

Modern and Post-Modern Rome in Irish Travel Writing An Overview

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Abstract Rome, after being an inescapable stopover on the European Grand Tour for centuries, has changed its iconic physiognomy attracting a different public and awakening different emotions. Irish travellers of the past had visited Rome mostly because of its classical associations and religious significance. The palimpsest of antiquity and modernity that Rome is nowadays, instead, offers a glittering surface of globalisation reminiscent of the Celtic Tiger to modern Irish visitors such as Elizabeth Bowen, Colm Tóibín, Sean and Julia O’Faolain. Yet, all four writers in their search for a fixed point that might allow them to grasp the contemporary essence of the city also preserve some remnants of an earlier, colonial approach.¹

Keywords Irish Literature. Rome. Bowen. Tóibín. O’Faolain.

Much has been written about the presence of Italy in English and American literatures. The Renaissance gave birth to generations of Machiavellian villains; the Gothic novel thrived on representations of a sublime and immoral country; Grand Tour travellers left countless reports about the classical grandeur, the architectural elegance, the natural beauties but also the shortcomings of the peninsula. Much work remains, however, to be done regarding a postcolonial vision of Italy as opposed to a Eurocentric or, at best, a Western view that has favoured the classical, artistic and religious features of the country seen as part of a common cultural legacy. The interest of postcolonial writers, instead, tends to focus on modern Italy. A borderline case is that of Ireland, which was incontrovertibly England’s first colony and was long treated as such but which also transgresses in many ways the different colonial models drawn up by scholars.

The vision of Italy entertained by Irish travellers of the past, who participated in such a Western and colonial practice as that of the Grand Tour (in its many variations), was “overdetermined by the country’s dependent position”, a characteristic that, as Joe Cleary argues, makes Ireland differ

1 An Italian version of parts of this article has been published with the title of “La Roma post-classica e post-moderna nell’immaginario irlandese” (Kanceff 2015, 95-109).

from other countries in Europe (Cleary 2003, 24). Even in the present, remnants of the old sensibility persist. This is particularly true in the case of Rome, which has always held a particular significance for Irish people. The changes that have taken place in Irish society, the processes of independence, modernisation and globalisation weigh upon the perception of the new faces of modern Italy and, more specifically, of its capital, Rome, the city that best exemplifies the persistence of the past in the present and the difficulty of shaking off the weight of tradition. Rome is no longer what it was one hundred and fifty years ago: it is neither the *caput mundi* of the ancient world nor of Christianity but the capital of a young modern state bearing some similarities to Ireland especially in the consciousness of having just overcome a long servitude.

It is the purpose of this article to examine the attitudes of modern Irish visitors toward the eternal city as exemplified by the works about Italy of some writers who all published after Ireland had emancipated itself from the British rule. Sean O'Faolain, who had taken part in the Irish Civil War and was very critical towards the new Ireland, visited Italy immediately after the end of World War II (his first visit goes back to 1948), leaving two accounts of his travels, *Summer in Italy* (1949) and *South to Sicily* (1953) and several articles published in glossy magazines such as *Holiday*. Elizabeth Bowen – who was O'Faolain's lover and went to Italy several times with him or on her own – belongs to the same generation. *A Time in Rome* (1959) is a love declaration to the eternal city in which the author tries to capture the atmosphere and complexity of the capital and to reconstruct what life was like in classical days.

Sean's daughter, Julia O'Faolain, studied in Rome at the University of La Sapienza,² which she evoked in a rather disparaging way in her autobiography, *Trespassers. A Memoir* (2013). Italy also largely looms in her narrative production, as the setting of *The Irish Signorina* (1984), *The Judas Cloth* (1992), and of a novel dealing with an episode of the life of the Communist leader, Palmiro Togliatti, *Ercoli e il guardiano notturno* (1999).³ In these texts as in *The Sign of the Cross. Travels in Catholic Europe* (1996), the travel account of the novelist Colm Tóibín, the youngest of this group of writers, the image of Rome appears to be suspended between a romantic notion of the eternal city – the city of the Caesars and the Popes – and the representations of a decentralised and fluid urban space in which alternative forces coexist, which make it “anti-universal and anti-eternal” to use Dom Holdaway's and Filippo Trentin's expression to define post-modern

2 Julia O'Faolain's academic year in Rome, 1952-3, was funded by an Italian government scholarship. She spent it studying at the University of La Sapienza and preparing for a two-year National University of Ireland travelling studentship.

