

Naturalizing Alterity: Edward Maturin's *Bianca: A Tale of Erin and Italy* and Lady Morgan's *Italy*

Donatella Abbate Badin

Università di Torino (donatella.badin@unito.it)

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It has almost become an axiom that otherness is a useful tool to define identity. Manfred Pfister has neatly summarized what he calls a «truism of Cultural studies»:

A culture defines itself by defining other cultures; the self defines itself by defining the other. The need for cultural and national identity always expresses and realizes itself in ascription of differences and otherness to the neighbouring cultures and nations. [...] The Other [...] helps both the individual and the culture to establish and maintain identity by serving as a screen onto which the self projects its unfulfilled longings, its repressed desires and its darkest sides (Pfister 1996, 4).

Englishness, in consequence, is defined, in part, in opposition to everything not English and, at least during the Renaissance and in the age of Romanticism, against everything Italian. Indeed the relevance of images of Italy in English and other northern literatures is a subject much investigated in our days. When it comes to Ireland, however, little progress has been made in the field of confrontation with Italy for which this journal hopes, in due time, to compensate. Admittedly, Anglo-Ireland, in one of the epochs which was most fertile for Anglo-Italian cultural relations, had to define itself mainly against England leaving to Italy a secondary but significant role. This significance lies, however, rather in the uses that were not made of the image of Italy than in those that were made.

«What is out there in the world», the Other, can have strong implications for the self with the provision offered by Joep Leerssen «that images work in an epistemological economy of *recognition* value rather than *truth* value» (Leerssen 2007, 284). The mental images of Italy held by some Irish Romantic writers served the purpose of underlining resemblance rather than difference, of creating a shock of recognition which would be dealt with more or less gingerly according to the personality and circumstances of the writer. The way the Irish naturalized the alterity of Italy, in fact, is rather ambivalent, on the one hand filtering the connection through their relationship with England

and mirroring stereotypes common to the English-speaking world and on the other hand establishing a special relationship of their own shaped by their ideological and cultural differences from the British. Since, as ethnologists assure us, «when a culture takes cognisance of another [...] it will inevitably do so, so that alterity while being noticed, processed and absorbed is invariably and automatically ‘naturalized’» (Bode 2004, 34), Irish writers of the first half of the nineteenth century reacted to Italy by focusing on those elements which were closest to their historical circumstances such as nationalism, dependence from a foreign power and a desire for and fear of insurrectional movements.

The experience of Italy as a land of refuge and the more recent historical events in both countries (the 1798 Rising in Ireland, the 1799 Rising in Naples, the influence of the French Revolution, with the establishment of a republican government in Italy, the rise and development of the Risorgimento in 1820-1821, in 1830 and in 1848) could have fostered a debate on nationhood and the separate identity of the Irish and the Italians and created a literary image of Italy which differed substantially from the English, that of a country, in Lady Morgan's words, which, like Ireland, «can breathe the spirit of liberty beneath the lash of despotism» (Morgan 1807, 48). Yet, with some exceptions such as Morgan's, Irish writers, although aware of the similarities, used great cautiousness in their representation of the Italian national character and circumstances, clinging to the old English stereotypes. They were clearly aware that a portrait of Italy could be read as a metaphor of Ireland in which case, as Seamus Deane warns, «the one element that had to be erased was the revolutionary element; for once that appeared, the commercialisation failed and Ireland became a territory as Other [for England] as revolutionary France» (Deane 1997, 67). Thus at a time when the Risorgimento could have represented an appeal for the Irish (as it did for many English radicals), as a rule the Irish kept silent because of the similarities perceived and half-heartedly concentrated on a picturesque Italy, full of artistic beauties and of villains.

