

LOOKING AT ITALY THROUGH GREEN GLASSES: IRISH TRAVELLERS IN ITALY

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In the wake of Edward Said's seminal text, *Orientalism* (1978), one is tempted to employ the term "Italianism" to indicate the study of images of Italy in literature, of how they are influenced by the ideological bias behind them and, more especially, by an idea of cultural hegemony. British, American, French, and German "Italianisms" have been studied extensively, but Irish "Italianism" is still a field to be ploughed. Italy and Italians occupied for a long time a privileged position in English mentalities, and consequently also in Anglo-Ireland. The Irish, like the English, travelled to Italy on the Grand Tour and left accounts of their travels; Irish Gothic tales set their terrors in Italy; sentimental novels found a fruitful terrain there; Italian writers were translated into English by the Irish and some of them had a great influence on Irish writers (e.g. Dante on Heaney, Svevo on Joyce). But for all this, the specificity of the Irish gaze on Italy (what has been jokingly called "looking at Italy through green glasses")¹ has not yet been investigated in a comprehensive way.²

The study of Irish travel to Italy, for instance, is sure to yield many surprises and interesting interpretations. From the eighteenth century onwards, the Irish, who had had in the past a long tradition of journeys of exploration, proselytizing, pilgrimage and exile, also began to take part in the Grand Tour, that great formative experience in which, by testing oneself against the Other and incorporating notions of the Other, the upper classes all over Northern Europe took their first steps towards globalisation. One of the chief destinations of such travels was Italy, a country that was perceived as strange in terms of language, mores, religion or physical characteristics and often viewed suspiciously but also, surprisingly, as bearing an unexpected kinship to Ireland. This at least was the attitude of such nineteenth-century Irish Grand Tourists as Lady Morgan and Thomas Moore or of their twentieth-century heirs, Sean O'Faolain, Elizabeth Bowen and Colm Tóibín, who are the objects of this essay.

Travel to Italy and the related writings were a codified practice in the Anglophone tradition, established by generations of British travellers. Much too often, however, the

1 Julia O'Faolain in an interview about her father said that Sean O'Faolain saw Italy through "a pair of green glasses" (Superbo 113).

2 Apart from many individual studies scattered in journals and miscellanies, there are, however, two publications approaching the question of the interaction between the two cultures in a more organic form. The first issue of *Studi Irlandesi* (2011) contains a 250-page thematic section, "Italy-Ireland: Cultural Inter-Relations," edited by Donatella Abbate Badin and Fiorenzo Fantaccini. Chiara Sciarrino's monograph explores the ways in which Italian culture has influenced Anglo-Irish contemporary literature and drama.

encounter with the Italian Other involved what a scholar specializing in travel has described as “the production of a national mythology emphasizing British exceptionalism and justifying ethnocentric attitudes” (Kostova 19). Ireland, instead, was not, to borrow Peter Denman’s observations on Charles Lever, “a place for travellers to set out from, with the implicit base of a predominant set of cultural and economic values to underpin both an author’s attitudes and a publisher’s sale figures” (Denman 265). Admittedly, many of the upper class Irish travellers who in the age of the Grand Tour set out for Italy belonged to the same milieu as the English travellers and shared their aims and views, yet an ever-increasing consciousness of their Irish identity influenced the perception of the country they visited. The awareness of being themselves the objects of the gaze of a presumed dominant race mitigated the sense of superiority and often resulted in an increased identification with the foreign country. Thus the writings about Italy by Irish literati and travellers, although pertaining to the same linguistic domain as British travelogues, possess characteristics of their own, different from the British, and these characteristics are tied to the images the Irish have of themselves. This, in differing degrees, is true both of the nineteenth and of the twentieth century.

