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FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
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Beyond the Travelogue: Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s Plea for Italy in *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home*

Leonardo Buonomo

Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1867) was arguably the most highly regarded American woman writer of the first half of the nineteenth century. Though deeply invested in the creation of a distinctively national literature, she was also remarkably cosmopolitan in her tastes and interests as testified by her 1841 travelogue Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home. This article examines the ways in which Sedgwick, while taking her readers on a traditional guided tour of celebrated cities, also tried to make them aware of the effects of foreign occupation and despotism on contemporary Italy.

Keywords: Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home*, nineteenth-century American travel writing, Italian art, Risorgimento

Best-known today for her historical novel *Hope Leslie* (1827)[1], New Englander Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1867) was the most highly regarded American woman writer of the first half of the nineteenth century. As Mary Kelley has noted, in her time Sedgwick was recognized alongside Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant as “a founder of her nation’s literature”[2]. Equally adept at mining her country’s past for literary materials or portraying the contemporary scene, Sedgwick moved skillfully and freely between fiction and non-fiction. Although she consistently maintained a conservative view of marriage and motherhood as a woman’s ultimate fulfillment, she herself chose not to marry and committed herself fully to her profession. Furthermore, she transgressed traditional gendered boundaries between literary topics, delving into the supposedly masculine domains of history, politics, and economics, as well as into areas such as sentiment, domesticity, and piousness, widely believed to be the woman writer’s special province. Deeply invested in the question of American cultural independence and the creation of a distinctively national literature, Sedgwick was also remarkably cosmopolitan in her tastes and interests as testified, in particular, by her 1841 book *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home*[3].

Based on her European travels of 1839-1840, this book fits into the Anglo-American Grand Tour genre, with its route through well-known locations, its descriptions of histori-

[1] C.M. Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie; or, Early Times in the Massachusetts*, M. Kelley ed., Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 1993.

[2] M. Kelley, *Negotiating a Self: The Autobiography and Journals of Catharine Maria Sedgwick*, “The New England Quarterly”, 66, 1993, 3, p. 367.

[3] C.M. Sedgwick, *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home*, Harper & Brothers, New York 1841, 2 voll.

cal and artistic landmarks, and its emphasis on the picturesque; but it also departs significantly from that tradition in its pronounced interest in contemporary social and political issues. Sedgwick's concern about the 'here and now' is particularly evident in the second volume of her book, devoted almost entirely to Italy. Instead of focusing mostly on the past, as many British and American authors of books about Italy invariably did, Sedgwick used her observations about the country's history and glorious artistic heritage to throw into bold relief its present state of near-paralysis and despondency, which she saw as the direct result of political oppression. While duly taking her readers on a guidebook-sanctioned visit to celebrated cities, landscapes, and monuments, she also tried to make them aware of the effects of foreign occupation and despotism on contemporary Italy and the special relevance of Italy's situation for Americans.

Sedgwick chose to convey her observations in epistolary form, structuring the book as a series of travel letters nominally addressed to her brother Charles back home. But these published letters differ significantly from her surviving private correspondence with Charles and other members of her family, both in size (they are considerably longer) and content (favoring as they do descriptive passages over personal references). Evidence seems to suggest that they never existed in any other form, that they were not transcribed from actual letters. The published letters then constitute, in the words of Lucinda Damon-Bach, "a literary strategy calculated to create a sense of intimacy between author and audience"[4]. Together with Charles, other relations, and friends of the family, all of Catharine's readers are the "kindred at home" whom, as the book's title announces, she addresses from across the Atlantic. It seems to me that particularly in the Italian section of the book – by far the longest – Sedgwick extends the meaning of 'kindred' even further so as to include, in general, her fellow Americans. She appeals to them as the citizens of a democracy born out of a revolution, and as such, a people capable of relating to, and sympathizing with the Italians, then engaged in a struggle for independence and the achievement of nationhood.

