



Citation: G. Pusceddu (2025)
A Portrait of Sean O’Faolain
as a Travel Writer. *Sijis* 15: pp.
19-30. doi: 10.36253/SIJIS-2239-
3978-16583

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Data Availability Statement:
All relevant data are within the
paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The
Author(s) declare(s) no conflict
of interest.

A Portrait of Sean O’Faolain as a Travel Writer

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Abstract:

Despite being regarded as one of Ireland’s foremost short-story writers, O’Faolain’s literary output also encompasses travelogues, although this literary genre is sometimes considered as a minor phase in his writing career. His travel books include *An Irish Journey*, *A Summer in Italy*, *An Autumn in Italy*, and the article “In Search of Sardinia”, written for the American magazine *Holiday*. This essay analyses the characteristic traits of his travel writing, namely the constant presence of characters, delineated through the deliberate and sophisticated dialogic form, the setting of the narrated stories, and the personal reflections. His way of narrating and describing the places he visited, between wonder and reality, with disenchantment and irony, makes his travel books a personal form of narrative, thanks to the rich vocabulary due to the artistic maturity, intertextuality, and internationalization of his work.

Keywords: Dialogic Form, Intertextuality, Irish Literature, Sean O’Faolain, Travel Writing

1. Introduction

In the broad and varied literary production of the Irish writer Sean O’Faolain, sometimes written as Seán O’Faoláin (Delaney 2014)¹, baptised John Francis Whelan (the renaming to its Gaelic variant was due to political reasons), it is often assumed that the works attributable to travel writing belong to a minor phase of his career (Doyle 1968). Nevertheless, during a conference commemorating his centenary held at the university in Turin in 2000, where the emphasis was placed on Irishness and internationalism, a significant portion of the two-day discussion revolved around his travels in Italy, “the foreign country he

¹ For the sake of clarity, in this essay we will use the name without the acute accent (the Irish Gaelic diacritic mark also known as *sineadh fada*) on the vowel *a*, as it appears in the titles of his travel books.

loved most and to which he devoted many brilliant pages of travel notes and fiction” (Abbate Badin, *et al.* 2001, 10). Moreover, the emphasis on his travels aligns with the significance of travel writing that has been established in the realm of literary studies, by now considered, according to Tim Youngs, “the most socially important of all literary genres” (2013, 1). It is also helpful to note that “the recent burgeoning of academic interest in travel writing has been accompanied by considerable controversy and debate about the merits and morality of the genre” (Thompson 2011, 7).

2. *The Irish Journey*

The beginning of travel writing in the life of Sean O’Faolain dates back to 1939, when the Irish author was commissioned to write a travel book about the new Ireland with some illustrations (eight watercolours) by the Belfast-born artist Paul Henry. Rather than starting from Dublin, O’Faolain’s journey began in County Kildare, some fifty kilometres from the capital, at Sallins station, where he hired a buggy to Naas, the capital city. Although transport horses were still present, travelling conditions in Ireland had improved over time since young student John Whelan travelled part of the island by train and motorbike some twenty years earlier.

According to Clair Wills, the resulting travel book, titled significantly *An Irish Journey*, “envisaged a new sort of readership, in addition to the English and American tourists targeted in the past: he [O’Faolain] wrote too for the burgeoning Irish middle class” (2007, 295). Furthermore, *An Irish Journey* can also be considered as a “literary initiation into the everyday life of provincial towns in postcolonial Ireland” (Beebe 2018, 19). Therefore, considering all these aspects, from the semiotic perspective of urban space (Barthes 1967) we can interpret each Irish town as a text, or, borrowing a definition from Italo Calvino, as a “combination of many things: memory, desires, signs of a language” (1983, 41).

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, titled “From the Liffey to the Lee”, begins in Naas and follows a journey south, touching on Kilkenny, Tipperary, Mallow, and finally Cork. Regarding the town of Naas, O’Faolain notes that there is uncertainty surrounding its gender, stating that certain locations exhibit more “feminine” characteristics than others: “[t]here can be no doubt about the sex and character of Naas; or, for that matter, any part of Kildare. Neddy [i.e., Naas, formerly called Neddy Naas] wears riding-breeches. He speaks in terms of half-dollars and odds” (1940, 4).