An example of Irish ambivalence and circumspection is at the centre of an important scene of *Bianca. A Tale of Erin and Italy* (1852) by Edward Maturin, the son of the better known Charles Maturin. In the first conversation between Morven O'Moore, a Trinity College student, and Bianca Romano, an Italian exile in Dublin, the Italian woman exposes her ideas about the resemblance of the two people:

«Ah! Dear generous Ireland!» interrupted Bianca [...] «I can almost fancy myself again under my own bright sky, for the people seem almost the same. The same in fire – enthusiasm – their love of song – in all save their language

«[...] So you like the Irish?»

[...]

«I love them, for in their character I read the transcript of all that commends my countrymen to my heart – nay, even in our misfortunes we have sympathy – »

«To what do you allude?»

«The genius of Italy weeps at the grave of Brutus, but the freedom of Ireland reposes in its tomb without a tear.»

I felt the blood rise to my cheek, and anxious to evade any thing of a political character, I rejoined, «that if Ireland were now soldiered by a foreign foe, the blame lay in her own sons, whose energies were expended in maintaining religious faction rather than in asserting her independence. [...] Have you been long here?» I continued, anxious to change the subject (Maturin 1852, 39-40).

Obviously the theme of the resemblance of the two people in their suffering for the lack of independence and the oppression of foreigners – the epitome of patriotic rhetoric – is a cause of embarrassment for the Irish protagonist, and by attributing the fault of the situation to the «house divided» of Ireland, he tries to dodge the issue as does the author of *Bianca* himself, who also says and unsays things, recognizing and dismissing similarities and touching upon hot political issues and immediately dropping them.

Edward Maturin (1812-1881) was born in Dublin and graduated from TCD, emigrating soon after to the USA with letters of recommendation from Thomas Moore and other men-of-letters. After a stint at the bar, he turned to scholarship and writing, holding the chair of Greek and Latin at various American universities while publishing several literary works. He never lost touch with his Irish origins, however, and most of his creative works relate to Ireland either directly, as in the extravagant melodramatic national tale, *The Irish Chieftain* (1848), or, more often, in emblematic tales set in the classical past or in foreign parts which act as rather transparent metaphors for Ireland. Thus *Montezuma, the Last of the Aztecs* (1845) is a sorrowful tale about the Spanish conquest of Mexico in which it is easy to read parallelisms with Ireland; *Benjamin, the Jew of Grenada: a Romance* (1848) deals with the fall of the Moslem empire in Spain, while *Lyrics of Spain and Erin* (1850) brim with patriotic rhetoric. One of the poems, addressed to Napoleon, contains such tell-tale verses as «Thou taught'st mankind to break the chain / That bound the soul for ages long» (Maturin 1850, 207). Maturin thus chooses to dwell on stories of defeat, oppression and aspiration to freedom, skating dangerously close to Irish concerns but avoiding to take the final plunge and draw explicit comparisons.

Bianca (1852), a hodgepodge of narrative genres – Gothic romance and national tale, travel report and, occasionally, edifying story – has been (justly) condemned to 'canonical silence' yet it can offer food for thought regarding the literary representations of Italy in Romantic Ireland. Maturin narrates the thwarted love story of an Irishman, Morven O'Moore and Bianca Romano, a beautiful and very musical young Italian woman, exiled for mysterious reasons in Dublin, whom the hero saves from drowning. The two fall in love but on being informed that his brother's machinations have disinherited him and

left him destitute, Morven can no longer hope to support and marry Bianca and disappears suddenly to look for employment. After a period of separation during which Morven, as a tutor in a ancient Irish family, gets sentimentally involved with the young lady of the house, Geraldine, and in a duel shoots his own villainous brother, the two former lovers meet again in Rome where it is now Morven's turn to be an exile while Bianca has become a famous and rich opera singer. Morven's pride, however, still forbids marriage since he is not only impoverished but also a fugitive criminal. Heart-broken, Bianca accepts to marry Salviati, a villain in the best Elizabethan or Gothic tradition, but on the altar, in a *Jane Eyre*-like scene, a mistress is produced, now a madwoman, whom Bianca recognizes as her long-lost mother. Shame and pity for her mother's dishonour at the hands of Salviati, abhorrence of the man she almost married and grief for having been abandoned by Morven lead Bianca to her grave, leaving the Irishman free to return to Ireland and discover that his brother had not died in the duel and is now repentant. He recovers his inheritance and marries Geraldine.