3 The novel was originally written in English but was published in Italy by Editori Riuniti in the Italian translation of Pittoni. So far, the English text has not been published.

Rome.⁴ All of them, however, tried to free themselves from the colonial heritage that determined their forebears' response to Rome. In the end, however, the colonial taint remained.

The diverse facets of Rome that appear in the writings of these four authors reflect, in fact, not only the new realities of the capital but also the changes that affected their own country. Over the period that goes from the Easter Rising (1916) to our days with its recent economic crisis, Ireland has freed itself from its colonial destiny becoming eventually an independent republic, has been split in two by the partition and the ensuing Civil War and, in the last decades of the past century, by the Troubles, and more recently has experienced a period of rapid and prodigious economic expansion known as the phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger during which era, from being the poorest country of Europe, it became one of the richest. All of the above led the Irish (including our four writers) to elaborate new definitions of national and religious identity and new space/time relations with the rest of the world. The historical events of the past century have, as a consequence, also changed their perception of the eternal city, the objects of their interest in it and the instruments through which they interrogate the reality of the capital.

For centuries, Rome had been a mecca for Irish travellers not only as a must of the Grand Tour but also as the destination of pilgrimages and, especially, as a refuge for persecuted Catholics. During the period of the Penal Laws, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, hundreds of Catholics studied in the Irish Colleges of Rome, immersed in a sophisticated and stimulating atmosphere which they knew how to appreciate, as we elicit from their letters and writings, even as they prepared for clandestine activities on their return to Ireland, which at times lead to martyrdom. The fact that Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, after his long battle for Catholic Emancipation should ask that his heart be buried in the chapel of the Irish college proves how the Irish identified with Rome. Besides the image of the baroque splendour of ecclesiastical Rome transmitted by the Catholic exiles, however, the Irish also cherished another image, that of a city of splendid ruins that opened up the magnificence of imperial Rome to the imagination. The myth of the eternity of the Rome of the Caesars and its role in shaping a European identity was celebrated especially in the age of the Grand Tour and is still at the centre of the tourism industry. It had inspired international visitors from Gibbon to Winckelmann and Goethe and was also appropriated by the Irish travellers who followed the itinerary of the Grand Tour and who, mostly, belonged to the Protestant Ascendancy or

4 In the "Introduction" to a collection of essays on post-modern Rome (*Rome, Postmodern Narratives of a Cityscape*, 2013), the editors, Dom Holdaway and Filippo Trentin, argue that in order to "marginalize our European gaze" that has always emphasised a vision of Rome as the universal and eternal city, it is necessary to focus on the post-modernity of the city (2013, 7).

to the wealthy upper classes, which led them to share British values. Their negative attitude towards 'papism' influenced their perception of the city, its contemporary architecture and its recent history leading to scorn for the opulence of religious buildings and Church ceremonies. Conversely, they extolled the civilisation represented by the remains of ancient Rome, a nobler city, they thought, than the present one.