The second one, “The South-West”, starts in Kinsale, south of Cork, follows the entire south-west coast to go up to Limerick and then to Ennis. In this part of the journey, the writer experiences a return to their ancestral place. He described Cork several times in stories and novels. It is the town of the early part of his life, so he cannot be objective about the town because “[t]here is only one tune for Cork. It is of those towns you love and hate. Some wag that in Cork you do not commit sin; you achieve it. You do not, likewise, enjoy life in Cork; you experience it” (75).

“The West” is the third part of his journey. Athenry, Galway, Connemara, Ballinrobe, Castlebar, Westport all the way to Sligo. And the centre of the West was Galway,

the most foreign town in Ireland – probably in Great Britain and Ireland: meaning thereby that it is barbarically native. It has no veneer, unless rust is a veneer, or the soot-skin of smoke, or the cake of sea-spray, or the common dirt of old age, stuck into every crevice like the years into an old man’s skin. Neither sun, nor paint, nor chromium can alter Galway, or brighten it. Infinite variety cannot stale its custom. Like an old beauty under the enamel, the more she daubs the rouge the more does the antique face impress its power. (171)

The name “The Six Counties”, the fourth part of the journey, is not a pleasant one for O’Faolain to hear; indeed, “[i]t falls numerically on the ear, much as if one said, the six-cylinder. Why? Because there is no such place” (235). Here, the former IRA volunteer touches on a sensitive issue whose repercussions are still felt today, as he proposes a novel solution to the problem of partition. The writer recalls the 1935 riots in Belfast, lists the number of Catholics driven from their homes, pointing out that not a single non-Catholic was evicted. He wasn’t unaware of the situation. In fact, according to Marie Arndt, O’Faolain “acknowledged the disproportionate political and economic influence of the protestants. He intellectualised the divide as being more based on economic gain than religious concern; those who profit financially from the link with Britain are eager to retain *status quo*” (2001, 96-97).

Apart from the focus on religious, economic, and political affairs, what he finds most exciting is discovering intriguing elements that could serve as a narrative or perhaps a setting for a novel. Indeed, stories waiting to be told can be found; one simply needs to encourage people to share their experiences. For instance, consider the customs station in Lifford. The border ceased to function after six o’clock, and regarding this particular characteristic, one woman shared an intriguing story with him:

She wanted to bring in some poteen from Donegal to make sloe gin. She bought the poteen (illegality number one), put the jar in the back of the car, and, waiting until after six drove out of Lifford (illegality number two). At the Northern Irish station, to her heart-fluttering dismay, she was held up. But, it was only a clerk who had been detained after hours and who wanted a lift into Strabane.

‘Get in’, she gasped, opening the front door.

‘Ah, no!’ he said politely, ‘I’ll get in at the back’, and did.

Presently he said:

‘What’s in the jar?’

‘Poteen!’ said the lady, feeling her number was up, and she may as well make a clean breast of it.

‘Ha! Ha!’ said the clerk. ‘You will have your little joke!’ – and said no more about it. (1940, 243)

This way of proceeding by the Irish writer recalls the well-known words by Walter Benjamin on the figure of the storyteller: “Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn” (2006, 362). That is, in fact, a national characteristic – the essence of storytelling in Irish culture, which is rooted in the tradition of the *seanchaí* (Kiberd 1979; Alexander 1990); after all, “[s]tories of one kind or another have a way of pressing themselves into Irish conversation, both as entertainment and as a form of communication” (Trevor 2001 [1989], ix). And indeed, as O’Faolain wrote after his passage in Derry, “the loveliest of all Northern cities” (1940, 248), spending time in the County Library of Coleraine, he “wanted only to gossip-to pick up, gradually, and casually, some flavour of local life” (254). Sean O’Faolain succeeds in describing events and characters in his travel writing that belong to both real life and the realm of literature, by making in this case frequent use of intertextual quotation. One example is his long-standing friendship with Elisabeth Bowen. Consider the visit, which was first postponed then carried out, to the writer’s home in Mallow, near Cork, specifically the famous “Big House” Bowen’s Court.