The apparent obstacles to the love of the Irishman and the Italian woman, in this emotionally charged romance, full of agnitions and half-resolved mysteries, however, are hardly convincing being due not to their nationality nor to political reasons but simply to a financial set-back. What might have been an intercultural marriage plot which could have led to a union between different and seemingly opposed cultures (as in the marriage plots of national tales) fails on the verge of coming true, sending the hero back to Ireland to a safe and uncontroversial union with a character who has not had a great role in the romance, Lady Geraldine, a true Irishwoman who plays Moore-like melodies on the harp. The dénouement of the novel comes almost as an afterthought, as if the author could not allow a true-blooded Irishman to become involved with a country which, unlike Ireland, was on the verge of full fruition of its secular aspirations (Italy would be unified and shake off foreign dominance in 1861) and which the first-person narrator represents, maybe to justify his turnabout, in the most derogatory way.

Much has been written on the allegorical value of marriage in Irish national tales (the marriage, however, being usually between the Irish and the English), and as to allegory, Fredric Jameson argues that all postcolonial texts (which he calls third world texts) are allegorical:

[All] third world texts are necessarily [...] allegorical, and in a very specific way they are to be read as what I will call "national allegories." [Texts] which are seemingly private [...] necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society (Jameson 1986, 69-73).

What, then, is the allegorical significance of Maturin's finale? A marriage with Bianca would have meant espousing her cause and accepting the

similarities between the two nations which the heroine had pointed out in the initial scene. It would have meant putting Irish nationalism in a European context and allying it to a cause, the Italian, which at the time the romance was published, 1852, had taken an open revolutionary bend (there had been bloody risings in 1820-1821, in 1830, in 1848) to which Bianca obliquely alludes when she exclaims: «We long to tread the spot where Freedom reared her altar, and the tyrant fell, or the field where countless thousands toiled and bled» (Maturin 1852, 51).

Such symbolic alliance could have been dangerous for Maturin if not politically (for he lived in America) certainly commercially. It was much safer (and pleasing to an Ascendancy readership) to revert to a bland, sentimental, Moore-like nationalism and antiquarianism epitomized by Lady Geraldine, who, dressed in green and with a shamrock crown on her head, plays and sings «as though the very soul of her country were breathing in and informing every tone» (Maturin 1852, 94). Even her repertoire derives from Moore, indicating the political significance of Morven's marital choice: «The halls of Tara, her Red Branch Knights, their martial prowess, and her present desolation, interrupted only by the sound that told her "tale of ruin", all were before me» (*ibidem*). Geraldine's country, like Moore's, is an unreal country, crystallized in its antiquarian rhetoric and with no connection to the present nor, especially, to present potentially violent realities such as were Italy's. There is no sign that the Famine, a real «tale of ruin», had taken place only four years before the publication of the novel. Nor, indeed, are there any hints to the 1848 Italian war of independence.

The Italy Maturin describes, is an invented country as unreal as his Ireland. Morven's impressions as he moves up and down the peninsula as a Byronic grand-tourist, are not based on real experience but are a collage of passages borrowed from other travellers with an insistence on difference rather than on similarity. While Bianca had repeatedly pointed out Italy's resemblance to Ireland, Morven on the contrary underlines its fascinating otherness comparing it to a Mecca, a Caaba in front of which Moslems bow (Maturin 1852, 198) or perceiving «something talismanic in the nature of that fair land» (Maturin 1852, 196). Indeed, departing by steamship from Genoa in the moonlight, «realized [Morven's] early dreams of enchantment in the Arabian nights» (Maturin 1852, 197). More often, however, Maturin voices all the italophobic prejudices and platitudes that recur in the vast literature about Italy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries along the negative Addison-Sharp-Smollet line. It is a land of Machiavellian villains (as in Jacobean drama or Gothic novels) and of «cringing and sycophantic» people (Maturin 1852, 212) capable of «deep craft and foul stratagems» (Maturin 1852, 256) like the Roman aristocrat Salviati who is Morven's rival for Bianca's love and the cause of her untimely death.