Not all Irish travellers, however, felt admiration for classical Rome. The more radical and nationalist saw in the ancient civilisation the model for the British imperial power that had first been imposed on Ireland before affecting other continents. The awareness of Irish identity led the Protestant but nationalist author, Lady Morgan, to consider both the remains of imperial rule and the baroque splendour of Catholic Rome with equal execration. Far from evoking ideal perfection, the ruins irked the democratic author by their undemocratic story of "power, privilege and knowledge for the few - slavery the most abject for the many" (Morgan 2010, 175). The Irish author is annoyed by the view of "triumphal arches and laudatory columns" that recall "the triumphs of Imperial ambition" (185-6) and evoke actual crimes against humanity. Indeed, for her, most great monuments in Rome were erected "to commemorate the faults or follies of men, their wars and their errors" (187). These in the main, with obviously many exceptions, were the positions of the Irish who visited Rome between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Stephen Dedalus's complaint in the first chapter of *Ulysses*: "I am the servant of two masters, [...], an English and an Italian, the Imperial British state and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church" (Joyce 1998, 20) anticipates the rejection of the two "masters" that was to take place later in the twentieth century in Irish approaches to Rome. Not only did the appeal of the "catholic and apostolic Rome" slowly begin to wane owing also to Sean O'Faolain's journalistic efforts, for one, but political rebellion against the Imperial British state implied also discontent with its Augustan models in Rome, as was already foreshadowed in the nineteenth century by Lady Morgan. In Stephen's *non serviam* we can recognise many modern Irish travellers' attitudes toward Rome. Joyce's own stay in Rome in 1906-07 was actually motivated, wrote Melchiori, by his desire "to acquire first-hand knowledge of those institutions that originated the paralysis [of contemporary Dublin]" by infiltrating the "palace" of the Italian master (Melchiori 1984, 10).

Having first obtained their independence in blood, the new Irish travellers, too, now refused allegiance to the old myths of the Roman Church and the Roman Empire and sought fresh objects of interest more consonant with what Ireland was or was beginning to be. They bade farewell (or tried to) to the cult of classicism inherited from the British and veined with imperial longings but also stayed clear of too much involvement with the Church, recognising that the all-out defence of the Church or the virulent

attacks against it were both attitudes dictated by the lacerations of the past. Although they could not ignore either the importance of the classical past or the religious centrality of Rome, they tried to see the Italian capital with postcolonial eyes refusing the legacy of ancient servitude with the result that they often conveyed the image of a bewildering city that defeated their attempts to understand it. Echoing Yeats' prophetic exclamation that "the centre cannot hold", all of them, in writing about Rome, seem to be in search of a fixed point that might allow them to grasp the contemporary essence of the city notwithstanding its fragmented essence and their awareness that its classical and Christian identity cannot be circumvented. In that, as De Petris writes about O' Faolain, their representations of Rome are "tinted with modernity" (De Petris 2001, 189). Similarly, they perceive Ireland as finally free from the obsession of its Gaelic past and of the colonial condition, and in the case of the younger authors, as a modern country that is globalised and cosmopolitan as Rome is. In their eyes, they both represent a new reality incorporating various identities and stratifications, looking towards the future and trying to shake off the fetters of the past.

The senior O'Faolain's complaint that there is "Much too Much Past" (as one of the chapters of *Summer in Italy* is entitled) and his desire to be "finished once for all with the shadowy and shining past" (S. O'Faolain 1949, 156) are fully shared by the travellers of the second generation, Tóibín and his daughter, Julia O'Faolain. As for Bowen, in an imaginary dialogue with herself, she wonders what her attitude to classical Rome is: "Then I did not care for antiquity? - Not in the abstract. - What did I see in Rome, then? - Beginning of today" (Bowen 2003, 71).

In spite of the commendable intention of remaining rooted in the present, this in practice results in ambiguities and wavering for, what would Rome be for an Irish person without Catholicism or without its imperial past? The attitude of the Irish travellers in search of a picture of Rome corresponding to their status of citizens of a new country is in fact characterised by many contradictions on these issues. They might all agree with Sean O'Faolain that "no man can ever wholly leave ancient or sacred Rome behind him completely or for long" (S. O'Faolain 1949, 156). Rome's past is as essential a part of it as is its present.