It is an axiom that images of foreign countries are influenced not only by ideological bias but also by the self-perception of the perceiver.³ Irish attitudes towards Italy can, arguably, be tied to some important features of Irishness such as, in the nineteenth century, a colonial status and aspirations to some form of liberation, not to mention the ever-present religious question, and, in the twentieth century, Catholicism and the growing pains of a young, independent nation-state. Italy, too, was a Catholic country that in the nineteenth century had been under foreign rule, frequently attempting to shake it off, and in the twentieth century had been adjusting to its recent independence going through the throes of nationalism, dictatorship, racism, terrorism, separatism, political crises and a rapid economic growth followed in the twenty-first century by a rapid downfall. All these features, then, could justify a special relationship of Ireland with Italy, whose history, traditions and culture were, in fact, often used by Irish writers to construct a parallel Irish discourse. Italy, with its sense of oppression and its struggle for independence, provided, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Irish authors with instances of national unrest, which lent themselves to pointed representations and interpretations alluding in a veiled way to the Irish plight. Twentieth-century Italy, on the other hand, offered more complex and varied distorting mirrors in which the Irish could contemplate themselves. Besides the obvious points of contact, religion and the strictures of morality, another important element in the construction of Italy was the economic question, with the contrast between the earlier disabling poverty and, later on, the prosperity of the ages of the Italian miracle and the Celtic Tiger. And then there was the all-pervading influence of the Catholic Church with

3 For a full treatment of the dynamics between those images which characterise the Other (*hetero-images*) and those which characterise one’s own, domestic identity (*self-images* or *auto-images*), see Beller & Leerssen.

which the modern states and societies of Italy and Ireland had to deal in the twentieth century. Even in the partly post-nationalist, post-Catholic and globalised Ireland of the twenty-first century there is still room (though less than before) for mirroring oneself in an Italy that has gone through a similar process.

The Nineteenth Century

Irish visitors to Italy in the early nineteenth century were certainly aware of similarities between the conditions of the two countries and knew that a portrait of Italy could be read as a metaphor for Ireland. The political component, for instance, was quite important in Thomas Moore's and Lady Morgan's reactions since they came to Italy at a time of great turmoil, just before the breaking out of the 1820-21 uprisings which heralded the Risorgimento. The perception of similarity, whether made explicit, as in the case of Lady Morgan, or covered up because it was felt to be too dangerous, as in the case of Thomas Moore's poems, transpires also from the accounts of other nineteenth-century Irish travellers to Italy.

Lady Morgan's monumental travelogue, *Italy* (1821), by common consent one of the most sympathetic to the country, though not to its leaders, provides copious information on all aspects of early nineteenth-century Italy and of its history and conveys the thrill of the encounter with the foreign and the unfamiliar. Between the lines of the conventional discourse of travel, however, a political subtext surfaces and the rhetoric of diversity is juxtaposed to the rhetoric of sameness as events observed on the Italian peninsula conjure tacit comparisons between the plights of Italy and Ireland. By writing about Italy, Morgan voices her Jacobinism and explores the meaning of national identity, as she was doing for Ireland in her fictional production.⁴

Morgan often uses the dialectical opposition of an oppressing race (the Austrians or the Spanish in different eras and regions of Italy) and of an oppressed race whose lost dignity, she implies, is soon to be regained. One may recognise here the binary structure of her national tales and of two romances, *Ida of Athens* (1809) and *The Princess; or, The Beguine* (1835), in which, under the pretence of writing about Greece or Belgium, Morgan alludes to Ireland. Whenever in her travels she encounters "privilege against the rights of nations" (*Italy* 2: 28) and disregard of a country's claims on one side and "ignorance, degradation, and passive obedience in the vassal people" (1: 49), on the other, she reacts with a passion that owes some of its vehemence to the bitterness she feels about Ireland. Conversely, the resilience and love of liberty in spite of the oppression, which survived in the many Italian states she had observed, calls for the same admiration which she had voiced for her own country in *Patriotic*

4 Parts of the section on Lady Morgan's comparisons between Italy and Ireland are derived from Donatella Abbate Badin, *Lady Morgan's Italy: Anglo-Irish Sensibilities and Italian Realities* and "Lady Morgan's *Italy*: Travel Book or Political Tract?."

Sketches: “That mind indeed must be endowed with great native strength [...] which can breathe the spirit of liberty beneath the lash of despotism” (48).