The writer, in the company of Elisabeth Bowen, wanders around the house, talks about things as they arise, and then he goes to the library, picks up “a Spenser” and recites it aloud,

pretending to read the “beautiful stanzas of that unfinished tale of the Titan-Change” (58) under the dim light of a lamp. O’Faolain reports the two Spenserian stanzas in full, inviting the reader to follow his example. Finally, with darkness and silence descending on the fields, the writer and her friend return to the house. From his room, he hears the door close and footsteps crossing the house:

Far away to the right over the screens, beyond the fox-covert, across the dark bogland, towards Doneraile, he [Spenser] too may well have sat up late and on such a night as this. And at some lines like:

The day is spent, and cometh drowsie night...

looked up over the sleeping land of Cork, yawned, stretched his arms, and, as I do now, laid down his pen. (59)

This passage, when read between the lines and considering the insinuating ellipsis at the end of the line from *The Faerie Queene*, can be regarded as a meta-narrative. On the one hand, O’Faolain creates the narrative illusion with the reading of the poet’s stanzas, and on the other hand, it makes us think that the protagonists of the poem are none other than the writer himself and his host friend, also considering the comment concerning the previously postponed meeting, in order to “spend a pleasant night in Mallow” (43).

Furthermore, an indiscreet reader would probably have a different perception of the “intimate” friendship between O’Faolain and Elizabeth Bowen. In this respect, we have the testimony of his daughter Julia, who in her memoir devotes an entire chapter to the relationship between the two writers. The daughter also highlights the less than idyllic relations between her father and her mother Eileen, herself a writer:

All I knew at the time was that there was a bristle of tension in our house, that Eileen was restive and that Seán making trips not just to London but to Cork – and not Cork city either, where his mother lived, but to Bowenscourt. Why, I heard Eileen ask, if he was going, as he claimed, to a house party, had she not be invited too? Airily implausible, he insisted that it was to be a professional gathering which only writers would attend. A likely story! (2013, 44)

At the time of publication, the book could be considered as a “work of literary tourism a guide to an Ireland that could be visited in an armchair” (Wills 2007, 295), but on a closer reading, *An Irish Journey* can instead be understood as a travel narrative. O’Faolain wrote his travel book in the same way he wrote stories and biographies in the 1920s and 1930s. He saw cities and people through the eyes of the narrator. The personal view of places visited, the romantic description of characters, the observations of historical, political, or intellectual figures, every reference to things or people, in short, became for O’Faolain a narrative pretext.

3. *The Italian Journeys*

The late 1940s saw a turning point in Sean O’Faolain’s busy literary career. The encouragement of Graham Greene, who invited him to write a travel book on Italy – “to describe the life-ways and the traditions of one of the most civilised countries in history” (O’Faolain 1993 [1964], 334) – was decisive. He grabbed the lifeline immediately. According to his biographer Maurice Harmon,

[t]he articles and books he wrote on Italy opened a career for him as an international journalist writing for glossy American magazines that paid well. For the first time he did not have to worry as to

where the next penny would come from. The cosmopolitan European writer replaced the embattled Irish intellectual. [...] More than anything else Italy helped him to find a new perspective on human nature. (1994, 165)

The result of the invitation came in the form of the book *A Summer in Italy*, published in 1949. The travel book narrates a journey from Turin to Verona, with stops in Genoa, the Ligurian Riviera, Florence, Siena, Rome, and Venice. The characteristic atmosphere of the stories reflects that of a traveller wandering aimlessly, casually encountering other characters or becoming lost in contemplation before a site of artistic interest. We are faced with the example of writing that reinterprets the journey, that is the interrelation “dalla doppia direzionalità e vettorialità [...] del rapporto tra resoconto di viaggio e viaggio fattuale” (Pifferi 2011, 362), where the extra-literary element such as the journey interacts with the literary element of the travel account.

The account of the journey, “a mixture of romance and realism” (Harmon 1994, 165), is constantly interspersed with dialogues, real or fictitious, with people encountered along the way: be they fellow travellers or characters taken from other authors who have visited the same places.

The people encountered and chosen for the story appear to be descriptions of characters invented for a “fictional” work, a task in which Sean O’Faolain, an expert novelist, excels. The same goes for the narrator-protagonist who reveals his personality, through tastes, sensibilities, opinions.