Only for Julia O'Faolain who wrote her Memoir, *Trespassers*, in 2013 and knew Italy better than the others for having lived there, the question of the past does not arise. The real Rome is not the historical and glorious city sought by tourists but the ordinary, almost provincial city in which she was a student in the fifties. "When I knew it first, Rome's *centro storico* had traces of a rural languor which might almost have dated back to the era before 1870 when the pope was king" (J. O'Faolain 2013, 125-6.). As for the monuments of its grandeur, they are just a theatrical scenario for her scooter rides with a boyfriend: "I enjoyed whizzing around Rome on the pillion of

his Lambretta or Vespa [...] and the pleasure of moving from one theatrical setting to another: the Forum, the Colosseum, piazza del Popolo, piazza Navona, via Veneto, the hills" (142). The streets connected with shopping and the *dolce vita* were much more important than the monuments: "just as pleasurable was strolling alone along smart streets such as the via Condotti, then up to the Spanish steps to the via Sistina which to my mind had the best window-shopping in the city" (142) while other streets tempted her with their elegant restaurants such as "via Margutta or the next-door via del Babuino, two bohemian streets celebrated in a song of the day in which a foreign girl remembers her Roman lover" (131). In conclusion, "everything about the city was thrilling: the shop windows, the shapely women wearing tight emerald green silk when it was warm and Donegal tweed when cold [...], their buttocks oscillat[ing] like pendulums" (143). In the young student's impressions of Rome, one can already foresee the materialistic and consumerist culture of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

While in *Trespassers* the ancient pomp and splendour of the historical city are totally ignored except as a backdrop, the other authors seem to be less comfortable with turning their backs on the past although they, too, try to stick to the present. In the portrait of Rome that the novelist Colm Tóibín proposes in *The Sign of the Cross*, Catholicism and empire are emptied of meaning as in a television reality show. The city, visited in the days of Berlusconi's 1994 electoral victory, appears to be suspended "between the traditional and the venal" (Tóibín 1995, 284). This is clearly represented by the Easter Mass in St Peter's in the presence of the Pope, which acquires a new meaning in the glare of "hard television light and the clicking of cameras" (280). The Holy Week ceremonies in the Vatican, a favourite *topos* with writers in search of local colour, are nothing but a vulgar and showy spectacle:

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. (284)

The pomp of the solemn ceremony barely hides a loss of faith similar to the author's while the city is fascinated by the "glittering" promises of prosperity offered by the rising new empire and has fallen prey to the same kind of schizophrenia that was also to grip the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger and to which this author is particularly sensitive.

Among the four writers, Bowen is the one who has the most ecumenical views, accepting the ancient and the contemporary, the splendid and the ugly. She realises that Rome is a city capable of swallowing and me-

tabolising every change (“Rome ingorges whatever is added to it”, Bowen 2003, 18) – from the ruins, aqueducts, fountains, cupolas to the icons of modernity:

Gasworks, slaughter-houses, rubbish dumps, cattle markets, [...] schools, asylums and hospitals, squatter’s villages, and other relics of pleasure or signs of progress crop up according to where one goes. Each demands to be taken into the picture. (21)

Indeed, to Bowen, Rome “is full of spaces, but all are Rome” (27). The sprawl of suburban neighbourhoods superimposed on historic images of the capital creates, however, unexpected and disorienting contrasts, as she notices. Rome “seems larger than it probably is. Hills contain it no longer; it overflows, darting all ways like quicksilver” (18). The city is disseminated with “*modernissimo* apartment blocks, like photographs, pasted on to a Victorian sepia wash-drawing” (18) creating interesting contrasts. She diligently exposes the characteristics of modern neighbourhoods such as Parioli, Prati, EUR underlining, however, that they are overlaid on a diagram of arteries and gates whose names (Appia, Flaminia, porta Metronia) evoke ancient times: “the present day shape of Rome has as a framework the ancient roads of the Republic” (21) she points out.