As a student of Italian language and culture, Sedgwick was certainly well equipped to read and interpret the Italian scene for her readers. In antebellum America, an acquaintance with the Italian idiom, accompanied by a fascination with things Italian, was not rare among cultivated upper and middle-class women (as evidenced, for example, by the fairly astounding number of Italy-related stories, sketches, poems, and pictures published in the popular magazine *Godey's Lady's Book*)[5]. But Sedgwick's interest in Italy went far beyond the narrow confines of what was regarded as a highly desirable accomplishment in a lady. In the 1830s Sedgwick and her family welcomed to the United States, befriended, and provided essential assistance to, some of Italy's most prominent patriots who, originally condemned to death by the occupying Austrian government, had had their sentences commuted to

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[4] L.L. Damon-Bach, *Catharine Maria Sedgwick Tours England: Private Letters, Public Account*, in *Transatlantic Women: Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and Great Britain*, B.L. Lueck – B. Bailey – L.L. Damon-Bach ed., University of New Hampshire Press, Durham, NC 2012, p. 29.

[5] On the fortune and role of *Lady's Godey's Book* in antebellum American culture, see I. Lehuu, *Sentimental Figures: Reading* Godey's Lady's Book *in Antebellum America*, in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in 19th Century America*, S. Samuels ed., Oxford University Press, New York 1992, pp. 73-91.

exile after being confined for years in the notorious Spielberg prison[6]. Of the Italian exiles Sedgwick wrote the following: "several of them became intimate in my family, and closely bound to it by reverence and affection on our side [...] Confalonieri, Foresti, Albinola, and our Castillia became our dear friends"[7]. While Sedgwick was not alone in her sympathy for the Italian cause, it is fairly safe to say that no other American writer at the time became so actively involved, or developed such a close relationship, with the representatives of the Italian political diaspora. And only Margaret Fuller, *after* she took up residence in Italy as the correspondent for the "New-York Tribune" in the late 1840s, gained a keener awareness and a deeper understanding of Italy's predicament in the Risorgimento era[8].

The encounter with the Italian exiles had a powerful impact on Sedgwick's opinions about national character, ethnicity, and religion. It forced her to question some of her beliefs which, however more progressive and liberal than most, were certainly not immune from the Anglo-Saxonism and anti-Catholicism to which so many of her contemporaries in the United States heartily subscribed. What she saw in men such as Gaetano De Castillia and Federico Confalonieri was a kind of moral purity, a clarity of opinion and conduct which matched her ideas of what an enlightened elite should possess (her father, a former US congressman and senator, and her brothers being her nearest point of reference). What she also recognized, however, was that those character traits, indeed the whole moral and intellectual make-up of the Italian exiles, was inextricably connected with their Catholic upbringing and faith. In a period when, especially in New England, anti-Catholic prejudice was rampant and occasionally led to violence (as in the 1834 burning of the Ursuline convent and school in Charlestown, Massachusetts)[9], Sedgwick was confronted with living proof that intellectual lucidity, integrity, and a love of freedom were not incompatible with Catholicism. Remembering the Italian exiles in later years, she painted them as patterns of virtue, as heroic, and almost saint-like. De Castillia, whom she called "an elected brother to us all," possessed, in her words, "all the virtues that one can name, and in their most attractive forms. He was a Catholic – such a Catholic as Fénelon was, as St. Paul was, 'clothed in the whole armor of God'. But Castillia had more of St. John than St. Paul, and as appropriately might that apostle, who is to us the impersonation of all gospel love and gentle-

[6] For information on Italian political exiles, see, in particular: G. Stefani, *I prigionieri dello Spielberg sulla via dell'esilio*, Del Bianco, Udine 1963, and A. Bistarelli, *Gli esuli del Risorgimento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2011.

[7] C.M. Sedgwick, *Life and Letters of Catharine Maria Sedgwick*, Harper & Brothers, New York 1871, p. 223n.