Take for instance the first chapter, titled “Entry”. The narrator-protagonist describes the train entering a station. He looks out of the carriage window and sees the blank platform. Through the arcades, outside the station, he glimpses an “equally blank” Piazza Carlo Felice. The narrator tells us even the time: twenty-five minutes to two o’clock in the morning. A warm summer morning in Turin. Without further consideration, the narrative takes an entirely unexpected turn:

As I climbed down the heat gushed into my face from the platform as if there were red coals beneath it. Suddenly the platform was no longer empty. A small cheering group raced along it immediately they saw Eleonora Spinelli behind me in the doorway. They were four of them, all bareheaded; two women of about forty, a tiny tottering white-haired woman who might have been eighty, and a youth of about twenty; three generations. (1950 [1949], 12)

We are introduced to the character of Eleonora Spinelli, a traveller met on a train and with whom the narrator has engaged in a long conversation. A sudden, mutual, and confidential friendship develops between the two, to the extent that Eleonora invites the narrator to her home for lunch, along with her reunited family members. Once at Eleonora’s house, the relationship between the narrator and the characters evolves, a transformation that is reflected in the narrative style:

‘Stay in Turin. This is *it*. An Italian novel would radiate out from this room, their friends; their ambitions; their lives past and present’. But then I thought: ‘It would take a lifetime!’ Even as I sat there, alone at the table now; they had already gone from me. They were doing a ballet around the room, squabbling like Furies about something involved in personalities of whom I knew nothing that I was suddenly a complete stranger again. I staggered up to go. They hardly noticed me going, hurling pressing invitations to supper over their shoulders as they fought their private war. (32)

As we can see, personality traits that shape characters play a significant role in the writer’s narrative. The role of the character is the stylistic feature that characterises Sean O’Faolain’s

stories: his physical description, the way he behaves, interacts, and his standpoint; just as important as his surroundings, the social and cultural context, and historical time. Regarding the figure of the character, in his essay *The Short Story* the writer points out that

in short story writing there can be no development of character. The most that can be done is to peel off an outer skin or mask, by means of an incident or two, in order to reveal that which is – as each writer sees this ‘is’. The character will not change his spots; there is not time; if he seems likely to do so in the future, the story can but glance at the future. (1951, 191)

Of course, in a travel narrative, the central role of characters is diminished because the narrator must also focus on other elements. In fact, the narrator’s reliability in observation “can be tested when they deal with geography, flora, fauna, and historical facts” (Adams 1983, 178). Sean O’Faolain solves the problem of credibility through the method of casual exploration. The narrator is not compelled to document his observations or experiences; instead, he recounts what he remembers. In this approach, O’Faolain also distinguishes between two types of travellers:

The systematic traveller, unlike the casual traveller, has, I believe, more to record than to remember. The casual wanderer stays here, ambles there for each moment’s pleasure, and afterwards when people ask him ‘What did you do?’ he cannot reply. The things that made him happy are too little, too evanescent, too personal to be named. (1950, 26)

The book can be seen as the tale of a casual wanderer; a unique travelogue in which the narrator-traveller serendipitously discovers locations that others, perhaps diligent followers of Aldous Huxley’s “Baron Baedeker” (1948), find only after meticulous travel planning.

Due to its historical, literary, and artistic references, *A Summer in Italy* can also be read as a guidebook, albeit in reverse. In fact, one must approach the book with prior knowledge of the events, places, or characters described by O’Faolain. Beyond mere tourist curiosity, the chosen itineraries reflect the author’s cultural interests, which often provoke intellectual questions and doubts. This way of looking at the journey highlights the “unimportance” of traditional guidebooks. Indeed, according to the Irish author, “[g]uide-books do us a certain disservice by romancing about the mere paraphernalia of strangeness” (1950, 97). In other words, due to their “non-autobiographical” nature, guidebooks, as Paul Fussell notes, “are not sustained by a narrative exploiting the devices of fiction” (1982, 203). Consequently, the result is a plethora of literary citations along with historical and cultural references. For instance, in the case of Florence it is essential to consider the works of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. After all, O’Faolain emphasizes that Browning “is a better guide than any guide-book” (1950, 98).

