

ARTICLES / SAGGI

QUESTIONING THE 'EXOTIC' IN TWO ITALIAN TRAVELLERS' ACCOUNTS OF NEW ZEALAND

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Sommario

L'articolo studia le testimonianze di due missionari italiani presenti in Nuova Zelanda tra la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento: il benedettino Dom Felice Vaggioli e il salesiano Giuseppe Capra. Sia l'uno sia l'altro, attratti dalle bellezze naturali del paese descritto come una sorta di esotico nuovo Eden, finirono col guardare alla Nuova Zelanda da una prospettiva fortemente eurocentrica, Vaggioli addirittura definendo la Nuova Zelanda – a partire da superficiali coincidenze topografiche – come l'Italia dell'emisfero australe. Di là dalle finalità di proselitismo religioso (permeato da una forte vena anti-inglese), gli scritti dei due religiosi costituiscono una viva autorappresentazione dell'Italia e degli italiani mezzo secolo dopo l'unificazione.

As a commonly used term, the concept of the 'exotic' is usually employed to refer to images of distant places and strikingly unusual habits. The word 'exotic' means 'introduced from abroad' and the term has been used to refer to something remarkably strange, unusual, originating in a foreign place (the Latin 'exoticus' means foreign, alien and it derives from the Greek 'exo', outside). The concept of 'exoticism' has been associated with European colonialism and the widespread use of this term can be traced back to seventeenth-century European explorations. According to Post-colonial scholar Isabel Santaolalla, the fascination for what is foreign can not be restricted to

the West, rather it is characteristic of many cultures, but she also argues that “the West’s supremacy and the long-lasting impact of the European imperial project have historically granted it the upper hand in defining and constructing its Others as ‘the’ Other” (Santaolalla, 2000:9).

Post-colonial studies have demonstrated that the concept of ‘exoticism’ is a European construct and Palestinian-American literary theorist Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism*, defines this term as a kind of aesthetic substitution which “replaces the impress of power with the blandishments of curiosity” (Said, 1993:159). Stephen Greenblatt as well, in his *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, argues that Western subjugation of indigenous people has always been preceded by wonder for their land, as it is evident in Columbus’ letters, in which “the language of the marvellous is subtly revised [...] to function strategically as a redemptive, aestheticizing supplement to a deeply flawed legal ritual of appropriation” (Greenblatt, 1992:24). Kateryna Olijnyk Longley argues that “historically, exoticism signals a special form, a politically and sexually charged form, of *othering*, one that has come to be associated with European colonialism through its close relationship with orientalism” (Olijnyk Longley, 2000:23). According to her, “the exotic is by no means a docile category relating to something safely ‘out there’. It is a dangerous double-edged sword in the politics of othering” (Olijnyk Longley, 2000:28). Graham Huggan, in his *The Post-colonial Exotic*, argues that “among others, exoticism has proved over time to be a highly effective instrument of imperial power” (Huggan, 2001:14), thus “the exotic splendour of newly colonised lands may disguise the brutal circumstances of their gain” (Huggan, 2001:14). Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo, in their *The Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism*, argue that ‘exoticism’ is “the aestheticizing means by which the pain of that expansion [imperialism, ‘the expansion of nationality’] is converted into spectacle, to culture in the service of empire” (Arac & Ritvo, 1991:3).

‘Exoticism’ is the experience of faraway places and of radical cultural difference, it is both an attraction and a repulsion, a shock provoked by the ‘Other’ or ‘le Divers’, as French travel writer Victor Segalen defined this term. In geographical terms, the most ‘exotic’

place for a European is represented by the Pacific. In this sense, for the Italian audience at the beginning of the 20th century, the description of a faraway setting, such as New Zealand, was quintessentially 'exotic', New Zealand being the most distant country from Italy. Moreover, at that time, there was absolutely no knowledge of New Zealand and of Maori culture in Italy.