[8] On nineteenth-century American responses to Italy's struggle for independence and nationhood, see: H. Marraro, *American Opinion on the Unification of Italy, 1846-1861*, University of Columbia Press, New York 1932; R.M. Peterson, *Echoes of the Italian Risorgimento in Contemporaneous American Writers*, "PMLA", 47, 1932, 1, pp. 220-240; P. Gemme, *Domesticating Foreign Struggles: The Italian Risorgimento and Antebellum American Identity*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens 2005; D. Berthold, *American Risorgimento: Herman Melville and the Cultural Politics of Italy*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus 2009; D. Fiorentino, *Gli Stati Uniti e il Risorgimento d'Italia 1848-1901*, Gangemi, Roma 2013.

[9] On Anti-Catholicism in nineteenth-century America, see: R.A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860*, Quadrangle Books, Chicago 1938; C. Beals, *Brass-Knuckle Crusade: The Great Know-Nothing Conspiracy 1820-1860*, Hastings House, New York 1960; J. Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1994.

ness, have been 'chained' in a dungeon as Castillia"[10]. To Federico Confalonieri Sedgwick erected a verbal monument, celebrating him as "a man that no circumstances can subdue, but whose spirit, like angelic spirits, makes all circumstances subservient to his progress. I have never seen any man who has so realized to me my beau ideal, the dreams of my youth, and the 'sane' portraits of my maturity"[11].

Confalonieri and his fellow exiles were very much on Sedgwick's mind during her Italian travels. While touring the North she visited scenes from which her Italian friends had been displaced, and witnessed almost on a daily basis the pervasive, stifling presence of the Austrian military. It was only natural that she should think of the exiles as part of her ideal readership, as honorary members of the 'kindred at home' to whom she addressed her letters from abroad. But what makes Sedgwick's travel book unique is that her very trajectory in Italy reflects, to some extent, her close relationship with the Italian exiles. While Sedgwick's European trip was a family affair, in that she traveled with her older brother Robert, his wife and eldest daughter and two other nieces, and the trip's primary purpose was to cure Robert, who had recently suffered a stroke, Sedgwick was also on a mission of sorts for the Italian exiles. In addition to being among the imagined addressees of her travel letters, they were themselves the authors of letters of introduction Sedgwick carried with her[12]. Those letters gained her admission into the homes – and won her the gratitude – of the exiles' families and friends, of other former prisoners of Spielberg, most notably Silvio Pellico, and of other illustrious Italians, such as Alessandro Manzoni. Sedgwick was then, simultaneously, the exiles' emissary and their representative. She carried news of them to their loved ones, and at the same time evoked their presence and reputation in her travel book to sensitize her American readers to the cause of Italian independence. For clearly it was of paramount importance to Sedgwick to convince her fellow Americans that the Italian people were worthy of self-rule. The Italian exiles she counted among her friends were the incarnation of that worthiness. This message, which runs like a common thread through the Italian section of Sedgwick's book, stood in sharp contrast to that infantiliza-

[10] C.M. Sedgwick, *Life*, p. 223n. In a letter to Catharine, Charles expressed similar sentiments about Castillia: "I wonder how many men there are on earth like him; we have known no other – one such man in such a condition is to my mind a revelation of a future heaven, and his pure mind, his affections and his bitter trials could not exist in the same person, but for the ever living faith that the sufferings of his present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed". C.M. Sedgwick, *Letters from Charles Sedgwick to His Family and Friends*, C.M. Sedgwick – K. Sedgwick Minot ed., Privately printed, Boston 1870, p. 129.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 258.

[12] For example, in the journal of her trip to Europe, which formed the basis for *Letters from Abroad*, Sedgwick included a letter from Federico Confalonieri to his brother-in-law, Count Gabrio Casati. In the letter, Confalonieri gratefully acknowledged the providential support that the Sedgwicks has provided to Italian exiles and described them as "his true family in America" (my translation). C.M. Sedgwick, *Volumes, 1811-1897: Journal of a Trip to Europe, 1839-1840*, 3rd vol.: 3 Aug.-29 Nov. 1839, MS Catharine Maria Sedgwick Papers, Reel 8, Box 12, Folder 2, Massachusetts Historical Society, p. 180.

tion and feminization of Italy and its people which, as Brigitte Bailey[13] and Paola Gemme[14] have shown, figured prominently in American portrayals – both literary and visual.