Only Bianca, whose alterity is constructed through sensory means by dwelling on her exotic beauty, seems to be an exception. Not surprisingly she is described with almost the same words and in the same situations as the Irish heroine Geraldine. In her singing, too, one could hear «the soul, the inspiration, proclaiming her Italian» (Maturin 1852, 67) especially when she is «[like the Sybil] pouring forth her prophetic fury in strains that mourned over the ruins» of her own country (Maturin 1852, 227) or, indeed, on those of Ireland when she plays Moore's «Hath sorrow thy young days clouded?» eliciting Morven's surprise: «A melody of old Ireland – and in Italy!» (Maturin 1852, 352). But she is also capable of fusing the souls of the two races when, as the famous opera singer she has become, she sings the role of the Celtic druidess in Bellini's *Norma*. In fact, Bianca is almost the Italian double of her Irish counterpart. Bianca and Geraldine are both brilliant musicians and ardent nationalists, their music telling «the tale of ruin» of their respective countries. And they both love Morven. If Bianca and Geraldine, as is quite obvious in this novel, stand for their countries, Italy and Ireland, which in the rhetoric of the time were considered feminine for their beauties but also for their softness and their tendency to be dominated, their resemblance has national implications which, however, Maturin chooses just to suggest but not to develop. Thus at the structural and thematic level, Maturin denies that alterity which he portrays on the surface of the romance; he dares not, however, to make it more explicit because of the possible implications.

The drawing of connections between the two countries represents, indeed, the most interesting and original aspect of the romance especially in its use of music as a device to reveal similarities and differences between Italy and Ireland and suggest historical and political realities which are not mentioned otherwise. Music and the rhetoric about the ruin of their countries link the protagonists and through music is effected that fusion of contraries which fails to be consecrated by marriage. Indeed, Bianca through her love for Ireland and her bi-national music seems to be the point of convergence in this rudimentary multicultural story.

Lady Morgan never wrote an historical romance about Italy as she did about Greece, India and Belgium (which all acted as metaphors of Ireland) but if she had, we might have expected that it would have celebrated through an intercultural marriage the similarities which she recognized in her monumental travelogue, *Italy* (1821). The book, by common consent one of the most sympathetic to the country, though not to its leaders, had been commissioned by her publisher, Colburn in 1818 to follow in the wake of her successful national tales (e.g. *The Wild Irish Girl*) and of her *France* and it gives a first-hand though ideologically biased account of the social and political situation in the various states of Italy examined in a strong spirit of Jacobinism. Italy, in her eyes, is not a mere «geographic expression», as Metternich had affirmed at the congress of Vienna, but an ideal community in which a sense of nation

was just beginning to reaffirm itself. By writing about Italy and concentrating on a few privileged moments of its history (the age of the city-states, of the republics, those of French influence) she can explore the meaning of national identity as she was doing for Ireland in her fictional production. The image of Italy she projects is that of a country characterized by an ardent love of freedom similar to that of Ireland.

Although Morgan is much more explicit than Maturin in recognizing Italy as a kindred country, she, too, often wavers and takes precautions. Travelling to Italy brings to the fore the ambivalence of her Anglo-Irish identity. Her pride of being British and belonging to a country that can boast of constitutional rights and of a sophisticated civilization is flattered by looking into the negative mirror presented by Italy. On the other hand it is in her Irish half we must seek the springs for Morgan's transculturation, in other words her identification and integration in the culture of the Italian 'Other', which frequently implies disowning her English identity and siding with the victims – Italian as well as Irish – of English hegemonic power. This is expressed at times overtly but most often it can be read between the lines.