We can notice an Irish reverberation in her observations on several Italian political circumstances. Commenting on Lombardy, she condemns the Habsburg form of government “that insulates the inhabitants of each petty state” and “the illiberal and narrow policy of the present day which knows no means of governing but to divide, and no method of tranquillizing but to degrade” (*Italy* 1: 110). This is the more angrily felt because it matches “the execrable system of ‘divide and govern’” denounced in her romance *Florence Macarthy* (Charles Morgan 1: v). The way the Spanish ruled over Naples by “*the delegated power of foreign despotism*” and without “any legitimate right to reign over a distant land of whose language they were [...] ignorant” (*Italy* 2: 361) suggests that Ireland is at the back of her mind. The disaster of 1798 had killed Morgan’s great hopes that the benefits of the French Revolution would reach Ireland. Her impassioned account of the Jacobin republic of 1799 in Naples and of its bloody repression that fills many pages of *Italy* reflects her sentiments about the 1798 Rising, which had been as ephemeral as the Neapolitan revolution, but, like the latter, had heralded a new awareness and new aspirations.

Italian poverty acts as a continuous reminder of her own people: “Irish eyes might well weep” in gazing on some ‘beggared-looking women’ working in the fields and some ‘loitering men’ and “Irish hearts might feel that human misery, seen where it may, has a constant type in the home of their affections” (*Italy* 2: 153). Morgan also complains about the essentialism of the representations of Neapolitan people: “It has been the fashion to accuse the Neapolitans of an inherent viciousness.” The equally maligned Irish could not have been too far from her mind when she uttered these remarks or when she gave a justification for the negative stereotypes: “Conquered nations are always subjects of slander to their foreign masters, who seek to sanction their own injustice by assuming the worthlessness of their victims” (*Italy* 2: 385). It is in her Irishness that we must seek the spring for Morgan’s transculturation, in other words her identification with, and her integration into, the culture of the Italian Other, which frequently implies disowning her British identity in favour of the victims – Italian as well as Irish – of the colonising country’s hegemonic power.

One of the purposes of *Italy* is to evoke the benefits of the liberal and progressive rule Italy had experienced under Napoleon both during the Republic and the Empire. Morgan’s defence of England’s archrival, considered as a champion of the fight against the enemies of liberty, is tantamount to an indirect attack against England, numbered repeatedly in the text among the tyrants and oppressors of the world. Her enthusiasm for France, “that nation which dared to redress the wrongs, and stem the abuses of a thralldom of ages” (*Italy* 1: 28), is coloured by the strong feelings her countrymen had for what was considered a land of refuge of the exiled and the repository of Irish hopes. Morgan’s Francophilia can be contrasted to her resentment against England and its “disregard of national rights” made explicit in her attacks

against England as a betrayer of Italian hopes. England's role in consigning the proud ancient maritime republics of Genoa and Venice into foreign hands, for one, reveals something the Irish people were familiar with, England's "disregard of national rights" (1: 48).

Clearly many of Morgan's positive or negative remarks are determined by epistemological and political reasons, but so is also her wariness. We must not forget, in fact, that Lady Morgan was a British citizen and that she wrote for a British publisher and British readers. Like Thomas Moore and other successful Irish contemporaries, she had to tone down her perceptions and her criticism of England. In her *Letter to the Reviewers of "Italy,"*⁵ defending herself from criticism, she emphasises that her intention had only been to compare Italian degradation with the model of excellence offered by a constitutional and Protestant Great Britain. While Morgan's British half often flattered by the comparisons that arose from her travel experiences, her other half, the Irish, wavered between sympathetic identification and rational distancing.