In terms of cultural history, numerous names come to mind for the writer. However, these figures do not always capture the essence of the Florentine aura: Fra Angelico is set aside due to his “destructive passion”; Botticelli, renowned for his *Nativity*, cannot fit in because he is associated with Savonarola; not to mention Masaccio and Donatello with his iconic *David*. Finally, one morning, a pivotal question arises: what about the most representative figures of Paris, London, or Dublin? The answer is clear: Balzac, Dickens, and Joyce. So, what about Florence? There is only one name that truly stands out:

Thinking of Joyce, I became excited by the many parallels between the two men; not only for the mere interest of these accidental similarities, but because to think of the story behind the *Vita Nuova* in terms of *A Portrait of the Artist* helps to dispel the cocoon of awe which we have been resolutely spinning about Dante’s passionate flesh ever since the doorstep gossips of Ravenna muttered as he went by: ‘There goes the man who has been in hell’. (114)

This is the distinctive feature of the book: the element that transforms a travel book into a deeply personal and intimate story. This characteristic is evident not only in O'Faolain's travel writings, but also in those of other authors with similar sensibilities who approach travel writing comparably, such as D.H. Lawrence. With the English writer, evoked several times in his travel books, O'Faolain shares an "absolute necessity to move" (Lawrence 1952 [1921], 7). From O'Faolain's perspective, one aspect of this necessity involves engaging in conversations with people through the Socratic technique of anacrisis, that is, "the provocation of the word by the word" (Bakhtin 1999 [1984], 111); a method frequently employed by the Irish writer to stimulate dialogues that enrich his storytelling. About this method, a few years later, when he returned to Italy to journey south, he wrote: "[i]n my joy and excitement at being on the road again I wanted to talk to my fellow-travellers" (O'Faolain 1953, 11).

The resulting book of this new journey will be titled *South to Sicily* in the English Collins edition; in the United States, it will be called *An Autumn in Italy*, referencing its commercial sequel. In this journey, O'Faolain leaves Rome, travelling to Naples, Paestum, and the islands of Capri and Ischia, before proceeding to Apulia, from Foggia to Otranto, not forgetting the opportunity to visit Padre Pio, the Capuchin friar venerated as a saint of the stigmata in the Catholic Church. Afterward, he returns to Naples and, "after idling happily there for several days" (115), finally boards a train to Messina, with Taormina as his destination, continuing on to Siracusa, Noto, Enna, Agrigento, Palermo, and Marsala.

One of the most intense and exciting parts of the trip is the one dedicated to Naples². While strolling through the bustling streets of Pizzozalone, O'Faolain reflects on the significance of Neapolitan morality: "[o]ne has to make a special adjustment in Naples. One has to abandon all hierarchical notions of classified or stratified society to enjoy and understand Naples" (23-24). Ultimately, during an evening excursion, the author meets Giancarlo, the "prototype of amoral morality" (Mazzullo 2001, 212):

Giancarlo accosted me in the course of his work, late one night, quite late, running after me eagerly, trotting beside me as he talked. He wore a mackintosh, no hat, carried an umbrella and the inevitable Neapolitan briefcase. He was dark, small and lively as a rabbit. As he trotted smiling, beside me, he offered me everything that, according to wealth and taste, the heart of man is supposed to desire. A beautiful girl? No? A lovely boy? No? Antiques? No? Cameos, intaglios, coral, jewels? Fake or real as I preferred? No? I persuaded him that I was not rich and did not feel lecherous. At least I needed American cigarettes? I bought a couple of packets. (O'Faolain 1953, 23-24)

In this passage, O'Faolain demonstrates his skill in portraying Giancarlo, the fictional name of the sketch's protagonist, through the frequent use of parataxis. While the writer's ability to evoke dialogue is evident in Naples, the journey to Sicily appears to be quite different. For instance, there are several striking literary references. O'Faolain emphasizes that writers serve as better guides than any guidebook, citing Browning in the context of Florence as an example. One reference pertains to Cardinal John Henry Newman, to whom he had previously dedicated a biographical work. It was in Enna, the Newman's Emmaus according to O'Faolain, "and not, or at least not alone, in the Straits of Bonifacio, that we find the impulse of his one great poem 'The Pillar of Cloud'" (126-127). And again, the reader is invited to read the first lines of the famous hymn.

² He returned to Naples in 1956 on behalf of the magazine *Holiday*, and again in 1972 to film the short documentary *There are Too Many Italians in Italy*, part of a programme by RTÉ, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland's public radio and television service.