In the same vein, and with the same objective, Sedgwick examined the Italian past and contrasted it with the present. As we shall see, in her survey of Italian cities and landscapes, she singled out the era of the independent city states as the most glorious chapter in Italian history. It was a precedent which showed what the Italians had been capable of when they were masters of their own destiny. It was also the model of government and society that, in her view, contemporary Italians were striving to recreate on a national scale. Similarly, Sedgwick was drawn to those art works that, in addition to being superior aesthetic achievements, told foundational stories about the country where they had been created. Thus, in her travel book celebrated masterpieces are made to testify in favor of the Italian people, to attest to their fitness to aspire to nationhood. This idiosyncratic and ideological reading of Italy sets Sedgwick's views apart from those one encounters in most previous and contemporary American travelogues and looks forward to Margaret Fuller's politically engaged dispatches for the "New-York Tribune"[15].

Rather than a limitation, Sedgwick's lack of expertise in art history – which she acknowledged candidly – gave her license to assess the Italian scene by different standards from those traditionally prescribed and codified from a "perspective textually marked as masculine" (to use Elizabeth Bohl's phrase)[16]. Her deficient education in art (for which she was chastised by the critic of the "North American Review")[17], allowed her to distance herself from the type of acquisitive, imperialist, and sexually charged gaze that countless Anglo-Saxon male travelers had directed at Southern Europe and, in particular, at Italy. While Sedgwick shared, like most American and British women travel writers of her time, the class status and accompanying privileges of her male counterparts, as a woman she was particularly sensitive to the lot of those who, like the Italians (or, even more glaringly, African Americans in the United States), had their liberty severely curtailed.

This is not to suggest that Sedgwick's portrayal of Italy and its people is entirely free from tropes and commonplaces that, by 1841, were firmly established. Like many of her predecessors she occasionally depicts Italian life as a spectacle, a giant pageant in which history and art, the dead and the living all contribute to the overall aesthetic effect for

[13] B. Bailey, *Gender, Nation, and the Tourist Gaze in the European 'Year of Revolutions': Kirkland's* Holidays Abroad, "American Literary History", 14, 2002, 1, pp. 60-82; *Representing Italy: Fuller, History Painting, and the Popular Press*, in *Margaret Fuller's Cultural Critique: Her Age and Legacy*, F. Fleishmann ed., Peter Lang, New York 2000, pp. 229-248.

[14] P. Gemme, *Domesticating Foreign Struggles*.

[15] M. Fuller, *'These Sad But Glorious Days': Dispatches from Europe, 1846-1850*, L. J. Reynolds – S. Belasco Smith ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 1991.

[16] E. Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1995, p. 3.

[17] Review of *Letters from Abroad to Kindred at Home*, by C.M. Sedgwick, "North American Review", 53, 1841, 113, p. 531.

the benefit of foreign spectators[18]. In particular, like most Protestant visitors, Sedgwick responds with a mixture of puzzlement and discomfort at what she perceives as the theatrical, performative quality of Catholic ritual. At the same time, however, Sedgwick was aware of her cultural bias, and tried more than once to take it to task. Her description of the ceremonies in honor of St. Charles, in the Duomo of Milan, is a case in point. Sedgwick remarks that she and her party could not escape the feeling that they had been "witnessing a sort of melodrama"[19]. But if the ceremonies, in her eyes, were not truly Christian (being too showy and Pagan-like), the same could be said, she had to admit, of her hasty censure. If she tried to place what she had seen in its proper context, she was bound to acknowledge that "[t]ime and use have consecrated [those ceremonies] to the pious Catholic. To him, each observation of this to us empty and inexpressive show embodies some pious thought or holy memory"[20].