Besides expressing patriotic feelings and the rhetoric of 'pining for freedom' and 'groaning under the yoke', which can be found in many other Irish writers as well, such as Maturin or, also, the poet Thomas Moore, Morgan sees Italy and Ireland similar in many much more tangible features. The poverty and bad reputation the two people share are due less to intrinsic factors than to similar causes: the economic and moral oppression of hegemonic powers. In these as in the love of freedom and the occasional uprisings (as for instance those in 1798-99 in both countries) lie the most obvious similarities of the two people which endear Italians to the eyes of the Irish writer and result in a portrayal much more favourable than what can be found in her contemporary fellow-countrymen's.

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» (Morgan 1821, II.xviii.153). Yet, Italy fares much better in comparison. Irish peasantry even lacks the small luxuries and simple ornaments worn by women near Tortona: «the worst habited among them might have passed for a princess in *grand costume* among that race, whose misery has no parallel in the lowest degradation of other countries – the peasantry of Ireland» (Morgan 1821, I.xi.216). The sight of prosperity, indeed, as in the case of the countryside between Piacenza and Bologna, becomes a source of grief because it shows Ireland's backwardness off: «Surely it is a dreary penalty paid for the enjoyment of foreign scenery», she comments, «to have the heart dragged back by inevitable comparison at every step, and to see, even in the oppression and misrule of Italian Principalities, a prosperity too forcibly

contrasting with the distresses and degradation of the land of one's birth and affections» (Morgan 1821, I.xiii.263-264). In a reversal of the more customary dialectical relationship between northern self and southern 'Other', Morgan realizes that the difference is tilted in favour of Italy not only because of a more generous nature, but because of a more advanced social system, whereas in Ireland, unfair legislation would forbid progress in spite of the favourable objective circumstances:

But even here, Nature, all lovely as she is, would smile in vain, if placed under such circumstances as operate in Ireland to degrade the labourer, and to ruin the soil. [...] At every step a conviction is forced upon the mind either that the boasted Constitution of England is inadequate to the prosperity of society, or that the Irish nation is mocked with its semblance and has never enjoyed it but under those corruptions, which are ever fatal in proportion to the excellence they strive to simulate (Morgan 1821, I.xiii.263).

The Italian and Irish people have also traditionally been the objects of ethnic jokes and of much more serious forms of denigration, as eighteenth-century travel literature about Italy illustrates. Harking back to *Topographia Hibernica* and Spenser, there had also been a long tradition of slander and accusations raised against Irish people. Morgan was quite familiar with these tactics and aware that generalizations are constructions often dictated by expediency. Thus she was quick to recognize them as put in practice in Italy about which negative stereotyping was rampant. Her daring explanation, for example, of the charge of «inherent viciousness» raised against Neapolitans could also apply to Irish people: «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» (Morgan 1821, II. xxiv.383).

Made wise by her own experience, in the chapters about Naples she lashes out against all essentialisms.

It is a calumny against Providence and a solecism in philosophy, to assert that there are nations so marked by physical tendencies to evil, so instinctively devoted to particular vices, that they remain unredeemable by good laws, incorrigible by wise institutes [...] It has been the fashion to accuse the Neapolitans of an inherent viciousness, over which external circumstances could hold no control; but the prejudice has only obtained currency in European opinion, since that country has been the slave of Spain (Morgan 1821, II.xxiv. 382-383).

Because of her ideology and the implicit parallelism she establishes between Italy and Ireland, Morgan's sympathy for the local population is great. She even exonerates from blame those categories of Italians that were usually the target of other writers' criticism, such as beggars, criminals, outlaws, «banditti». «The people», she writes about Southern Italians, «are what ages of despotism and anarchy, bigotry and misrule, had left them, the least civilized,

and most debased population of Italy» (Morgan 1821, II.xxiv.371) and «The falsity and dishonesty attributed to the Neapolitans, and always exaggerated, are the inevitable results of their social position» (Morgan 1821, II.xxiv.385). Substitute Irish for Neapolitan and what she could not have written openly in her national tales is there to be read between the lines of her travelogue since in both kinds of writing she continues exploring the meaning of national identity.

