

Introduction

Writing on Fascist Culture

The twenty years of Fascist rule in Italy were characterized by a series of violent and spectacular events. The 1920s witnessed the destruction of the democratic institutions of liberal Italy, the murder of Giacomo Matteotti (1924), the effective silencing of the opposition and the establishment of a dictatorship. In the mid-1920s, the regime orchestrated the collective struggle to increase the production of grain ('the Battle for Wheat') and to retain the value of the Italian currency ('the Battle for the Lira'). In the early 1930s Italy developed its interest in territorial expansion with new impetus and in October 1935 it launched its assault on the Ethiopia of Haile Selassie; the successful conclusion of the invasion was celebrated by Mussolini's night-time declaration of empire to throngs of ecstatic supporters. In the Spanish Civil War Italy was quick to send armed support for the Nationalists, though engagement in the conflict soon exposed costly deficiencies in the military's preparation and strategy. Rapprochement with Nazi Germany in the late 1930s led directly to the introduction of anti-Semitic legislation. The annexation of Albania and the ruinous invasion of Greece were to follow as Italy's opportunistic entry into the Second World War quickly began to prove disastrous. During the years of its existence, the regime attempted to control every aspect of the life of Italians: it dictated what was taught in schools and it extracted allegiance from those it employed; it placed definite limitations on movement and expression, while establishing powerful networks of surveillance. The state sought to control the media and guided representation both of itself and of happenings in the wider world.

The success of Fascism in extending the boundaries of the modern state was achieved not only through coercion but through its ability to encourage mass consensus by propagating a vision of society that large sections of the Italian public were prepared to appropriate and adapt. Much scholarship, over recent decades, has focused on the power of elements within the

evolving ideology of Fascism to promote a sense of mass belonging and purpose.¹ Roger Griffin has examined in detail the emergence and the strength of the conception of the nation that lay at the heart of Mussolini's philosophy, with its eclectic origins in the thought of pre-war avant-garde groupings, in radical syndicalism and in the rightist nationalism of figures like D'Annunzio and Corradini (Griffin 1993: 1–26, 56–85).² In the model that Griffin's work sets out, Fascism is seen as a political ideology based on the profoundly rooted belief that it alone offered the national community the promise of a radically reordered society. While proclaiming a vision of the future at odds with the alleged decadence of liberal democracy, it depended upon an idea of the nation as a higher spiritual entity. If the suffering and sacrifice of the First World War had enacted the beginning of the nation's rebirth, its 'palingenesis', then Fascism, a movement whose core was initially made up of veterans and interventionists, would ensure the nation's continual renewal through one struggle after another.³ Its ultra-nationalism was not elitist but popular since all strata of society were insistently led to believe that they were active participants in the colossal process of regeneration. For Griffin the power of Fascist ideology resided in its ability to use the myth of a resurgent nation as an agent of revolutionary transformation. Initially within the movement itself, and subsequently within the propaganda sponsored by the state, the notion of an ideal society served important mobilizing and anticipatory functions. By presenting his political doctrine as the path towards military might, empire, order and prosperity, Mussolini could allow his followers to enjoy the dream of a magnificent future, while enlisting their active support in the creation of that future. The myth of a new beginning for the Italian civilization could be enjoyed as a fantastic projection, while working as an impulse towards radical change.

Emilio Gentile's influential theorization of Fascism (1993) as a kind of secular religion has some affinities with Griffin's model though methodologically it relies more on cultural anthropology. The premise of *Il culto del littorio* is that modernity, understood as the increasing rationalization of every aspect of society dating roughly from the French Revolution, is characterized by the transference of the sacred from the domain of the established religions to that of politics.⁴ In other words, as faith in an afterlife and in the observance of the law of God declines, then political movements concerned with material reality begin to occupy the ground that has been left vacant. Gentile interprets Fascism as a hybrid belief system whose cult of the nation drew both on the post-Risorgimento liturgy of the state and on symbols and concepts appropriated from Christian worship.⁵ The principal squares of most towns and cities in Italy were, in the years between the wars, transformed into vehicles for the

celebration of both the nation and the regime through the succession of parades, memorial services and occasional apparitions of the Duce.⁶ But it was Piazza Venezia, at the very heart of Rome, that became the most sacred space within the developing cult of the Lictor and the fulcrum of the ceremonial calendar of the regime. From the balcony of his official residence, Mussolini proclaimed the successful completion of one stage after another in the acquisition of imperial power. Beneath liberal Italy's most grandiose monument, the imposing Altar to the Nation, the Fascist state celebrated its rise to power, its military prowess and its heroic dead.⁷ The carefully orchestrated rallies in Rome and elsewhere served, as Gentile documents, not only as the representation of the mystic communion between the nation and its inhabitants with the profession of collective affirmation of patriotic faith that such a communion implies. They were also the repeated occasion when the mass of the Italian population could be exposed to the core myths of Fascist ideology with their emphasis on a narrative of mourning and renewal, the importance of individual sacrifice and the unquestioned legitimacy of the state. In their fusion of the world as lived and the world as imagined, the rituals organized by the regime, from the celebration of the martyrs of Fascism to the anniversary of the March on Rome, were intended to confirm a belief in the fundamental value of collective action and belief. They articulated a vision of humanity and history that rendered the sentiments that they inspired the only reasonable way of reacting physically and psychologically to the problems of the contemporary world.⁸