At the very outset of her Italian tour, in Turin, Sedgwick notes that "on the very threshold of Italy, we instinctively turn from what 'is' to what 'was'"[21]. And yet, in the rest of the book she tries to fight that instinct or at least balance it with a pronounced focus on contemporary matters. And even when the language of aesthetics creeps into her speech, it is made for the most part subservient to political and ethical issues. This is especially noticeable in Sedgwick's account of her encounter with Silvio Pellico, undoubtedly the best-known of the former Italian prisoners of Spielberg thanks to the international renown of his book *My Prisons* (parts of which Sedgwick had translated into English). While introducing the encounter to her brother as "something [...] that will probably interest you more than all the pictures in Italy", she cannot help turning Silvio Pellico himself into a picture: "He is of low stature and slightly made, a sort of etching of a man, with delicate and symmetrical features"[22]. But then, she fleshes him out, as it were, and for the benefit of her American readers compares him to one of their most influential and most highly respected intellectuals, the Unitarian theologian and author William Ellery Channing. Pellico, she states, has "enough body to gravitate and keep the spirit from its natural upward flight – a more shadowy Dr. Channing!"[23]. Aware that to most Americans, Pellico was known primarily as the author of *My Prisons*, Sedgwick makes him one with his book, à la Whitman: "His looks, his manner, his voice, and every word he spoke, were in harmony with his book, certainly one of the most remarkable productions of our day"[24]. Tellingly, then, the Italian section of Sedgwick's book opens with the portrait of an exemplary Italian. And although she does mention some of the rumors that circulated at the time about Pellico, namely that he had finally succumbed to "political despotism and priestly craft", Sedgwick dismisses those rumors quite emphatically with the statement that Pellico "is a saint that 'cannot'

[18] Significantly enough, early in the Italian section of her journal, Sedgwick refers to Piazza Castello in Turin as "the first theatre of Italian life we have seen". C.M. Sedgwick, *Journal*, p. 167.
[19] C.M. Sedgwick, *Letters*, 2, p. 46.
[20] *Ibidem*.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
[22] *Ibid*, p. 23.
[23] *Ibidem*.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

fall from grace"[25]. Like the exiles in the United States, of whom the Sedgwicks were able to give him news, Pellico embodied the virtues that, in Catharine's view, the best part of the Italian elite possessed; she portrayed him as a human masterpiece and one perhaps more impressive and precious than those on canvas, walls, or in marble.

In men such as Pellico, Confalonieri, Foresti and the other patriots she knew, Sedgwick saw the possibility of a resurgence of that spirit of independence that, she believed, had had its heyday in the medieval Italian city states. Writing at a time when, as Reginald Horsman has shown, Anglo-Saxonism was on the rise in American public discourse[26], Sedgwick celebrated the days of the Italian city states as a sort of local equivalent to the Anglo-Saxons' supposedly innate love of liberty. And she suggested that just as her own countrymen had proved to be the true heirs of the Anglo-Saxons in the modern world, so too could the Italians reclaim their own glorious heritage. Interestingly, given the ethnic and racial slant of the Anglo-Saxon myth, Sedgwick singled out northern Italians, and the Lombards in particular, as the people who more any other had remained true to their roots and who continued to show a commendable intolerance of despotism. Northerners, in short, were the most American of the Italians. Calling Milan "the queen of the northern Italian republics"[27] Sedgwick recalls the "rising of the people [...] in the eleventh century upon the nobles" as "evidence of the spirit of equal rights hardly surpassed in our Democratic age"[28]. And she detects traces of that original fervor when, upon attending a performance at La Scala, she notices how Italian ladies refrained from receiving Austrian officers in their boxes, knowing that if they did they would be ostracized by their countrymen:

> Is there not hope of a people who, while their chains are clinking, dare thus openly to disdain their masters?[29] [...]
>
> It is true, we see no rational prospect of freedom for Italy. Overshadowed as it is by Austrian despotism, and overpowered by the presence of her immense military force, and, what is still worse, broken into small and hostile states without one federative principle or feeling. But we 'cannot' despair of a people who, like the Milanese, show that they have inherited the spirit of their fathers[30].