That palimpsest of ancient and modern that has always intrigued and fascinated visitors is, however, in spite of the travellers’ good will, experienced as confusing especially by the older travellers, Bowen and O’Faolain, who repeatedly try to qualify the “bizarre and irreconcilable juxtapositions” (S. O’Faolain 1949, 135) as “a maze”, a “terrible jumble”, “a babel”, “a tangle”, “shifting sand”. It is all summarised by Sean O’Faolain who, after a vain attempt at finding some order, writes:

It was the old jumble all over again; here the catacombs; there the Ardeatine Caves, where hundreds of Italians were murdered by the Germans; beyond, a night club; here, a modern villa; there Cardinal Wiseman’s little church looming against the sky, while the ancient cypresses whispered and a prowling police car hummed out under the arch where one of Mussolini’s aces had lived. (157)

In spite of the confusion, both O’Faolain and Bowen are determined to resist the temptation to see the city through the prism of the past: “it takes one’s entire capacity” – writes Bowen – “to live one moment – the present, the moment one ‘is’ living” (Bowen 2010, 11), even if it implies a fragmented and destabilising view (one only gets “splinters” of reality). No sooner does one swerve from the beaten touristic track, one feels “extraneous, dubious, an alien” as is experienced by Bowen walking along the dreary Via Nomentana that belies its time-honoured name (20).

The two lovers share with many other modern visitors a sense of “irreality”, as Sean O’Faolain writes (S. O’Faolain 1949, 134) regarding the Rome they are actually visiting or the one they are trying to recreate through fantasy or the reading of books. Describing the Rome of the past is for Bowen an act of imagination bordering on the unreal but at the same time a challenge: “[s]eeing the greater part of the time, had to be an act of the mind’s eye (or better that of directed imagination). To recreate, even for an instant, what is laid low, dishevelled, or altogether gone into thin air is exciting” (Bowen 2010, 64). However, the Rome of the present, the real city where real people live and work is equally ungraspable. Sean O’Faolain expresses his frustration thus: “there is, in fact, no way past the mirages of romantic Rome towards the refreshing oasis of the ‘real’” (S. O’Faolain 1949, 135). In spite of his desire to “restore some sense of common earth and of a more familiar Rome” (127), he ends up poking fun at himself and at all those who preach “that the search for the ‘real’ Rome [...] should be directed at red, raw [...] bleeding life; it should be conducted among the cafés of the Via Nazionale” (134).

The only Rome that is real, whether modern or ancient or a combination of the two, is the textual Rome, forged by the words of English-speaking or Latin poets, novelists and travel-writers: “you cannot read Rome without footnotes” comments Sean O’Faolain (126), since it is a city made up of words and of literary memories: “we come to Rome less to see a city than to verify an ideal one. We have all been here before, many times since childhood” (125-6). Indeed, as Carla De Petris remarks, “O’Faolain comes to Rome as a literary pilgrim following the footsteps of many English-speaking writers” whose books “have been carefully packed in his case” (De Petris 2001, 186). With a post-modern sensibility, these Irish writers are painfully conscious of the textual nature of the place and resent both the artificiality of the experience and the weight of this textual legacy, especially since it is part of the culture of their masters. The filter of language remains all important even to interpret the Rome of the present (“The reading of books about Rome in Rome is a pleasant sentimental occupation” S. O’Faolain 1949, 124-5), but it does not lead to an understanding of the actual city. Bowen, too, knows that books frustrate her need to understand Rome rather than help: “what I was looking for was so elementary, so much (I suppose) a matter of common knowledge, that no one had considered it worth recording” (Bowen 2010, 9). Travellers are on their own if they want to discover a common-place, non-literary Rome.