If we accept Gentile's interpretation of Fascism as civic religion, then the movement's dependence on and manipulation of aesthetics becomes especially significant.⁹ The architects of the Fascist state were prescient in their understanding of the power of the image in mass society. The recurring celebrations and rituals, as they staged patriotic feeling and allegiance, exploited the aesthetic sensibilities of the crowds they attracted for political ends. The state's visual representation of its power was intended to promote sensations of awe, wonder and ultimately submission. The symbolic language of Fascism as it was articulated through images, rituals and speeches is the subject of Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's book, *Fascist Spectacle* (1997). Working from Walter Benjamin's definition of Fascism as the introduction of aesthetics into political life (9–10) in order to facilitate the production of ritual values, she explores the different levels at which the regime's coherent system of myths aimed to appeal to Italians. She looks in particular at the cult of the leader and the rewriting of the history of ancient Rome. What emerges from her analysis of the personality cult surrounding Mussolini is its multi-faceted nature. Over the twenty years of his rule, Mussolini was presented as military leader, romantic hero, superhuman

sportsman and tireless administrator. Not only was he portrayed as the man responsible for the restoration of Italy's fortunes, he was also identified with the nation itself. The recurrence of his image in the iconography of the regime nourished the fable of his omnipresence, while his triumphant appearances in the ceremonies of the state reinforced his status as the God-like creator, moulding the masses through his speeches and through his orchestration of a cult. Accompanying the presentation of Mussolini as the new Caesar was the increasing indulgence in a highly selective celebration of Roman glory.¹⁰ The celebration took little account of the complexity of the different stages of Rome's evolution and it ignored periods of decline or decadence, preferring to concentrate on the hagiographic representation of figures like Augustus or Scipio. By the 1930s not only did ancient Rome figure as the predominant trope in the official symbolic discourse of Fascism, but the very purpose of the regime seemed to be the recovery of the glories of the ancient past. The successful conclusion of one domestic or foreign campaign after another was celebrated as a stage towards the overarching objective of regaining Italy's rightful heritage as the guiding nation of the world.

The concluding section of *Fascist Spectacle* examines the presentation of the regenerative power of war. Falasca-Zamponi examines the complex of belligerent metaphors in Mussolini's speeches and the presentation of one policy after another in terms of military conquest.¹¹ Above all, she reveals how the Italian assault on Ethiopia in 1935 was presented as a melodramatic clash of good and evil. The cult of the leader and of ancient Rome was furthered also by the extensive exhibition culture of the 1930s, which a number of recent studies have examined (Schnapp 1992; 1996b; Stone 1993; Russo 1999). One gigantic exhibition was staged after another: they celebrated the anniversaries of the March on Rome, of the Fascist Revolution, of the beginning of the Battle for Wheat and of the various projects of land reclamation. Had the Second World War not intervened, then Naples would have been the site of a vast exhibition of the Italian empire (or Italy beyond the seas) and Rome would have hosted the universal exhibition of 1942. To visit any one of the many exhibitions in which the regime celebrated its achievements, its vision of history, its preference for the monumental over the human, was to experience a range of carefully staged feelings. It was to move from the profane to the sacred, to experience a sense of individuality giving way to one of collective pride and belonging (Schnapp 1992). The purpose of encouraging the mass reception of spectacular images was intended to replace the normal procedures of democracy and legitimate Fascism's hold on the destiny of the nation. Through its mystifying rhetoric and symbolic practices, the regime sought to substitute scrutiny of its policies with an aesthetically mediated belief in

their inevitability, to make, in the words of Gentile (2002), a rational use of the irrational.¹² The narrative of the state's resurgence predominated over criticism of its operation just as the beauty of armed struggle was intended to replace any perception of the objective reality of violence.

The vast cultural apparatus, which supported the mythic projection of policy, is the object of Ruth Ben-Ghiat's study, *La cultura fascista* (2000).¹³ She locates the appeal of Fascism both to the community of intellectuals and to other leading sections of society in its claim to offer a path towards modernity that endangered neither existing social hierarchies nor deep-laid national traditions. As a movement that had originated in liberal Italy and that was prepared to accommodate the Catholic Church, Fascism could claim to protect Italian society from the perils of Soviet Communism on the one hand and consumer capitalism on the other.¹⁴ It was also a political ideology that intended to promote the spiritual well-being of its adherents rather than simply aiming to improve their economic circumstances. Ben-Ghiat sees the primary role of organized culture as disseminating the vision of modernity and national regeneration – understood as reclamation, radical reordering and appropriation – that lay at the base of the Fascist project of social engineering. In the late 1930s, journalists, artists and writers were employed to facilitate the state's totalitarian ambitions. Intended to ensure consensus, cultural initiatives promoted the integration of the masses into the spiritual revolution of Fascism, and broadcast a code of behaviour that encompassed the work patterns, leisure activities and daily lives of Italians, encouraging the belief that every aspect of life could be lived in accordance with a creed that dictated obedience. The ultimate purpose of the cult of the nation – as the work of Gentile, Ben-Ghiat and others emphasizes – was nothing short of a reformulation of individual consciousness, a drive to make the Fascist self.¹⁵ The ritual practices of the regime, coupled with the institutional apparatus of modernity, aimed to change Italians down to their most intimate thoughts of life and death. Ideally the individual conflated his or her destiny with that of the state, becoming not only a believer but also an agent of the nation's imperial, autarchic or demographic campaigns. In his examination of the exhibition culture of the 1930s (1992), Schnapp argues that the symbolic representation of the movement from disharmony to order was intended to mirror the journey of the new kind of citizen from the chaos of individuality to the joy of the collective.