With its appeal to enlightened, heroic founding fathers, the last sentence, it should be noted, echoes a previous passage in which Sedgwick not only emphasizes the affinity between the Italian battle for independence and the American Revolution, but seems to give the Italians an edge over her own countrymen in terms of selflessness and valor. What is more, prefiguring Margaret Fuller, she defines support for the Italian cause as a specific American duty: "We honor our fathers for the few years of difficulty through which they

[25] *Ibidem*.
[26] R. Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1981.
[27] C.M. Sedgwick, *Letters*, 2, p. 31.
[28] *Ibid*., p. 31n.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 41.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 41n.

struggled; and can we refuse our homage to these men, who sacrificed everything, and 'forever', that man holds most dear, to the sacred cause of freedom and truth?"[31]. Later in the book, while visiting Padua, she once again alludes to a special connection, an affinity between Italy and her own country, and she does so by identifying the Italian tradition of municipal independence as specifically republican. Moreover, she associates that era of independence with the flourishing of agriculture and the arts in a relation of cause and effect:

> The Roman remains and memorials in Lombardy are comparatively few; and it is not to the days of Roman dominion that the mind recurs, but to the period of Italian independence. You perceive in these rich plains of Lombardy the source in nature of the individual life, vigor, and power of the free Italian cities, in these warm plains completely irrigated, and producing without measure corn, wine, and the mulberry-tree, those surest natural sources of wealth. And you perceive still, in the noble physiognomy of the people, the intellectual character that made Italy the seat of art, literature, commerce, and manufactures, while civilization had scarcely dawned on the rest of Europe. [...] These were the days when Milan and Brescia, Verona, Vicenza, and Padua, and all the rest of their glorious company, were republics[32].

In her campaign 'against' despotism and 'for' Italian independence, Sedgwick enlisted, so to speak, some of the art works she had the opportunity to observe closely in the course of her travels. Indeed, the extent to which certain monuments, pictures, and statues lent themselves to political commentary, or seemed to reveal distinctive traits of the Italian character, seems to have been one of Sedgwick's main criteria for deeming them worthy of special attention. While several other travelers experienced Italy's artistic heritage mostly as a reminder of an irretrievably lost greatness, Sedgwick looked for clues that might give her (and her readers) a better understanding of Italy's present situation and some hope for the future. For instance, one of Italy's great masters, Raphael, could be celebrated not only for his genius and exceptional skill, but also for preserving his artistic integrity and creative autonomy even in the context of papal patronage. Tellingly, after admiring his *Sibyls* in Rome, Sedgwick paid Raphael what she thought was the highest possible compliment by calling him "the Shakespeare of painters, and with almost as full a measure of inspiration"[33], thus using as a yardstick for excellence what many considered the very best of Anglo-Saxon culture. And she found herself riveted by *The School of Athens* (in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace) which, she pointed out, "was a subject of Raphael's own selection". What, in her view, made *The School of Athens* so compelling was that its creator "was unshackled by dictum of pope or cardinal, and freely followed out the suggestions of his inspired genius"[34]. Here was an undisputed masterpiece which advertised, as it were, the Italian capacity for independent thought, a capacity largely suffocated in the country

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 32n.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 94.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 168.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 199.

Sedgwick toured but which she had reason to believe could re-emerge and finally make Italy one and free.

Sedgwick certainly lost no opportunity to denounce the forces of oppression. For instance, after declining to offer any observations on the holdings of Palazzo Madama in Turin (which included works by Dolci, Reni, and Murillo), Sedgwick turned her full attention to the Arch of Peace in Milan. Originally projected by Napoleon, it had been completed by the Austrians after his defeat and death. In the process it had also been appropriated and turned into a powerful piece of propaganda. To Sedgwick, the ways in which some of the original decorations had been tampered with to remove any allusion to Napoleon, served as an example of how art, all too often, became "the passive slave of tyrants"[35]. But what the Austrians had done to the Arch of Peace, rather than proclaiming their might, seemed to Sedgwick to betray their weakness and cowardice. And so did too their banishment of a bronze statue of Napoleon by Canova to a cellar of the Brera gallery. Although she found it "failing in resemblance", Sedgwick thought the statue was so life-like that she described it as "'buried alive'"[36] and capable, even in its present condition, of inspiring terror in the heart of the enemy.