In Rome I wondered how to break down the barrier between myself and happenings outside my memory. I was looking for splinters of actuality in a shifting mass of experience other than my own. (11)

There is only one solution if travellers want to emancipate themselves from books and other people's experiences and see Rome with their own eyes and as a real city: a "pedestrian" solution as Bowen writes. That is, conquering the city by walking all over it: "my approach was pedestrian twice over. [...] My object was to walk it into my head" (15). Any other approach is simply useless: "[i]nside Rome [...] to be anything but walking is estrangement. Trams, buses, tempting on a return journey, take routes which obliterate one's tracks" (35). The central figure of her and Sean O'Faolain's narration is that of a Walter Benjaminian *flâneur* who explores the urban space without a clear goal, gathering glimpses of the modern but never bringing back a complete image as he is continuously reverting to the past and his memories of it.⁵

The other figure looming in their text as a model, or rather a counter-model, is Leopold Bloom, the deliberateness of whose walks over Dublin is quite in contrast with the modern travellers' vague *flânerie*, as Sean O'Faolain points out in the parodic passage where he envies the concrete aims of Joyce's hero taking an imaginary walk in ancient Rome: "[Leopoldus Romanus] strolling up Holy Street (the *Sacra Via*) looking at the jewellers' booths (the *tabernae argentariae*) for a cheap gew-gaw for his moll" (S. O'Faolain 1949, 143). Another wanderer evoked by these texts is the Odysseus of Adorno's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. Like him, O'Faolain and Bowen must resist the allurements of the plurality and 'multitudinousness' of Rome, their Sirens' song. Tied to the mast of common sense, clinging to the glimpses of modern Rome they have conquered, they strive not to be sucked back by the dreams of the past.

The desire to have precise reference points and to recognise a design in the city exceeds the pleasures of aimless walking and losing oneself in the crowd. For travellers such as the Irish whose social, national and religious identity was in a process of transformation after the loss of political and religious standing points, the difficulty of understanding the physical aspects of Rome corresponds to the difficulty of discovering what they look for in Rome. Modernity or antiquity? The real Rome or the ideal one? Christian Rome? Roman Rome? Or a totally new city ready to be discovered and enjoyed abandoning oneself to its *dolce vita*? The problems they meet trying to find their way in the city, reflected in the recurrent device of the construction and deconstruction of maps in which to find order and understanding, symbolise their basic uncertainty. Both Sean O'Faolain and Elizabeth Bowen write hilarious pages on their failed attempts to read or draw maps, underlining the difference between the clear abstract diagram

5 In *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism* (1935) and in the unfinished *Arcade Project*, Walter Benjamin elaborated his seminal notion of the *flâneur*, the aimless stroller in the urban space of the nineteenth century indulging in detached observations of the city, who has become an icon of modernism and of the condition of the bourgeoisie.

and the shapeless identity, the fragmented post-modernity of the actual city. The failure of cartography is a *topos* of post-modern thought, but it also applies to the reality of modern Rome where it is impossible to draw precise boundaries between its various layers, where borders between one part of the city and the other, one historic era and another are porous and flexible. "Everywhere in Rome something has gone somewhere else", writes O'Faolain marvelling at the use of ancient stones in more recent buildings (S. O'Faolain 1949, 134). Rome has no boundaries nor shape; it is protean, as his daughter writes, and "fathomless" (142). With a graphic metaphor he represents his glance as a ray of light trying to penetrate to the core of the city: "[Rome] is all depth and no surface, like a great bay at night, when each dim light is a downward finger" (133).

On the contrary, for Colm Tóibín and Julia O'Faolain the modern Rome is all surface and no depth. Tóibín underlines how the new Italy and the new Rome at the beginning of the Berlusconi era are dependent and shaped by the media, with the "mask" of Berlusconi dominating all six channels as he was "uttering political platitudes, vague statements about Italy and its future" (Tóibín 1995, 279). The political values of its leaders reverberate on the city itself: "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" (279). Religious ceremonies are "just another spectacle to be videoed, a mild distraction rather than a thing of mystery or primitive wonder" (284).