As Guido Bonsaver's analysis of the censorship of literature under Fascism (2003) demonstrates, the regime relied upon a complex series of practices to regulate the culture industry: in the 1930s Mussolini's Press Office evolved into a ministry of its own, while publishers and authors sought new ways of dealing with the ever tighter strictures that emanated from government.¹⁶ The projection of the dynamism of the Fascist nation,

achieved in part by the active promotion of certain cultural initiatives and by the suppression of the opposition press, was something that no Italian could have ignored.¹⁷ Discussion of the attempt to enlist the active sympathy and support of broad strata of the population and of the means that were available to accomplish this aim – from the institutions of the state to the relatively new media of cinema and radio – leads to the question of how co-ordinated and effective state initiatives were in practice and how far the attempted colonization of consciousness was successful. David Forgacs (2004) draws a distinction between the redirection of the various sub-cultures – including militarism, syndicalism and ruralism – that coalesced within Fascism and the state's relationship with established forms of cultural production that raised more intractable problems of influence. He argues that, despite the possibility or the actuality of recourse to oppressive kinds of intervention, the involvement of all means of cultural expression within the totalitarian project was dependent on the scope of the agencies of the state and, to an extent, on the willingness or otherwise of those involved in the culture industry to co-operate. He suggests that it is through the record of processes of negotiation, compromise and interaction that one can piece together the complexity of attitudes that lay behind an appearance of formal acquiescence.¹⁸ Ben-Ghiat draws attention (2000) to the variety of factors – ranging from class, gender, geography, family tradition and religious belief – that influenced the reception of the hegemonic political discourse of the time. The question of the degree to which Italians were prepared to accept, resist or appropriate the teaching of the state is, of course, central to works of oral history on the period and to studies that seek to explore the impact of Fascism by examining specific communities or sections of the population.¹⁹ What is clear both from work that concentrates on the elaboration of Fascist doctrine and from studies that focus on the question of its reception is its essential syncretism, the facility with which it incorporated seemingly contradictory elements within the broadest confines of its ideology as well as its ability to mean different things over time to different people.

Travel and Travel Writing

The purpose of this study is, broadly speaking, to contribute to the body of work that examines Italian culture under Fascism. It does so by looking at a specific area of literary/journalistic production that can be defined, with some qualification, as travel writing. In its many and varied forms, travel writing poses questions of theoretical and cultural importance and it has aroused a high level of interest across disciplines that stretch from

literary studies to history, geography and sociology.²⁰ For John Kerrigan (1998) the range of critical interest in the genre, from a sociological concern with the mechanics of tourism to a geographical interest in culture, is in itself indicative of the collapsing of the boundaries between academic subjects. As many commentators have argued, travel writing attempts to convince its reader that what it describes is real and it makes a virtue of its apparent truthfulness and reliability (Buford 1984: 7; Davidson 2001), but representations of landscapes or cities are constitutive rather than reflexive (Barnes and Duncan 1992: 5–6). Though writing about travel may refute a connection with fiction and insist on the referential nature of its judgements, the genre is a hybrid literary form whose claim on the factual should be treated with scepticism. In the words of Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, it is ‘a practised art of dissimulation’ (1998: xi), one that draws on techniques borrowed from the adventure story, the epic or even the novel. At the same time as it disguises its status as representation, it tends to accentuate the imaginative or the strange, and it relies all the time on techniques of self-description.²¹ Travel allows any person the opportunity of discovering aspects of themselves: it provokes memory, it can induce fear, it acts as a stimulus for the imagination. In many of its modern manifestations, from tourism to the adventure holiday, it is related to pleasure. Travelling can prove to be a process, as Trinh Minh-ha suggests, where the self is altered by what may be a disturbing ‘yet potentially empowering practice of difference’ (1994: 23). In writing about the experience of the journey, the travel writer presents the reader with an interpretation of his or her inner motivation, susceptibility or resistance to diversity, and disposition to follow or to stray from the beaten track.

The peculiar pressures, the dangers and the emotional conflicts that travel can provoke may encourage introspection but they also lead to an awareness of individual and collective constructions of identity. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that ‘one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of *where* one belongs’ (1996: 19). The perception of the contingency of national, religious or cultural values is heightened by travel, and this perception, as well as generating a sense of uncertainty, produces a wide spectrum of reactions. What appears unfamiliar, strange or alien may be the object of hostility and motivate a more vigorous attachment to the beliefs and practices that constitute a sense of belonging to a given community.²² For many travellers the return home is a source of considerable enjoyment. Alternatively, travel may be a means not of questioning but of asserting a feeling of adherence to a group and of participating in easily identifiable constructions of place: the journey for the pilgrim is intended to enhance a pre-existing sense of personality,

while the itinerary of the tourist is rarely flexible.²³ Moving between spaces and recording that experience is a way of touring some of the basic assumptions of one's own culture: the writer may be tempted to reiterate the judgements of earlier accounts and thus perpetuate an older history of travel and representation. In instances that are perhaps rarer, the impact of an encounter with another country may be a liberation from the stultifying conditions of home or lead to more problematic understanding of conventions that are habitually relied upon to make sense of the world. Travel is a useful means of gaining self-knowledge and a spur to looking back on one's 'home'. In upsetting a vision of what is familiar, agreed upon or seemingly natural, it may incite criticism of restrictive notions of gender, sexuality or ethnicity.²⁴

The issues that travel writing raises concerning identity are all related to the question of how different cultures, peoples and places are represented. Almost by definition, the genre presents encounters with people who, belonging to other traditions of thought and behaviour, can only be 'partially known'.²⁵ Much of the interest that travel writing has raised, since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), has focused on what it reveals about European attitudes towards non-Western cultures. When seen as a manifestation of a larger discursive and institutional framework, the literature of travel and exploration provides clues to the development and the everyday working of colonialism; it gives some indication of the characteristics that are projected onto the subjects of Western domination; of the insertion of indigenous cultures into rhetorics of imperialism; of the role that one community may serve in the self fashioning of another. It tells of the dissemination of the stereotype as a means of interpreting and acting upon reality and of how images of the exotic were manufactured and consumed both in outposts of expansionism and within metropolitan culture.²⁶ It allows an insight into the production of the other as an object of Western desire but also of the complexity of the encounter between colonizer and colonized. Travel literature as a whole provides detailed accounts of places that Mary Louise Pratt has defined as 'contact zones', social spaces where different communities not only interact but 'clash and grapple with each other' (1992: 4). In the context of colonialism, the contact zone is a space of radical – social, racial, religious – inequalities, but it is also one, as Pratt's work explores, where some kind of circulation of cultures, some element of 'transculturation', in however partial or compromised a form, occurs. By its very nature, travel writing involves the translation of one sign system into the terms of another, and its study is a means of documenting the negotiation between cultures that takes place at the micro-level in both colonial and post-colonial worlds.