Sedgwick's strong response to another piece she saw at the Brera, Guercino's painting of *Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael*, is worth mentioning inasmuch as it seems to encapsulate her personal aesthetic principle. "The coloring and composition", she writes, "is, as it should always be, made subservient to the moral effect – the outer reveals the inner man"[37]. Similarly, when writing about Titian's *Repentant Magdalen*[38], which she saw in Venice, she claims it "belongs to the highest class of that intellectual painting which reveals the secrets of the soul"[39]. Also of interest are her comments on Leonardo's *Last Supper*. While noting, as many other visitors had done before her, that parts of the fresco were "so faded as to be nearly obliterated", she did not share the common opinion that its countless reproductions were more satisfying than the original: "No copy that I have seen has approached this face of Jesus, so holy, calm, and beautiful; it is 'God manifest in the flesh'"[40]. But more representative of Sedgwick's attitude and her priority system, is the way in which her visit to the studios of two notable living painters, Francesco Hayez and Pelagio Palagi, was completely overshadowed by her glimpse of Confalonieri's house on her way there, a house that, with its inevitable associations, "produced too vivid an impression of our friend's sufferings to allow any pleasant sensations immediately to succeed it"[41]. Sedgwick later visited the Casati Stampa family mausoleum in the little town of Muggiò, near Monza, and took this opportunity to pay heartfelt homage to the memory of Confalonieri's wife Teresa Casati, a "victim to Austrian despotism, and martyr to conjugal affection". In doing so, she

[35] *Ibid*., p. 33.
[36] *Ibid*., p. 35.
[37] *Ibidem*.
[38] This is the version Titian painted in the 1560s. It is housed in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.
[39] C.M. Sedgwick, *Letters*, 2, p. 104.
[40] *Ibid*., p. 37.
[41] *Ibid*., p. 57.

also addressed anti-Catholic prejudice which she correctly identified as a formidable obstacle to the full vindication of the Italian character in America. Appealing to her brother Charles, and through him, to all her American readers, she emphasized that Teresa Casati's exemplary character "was formed in the bosom of the Catholic Church"[42].

In similar accents she voiced her admiration for Canova's statue of *Palamedes* which she saw in the Villa Carlotta at Lake Como. She was particularly struck by the story of how Canova had narrowly escaped being crushed by the accidental fall of the statue and how his patron, Count Sommariva, had assured him he cherished the damaged statue precisely because it would always remind him of Canova's 'miraculous' preservation. In sharing this anecdote with her readers, Sedgwick pursued a dual purpose. On the one hand she used it as a strong argument in her rebuttal of widespread negative stereotypes about the Italians and in her passionate defense of their right to self-rule. Describing *Palamedes* as "a monument of the integrity of the great artist, and the delicacy and generosity of his employer", she exhorted her brother (the ideal reader, standing for all readers) to remember that "these are traits of Italian character, and that such incidental instances of virtue are proofs they are not quite the degraded people prejudice and ignorance represent them"[43]. At the same time, by praising Sommariva's disinterested conduct, his idea of what constituted 'real' value, Sedgwick placed before her compatriots an example which was in direct opposition to the unbridled market values that reigned in Jacksonian America. In this respect, *Letters from Abroad* is very much in tune with the troubled response to commercialism which, as Mary Kelley has pointed out[44], represents a key aspect of Sedgwick's production (particularly, I would add, in her urban novel *Clarence*)[45]. In stark contrast to Sommariva, American customers of American sculptors such as Thomas Crawford (whose Roman studio Sedgwick visited and described at length), treated their transactions with artists as they would any other exchange of commodities for money. Their intentions might be good, even "generous" Sedgwick conceded, but by failing to provide artists with an adequate advance with which to cover the cost of materials, they placed them in a very difficult predicament: sometimes orders were given "with the 'mercantile idea' of payment on delivery of the goods, which could not be executed for want of money to buy the block of marble"[46] (emphasis added). It was precisely a desire to escape, at least temporarily, the mercantile mindset and its powerful hold on American life, that drew so many Americans to Italy, a country they liked to believe was immune from, or at least as yet untouched by, the influence of modern market forces. Given the distinctly masculine connotation of those forces in antebellum American culture, Italy – conceived as an alternative dimension or a refuge – was particularly appealing to women. It comes as no surprise that when the Italian scene failed to live up to such expectations, the reaction of many nineteenth-century American travelers was one of disappointment. Sedgwick is no exception, as is particularly