Thomas Moore's copious notes of his brief visit to Italy in 1819 collected in his *Journal* were used for the composition of *Fables for the Holy Alliance* and *Rhymes on the Road* (1823), which contain several poems dealing with some specific past and recent Italian events (the fall of Venice, the Neapolitan Revolution, the revolt of Cola di Rienzo). While the general sentiment that inspires the historical poems is that of liberalism, Moore, however, reveals in his journal a hyper-critical, even hostile attitude that confirms his dislike of the country and clashes with what other radical Irish and English writers had to say about the first stirrings of a fight for freedom and independence in Italy.⁶ At the time of the publication of the 1823 volume of poems including *Fables for the Holy Alliance* and *Rhymes on the Road*, Moore was in trouble because of the Bermuda affair. While he could pose as a defender of liberty in an unfocused way, sympathy for an actual liberal rebellion against England's allies might have seemed inappropriate and politically unwise. Too much sympathy for the Italian revolutionary movement could also have been misinterpreted at home and would have been detrimental to the success of Moore's work. Indeed, in the poem "Oh! Blame not the Bard," Moore distances himself from all political involvement, even as regards Ireland, for "'tis treason to love her, and death to defend" (*Poetical Works* 3: 264-265).

In short, by writing about Italy in the nineteenth century, some Irish writers broached familiar and dangerous issues such as the meaning of national identity, the loss of dignity under foreign occupation, the right to rebel and shake off the oppression of that same foreign power. But when the foreign power was a close ally of the United Kingdom it was a more delicate issue than talking of rulers and oppressors in a

5 *A Letter to the Reviewers of "Italy"* was appended to the second edition of *Italy* and was also published as a separate pamphlet by Colburn in 1821.

6 Moore's views on Italy are examined in greater detail in Donatella Abbate Badin's "Lady Morgan and Thomas Moore" and "Thomas Moore in Italy."

vague satirical way. Whether Morgan and Moore took a position or not, the gaze they cast on Italy, however, was conditioned by Ireland's colonial status. The political dimension, even when it was not explicitly confronted, was, indeed, a key element in the constructions of Italy offered by nineteenth century Irish travellers.

The Twentieth Century

Travel to post-Independence Italy from post-Independence Ireland presents other peculiarities, and, on the whole, Italy does not seem to have left its mark on Irish literature in a meaningful way. There are, however, a few important exceptions confirming the thesis that the gaze the Irish cast on Italy is strongly coloured by national identity-formation even if nationalism is no longer a determining factor since, in contrast to nineteenth-century discourse, explicit or veiled political statements are no longer in order in the second half of the twentieth century. The constructions of Italy by more recent Irish writers are guided by a desire to see and understand the new Italy in all its diversity, but the discovery of affinities seems to be inevitable and each encounter ends up in an illumination about the Self rather than about the Other.

Colm Tóibín, in his travel book, *The Sign of the Cross*, uses Catholicism as the prism through which to view Italy and the rest of Europe. The shared religion is, indeed, the ground for a more personalised approach through which, however, the novelist-turned-journalist makes a brave attempt at constructing an Italy free of the usual clichés, balanced between tradition and innovation and viewed per se, independently from comparisons and contrasts with Ireland. He focuses on unusual subjects giving pre-eminence to some figures of civil society that rarely appear in writings on Italy, such as the anti-mafia Jesuits in Palermo or the magistrate, Giovanni Falcone, who attempted to dismantle the mafia and was murdered in 1992 and from whose writings he quotes. At the core of the chapter is the Italy of the beginnings of the Berlusconi era, which Tóibín witnesses on the day of its birth, the 1994 electoral victory of "the media magnate as god": "It was like something out of science fiction, or a dream about television, or a new version of *Nineteen Eighty Four* [...] the brave new world of post-Christian Italy" (Tóibín 279).

The rise of a new media-dominated society is a phenomenon which throws a new light on the descriptions of religious ceremonies, the staple fare of many travel writers in search of local colour. The quaint folklore of Holy Week processions in various cities and the solemnity of Easter Mass in St. Peter's in the presence of the Pope acquire a new meaning in the glare of "hard television lights" and the clicking of cameras (Tóibín 280). Although Tóibín strives to focus on peculiarities that are exclusively Italian, he ends up emphasizing a kind of schizophrenia that was also to take hold of the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger and to which the author is particularly sensitive:

I realised that I was watching a pageant from Berlusconi's Italy, Catholic and conservative, but deeply materialistic too, excited by the possibilities of glitter and wealth which Berlusconi and his empire offered, but holding on to traditions and processions on feast

days, taking part in the great balancing act between the traditional and the venal which Berlusconi had organised. (Tóibín 284)

The new image of Italy that should emerge from these distinctive approaches ends up being another mirror image, a construction biased by the author's national identity. In the end it is the old certainties and similarities that play a major role in Tóibín's construction of Italy, those an Irishman can best appreciate and in which the author can recognise himself. *Midnight Mass* at St. Peter's in Rome offers the novelist an actual revelation:

It was only when the choir and the congregation began to sing 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' that I realised that if I closed my eyes I could be right back in Enniscorthy Cathedral in the early 1960s [...] standing and sitting through this ceremony in St. Peter's brought me back to the half boredom, half attention of long childhood sessions in Enniscorthy Cathedral. [...] Listening to [the Sanctus] now was like walking back into the living room in my parents' house as it was in 1960, lino on the floor, red brocade curtains, a wireless in the corner. (Tóibín 286-287)

In spite of Tóibín's attempt to offer a novel vision of Italy, closer to its modern reality, the writer has to recognise with some disappointment that the Irish vision has prevailed:

This was not what I had wanted or expected. [...] Maybe I had been waiting for some image, some moment, which would illuminate the changes which were happening in Italian politics and the Church. Maybe I had even seen it and failed to recognize it. Maybe it was the strange ordinariness of the ceremonies, how much they belonged to my experience and background. Maybe that was important and instructive. I did not know. (Tóibín 289)

Rather than fashioning a new image of Italy, in recognizing the Self in the Other, Tóibín has ended up with an act of self-fashioning.

For many other Irish travellers of the twentieth century, religion is what makes the two peoples so similar but also so different. Moved by a visit to the Holy Shroud in Turin, Sean O'Faolain highlights the comparison: "The exceedingly large number of Italians who believe in the miraculous will never surprise an Irishman [...] It makes both races poorer hands at politics than at the arts. It encourages steadier races to treat us as dotty, as if this mad world of the rationalists is 'sane' – I hope we are" (*Summer* 29).

However, while irrational aspects make both nations' interpretations of Catholicism similar, Italian moral laws are in O'Faolain's eyes much more flexible: in Italy "sacred and moral love are love confederate." O'Faolain, who had fought many battles in this direction, believed that "we, of this forbidding North, who measure and strain, tuck God away in the Church and Venus away in the bed, and miserably and foolishly drain each part of life of the richness of the other" (*Summer* 22) should take this attitude as a model. Actually, his encounter with Italian Catholicism, a liveable Catholicism, "a sort of Catholicism I had never met before" (*Summer* 160), led to a quasi-conversion which took place in Rome, as is recounted both in his autobiography,

Vive Moi!, and in *Summer in Italy* (1949), one of his two books⁷ on Italy: "Mesmerised by Italy I suddenly felt that I must return to the warm bosom of this Church that some twenty years earlier I had spat out of my mouth for spitting me out of her mouth" (*Vive Moi!* 336).

There can be no doubt about the Irishness of O'Faolain's gaze, who, according to his daughter, Julia O'Faolain, saw Italy, indeed the world, through "a pair of green glasses" (Superbo 113). Italy provided the discovery of an enchanting difference that could entice him away from an Ireland that was often perceived as Joyce's 'centre of paralysis' but always present as a yardstick. His motivation, as he stated in a private letter, was, indeed, "to get rid of bloody Ireland through Italy."⁸ Italy came to represent the opposite of everything O'Faolain did not like about Ireland. Leafing through his two books about Italy, his daughter commented: "I can see he's constantly saying 'Yes, it should be like this in Ireland'," while, on the other hand, "his fiction often shows Irish lives as narrow and constricted." O'Faolain himself, in his autobiography, had talked about an "alien Ireland now gone puritanical. Priest-ridden, bigoted, isolationist, nationalistic, mentally starved by Church and Censorship" (*Vive Moi!* 334). In his travel books, Italy's Catholicism, seen as sophisticated and non-sectarian, is set against the fundamentalism of Ireland, and Italian *joie-de-vivre* is opposed to Irish gloominess.