Another reference is to the Italian writer Elio Vittorini, mentioned during the journey between Enna and Agrigento. The reference is to the first-person narrator in Elio Vittorini's novel *Conversation in Sicily*, character who lived as a child in this "vacant landscape": "It is a book which will give the reader ten thousand times more of the smell and feel, the passion and the pain of Sicily than any travel books" (131). Here, the reader is given an account of the passion and pain of Sicily, an example of Vittorini's distinctive writing style. However, the Irish writer overlooks the fundamental meaning of the book's title, which represents a journey conceived as an extended conversation, as it reads in this important passage by the Italian writer: "I was journeying still, and the journey was also a conversation, it was present, past, memory, and fantasy" (Vittorini 2000 [1949], 102). Now, we would have expected a more insightful commentary from a writer such as O'Faolain, who possesses travel experience and appreciates the art of conversation.

The narration is indeed full of the names of different writers. For instance, let us examine the section pertaining to the Palatine Chapel, which is situated within the Norman Palace in Palermo. Here, O'Faolain encounters an old friend who resembles William Morris, a sociable individual he had known during his travels in Northern Italy. The two, beneath the Byzantine mosaics, evoke the works of T.S. Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, until suddenly the writer bursts out with an exclamation: "Aren't we talking too much? Let us just *look!*" (1953, 144, italics in original). The subsequent passage serves as an ekphrastic, albeit *sui generis*, exercise in which O'Faolain describes the scenes depicted in the mosaics of the Nativity and the Entry into Jerusalem:

When one looks at Mary putting her hand into the child's bath to see if the water is too hot, or too cold, we look and smile only because we have seen other children's golden bodies swaying in the bath – one's own wife solicitous testing the water. We looked at the Nativity and we laughed. For you never saw such a surprised, gawkish look on anybody's face as there is on Saint Joseph's. And, after all, can any man in the world ever been more astonished by the Virgin Birth? We looked at the Entry into Jerusalem – the entire glittering wall-surface of the chapel is a life story told by a genius – where one boy is seen tearing off his shirt either to throw it under the donkey's hooves or to offer to Christ the tribute of his nakedness, the body bent at right angles, the hands forward to tear off the garment, the head already lost in its folds. How actual that drawing is! (144)

At the end of his Sicilian journey, he realizes that the Mafia has evolved and that Marx's economic theory should be applied to Marsala wine, as it is priced too low at the wine fair. After completing his tour, he returned to Naples and travelled to Calabria. His curiosity about the 1950 land reform law, commonly referred to as the "Sila Law," named after the expansive plateau region in Calabria, compels him to include an appendix in the book dedicated to financing. He then concludes his adventure with a heartfelt wish: "I have always wished that the Italians would make a film of this story: it calls for a script by somebody like Carlo Levi, or Silone, or Vittorini, or John Steinbeck. It is an epic of achievement" (207).

4. *The Sardinian Journey*

Of all his numerous visits to Italy, only one region remained unexplored by O'Faolain, the most archaic: Sardinia. As his daughter Julia recalled about a letter he wrote to her, these visits to Italy resulted in "two chatty books" (O'Faolain 2001, 24). In contrast, his journey to Sardinia was culturally and socially distinct. The most noticeable differences were in the personalities he encountered. Among the many characters one can encounter along the way, either real or imaginary, one in particular, even for a skilled and experienced writer like Sean O'Faolain, is perhaps impossible to describe: the "vero Sardo", i.e., the real Sardinian.

O'Faolain arrived in Sardinia in 1965 from the United States as a correspondent for the American travel magazine *Holiday*. Following the editorial line, the magazine sent a writer and a photographer to a destination, either near or far, around the world. At that time, the Irish writer was also working as a visiting professor at Boston College. Being writer-in-residence allowed him to continue his travels, especially to Italy, a country he loved. This is how O'Faolain's work for *Holiday* was organized:

While he worked on new articles to meet deadlines, he revised articles already sent in. He wanted to achieve a realistic sense of place, but *Holiday* also had definite ideas as to what they wanted and frequently asked for revisions. He was philosophical about this and his professionalism steadied him: 'one is asked to do a job competently and the rest is a cheque'. He met deadlines scrupulously, revised when requested, worked hard to make his articles informative, alive and factually accurate. He had the true journalist's capacity to become excited by fresh material. (Harmon 1994, 206)

In his programme of trips to Italy, planned for 1964, the island came after Florence, Val d'Arno, and Turin. Instead, Sean O'Faolain arrived in Sardinia in May the following year. He agreed the costs of his *Holiday* trips with his agent Emelie Jacobson, but for the trip the writer had in mind to Sardinia, the costs were significantly higher than for other Italian or European destinations: "[t]here was a time when I was trying eagerly to charter a motor launch or a yacht to sail around the coast of Sardinia – with a motorcycle lashed to the mast for inland journeys" (1966, 84). Nothing he had in mind came true once he arrived at the island because at the time Sardinia was not "fashionable" enough for this particular type of holiday.