The questions that travel writing provides a medium to explore, whether they concern the limits of personal autonomy, the coercive power of collective versions of identity or the problems that attend to representing other cultures and people, all assume an undeniable importance in the context of a regime that attempted to enlist large swathes of the population in its drive to transform the whole of society, and which pursued an increasingly aggressive and expansionist foreign policy. We may tend nowadays to see most travel texts as the work of freelance writers uniquely employed in discovering the attributes of appealing or remote regions of the globe and speaking to an audience which sees travel largely as a form of release from the grind of the workplace. But in the Italy of the 1920s and 1930s travel writing was more closely connected with journalism and it could not be said to occur at the margins of politics. Most travel texts were written by figures who worked as correspondents for the national dailies: figures as well known as Emilio Cecchi and Giovanni Comisso worked for Italy's leading newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*; Corrado Alvaro and Arnaldo Cipolla were employed by *La Stampa*; Luigi Barzini Sr. and Mario Appelius worked for the newspaper that Mussolini founded, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. What were later to become studies of individual countries or regions tended to begin life in the columns of a newspaper. These articles were subsequently printed in book form by leading publishing houses like Treves, Mondadori or Bompiani. The written accounts of journeys were often supplemented by a rich array of photographs so that the reader was offered not only a literary but a visual experience. The appetite of the reading public for works on travel was also supplied by the magazine culture of the time: in 1930 the *Touring Club Italiano* decided to publish a new magazine to accompany the already existing *Le Vie d'Italia*. The new and expensively produced monthly was entitled, *Le Vie del Mondo*, while the Fascist Colonial Institute published its own journal, *L'Oltremare*. Other titles in what was a long list included *Il Mediterraneo*, the illustrated journal of the empire, *Razze e popoli della terra* and *Rassegna dell'Espansione italiana*.²⁷

Though there was some variation in the degree to which any individual writer or journalist was prepared to subscribe to the guiding principles of Fascism, no publication was free from official interference, and most willingly sought to disseminate a vision of the world that accorded with the expansionist ethic of the regime.²⁸ Introducing the Milanese publisher Alpes' collection of books on European countries, Camillo Pellizzi claimed (1926: 5) that the collection was intended to contribute to the 'spiritual renovation' of the country by providing Italian readers with accurate information that would allow them to gain a greater sense of

their own destiny with regard to the rest of the world. The regime was keen to promote a body of work that nourished an understanding of Italy's self-appointed role as an imperial power pitted against the designs of other competing nations.²⁹ Leading figures, including Teruzzi and Pavolini, prefaced some of the more significant texts that were published on the theme of travel and exploration, seeing them as an integral part of Fascist culture.³⁰ Most importantly of all, it was the expansionist foreign policy of the 1930s that gave an impetus to travel writing: all the ramifications of Italian involvement overseas were witnessed and reported upon by the correspondents of the national dailies and these reports were often elaborated into lengthy accounts of a locality or a people. In an international climate increasingly defined by the effects of the Depression and by ideological confrontation, the writers and journalists of the time traced the complex of ideas that motivated Italy's allegiances and its military interventions. They presented the world as it appeared to the architects of Fascism, reporting on Italy's affinities with some nation states and presenting a radically dystopian vision of others. They tracked the assault on Ethiopia in 1935 and they witnessed the involvement of Italian troops alongside the Nationalists in the Spanish Civil War two years later. As Italy fell prey to the mesmerizing example of Hitler's Germany, the more prominent journalists of the moment were dispatched to report on the atmosphere of friendship linking the two modern powers. The opposition of Western democracies to the invasion of Ethiopia meant that both England and France were portrayed as decadent societies unable to understand the dynamism of Fascist civilization. Soviet Russia became the object of a constant stream of derogatory reporting, while the United States, initially viewed with some ambiguity, came increasingly to represent a model of social tension against which Fascism claimed to offer an effective barrier.

The amount of work that can be said to fall into the category of writing about travel is extremely extensive and I do not claim to offer a comprehensive survey of that material. The aim is rather to examine a representative selection of the writing that appeared on a series of key locations in the political and cultural context of the interwar period. Each chapter begins by setting out the type of travel text, from the tourist's diary of impressions to the correspondence of the war reporter, that will be examined and the parameters of the critical methodology that will apply. The first chapter of the book looks at the series of texts that were produced throughout the 1920s and 1930s on the eastern Mediterranean, attempting to relate writing on Italy's colonial possession of Libya to ways of seeing reflections of the ancient past in the present. The study then moves on to look at the record of more distant journeys by

concentrating on works by two of the most prolific travel writers of the age: Mario Appellius' Indian travelogue (1925) and Emilio Cecchi's exploration of post-revolutionary Mexico (1932). Given the nature of evolution of Mussolini's foreign policy and the development of world events, the bulk of the study concerns the mid to late 1930s – defined ironically by Leonardo Sciascia as the most comic years of Fascism (1988: 8). The middle section of the book looks at journeys within Italy and the newly acquired empire. More precisely, Chapter Three explores the reactions of a stream of curious visitors to the hallowed sites of the nation and to the rapidly constructed new towns on reclaimed land south of Rome. Chapter Four seeks to unravel some of the narratives of settlement that informed the vision of Ethiopia in the wake of its conquest. The final section of the book examines the slide towards the Second World War first by considering how Italian participation in the Spanish Civil War was perceived in the work of first-hand observers and second by looking at reflections on the gradual process of rapprochement with Nazi Germany. The concluding chapter looks at portrayals of Russia and the United States on the eve of the outbreak of the conflict.