Although Julia O'Faolain finds Rome, together with Paris, "enlivening and protean" (J. O'Faolain 2013, 181), she draws a scathing portrait of the city and its denizens marked by superficiality and bad faith. The Italian *fidanzati* are "dodgy" philanderers (142). The Jesuit preacher's sermons are marked by violence and worldliness as he attacks the Left to the applause of the congregation (152). Left-wing intellectuals wore "white shirts and perfectly ironed summer suits" and were very proper and priggish (199). The world-respected writer, Ignazio Silone turned out to have been an informer for the fascist police (134-ff.).

University professors, such as the eminent scholar Mario Praz, are accused of being absentees, drawing salaries in Rome while teaching in the United States (136). Students are commuting and rarely attend classes. Nothing is as it seems, nobody as it should be. It is a sham world in which only "show mattered" (143).

As the physical city escapes travellers either for its depth, its fluidity or its superficiality, so does the history of Rome, which is perceived as a heap of fragments and dreams (De Petris 2001, 189), of factual data mixed with imagination. This is testified by a cursory research conducted by Sean O'Faolain about St Peter's burial place. The various versions presented to him all contradict the official one, so fundamental for Christians, that St Peter is buried under the main altar: "is it so? Or do we all depend on a

fiction of our imagination?" (S. O'Faolain 1949, 142).

Irish travellers may, however, benefit from their national experience to face the difficulties presented by Rome. Julia O'Faolain reveals to the reader why the continuous reference to the past experienced in Rome is particularly meaningful for the Irish. Meditating on her personal "geography of romance", she finds that "countries known for their ruined grandeur offer a paradoxical thrill", the thrill of sharing a longing for their past (J. O'Faolain 2013, 216). Rome with its remnants of older times is a mirror reflecting an Ireland still bewailing its noble past as is exemplified by the Irish passion for *fotrach*, the Gaelic term for ruins. Irish history too, as Fritz Senn writes, "is a checkered stratification of successive invasions, a city like Dublin consists of superimpositions and changes of names" (Senn 1984, 206). Tóibín too finds in his home experience a way of making sense of Rome. Like Sean O'Faolain, a Catholic who had lost his faith, and Bowen, a Protestant Irish who had lost her status with the fall of the British Empire, the agnostic Tóibín looks at Rome in search for something that can give sense to his experience, a sort of illumination he cannot find at home, as Gino Scatasta points out.⁶ And like the other two he finds it in the old sources of certainty, the Church in his and O'Faolain's case, imperial institutions for Bowen. The Midnight Mass at St Peter's in Rome offers Tóibín 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" (Tóibín 1995, 286).

With some disappointment, Tóibín has to recognise that, in spite of his efforts, the traditional and very Irish views of a Catholic Rome have 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. (289)

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 the similarities that play the major role in Tóibín's construction of Italy, those an Irishman can best appreciate and in which the author can recognise himself.

6 "Qualcosa in grado di dare un senso alla propria esperienza, una sorta di illuminazione che non può trovare in patria" (Scatasta 2008).

For Sean O'Faolain too, who was a life-long anticlerical and had been excommunicated, the culminating moment of his stay in Rome was his return (although short-lived) in the womb of the Church. Accepting, when he decided to go to confession, the complexities of Catholic Rome – believing and sceptical, mystical and materialist – allows him to discover a kind of permissive and ecumenical religion he can live with. And Bowen with all her desire to remain in the present ends up delving in the history of the Roman Empire to find an archetype of her own predicament. In the decline of the Roman *domus* and of the figure of the *pater familias* she sees the decline of the big houses of the Ascendancy, of which she had been personally a victim. These are but a few of the examples of how Rome continues to bear an important significance for some categories of Irish people.

In conclusion, in these texts we witness the failure of a search for different approaches to Rome than its classical past and its religion, which had been central elements in the representations of Irish travellers of the past. The two key elements continue to be valuable and important for the new visitors although the authors try to take their distances from them. The opulence, chaos and the glittering surface of a globalised Rome and its post-modern city-scape are like a fun-house mirror reflecting the face of the Celtic Tiger and, as the latter, bound to melt into thin air. What remains is what has always mattered for the Irish.

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