He entitled the article "In Search of Sardinia", as if he had waited for some time before tackling the discovery of the island. However, Sardinia was not a completely unknown land: presumably, his knowledge was based on what he had learned from the novels of Grazia Deledda. In his essay "The State and its Writers", published when he was editor at *The Bell*, O'Faolain pointed out that "the Nobel Prize winner, Grazia Deledda, wrote about the simple life of her Sardinian peasants" (2016 [1943], 256). But the beginning of the article does not refer to the themes and characters depicted by the Sardinian writer, but rather is devoted to D. H. Lawrence's Sardinia trip in 1921, particularly to the excursion in the heart of the island: the village of Sorgono.

Reaching the heart of the island was a long and tiring journey, but a fascinating one for travellers' eager for scenic and archaeological beauty. This is how O'Faolain's Sardinian experience begins:

I came up here this fine May morning from Cagliari, the capital, in a Fiat 850, at my leisurely ease, on first-class roads. I paused several times, once for about three hours to explore one of the most famous of the 7,000-odd neolithic ruins of ancient Sardinia, the finely preserved village at Barumini. On a straight run I could have done the seventy-eight miles in three and a half hours, though such haste would have been quite stupid, because once you enter the region of Sarcidano, the road starts to wind and climb, and in Barbagia di Belvi [*sic*] the scenery becomes wildly beautiful. (1966, 52)

The first town in central Sardinia where he stays is not in Barbagia (the Romans referred to it as *Barbaria*), but in the sub-region of Mandrolisai, on the border with Barbagia di Belvì. It is called Sorgono, and O'Faolain probably did not choose it by chance. He mentions in his notes the characteristics of the hotel where he is staying, and even here, as we shall see, the choice was not left to chance:

As for this little hotel in Sorgono, it is modern, state-run, perfectly clean and most agreeably situated, with a wide terrace and flowers, and it even has a little bubbling fountain. I suppose by New York standards it would be considered second class. For central Sardinia it is a godsend, even if there is

no water tonight and the telephone has gone bust. I have no complaint. I am the sole resident. And I have the mountains all to myself. Today travel in Sardinia, with the exception of a few still undeveloped regions, can always be perfectly comfortable, and sometimes (not often) luxurious. (52)

But this is not “one of the luxury regions”. The writer’s thoughts range from the “silent tumult” of the mountains to the problem of banditry, a scourge that plagued the island in the 1960s. His is a long retrospective of the journey he had just made that afternoon: after leaving Barumini, every eight kilometres he encountered a Carabinieri checkpoint. He also mentally reviews the history and chronicle of banditry, citing names and dates, until he returns to contemplation from his window, to realistic description, averting his eyes from a newspaper reporting a new robbery in the province of Nuoro. But at the end, he makes an unexpected comment: “[t]he same day’s Roman newspaper? It simply drips with gore and corruption in high places. I think it fair to conclude that Sardinia is pretty safe and calm” (53).

This time O’Faolain was unable to exploit the dialogical form to enrich his narrative because he met very few literarily interesting and stimulating characters. Those few he met, unlike the Neapolitans, were not particularly talkative enough to engage in dialogue. The day he travelled to Dorgali, on the eastern coast, he met only two people all the way. The first was a shepherd,

whom I asked about *banditi*. He did not expand, but at least he did not laugh. He said philosophically, amiably and without rancor, “They are just men who don’t want to work”. Miles farther on I met an old woman who had walked up to the high-road from one of the villages buried in the valley of the Flummineddu [*sic*]. I gave her a lift to a point near Dorgali. I said, ‘What are these lovely pink-white flowers that I see all over the hills?’ and showed her one I had picked earlier while pausing for a pipe and a coffee from my flask while contemplating the vast view. I knew what the flowers were, but I wanted to hear what she would say.