My approach to the travel writing of the interwar period is dependent on critical perspectives that Edward Said's work (1978) and subsequent post-colonial criticism have made familiar. Rather than attempting to see this extensive corpus of writing as a collection of fully autonomous works, the approach seeks to display how the texts – in their representation of authorial consciousness and in the perceptual strategies they deploy – are indicative of the working of larger discursive frameworks. In seeking to identify collective patterns of thought and association within the work of individual authors, the methodology endorses Said's suggestion that every text that sets out to capture the essence of another place is itself ensnared in the web of ideas and images that have previously defined the way in which that place has been imagined or written about. My aim is in part to point to the history of representation in which the travel texts of the period were involved, but it is also to examine how many of the ultra-nationalistic concepts that lay at the heart of Fascist ideology were expressed and elaborated on in the travel writing and foreign correspondence of the time. The myth of Roman dominance, the supremacy of Italian civilization, the irresistibility of collective action, the deification of the leader all exerted their influence over the way in which specific locations were viewed or international events reported. The travel texts of the period thus provide a body of work through which one can see the development of dominant philosophies of identity and demographic expansion; one can see the workings of propaganda and its infiltration and exploitation of more deeply rooted structures of thought. What I have defined as travel writing

may represent an important resource for the study of attitudes and assumptions under Fascism but it is, of course, only one of many such resources and it should not be studied in isolation from other media. Indeed, the analysis of its conceptual structure, of its consistent reliance of certain figures of speech and its depiction of imagined, remembered or anticipated societies leads towards the identification of related strategies of perception and representation across a wide variety of forms of cultural production.

So far I have located the interest of narrated journeys to near or distant localities in the 1920s and 1930s in what it tells us about the dissemination of Fascist ideology and as a site from which one can work outwards to examine the operation of identifiably political kinds of thought. But attempting to read any body of work in these terms runs the risk of suggesting that human beings, however susceptible they may be to societal pressures, are prepared willingly to conform. It may be difficult to deny one of the central tenets of Michel Foucault's work – and a contention that underlies much post-structuralist theory – that the rationalizing principles and disciplinary processes that operate in Western societies apply not only within the social world but also in the way that our very subjectivity, our conscious understanding of our selves, is structured.³¹ But, while recognizing that there are boundaries to personal autonomy, it is important to examine the degree to which individuals consciously subscribe to, unthinkingly perpetuate or attempt to challenge the discourses, or 'webs of signification' (Geertz 1993a: 5), in which they themselves, their personal imaginings, their emotional and thought processes are enmeshed. The travel writing of the interwar period provides some explanation for individuals' investment in the policies of the regime and occasionally striking amplifications of some of its core values. It indicates how people were prepared to adopt subject positions within a range of interconnecting and mutually sustaining discourses: their willingness to accept the role of the colonizer in the expansionist drive of the 1930s; their appropriation of ideas of race or national identity; their purchase on the constructions of masculinity and femininity proposed by Fascism. It suggests some of the processes of negotiation between public statement and private reception. If, as Gentile contends, the new secular religion intended to remould the character of Italians down to their most intimate conceptions of life and death, then the extent of the project is revealed in the altered perceptions of the self and its environment that are articulated within the travel texts of the time.

The writers and journalists who are the object of this study published in the national media of their time and were all, to a greater or lesser degree, sympathizers of the regime – the work of those Italians who

chose the path of exile rather than submit to the constraints of Fascism and who wrote in opposition to Mussolini's foreign alliances and campaigns lies beyond the scope of the present work. My consideration of the writings of those who stayed in Italy throughout the *ventennio* sets out to examine how their work served a propagandistic function but, as importantly, it intends to explore the complexity of their reception of what was the political orthodoxy of their time. The travel writing of the period may indicate a series of essential beliefs but it also provides strong evidence of Fascism's inconsistencies, contradictions and areas of ambiguity. If, as I have suggested, travel writing can be regarded as a narcissistic practice in which the writer constructs an autobiography of impressions and encounters, then it is precisely in the representation of the travelling subject that one finds the most concentrated engagement with the prevailing belief systems of the period. My reading aims to look not only at the details of writers' lives that are contained in the texts and at the apparently straightforward personal reflections that they may contain, but also at the notion of subjectivity that inheres in the writing. Travel, by definition, confronts the individual with circumstances that disrupt the mind or challenge the imagination and my aim is to examine both how writers deployed their imagination and how they attempted to represent disturbances in the functioning of consciousness. In other European contexts some of the most celebrated exponents of literary modernism all wrote travel texts that experimented with new ways of understanding the relationship between time and space, thus bringing formal innovation to a stylistically conservative genre.³² The Italian corpus of the interwar years may not contain the equivalent of works by André Gide or D.H. Lawrence but those practitioners of the genre who have not sunk into oblivion were in some cases aware of or influenced by the imperatives of their European counterparts and owe the survival of interest in their writings to their ability to convey the intricacies of their emotional and intellectual experiences as they negotiated their way through foreign cultures.³³