In the accounts of two Italian travellers in New Zealand, Giuseppe Capra and Dom Felice Vaggioli, at the beginning of the 20th century, we apparently find some of the earliest depictions of 'exotic' New Zealand in Italian literature, as well as unique documentation of Maori people's customs and a strong critique of British colonization. In fact, in his *La Nuova Zelanda: una Italia australe (New Zealand: An Italy in the Southern Hemisphere)*, published in 1911 and in the following version *La Nuova Zelanda: il paese dei Maori (New Zealand: The Land of the Maori)*, published in 1913, Italian Salesian missionary Capra, envoy-geographer to the territories of Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea about twenty years after Vaggioli's mission, glorified the incomparable landscapes of New Zealand, describing it as a bountiful and Eden-like country. This article questions the 'exoticism' of these two missionary accounts, asking to what extent Capra and Vaggioli's books can be considered an example of the construction of the 'exotic' in Italian literature.

In *La Nuova Zelanda: il Paese dei Maori (New Zealand: The Land of the Maori)*, Capra's enthusiastic descriptions of New Zealand echo French 'exotic' travel writings of the nineteenth-century. The emphasis is put on enchanting images of New Zealand landscapes, as is evident in the descriptions of beautiful, tall ferns and other plants which recall biblical images of the Garden of Eden:

Felci d'una bellezza rara, con le lunghissime flessuose fronde, piu' eleganti di penne di struzzo, alti, soffici, vividi muschi di velluto, alghe dal disegno meraviglioso, dalle tinte piu' fini e delicate, e licheni crostosi, e piante, e arbusti dalle foglie verde cupo, come l'alloro e rampicanti ciuffi di erbe, graziosamente spioventi. Si e' come dinanzi a una vegetazione irreal, che si vorrebbe prendere e trasfugare in un impossibile bottino. (Capra, 1913:77)

Capra shows a similar astonishment for the uncontaminated New Zealand natural environment in the sections about the fiords of the South Island, in chapter IV which focuses on New Zealand forests and in the section about the ‘Southern Alps’, in which the description of thousands of beautiful perfumed flowers in the Hooker Valley looks more like a Chateaubriand’s novel than a geographer’s report:

Fiori, fiori dappertutto, a migliaia e migliaia i gigli giganti, dal cuore dorato, dagli enormi petali di neve, sorgenti in mezzo alle foglie piegate a conca, piene di acqua piovana, vere cappe vegetali; grandi margherite alpine, ricoperte di argentea peluria, stillanti di rugiada, scintillanti come diamanti sul candido velluto di uno scigno, viole dal colore intenso e vivo come abiti prelatizi; graziose pimpinelle, edelweis della Nuova Zelanda [...] un giardino incantato, sotto le rupi paurose, fra i ruscelli sonanti, in cui il pensiero corre agli spiriti ossianici di Fingal e degli Eroi, in una antipodiana Moi-Cena, nella valle dello zefiro, dove le nebbie vagano in drappi fluttuanti sulle rocce, in veli e cirri, sfioranti diafani le terre pianeggianti. (Capra, 1913:37)

Capra’s book contains many other apparently quintessentially ‘exotic’ descriptions of New Zealand, especially in the sections about Rotorua, which he calls ‘the Wonderland’ for its geothermal activity. According to him, New Zealand, the last country explored by Europeans during the nineteenth century, is the most wonderful region in the Southern Hemisphere, if not in the entire universe, and he also argues that it is the Garden of Eden humankind has always searched for.

An apparently ‘exotic’ description of New Zealand can be found in an earlier Italian traveller’s account, in Dom Felice Vaggioli’s two-volume *Storia della Nuova Zelanda e dei suoi abitanti* (*History of New Zealand and its Inhabitants*), the first volume published in 1891 and the second one in 1896. Vaggioli, Visiting Abbot of the Cassinese Congregation Reformed Rule, was sent in 1879 by his Superiors to work as a missionary in New Zealand and his *History* was requested

by Pope Leo XIII, who asked him to collect information regarding Maori customs and the progress of Christian religion in New Zealand.

Capra and Vaggioli's works are quite different. The former focuses on New Zealand's geography while the latter is a social history of NZ from European colonization to the mid 1880s and contains anti-Protestant prejudices as well as a strong critique of British colonial hegemony and its effects on the Maori people. However, in Vaggioli's *History of New Zealand* as well, we find a number of descriptions of the beauty of New Zealand's natural features, mineral resources, flora and fauna and images of prosperity which echo those of 'exotic' travel writings, as it is evident in this passage about the Bay of Islands:

La baja delle Isole è senza fallo il più vasto, il più magnifico ed il meglio protetto porto naturale che esista in tutto il globo. In essa possono comodamente prendere posto tutte le flotte dell'intera Europa, senza trovarsi a disagio. Quivi, fino dal principio del secolo XIX, accorrevano più che altrove le navi baleniere, particolarmente quelle che visitavano le coste dell'isola del nord, le quali mai mancavano di far sosta colà, a preferenza d'ogni altro luogo per rifornirsi di viveri. Le ragioni di tal fermata erano la comodità dei numerosi suoi ancoraggi, l'abbondanza che vi si trovava di patate, maiali, carne salata ed altri generi di vettovaglie, ed il gran numero di Maori viventi lungo le ridenti sue sponde, e sui banchi dei fiumicelli che sboccano in quella baja, dai quali si poteva avere senza difficoltà commestibili ed altri prodotti del paese. (Vaggioli, 1891:126-127)

Similarly, 'exotic' descriptions of natural settings can be found in the section of *History of New Zealand* which tells of the arrival of British settlers in Nelson: "The new arrivals were very happy with the mild, pleasant climate and the magnificent harbour at their doorstep, although it had a difficult entrance. A superb natural reef enclosed it. The local land was also very fertile" (Vaggioli, 2000:103) and in Vaggioli's definition of Taranaki as "the garden of New Zealand for its natural beauty and fertile soil" (Vaggioli, 2000:102).

However, all these descriptions of New Zealand close to ‘exotic’ *rêverie*, contained in Capra and Vaggioli’s books can be argued to be ‘exotic’ in appearance only. According to Post-colonial scholar Chris Bongie, in fact, the requisite condition of ‘exoticism’ lies “in the fundamental difference from what we might call ‘the realm of the Same’” (Bongie, 1991:17), thus everything unfamiliar and different from our own culture is ‘exotic’. As the poststructuralist Franco-Bulgarian critic and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov also argues, “exoticists cherish the remote because of its remoteness”, thus “the best candidates for the exotic ideal are the peoples and cultures that are the most remote from us” (Todorov, 1993:265) and, in this sense, Capra and Vaggioli could indeed be defined as ‘exoticists’ because their works contain descriptions of New Zealand, which is the most remote place from Italy. However, a deeper analysis of their books reveals ways in which they may well contradict the very definition of ‘exoticism’. In fact, in New Zealand, Capra and Vaggioli found merely the traces of their own culture and preconceptions.

In his *La Nuova Zelanda: il Paese dei Maori*, Capra proposes a provocative, Eurocentric definition of New Zealand as ‘an Italy of the Southern Hemisphere’ and describes New Zealand’s geography and climate by using Italy as a comparison:

Chi, venendo dall’Australia, dove ha lasciato campagne arse dal sole, fiumi senz’acqua, laghi prosciugati, colmi solo di sabbie salate, sbarca a Bluff, ponendo così piede nel porto più meridionale della Nuova Zelanda, riceve la piu’ dolce delle impressioni, e, se italiano, quella di approdare in una dolce rada della cara patria. Allora si saluta commossi quella terra ove tutto vi ricorda l’Italia, e vi pare di sognare, trovandone, proprio agli antipodi, alla distanza di oltre 20.000 km, riprodotta una immagine così mirabilmente fedele. (Capra, 1913:3)

By comparing the new surroundings Capra sees in New Zealand with Italy, he finds more similarities than differences and he argues that, although an enormous distance separate Italian immigrants in New Zealand from their home country, they do not risk feeling homesick because in their adoptive country everything contributes to keep alive

the image of Italy in themselves, so that, looking around, they have the illusion of being at home. For this reason, Capra finds an Italian equivalent for every New Zealand city: he defines Auckland as 'the Palermo of New Zealand' due to the similarities in climate and semitropical plants; Wellington is similar to Naples for its position on the coast, Christchurch has the same climate as Florence while Dunedin's the same as Venice.

Earlier, Dom Felice Vaggioli as well, in his *Storia della Nuova Zelanda e dei suoi abitatori (History of New Zealand and its Inhabitants)*, published in 1890 had suggested a similar comparison between Italy and New Zealand. In fact, Capra defined Auckland as 'the Palermo of New Zealand', while Vaggioli compares it to another city in the South of Italy, Naples, "for the beauty of its harbour" (Vaggioli, 2000:100). Italian Studies scholar Daniela Cavallaro, in her '*Una Italia Australe*'? *Two Italian Travellers describe New Zealand* (2005), analysing the ways in which these two early Italian travellers represented New Zealand to a nineteenth-century Italian audience, interrogates the accuracy of such a comparison. She argues that both Capra and Vaggioli's books are not only important reports on the conditions of life of Italian migrants settling in New Zealand, at that time, but they are also "an implicit representation of how Italy viewed itself about a century ago" (Cavallaro, 2005:207).

