be in the forefront, to have the advantage over Europe. The fact that this expression of faith in the possibilities of modernity (and of its symbol: the United States) is pronounced by Rocjan, is hardly casual. As is mostly the case throughout the novel, it is the

⁶ NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, *The Marble Faun* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1968).

⁷ For an analysis of Greenough's theories, see F.O. MATTHIESSEN, *American Renaissance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 140-52.

European who has for a long time experienced America (and who is then best qualified to compare the two ways of life) who more or less explicitly suggests that the future belongs to the New World.

Through Rocjan's speeches the author is able to abandon at times the mode of comedy to introduce a series of reflections on his country. On such occasions the American reader is exhorted to consider the achievements of his nation in relation to the present and past history of Europe. The political predicament of Italy, in particular, is viewed as full of lessons for the citizens of a democracy born from a fierce struggle for independence. What is mainly emphasized is the privileged condition of America ("the only really blessed and happy nation in the world"), something of which her people do not seem sufficiently aware ("your educated men know less of the history of their own country, and feel less its sublime teachings, than any other race of men in the world" p. 52). As in Julia Ward Howe's poem "~~A Protest From Italy~~"⁸ (1854), one detects in Leland's novel a concern for the country's immaturity. And the references to the Civil War⁹ ("the sermon will be preached by the god of battles to the roar of cannons and the crack of rifles, and I hope you'll profit by it after you hear it" p. 53) indicate a view of this event as an almost welcomed rite of initiation, marking America's entrance into adulthood.

Like Margaret Fuller in her letters for *The New York Tribune*¹⁰ (1847-49), Leland on more than one occasion exhorts his readers to learn more about themselves; he differs, however, from Fuller, in equating America's self-knowledge with a recognition of greatness. Her remark that "The American in Europe, if a thinking mind, can only become more American"¹¹, assured her public that the study of foreign cultures did not involve a loss of identity and was meant as a critique of the arrogant self-satisfaction of some of her countrymen. Starting from the same premise, Leland gives his own alternative formula: "the advantages of foreign travel to an intelligent American are to teach him ... the disadvantages of living anywhere save in America" (p. 124).

⁸ In Julia Ward Howe, *Passion Flowers* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed and Field, 1854), pp. 40-45. See also my "Julia Ward Howe's 'Italian Poems' in *Passion Flowers* (1854)", *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, XXX, 1-2 (1991), pp. 27-35.

⁹ In 1863 Leland was seriously injured in the Civil War and died as a result five years later.

¹⁰ MARGARET FULLER, *At Home and Abroad* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1971). See also M. FULLER, *Un'americana a Roma*, ed. R. Mamoli Zorzi, Pordenone, Studio Tesi, 1987.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

It is a lesson which, the novel suggests, may be fully inferred through a careful study of the visual impact of things. A comparison between Italian and American urban landscapes is only apparently destined to be unfavorable to the latter. Undeniably, Leland observes, the "artistic eye" is better pleased by the "soothing colors of Italy..., the subdued white and gray tones of Roman ruins and palaces, walls and houses" than by the "fiery-red bricks" (p. 124) of American cities. But the evaluation of a landscape should not be based solely on aesthetical designations. What Leland indicates is an idea of the landscape as a system of signs, as a field in which it is possible to analyze "man, his activities, his entire cultural world"¹². The plainness and simplicity of American dwellings is then an expression of sincerity, honesty, and determination. Their aspect does not distract from the exercise of duty, from the demanding rhythm of daily toil. Rather, their brutal, offensive color "goads (the American) on, as it doth a bull, to make valorous efforts – to do something!" (p. 124).

In exercising his creativity, Leland's American artist privileges functionality and commercial sense over beauty. It is perfectly legitimate for him to think of his activity as a form of business, provided he is straightforward about it. On the side of the "good" are in fact Caper, Rocjan, and those of their colleagues who, with great satisfaction of the eminently practical and philistine Mr Browne, never mention the word art ("if I didn't know I was with artists in Rome ... I should think I was among a lot of smart merchants ... I feel at home with you" p. 113). What is condemned in *Americans in Rome* is instead the hypocrisy of those who hide that same commercial sense behind a facade of pretentiousness. Thus, the closest thing to a villain in the novel is the American sculptor Chapin, always citing the rules of art and, at the same time, searching for new ways to accelerate his production of statuary. William Vance has suggested that this character may have been modelled on the sculptors Hiram Powers and Randolph Rogers¹³.

They were splendid old fellows, them Greeks. There was art for you – high art! ... They worked for a precious few; but we do it for the many. Now, there's the Apollon Belvidiary – beautiful thing; but the idea of brushin' his hair that way is ridicoolus... They had a way among the Greeks of fixing their drapery right well; but I've invented a plan – for which I've applied to Washington for a patent – that I think will beat anything Phidias ever did" (p. 37).

¹² EUGENIO TURRI, *Antropologia del paesaggio* (Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1983), p. 74.