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
[43] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
[44] M. Kelley, *Catharine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1867)*, "Legacy", 6, 1989, 2, p. 44.
[45] C.M. Sedgwick, *Clarence; or, A Tale of Our Own Times*, Carey & Lea, Philadelphia 1830.
[46] C.M. Sedgwick, *Letters*, 2, p. 158.

evident in her dismayed response to the Corso, the main thoroughfare in Rome. Tellingly, what made the Corso so unpleasant to her was that, with its many commercial activities, it reminded her too closely of America: "The Corso was full of gay equipages, filled with English people, and lined, for the most part, with mean shops, with mean, everyday commodities; such shops and such 'goods' as you would see in the 'Main-street' of Hudson, or in any other second-rate town"[47]. Sedgwick wanted Italy to come as close as possible to the American republican ideal, but without becoming Americanized in its customs, tastes, and concerns. The same shops that in Hudson or any other small American town would likely have been regarded as a sign of vitality and industriousness, however mean and prosaic they might seem, looked incongruous in Rome[48]. Perhaps more than any other European country, Italy in the nineteenth century made Americans feel simultaneously superior and inferior. While Sedgwick felt moved to thank heaven that her "lot was cast in a land where we can think, speak, and act as the spirit moveth us"[49], she also realized that she had never been so painfully aware of what was missing in her homeland:

> I cannot convey to you what I have enjoyed, and am enjoying, from painting, sculpture, and architecture; and when I involuntarily shudder at the idea of leaving all these magnificent and lovely forms, I doubt the wisdom of our New-World people coming here to acquire hankerings which cannot be appeased at home. I would advise no American to come to Italy who has not strong domestic affections and close domestic ties, or some absorbing and worthy pursuit at home. Without these strong bonds to his country he may feel, when he returns there, as one does who attempts to read a treatise on political economy after being lost in the interest of a captivating romance[50].

Exposure to Italy's art treasures was enriching, intoxicating, but also perilously addictive. Americans, she warned, could safely enjoy them only if personal attachments and responsibilities kept them firmly tied to the mast of their lives.

Sedgwick knew from experience that American visitors to Italy could take comfort from and pride themselves in their more fortunate circumstances with regard to material prosperity, personal freedom, and form of government, but she hoped that such an assurance would make them more sympathetic to a people that aspired to the same goals. She believed that well-informed Americans, on becoming aware of the parallels between the revolutionary origins of their own nation and Italy's struggle for independence, would connect the past to the present, and relate what they perceived in Italy to their own history.

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[47] *Ibid.*, p. 148.

[48] As James Buzard has argued, to visitors from Great Britain and the United States seeking refuge from utilitarianism and commercialism, "the ordinary making and trading occurring in Europe's tourist capitals was [...] an unwelcome reminder of the methods and exigencies shaping social life in their own nations". J. Buzard, *A Continent of Pictures: Reflections on the 'Europe' of Nineteenth-Century Tourists*, "PMLA", 108, 1993, 1, p. 32.

[49] C.M. Sedgwick, *Letters*, p. 256.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 193-194.

Thus, rather than succumb to purely aesthetic and sensual impressions, they would gain a true insight into Italy's predicament. Reading Italy and its treasures from the enlightened American perspective Sedgwick espoused in her book, they would understand with unprecedented clarity, and wholeheartedly support, Italy's right to self-determination.

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