She said in Sard, ‘*Sarbuzzu*’. They are the asphodel of the ancients, who believed that the dead wander through meadows of asphodel in their hopeful search for the waters of Lethe, or oblivion.

After a mile she said, ‘They are the tokens of *miseria*, nothing good grows where they grow’. (84)

What remained was the beauty, the silence of the mountain, broken only by the sounds made by the animals. So, on one hill behind him, he hears “the lonely tolling of a cow bell. Far away, the cuckoo faintly flutes his double note. It is otherwise so silent that I can hear a leaf rustling, and a distant stream. Very peaceful. Very beautiful. Very hard” (53).

It is not difficult for a writer to describe emotions where beauty and tranquillity reign, but O’Faolain, in the heart of Sardinia, was also looking for something more for his story:

I have been drawn up to the island’s iron center by an old lure, one that has tempted many another traveler before me – the search for that ancient prototype, *il vero Sardo*, your true-born, original Sardinian, almost certain to be an old shepherd or an overworked peasant, utterly conservative in all his ways, resisting the modern world, unspoiled unblended, incorruptible. A symbol, an archetype, a remnant. Almost a myth, an ideal one knows in one’s heart will at the best be seen only in glimpses – a man’s proud stance, a child’s dark brows and blackberry eyes, a mountain woman’s nose as magnificent as buttress, a jaw as ponderous as a nuraghe, hints of Carthage and Phoenicia, Africa and Crete, a word, a cool look, a pregnant silence³. (53)

³ In Sean O’Faolain’s articles for *Holiday*, one notices the use of American English spelling for some words, such as *center* instead of *centre*, *traveler* instead of *traveller*, or, as we have seen, *rancor* for *rancour* and, as we shall see below, *color* instead of *colour*.

A vain quest. O'Faolain describes the Sardinian character perfectly, as many other travellers and commentators before him, from Cicero to the 19th and early 20th century French and English writers who came to Sardinia, had.

His reflections on his bandits and the "true Sardinian" are the central part of his story, set in a hotel room, with the narrator recalling moments from the journey he has just made:

I stop my scribbling. It is time to dine. I begin to fear that I will probably never even glimpse *il vero sardo*, least of all among these silent mountains. Hopefully I glance at Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia*, open on my bedside table. My eye falls on this comment on the Gennargentu: "How different it is from Etna, that lonely, self-conscious wonder of Sicily! This is much more human and knowable, with a deep breast and massive limbs, a powerful mountain-body. It is like the peasants." In a fury I hurl the book into a corner. What a balderdash! The whole of his damn place is unknowable! (82)

O'Faolain chose Sorgono because in that small, remote village, more than forty years earlier, D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda von Richthofen stayed in an inn that became memorable for its dilapidated condition. After all, as we mentioned above, writers are better guides than any guide-book. Even when the places described are unknowable.

This is how the writer concludes his journey to Sardinia:

For whatever we take with us from Sardinia – the kindness of its people, its color, its fierceness, its beauty – we must carry also the chastening sense of the immensity of its past. Sardinia is an ark of age, a treasury of time moored in the morning of the Mediterranean. (85)

5. Conclusion

At the end of this portrait, it should be noted that in writing his travel accounts, particularly *An Irish Journey*, *A Summer in Italy*, and *An Autumn in Italy*, O'Faolain has shown a special sense of wonder. This sensitiveness was conveyed through his enthusiastic and joyful way of describing his surroundings, settings, things, and people, which Richard Bonaccorso summed up with the felicitous term "aesthetic gaiety":

As traveller, O'Faolain partakes in low and high life with equal enthusiasm, and feasts upon the aesthetic impact of landscape, cityscape, individual speech, the dynamics of crowds, historical echoes, architecture, painting, forms, colors, and weather. There is more than descriptive power at work in all this abundance of experience. There is a communication of moments of wonder, when the artist's temperament is excited and his spirit is expanded. In these moments he becomes a model of his major theme, the growth into life of the individual mind and spirit. (1987, 132)

This "aesthetic optimism" adapts the initial spirit of the "Literary Renaissance" that characterised O'Faolain's early writings into a different world view, an extension of Irishness, opening a new chapter in modern Irish literature.

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