

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 4.1 (SPRING 2008)

I Think I'm Turning European

Europe (In Theory). Roberto M. Dainotto. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007. 270 pp.

Reviewed by [John Plotz](#), Brandeis University



Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 4.1



<1>This book owes its origins to the terrible realization that “I, Roberto M. Dainotto, no longer was an Italian; slowly but surely I was becoming a European!” With appealing candour, the re-branded Dainotto ’fesses up to the emotion that shapes his book-length response: “Ressentiment, admittedly, is not a very noble human instinct” (1, 3). Dainotto’s brief is to lay bare centuries of assault on Southern Europe, just as postcolonial studies has chronicled the ravages of Orientalism. Despite a long tradition that had placed Italy or the Mediterranean at the center of the world, with Rome its cynosure and Athens its Omphalos, Dainotto writes to draw attention to a North-South divide that for more than two centuries has shaped what might be called Europe’s internal Orient.

<2>And so, as Euro-Union proceeded apace, Dainotto found himself being swallowed up by a Europe that he was convinced didn’t particularly care for him. When confronted with a similarly unwelcome identity change, the English (or is that Anglo-Indian? Indo-Anglian?) art-band Cornershop sang a pithy comeback: “This Western Oriental’s come full circle.” This Italian-European, too, has come full circle, and this book is his circuit: from alien and outcast to Europe and History, into its coils and, at the end, insistently outside again. It might have been called *The South Writes Back*.

<3>Without underestimating the Orient’s role in backlighting the “idea of Europe” that first attained adjectival status when Pius II coined the adjective “European” around 1470, Dainotto wishes readers to attend carefully to the abiding significance of the palpable line between Europe’s north and south. Postcolonial theory accordingly needs to be modified to take the problem of internal differentiation fully into account: “for European theory to dispense of the absolute Other ... difference has to be translated from the radical Other onto a negative part, or moment of the European self” (54). And “the deviant, the internal Other of Europe, is a Southerner” (54). Dainotto accordingly argues that Montesquieu is not being archaic but farsightedly modern when, around 1760, he replaces the long-standing Europe-Asia dichotomy with a latitudinal split, linking weather patterns to “cool” calculation and “hot” passions.

<4>This kind of resentful Southernism might produce a mere act of mirror-imaging, turning the moral scales on the North. Dainotto, an Associate Professor of Romance Studies at Duke, is after something more subtle. One mark of the book’s success is that Dainotto decides to undermine some of the easy generalizations about European accounts of East-West divides by retelling the story of Orientalism Southern style: *Europe (In Theory)* accordingly looks with fresh eyes at one Spanish and one Italian historian who approached the unfamiliar story of the Arab/Islamic Mediterranean, and its legacy in Southern Europe.

<5>Dainotto takes a little too much time, though, getting to his finest cases. In many ways, this is two books, one *In Theory* and the other *In History*. At the outset, the theory angle looks poised to dominate, with the innately Eurocentric nature of History playing the role of Dainotto’s chief suspect. Rather than being merely one continent among others, an *object* of History, Europe by virtue of its primacy and some difficult to articulate but equally difficult to evade latent sense of superiority is also the place where true *subjects* can both experience and study that history. The (*In Theory*) of the title marks Dainotto’s desire that Europe’s deeply subterranean claim to primacy be displaced.

<6>Dainotto launches into theoretical gyrations (owing much to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s

Provincializing Europe) to argue that Europe is both ground and referent for the (capital H) History we all now inhabit. Dainotto's claim seems to be that an Enlightenment universalism putatively rooted in the "republic of letters" is actually dependent on a real physical locus (probably centered not far from Madame de Staël's salon: Napoleon, after all, had said "Geneva is Europe"). Ultimately, though, the Nietzschean hermeneutic that undergirds this claim undoes itself: without some standpoint conceptually apart from the Eurocentric bias of history itself, where does the historian stand while claiming that all previous historical thought was unwittingly grounded in Europe?

<7>The real intensity of *Europe (In Theory)*, however, seems to lie elsewhere, not in Theory but in History—mainly the history of historians themselves, striving to establish reliable accounts of past events and usable syllogisms for future outcomes. At the book's core is a series of revealing case studies ranging from Montesquieu to Michele Amari, a fascinating nineteenth-century historian of Sicily (and, Dainotto says, a doyen of Italian Orientalists). Dainotto's heroes in this book all stand allied in protecting two things: the dignity of Southern Europe in all its particularity (J. M. Andres was in his day hagiographized as Spain's saintly scholar, and Amari in his as Sicily's savior) and historicism itself. It is striking, too, that many of his villains seem equally happy to align the South and the drive to historicize. One of Dainotto's most interesting discoveries is how strongly *both* Southern and Northern European intellectual historians, from the eighteenth century onwards, were drawn to the idea of the North as abstract and theoretically minded, the South as rooted in its past and, well, historicist.

<8>Beyond his general reflections on the tradition of Southern historicism, Dainotto has a terrifically sharp eye for the kind of inverting detail that reveals the inherent self-deception that shaped claims of European (and Northern) superiority. Rather than Huntington's memorable "clash of civilizations," Dainotto discerns ignorant armies missing one another by night, a world in which circumferences are everywhere, and centers nowhere. His commitment to uncovering the other viewpoints, from which other ruling categories than Europe might have come to dominate, comes through very elegantly in the long final chapter on Amari, whose 1842 *Period of the Sicilian Histories of the Thirteenth Century* was a "hybrid narrative attempt" that charted the "Europeanization of Sicilian History" by showing what the Sicilianization of European history might look like instead.

<9>Dainotto astutely demonstrates that what looms large from one vantage point may not, from another vantage point, be memorable at all. History, in other words, is not only written by victors, it is also written by the people who care enough about what happened to recall it. In Amari's telling and Dainotto's sympathetic retelling, clashes in Sicily that later Christian historians persistently represented as epic battles waged against an arrogant East doing its worst were recorded by Arab chroniclers, if at all, as merely a series of forgettable border clashes. (I am reminded of the moment, in a B-movie, when a young woman tells a general that the day he killed her father was "the worst day of my life." He gazes absent-mindedly at her and says, "Yes, to me, that day was ... a Tuesday.")

<10>*Europe (In Theory)* anatomizes the many ways in which the brand of history congenial to latter-day orthodoxies strives to retrofit, for the benefit of that orthodoxy, a well-bounded locus (in this case, Europe) bearing few or no traces of all the previous floor-plans that could have made use of the space far differently. By messily revealing the messy histories that failed and succeeded in leaving their trace on the idea of Europe, this book reminds readers that one person's margin is another's metropole, that from Gibraltar to Shanghai there lurks the perpetual potential for the kind of visible seesawing that created Istanbul/Constantinople. Roberto Dainotto is not about to become a European quietly.