The contrast is best conveyed by the images of bathing beauties exhibited in magazines at a news stand, which welcome him as he is coming out of the church of Santa Cristina in Turin or by the "body glory" of actual bathers in "the golden river" of Turin, the Po. "What do they do about it?," he wonders. "Are these passionate creatures never troubled as the puritanical North is troubled?" (*Summer* 20). Unlike the Irish, Italians do not perceive the conflict between love and religion, he muses. Churches are actually a receptacle for amorous thoughts, as is proven by the graffiti in the porch of Saint Rita of Cascia asking the saint for things which would make D.H. Lawrence blush (*Summer* 21).

Italy, or rather O'Faolain's idea of it, represents not only a non-sectarian religiosity and the ability to reconcile sexuality with morality but altogether open-mindedness, flexibility, a lack of inhibitions. There is in his books an overabundance of clichés such as "The Italians have a gift for enjoying life" (*Summer* 60) or "The Italian's main principle of life [is] the pursuit of happiness" (*South* 52). The midday sun is "a proper metaphor of the nature of Italy itself, so exuberant, so excitingly prodigal, so running-over, so lavish, so unrestrained" (*Summer* 187). The necessity to insist on the hetero-stereotype of an extrovert Italy in order to confirm the auto-stereotype of a narrow-

7 Sean O'Faolain published two books and a number of uncollected articles on Italy, mostly in *Holiday* and other glossy magazines. The twin volumes are *A Summer in Italy* (1949) and *South to Sicily* (1953) (American edition: *An Autumn in Italy*).

8 Julia O'Faolain, quoting from a 1972 letter her father had sent her 'under the sigillum' ("The Irishman Who Stayed" 24).

mindful and priest-ridden Ireland accounts for the rather simplistic views of Italy and Italians offered by O'Faolain, but is also a confirmation of his theory that "one travels inside oneself. It's all done with mirrors" (*South* 16). This quote from *South to Sicily* offers a key to interpret his two travel books as texts through which Ireland is better understood for being observed, as his daughter writes, from a "detached perspective" (Superbo 113). Rather than travelogues they are a sort of "deflected" spiritual autobiography.⁹

Like the *Odyssey*, on which O'Faolain's travelogues are modelled, and, even more pointedly, like its modern counterpart, Joyce's *Ulysses*, his travelogues are governed by a pendulum swing between centrifugal and centripetal aspects: the centrifugal aspect is the discovery of difference and enchantment luring him away from "bloody Ireland"; the centripetal aspect is represented by *nostos*, the return or rather the fixation on homecoming. A visit to Italy becomes an occasion for testing one's identity and discovering one's Irishness even while one succumbs to the charms of the foreign country and its cities. The *figura* of O'Faolain's wanderer fits the model of the Homeric Ulysses as well as that of its two Joycean counterparts, Stephen flying the paralysis of Dublin towards unknown lands and Bloom travelling around the *omphalos* of his native city.

This double movement holds true for many writers but not for another Irish novelist and traveller, Elizabeth Bowen, who for a while was O'Faolain's lover. They both came to Italy, together or separately, several times during the post-WW2 era, during the period of reconstruction, but long before the "Italian miracle" (an analogue of the Celtic Tiger). They both had roots in County Cork, but she was from an utterly different family background, having grown up in a 'Big House,' her ancestral home of Bowen's Court. Consequently, the gaze they cast on the country is quite different, reflecting the polarities of male and female, Catholic and Protestant, nationalist and Ascendancy, although these polarities do not always hold in rigid ways. O'Faolain was sociologically and psychologically oriented, Bowen focused on art and history; his Italy was alive with people, Bowen's with places and monuments. Bowen's *Time in Rome* and O'Faolain's *Summer in Italy* and *South to Sicily* are full of "apparently random and arbitrary interpretations" (Ono 152), being records of states of mind, personal impressions, musings presented in a stream-of-consciousness style.