Although Capra and Vaggioli are complicit in the process of spectacularization of the 'Other' through their appropriation of the 'exotic' myth of an unchanging, uncontaminated environment, the 'exoticism' of their descriptions is at least in part cancelled out by their definition of New Zealand as 'the Italy of the Southern Hemisphere'. In this way, they 'domesticate' descriptions that appear to be 'exoticized'. Paradoxically, instead of being depicted as incommensurably different, New Zealand was, it appears, on the contrary, the most familiar place for an Italian. In this sense, Capra and Vaggioli's reports could be included in the field of Post-colonial studies, which aims to 'de-exoticise' non-Metropolitan cultures, trying to domesticate and bring them from the 'margins' to the 'centre'. However, as anthropologist Stephen Foster argues, "to domesticate the exotic fully would neutralise its capacity to create surprises, thereby integrating it 'into the humdrum of everyday routines'" (Foster, 1982:21). Consequently, by using Italy as a term of reference for

everything they see in New Zealand, Capra and Vaggioli neutralise not only the displacement provoked by the shock following the encounter with the 'Other' but also the capacity of the 'exotic' spectacle to create surprises, thus their reports contradict the principles upon which representations of the 'exotic' are based.

A deeper analysis of Capra and Vaggioli's works reveal nonetheless that they should be defined as 'colonial' rather than as Post-colonial. In fact, both accounts focus on the way Italians and, in general, Europeans, were fascinated by New Zealand as an 'exotic' and unusual cultural 'Other'. Nevertheless, they reproduce the assumptions underlying Eurocentric perspectives in describing other cultures. In fact, their appreciation of New Zealand is predominantly a means of glorifying their own country. New Zealand is depicted as an earthly Paradise not in itself but because it looks like Italy. In this sense, Capra and Vaggioli use a colonial approach in portraying the 'Other' or 'le Divers', their fascination for what is foreign, alien, is ultimately a mechanism for confirming European claims of cultural superiority.

Both *New Zealand: The Land of the Maori* by Capra and *History of New Zealand and Its Inhabitants* by Vaggioli, through their comparisons between New Zealand and Italy, confirm what French travel writer Victor Segalen argued, that Europeans themselves theorized the relationship with other cultures and, in describing them, provided only a version of the cross-cultural encounter: "Ils ont dit ce qu'ils ont vu, ce qu'ils ont senti en presence des choses et des gens inattendus dont ils allaient chercher le choc. Ont-ils révélé ce que ces choses et ces gens pensaient en eux-mêmes et d'eux?" (Segalen, 1986:31). According to him, 'exoticist' writers were not really interested in other cultures, rather their aim was just to depict their own reaction in relation to this encounter. In this sense, in Capra and Vaggioli's reports we find only "the experience of the European subject that, in search of the thrill of exoticism, merely recounted and represented its own vision" (Michel, 1996:4). Consequently, their depiction of New Zealand as an 'exotic' place is a way of seeing the 'Other' sustaining their own cultural centrality, it is a mechanism developed to defend themselves against the encounter with 'le Divers', as well as to reinforce, at the same time, their sense of identity. Moreover, their use of Italy as a term of reference for everything they

see in New Zealand, reproduces general European colonial attitudes in creating a kind of 'cultural centre' which defines its own 'margins'. In this way, they reduce New Zealand "to the grid of Western conceptual thought" (Michel, 1996:2), judging and classifying it "from the position of a purportedly universal reason" (Michel, 1996:4).

G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, in their *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, argue that the West reduced non-European cultures to an object to be classified in order to protect itself from the challenge produced by the encounter with the 'Other'. In other words, Capra and Vaggioli strategically construct a supposed 'exotic' New Zealand as a kind of mechanism to avoid questioning their own culture (an inevitable consequence of any cross-cultural encounter), in order to "eliminate the resistance, the anxiety, provoked by the alien" (Rousseau & Porter, 1990:1).

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