The variety of motives underlying allegiance to the regime and subscription to its narratives of identity that are evident in the representations of place of the period can be appreciated by looking very briefly at the work of three writers whose names recur consistently in the following pages. An early convert to Fascism, Mario Appelius (1892–1946) worked principally for *Il Popolo d'Italia* though he also wrote for a number of other well known journals, including *La Nazione* and *L'Illustrazione Italiana*. As a foreign correspondent able to publish his articles in book form, he became one of the most well-known travel writers of his age. In the 1920s and early 1930s he produced a narrative

version of his journeys from Morocco to Madagascar (1924), through Central and South America (1929a; 1930) and through South East Asia (1926b; 1929b; 1934a).³⁴ As a war correspondent he wrote on Ethiopia. Having already travelled extensively before Mussolini's assumption of office, he saw Fascism as a movement that could lead Italy towards the assertion of greater power on the global stage and towards the acquisition of extensive colonial territory. His writings provided an indirect and sometimes direct commentary on Italy's imperial ambitions under Fascism. Judging by the ease with which he was able to publish one book of his travels after another, his voice was popular but it was not moderate.³⁵ If he was willing to believe unquestioningly in the right of the Italian nation to expand by force he was equally susceptible to the irrational allure of authoritarianism. The glorification of violence was a constant of his work: during his visit to Japan he admired what he saw as the belligerent temperament of the people (1941: 91); while reporting on the invasion of Ethiopia (1937), he experimented with literary technique in order to convey a vivid impression of the assault on the country (see Chapter Four). In this writing he saw the Fascist nation embodied in the ideal type of the soldier, in the triumphant progress of the army and in the ruthless suppression of the enemy.

A similarly prolific but quite different travel writer was Emilio Cecchi (1884–1966). In contrast to Appellius, who left school at an early age and learnt the journalistic trade quickly through experience, Cecchi began his career as a literary critic, writing for the journals of the Florentine avant-garde, *Leonardo* and *La Voce*. By 1915 he had published a history of nineteenth-century English literature and in the mid-1920s he had begun to publish work on art history that centred on nineteenth-century Italian art (1926) and on medieval and Renaissance Tuscan painting (1928, 1930). He brought his wide-ranging interest in literary and visual culture to his travel writing. He started contributing regularly for the *Corriere della Sera* in 1927 and it was in its pages that his correspondence from different countries appeared. In the 1930s he published books on Mexico, Greece and the United States. Unlike Appellius he was not initially seduced by the appeal of Fascism and had been one of the signatories of the Manifesto of anti-Fascist Italian intellectuals printed in *Il Mondo* on 1 May 1925.³⁶ In the late 1920s, however, he was drawn, in part by necessity, towards a more compromised position.³⁷ His travel writing reveals a highly conservative critic, fearful of the modern world and ready to place his trust in a system of dictatorial power that claimed to protect the basic structure of Italian society. He was prepared to elide liberalism and Fascism, and his travel writing developed a vision of Mussolini's government as the guarantor of Italy's classical heritage. His writings on

the changing urban fabric of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s drew ingenious analogies between what he saw and earlier expressions of religiously inspired architecture. His fascination with transience and immortality, with funerary rites and monumental sculpture, led to an interpretation of Marcello Piacentini's massive building projects in Rome and elsewhere as temples that celebrated the memory the nation's religious inheritance (see Chapter Three). Within such writing he asserted his own presence by articulating the mystic suggestions of the architecture and by linking the cult of the nation with more ancient rites of observance.

One might argue that the travel texts of the interwar period are a source that reveals much about the reception of authoritarian ideas among a wide selection of Italian men but that these texts, given that the overwhelming majority of them were male-authored, have little to say about Italian women and Fascism. Such an argument is, however, true only up to a point. During the years of the consolidation of power, the journalist and art critic, Margherita Sarfatti (1880–1961), was influential in propagating the new style of identity politics, in orchestrating its aesthetics and in promoting its veneration of particular figures and institutions.³⁸ She drew a number of leading Milanese artists, including Mario Sironi, towards state patronage, while *Dux* (1924), her biography of Mussolini ran through no fewer than seventeen editions between 1926 and 1938.³⁹ But as well as performing a prominent role as a cultural organizer and, more discreetly, as the Duce's 'other woman' – to quote the title of Cannistraro and Sullivan's biography (1993) – she was also an accomplished travel writer. She travelled to Tunisia in the 1920s, to Egypt as a correspondent for *La Stampa* in the early 1930s and between 1936 and 1937 she moved through the high society of the United States as Mussolini's unofficial ambassador. The textual record of her journeys displays a familiar chauvinism: she was as keen as most observers of her day to raise her voice in favour of Italy's right to spread the model of its own civilization both within the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Yet, her travel journalism is most interesting in the way in which it served as a vehicle to express a coherent feminist argument at the heart of Fascism. Though she contributed actively to shaping a discourse aimed at exalting a certain kind of masculinity, she suggested both implicitly and explicitly in her travel writing that Italian women should seek to emulate the same kind of pioneering spirit.⁴⁰ The presentation of imposing female figures from other cultures, whether the Egypt of antiquity or the America of the New Deal, was supported by the subtlety with which she constructed an image of herself in her writing.

There are, then, important differences in the work of the three writers that I have selected. They all saw themselves as occupying an important role in the dissemination of a nationalistic worldview, they all celebrated

the grandeur of Italian civilization, and yet each invested in a particular interpretation of Fascism. Despite the varying degrees of originality that they showed, none was an isolated voice. The purpose of this study is, in part, to investigate similarities and dissimilarities in the perception of foreign spaces in the work of an extensive selection of travel writers. By so doing, it aims to look at how the fantasies, beliefs and prejudices that made up Italian Fascism exerted an appeal both at a rational and irrational level. It is not my intention to suggest that elements of Fascist ideology were either necessarily compelling or all pervasive, it is rather to consider how in a series of formally similar texts the expression of comparatively recent concepts of order and belonging were grafted onto pre-existing ways of thinking and interwoven with the representation of the psychological processes of the individual. Writers of the sophistication of Cecchi or Sarfatti deliberately drew their reader's attention to the derivation and to the ramifications of their aesthetic judgements. They alluded to the inconsistencies of memory and, to a degree, their writing was intended to be a speculation on their own consciousness of identity. In their observation of themselves and of other people, they reflected on the impact of political, cultural and social change. They were, within the terms of their own frame of reference, aware of the relation between subjectivity and ideology.