¹³ WILLIAM VANCE, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

The average American traveler in nineteenth-century Italy had but brief and insignificant contacts with the local population. In part for lack of interest, in part for the logistics of travel, his experience was mostly limited to the lower orders of society. In Leland's case, though, the association with those social strata was not accidental, but rather eagerly sought. They represented his chosen – and, one might add, his only – subject of study. His assertion in the preface to *Americans in Rome* that he had “constantly borne in mind the variety of elements in Roman society” (p. 4) is clearly contradicted by the text. What he does in the novel, is actually to portray only one section of that society, indicating it as representative of the local – and even the national – character. As a result, the contrast with American life proposed in the book is frequently unbalanced. A significant example is provided by a scene in Chapter IV, in which Caper, Rocjan, and their English friend Bagsweel, socialize with a group of country people at a Roman inn. Leland calls our attention to the three women who are part of the company and who are just as lively and fun-loving as the men.

Conversation then fell on the fair; and one of the Italians told several stories which were broad enough to have shoved the generality of English and American ladies out of the window of the room. But Angeluccia and the two wives of the stout gentlemen never winked; they had probably been to confession that morning, had cleared out their old sins, and were now ready to take in a new cargo (p. 81).

Having duly noticed the author's final comments on religion (a sort of milder, more tolerant version of Hawthorne's ideas on the “convenience” of Catholicism in *The Marble Faun*)¹⁴, it is well to focus on the transverse character of the comparison. For the manners of uneducated peasant women are not placed side by side with those of their American social equivalent. Implicitly, I believe, the reader is invited to identify the second term of comparison (English and American ladies) as representative of his own (supposedly) genteel, middle-class standards. Ignoring any kind of class consideration, Leland opts for a hasty, inaccurate translation of social terms.

Leland's identification of the Italian character with plebeian traits and manners is not to be viewed, however, as solely aimed at encouraging a condescending bias in his readers. For behind that choice there is also, in a sense, a desire to be anthropologically correct. The customs of the Roman lower classes are in fact indicated in the novel as the most authentic, the least affected by foreign

¹⁴ NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, *op. cit.*

influences. As Leland often points out, they may still be observed with the assurance of detecting their centuries-old origins. They are a living embodiment of the ancientness of Rome. The meaning of tradition is viewed in *Americans in Rome* as better preserved and more easily appreciable in the uses and mores of the people than in monuments and ruins. Antiquity loses then what Hildegard Eilert calls "its museum-like character" and becomes "sensually perceptible, recognizable in its original context and in its practical immediacy and dailiness"¹⁵.

A painstaking portrayal of Rome's popular life is not merely instructive and useful, but urgent as well. That life, Leland maintains, is destined in fact to undergo a profound transformation. Many of its "noticeable traits" will inevitably vanish and Rome, "no more the prolongation of the Middle Ages will be the capital of a nation earnestly striving with the present, and rapidly assuming its characteristics" (p. 5). Though not overtly, the author of *Americans in Rome* claims for his work a relevance that has little to do with its literary value. The suggestion is that, by recording in writing something which will soon disappear, he has rendered a valuable service to posterity. Leland's attitude here makes one think of what James Clifford has defined as "salvage, or redemptive ethnography". "The other", writes Clifford, "is lost in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text"¹⁶.

In *Americans in Rome* the author's concern for the "vanishing other" finds also expression in his ambivalent attitude toward Italy's future. Often in the book does Leland envision an independent and unified Italy. With fervor, he foretells the end of the political power of the Church and the transformation of the country into a modern and lay state. Such process is perceived by Leland as unfailingly accompanied by economic, social, and cultural progress, and yet not devoid of sinister consequences. Thus it happens that while the most obsolete aspects of Italian life are negatively emphasized or exploited for their farcical potential, the prospect of change is at times anticipated with anxiety. In Leland's portrayal of the little mountain town of Segni, the arrival of modernity (symbolized, not surprisingly, by the railroad) wipes away not only ignorance, inefficiency, and super-

¹⁵ HILDEGARD EILERT, "Wilhelm Müller, 'Professore di scienza plebea' in Italia", *Viaggi in Utopia ed altri luoghi*, ed. Maria Enrica d'Agostini (Milano: Guerini e Associati, 1989), p. 83. The English translation is mine.

¹⁶ JAMES CLIFFORD, "On Ethnographic Allegory", *Writing Culture*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 112.

stition, but cultural individuality as well. The town once conquered by Goths and Saracens faces new invasions which, though far less violent than those of old, are to Leland's eyes equally devastating.

On his way he passed a store having French calicoes in the window, and mourned in his heart to think how short a time it would be before these became popular, and the homemade picturesque dresses of the female Segnians would be discarded. The time, too, was fast coming – with the railroad from Rome to Naples – when travellers will overrun these mountain towns... Then the peace of the Volscians will have departed, never, oh! never more to return.

Then the women will wear bonnets! and cheap French goods; will no longer... bear aloft the graceful *conche* filled with sweet water from the fountain, for hydraulic rams will do their business (pp. 241-242).