In Bowen's writing neither the pendulum swing nor the mirror effect are clearly evident. *A Time in Rome* (1959) is entirely focused on the Eternal City, and there is apparently no evidence that the author is Irish or that in writing about Italy she is thinking of home. She seems only concerned in conveying a sense of place throughout various periods of Rome's history. The author focuses mainly on the past of Rome

9 The concept of "deflected autobiography" is illustrated by Taura S. Napier in her study of the strategies used by some Irish women writers to narrate the self in an indirect way and through genres other than autobiography.

and on the stratification of eras, a common *topos* in travel-writing about Italy, as Marie-Madeleine Martinet points out (7). “What we look at is less a city than the long and complex story of mankind,” says O’Faolain, commenting on the images of syncretism presented by Rome (*Summer* 126). But to Bowen, trying to reconstruct an image of what Rome was and how it functioned in the days of the Empire, this stratification reveals instead something closely connected to her own identity: “To recreate, even for an instant, what is laid low, dishevelled, or altogether gone into thin air is exciting,” she writes (*Time* 64). In her excitement we recognise more than simple sympathy and admiration for the Rome she has recreated. Deep down there is a sense of kinship, a kind of response coloured by her Irish identity. In offering a vibrant and lively portrait of a world that has disappeared, Bowen recognises “the effect of something pressed between two forces, ambition and destruction” (*Time* 10), an emotion recognisable also in her evocation of Ascendancy Ireland with its Big Houses. The trope of the Big House that plays such an important role in her Irish writings is, *mutatis mutandis*, exploited in her reconstruction of the Roman past with the *domus* as the ‘ideal unit’ of its civilisation, while her Anglo-Irish gaze falls sympathetically on the Roman Empire.

The technique Bowen uses in recreating ancient Rome is similar to that used in *Bowen’s Court*. In the latter book she brings back to life the history of her family’s Big House in the several phases of its existence; for Rome, she retraces the various phases of its history by dwelling on various sites. The result is a sort of psychological archaeology that goes back to the core of the *domus romana* to which she devotes many pages. The *domus*, the central image of her Roman fresco, is, indeed, the prototype of the Big House of which *Bowen’s Court* had been a shining example. Both were isolated havens, islands of civilization in a rough world. While the *domus* was “palisaded against the outside world” (*Time* 104), breeding “virtues which extended their value outside its walls” (*Time* 107), the Anglo-Irish family homes were “an island – and, like an island, a world” (*Bowen’s Court* 19) from which the “Protestant nation” acted as “the agents” of their times and in the eighteenth century “began to feel, and exert, the European idea – to seek what was humanistic, classic and disciplined” (*Bowen’s Court* 452). Both the values of the Big House and of the *domus* extended “outside its walls.” The description of the *domus* as “the private source of the public character, educated, temperate, disciplined” (*Time* 107) fits her idealisation of Big House society. Indeed the *domus*, like the Big House, was more than “the private house of a single family [...], an infinity of wider meanings attached to it” (*Time* 106). The sanctity of the *domus* was indisputable, but so was that of those Big Houses in which, when “things are done properly,” as she writes in *The Death of the Heart*, “there is always the religious element” (90).

The figure of the *paterfamilias*, “the centre of pressing forces” (*Time* 107), adhering to a strict code of honour and fighting against the possible physical and symbolic collapse of the house, also lends itself to being read as a prototype of those Bowens whose dynasty she traces as if they were emperors, naming them Henry I, Henry II

and so on. *A Time in Rome* was written in 1959, at the time when Bowen's Court, having survived the Civil War and World War II, was sold by Bowen herself, since she could no longer maintain it. The house was razed to the ground by its acquirer. Throughout the pages dedicated to the *domus*, we perceive the poignancy of the attachment to a physical and symbolic place under threat of disappearance, and the misgivings towards the new rising class who might inherit those estates or destroy them – the key notes also of much Big House literature:

Rome now was thronged, however, by a new upstart class who made light of the code, made fun of it or had never heard of it and intolerably threw on its contravention. Freedmen, who had got themselves out of slavery by intelligence, then gone on to carve out careers and amass fortunes, were in particular loathed by the *ancien régime*. [...] Their flashy homes in the newer suburbs contradicted every idea of living stood for by the superciliously modest *domus*. (*Time* 112)

Although Irish Big Houses are not directly mentioned, the description of the *domus* thus allows Bowen to voice indirectly verdicts which concern her class or are otherwise biased by autobiography. Pictured as a fictional character lying sleepless in the night and “seeing in his mind’s eye, as he lay in the dark, the faces of his still blameless children, the *paterfamilias* must have asked himself which would be the one to grow up to sell the fort, and in what manner, and how soon? Or would it be himself – through some inadvertence, blind spot, or moral miscalculation?” (*Time* 112-113). There are moments such as this one when *A Time in Rome* may also be read as “deflected autobiography,” as a text alluding to her father’s forebodings¹⁰ and to her own misgivings, when she could no longer sustain the upkeep of the house.

Bowen comes very close to revealing her autobiographical and sectarian bias when she mentions how much the Ascendancy is indebted to Rome as regards the concept of home: “As for us, in so far and for so long as home is a concept, rather than a container for things and persons, we continue to be in debt to the Romans. With us, lately, the concept has watered itself down, becoming more sentimental, less legalistic. Or at least, that is so with us Anglo-Saxons” (*Time* 106-107). Here then is an oblique explanation of the rationale of her *Time in Rome*. By recognizing that the *domus* is at the root of the mythical or metaphoric qualities attached to Big Houses, she plays down their role as “the cultural and spatial sign of the English colonialist discourse” (De Petris 339), internationalizing and historicizing them.

In the same way, her origins also account for the admiration of Imperial Rome we may deduce from her pages. Bowen’s refusal to find fault with the Roman Empire, as many British travellers had done, is tinged by her political ideas, but also by her national identity: “I am sick with the governessy attitude of our age. [...] In cases of history, we may not be seeing things quite as they were, down in the long perspective” (*Time* 203-204). The revisionist attitude displayed in her analysis of various

10 In a letter of 1921 addressed to his daughter, after the destruction by fire of three neighbouring houses, her father had asked her to be “prepared for the next news, and be brave” (*Bowen’s Court* 440).

figures and events of imperial Roman history would be equally valid for Anglo-Ireland. Her exoneration of the Roman Empire from the clichéd accusations of cruelty, arrogance, and oppression, which, for instance, we find in Morgan, may be rooted in her own sense of belonging to a much maligned dominant class, the Ascendancy, an expression of the British Empire. Although it is never stated, Ireland seems to be at the back of Bowen's mind when she describes the days of the Roman Empire or of its institutions.

Irish travel-writing concerning Italy, then, goes well beyond the climatological clichés that recur persistently in many writers dreaming of escape from Irish wetness and gloom. As Deirdre Madden writes in her novel, *Remembering Light and Stone*, "no one wants to shatter the myth of the warm, sensual, happy south, for if we did not believe in that, where would people go to escape the rigour of the north?" (2). Italy, however, is not only blue skies and clear air, even for Irish writers. There is much more depth and width in the reflections of the authors we have briefly investigated. Whether self-referential like O'Faolain's or Tóibín's texts, or other-referential like Bowen's, whether containing hard facts like Morgan's, or a poetic vision like Moore's, Irish travel-writing constructs Italian 'Otherness' on the basis of original investigations and familiar concepts, known facts and personal experience, but also draws on a corpus of interior images generated by the subjectivity of the author. In other words, it conveys hetero- and auto-images alike. One defines one's own culture in the same way as "the self defines itself by defining the other," as Manfred Pfister writes, "each description or definition of the other culture implies a self-description or self-definition" (4). Since the most important component of auto-images is the author's cultural frame and national identity, his or her being Irish (even with the proviso that Irishness means different things at different times), we end up gaining a clearer vision of what Ireland represents or has represented when reading about Italy. There is, indeed, a green tinge in the images of Italy constructed by Irish writers.

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