As well as looking at the extent to which the construction of the travelling subject was bound up within the discourses of the time, the study sets out to examine how the inhabitants of other cultures were represented. The delineation of the ideal Fascist type involved, as George Mosse has written, the formulation of its counter-type (1996: 249). Insofar as they represent a catalogue of strategies of perception and inference, the travel texts of the interwar years prove a valuable resource in mapping the desires, investments and projections that were central to a vision of the world as a series of competing ideologies and of territories that awaited colonization. As we might expect, accounts of the most dramatic episodes in Italian national life of the 1930s, the invasion of Ethiopia and participation in the Spanish Civil War, legitimated aggression by the way in which they portrayed those who opposed the tide of expansionism. Yet the processes through which the enemy was rendered the fitting object of violence were never simple, depending as they did on the deployment of recognizable stereotypes and on a vocabulary of religious derivation. As colonization gathered momentum other strategies were relied upon to sustain Italy's putatively civilizing mission, to encourage a sense of racial and cultural superiority and to inscribe the indigenous population of the country's overseas possessions within that narrative. In the late 1930s the racist association of moral attributes with physical characteristics was

given renewed impetus by the rise in anti-Semitism. Yet at the same time as the travel accounts of the time asserted rigid distinctions between self and other, they also provided some instances of dissidence where a general view of a foreign community was, to whatever degree, questioned and where the boundaries between identity and difference did not remain fixed.

A criticism that can be raised against the analysis of a type of literary production that flourished under Fascism is that, by concentrating on the work of figures who were for the most part convinced supporters of Mussolini and who were often willing to tailor their observations to the demands of the regime, it may tell us something about officially sanctioned perception but it does not address the more complex problem of how far the views expressed in such writing were shared beyond a rather select community. The study does not claim to answer this question but it does seek to engage in a variety of ways with the issue of the wider resonances of the texts. Wherever possible the analysis of the work of established journalists and writers is substantiated by the consideration of work by occasional travellers and by people who did not write as professionals. Secondly, there was a persuasive dimension to much of the travel literature of the period: the writer made every effort to convince the reader of the accuracy of the representation that was set before them and in so doing he or she made appeals to what were perceived to be the susceptibilities, the prejudices and the different levels of cultural preparation of the reading public. An idea of the reader was, in other words, part of the text. The avowed aim of many writers to represent an Italian consciousness in foreign parts is an issue that is of central importance. Lastly, the travel writing of the interwar years cannot be analysed in isolation from works written after the fall of Fascism by those who participated in the formation or the dissemination of its cultural geography. The identification of the narratives of Italian expansionism in the travel texts of the *ventennio* leads directly to the wealth of writings that look back at personal involvement in the initiatives of the regime: one literary practice opens the door to another that is similarly concerned with the representation of the self in relation to its group identity. The correspondence on the Spanish Civil War can usefully illuminate written memories of the conflict, but perhaps the most interesting comparisons between a contemporary vision of reality and one that was later mediated through memory relate to Italian East Africa. It is by referring to this body of memorial literature that one can gain a sense of the degree to which the view of the newly acquired African colonies that the journalists of the regime were eager to promote coincided with or contradicted with ordinary Italians' experience of empire.

Notes

1. The following comments on the range and type of research that has been carried out in recent years on the origins and development of Fascist culture are not intended to offer a comprehensive survey. Inevitably schematic, they are meant simply to indicate the scholarly context, or rather the current of historiographic research, in which the present work is situated. The body of texts on which my comments are focussed is described by Jeffrey Schnapp, in his introduction to the special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary History*, 'Fascinating Fascism', as work which, spanning a wide array of disciplinary areas, pursues 'a differentiated cultural history of Italy's fascist decades' (1996: 237).
2. Zeev Sternhell (1994) locates the birth of Fascist ideology in the unexpected convergence of the thinking of Enrico Corradini and his Nationalist Association with the revolutionary syndicalists: though coming from opposite ends of the political spectrum, both were drawn to the myth of national regeneration and the promise of political upheaval that a major war between European nation states seemed to offer. For an analysis of avant-garde culture centred on the Florentine journal, *La Voce*, see Walter Adamson (1993). On the origins of Fascism and on the actual taking of power by Mussolini, see the work of Adrian Lyttelton (1973), Emilio Gentile (1975) and Roberto Vivarelli (1991).
3. On the transformatory myth of the nationalist war, see Isnenghi (1973).
4. *Il culto del littorio* is published in English as *The Sacralization of Politics* (1996).
5. In *Il mito dello stato nuovo* (1999), Gentile traces the history of the myth of the radically new state from its beginnings, in the writings of Giuseppe Mazzini and other theorists of the Risorgimento, through to the nationalist groupings of the early part of the twentieth century and eventually to the thinking of Mussolini and his followers.
6. On the history of the town square as the locus of ceremony and public gathering in post-unification Italy, see Isnenghi (1994).
7. The cult of Mussolini and the succession of mass rituals were both accentuated by Achille Starace, Secretary of the Partito Nazionale Fascista (1931–39). On Starace's running of the party machine, see Marco Innocenti (1997).
8. The interpretation of ritual draws on the work of Clifford Geertz (1993b: 87–101).
9. Schnapp argues that the body of academic work that addresses the manifold aspects of Italian culture in the interwar years aims precisely 'to get inside Fascism's power of fascination' (1996: 237). On the symbiosis between art and Fascist ideology, see Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff (1997) and Emily Braun's study of the work of Mario Sironi (2000).
10. The example of Rome's grandeur, as Falasca-Zamponi documents (1997: 90–100), had certainly exercised a powerful influence on preceding periods of Italy's history. Mazzini and other theorists of the Risorgimento referred to Rome as a model for Italian unification, while in the early years of the twentieth century the memory of Rome was central to nationalist thinking. On the ideological significance that Rome assumed in the 1920s and 1930s, see also Marla Stone (1999) and Maria Wyke (1999).
11. See also Morgan (1995) on the link between domestic and foreign policy in the Italy of the 1920s and 1930s.
12. Luisa Passerini's work on biographies of the Duce (1991) explores in detail the wealth of irrational identifications that the public of the *ventennio* were invited to make.

13. The text is published in English as *Fascist Modernities* (2001).
14. Specifically on this point, see Ben-Ghiat's essay on the aesthetics of the 'Third Way' (1996).
15. The allusion is to the title of Mabel Berezin's work (1997).
16. Bonsaver sees the evolution of the Press Office, which was to become the Undersecretariat of State for the Press and Propaganda in 1934 and finally the Ministry of Popular Culture in 1937, as being given a particular impetus by the example of Goebbels' creation of the Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda on the Nazi assumption of power (2003: 167–70). For an analysis of state organization of the media of cultural diffusion, Philip Cannistraro's *La fabbrica del consenso* (1975) remains fundamental. The increasing anti-Semitism of state censorship in the late 1930s is the subject of Giorgio Fabre's work (1998). Romano Canosa (2002) has examined the role of the press agency, l'agenzia Stefani, in the regulation of the press.
17. For an account of daily life under Mussolini's rule, see Alexander De Grand (1982), Danilo Veneruso (1986), Philip Morgan (1995) and Patrizia Dogliani (1999).
18. For an analysis of the state's system of patronage, see Ben-Ghiat (2000) and Stone (1998).
19. Important studies of this type would include Passerini's work on the cultural experience of the working class of Turin (1984) and Victoria De Grazia's analysis of the impact of Fascism on the lives of Italian women (1991).
20. In the view of Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (2002: 9), the interest that travel writing now receives in academic writing is unprecedented. James Duncan and Derek Gregory similarly refer to an explosion of interest in the genre (1999: 1).
21. Writing about the journey, to quote Charles Grivel (1994: 254), means writing about the self. The issue of the relation between travel and autobiography is explored in detail by Derek Duncan (2002) through an analysis of the work of Giovanni Comisso.
22. For a discussion of the dependency of identity on constructions of location, see Carter, Donald and Squires (1993).
23. Bauman's essay on travel and identity (1996) focuses on these two types of traveller.
24. The importance of foreign travel as a means of looking back at home is one that is examined in detail by a number of studies that are centrally concerned with travel and gender: Dea Birkett's work, for example, on women explorers of the Victorian age (1989) and Sara Mills' study of women, travel writing and colonialism (1991).
25. The quotation is taken from Harry Liebersohn's inquiry (1996: 628) into the nature of travel writing's struggle to witness other cultures and people.
26. The implication of travel writing in the history of colonialism has, since Said, been well established. On the importance of the stereotype, the reference is to the work of Homi Bhabha (1994). For a discussion of the changing meaning of the exotic, see Chris Bongie (1991).
27. Richard Bosworth has examined in detail the impact of the regime on the tourist industry (1997a) and the attempt of the *Touring Club Italiano* to retain some autonomy under the pressure of state intervention (1997b).
28. For a record of the increased level of intervention in the way in which Mussolini's wars of the late 1930s were reported in the *Corriere della Sera*, see Licata (1976: 278–94).

29. For details of state sponsored initiatives to promote an interest in expansionist or colonial themes, see Chapter One.
30. Attilio Teruzzi (Minister for Italian Africa 1939–43), for example, wrote the preface to Alessandro Melchiori's account of a journey to Italy's newly established empire (Melchiori 1938). Alessandro Pavolini provided an introduction to Giovanni Cenozato's *Itinerari provinciali* (1938). Before becoming Minister for Popular Culture (1939–43), Pavolini was himself a correspondent for the *Corriere*.
31. See McNay (1994: 4–5) on the significance of Foucault's questioning of the concept of the fully reflexive rational subject for later post-colonial and feminist theory.
32. André Gide, Federico Garcia Lorca and D.H. Lawrence all wrote significant texts that experimented with the formalities of the genre. For a discussion on travel, literary modernism and English literature, see Andrew Thacker (2003). European travel literature of the 1930s is considered in Burdett and Duncan (2002).
33. Though the names of many of the most prolific travel writers of the time have now become unfamiliar, it is worth recalling that writers and critics of the standing of Massimo Bontempelli, Carlo Emilio Gadda and Mario Praz also wrote as travellers.
34. A complete list of Appellius' publications can be found in Livio Sposito's biography of the writer (2002: 333–34). A different account of his life is presented in his autobiography, *Da mozzo a scrittore* (1934b).
35. His African travelogue, *La sfinge nera* (1926a), proved a considerable commercial success selling over 40,000 copies and running through four editions (Sposito 2002: 129).
36. See Del Beccaro (1979: 256).
37. Cecchi has been regarded in Italy as one of the nation's greatest literary critics of the twentieth century. It is only recently that this reputation has come under more intense scrutiny: Ben-Ghiat has noted, for example, that he became a member of the Accademia Nazionale only after it had embraced anti-Semitism and she has pointed to his escape from censure after the Second World War (2000: 272, 333).
38. The importance of Sarfatti as a figure who reveals many aspects of her time is reflected in the fact that she has been the object of two biographies in recent years, by Philip Cannistraro and Brian Sullivan (1993) and Simona Urso (2003).
39. The figures are given by Cannistraro and Sullivan (1993: 305–6). As they note, the book was not only an instant best-seller in Italy, it was also hugely successful abroad and played, 'a major part in making Mussolini a pre-eminent international figure in the 1920s while doing the same for Sarfatti'.
40. On the adoption by a number of prominent Italian women of a Fascist rhetoric of virility, see Barbara Spackman (1996: 34–48).

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