Although Morgan dares not point an accusing finger against England for the oppression of Ireland, she lashes out against it in several examples of injustice regarding Italy which remind one of similar circumstances in Ireland. For instance, when she laments the role England played after the Congress of Vienna, in helping the Savoy dynasty incorporate the one-thousand-year-old maritime republic of Genoa, she pronounces tell-tale words which extend the role of plaintiff to other unnamed nations as well:

[Genoa] owes its misfortunes to the same councils and the same system, which, in a shameless conspiracy against the rights and feelings of humanity, are plotting the total extinction of liberty in Europe. The part which England has played in this surrender of this ancient republic, has earned for her the double obloquy of crime and of dupery; and the indignation which yet murmurs upon the lips of the whole Italian population, is largely mingled with contempt for a nation, whose indifference to the liberties of foreign countries they take as a certain sign and forerunner of the loss of its own (Morgan 1821, I.xii.255).

Admittedly the accusation of «indifference to the liberties of foreign countries» regards the present government, namely Lord Castlereagh, the Irish born Tory minister who «having destroyed the liberties of his own country [by the Act of Union], has laboured so hard to annihilate those of the nation, by which he has been adopted» (Morgan 1821, I.vii.153n). Castlereagh was instrumental in confirming also this other «Union», that of Genoa to Piedmont. As for the 1801 Union which made Ireland lose its parliament and semi-independent state, Morgan declares here openly her feelings of loss thus putting on a par her own country and Genoa as victims of a similar act of injustice.

An equal disrespect for national rights was shown by England in another episode of the history of the House of Savoy when the island of Sardinia was annexed to Piedmont and Savoy «at the interposition of our Queen Anne: as the English have since conferred on his Sardinian Majesty the Dukedom of Genoa, and as they have, with an equal disregard of national rights, ceded the Christians of Parga to Ali Pacha» (Morgan 1821, I.iv.48). What is left unsaid is that the same disregard for national rights is also displayed by England in Ireland.

Italian history particularly lends itself to Irish applications. With a sensibility made sharper by the situation at home she also comments on various moments of Neapolitan history which attract her attention because of affinities

with Ireland. Under Charles the Fifth and his heirs, the territory was administered from a distance by governors who were indifferent to the welfare and even to the culture and language of the natives: «They successively governed this beautiful and unhappy country, by that refinement upon all bad government, the delegated power of foreign despotism» (Morgan 1821, II.xxiv.361). One could almost read between the lines: «like the British in Ireland». Those who governed it did not have «any legitimate right to reign over a distant land of whose language they were [...] ignorant» (Morgan 1821, II.xxiv.362). Again one could read between the lines: «like the British in Ireland». «Their imposts upon the abundant produce of that teeming soil, on which Nature has lavished all her beauty, continually reduced the people to famine, perpetuated their poverty, and drove them into [...] insurrections» (Morgan 1821, II.xxiv.361). Once again the situation denounced in the national tales and in *Patriotic Sketches* or in *Absenteeism* presents itself to the mind.

Naples and Ireland are especially brought together by the evocation of the Jacobin revolution of 1799, as ephemeral as the 1798 rising in Ireland and like it a bearer of a new awareness and new aspirations. The chapter dealing with that page of Italian history is a masterpiece of allusiveness.

The over one thousand pages of *Italy*, however, also provide innumerable examples which could be used to disprove Morgan's appreciation of the country as they show her espousing the old stereotypes, nagging against superstition, corruption, bureaucracy, deceitfulness, dirt. What, however, interests us here are the moments when her understanding of Italy is enhanced by her knowledge of Ireland and the two countries are seen as kindred and her certainty of belonging to «the dominant order» is undermined by the suspicion of writing from a marginalized position.

On the strong evidence of these two Irish writers – and that of Thomas Moore with whom I have dealt in two forthcoming publications – one could advance the hypothesis (to be confirmed by more research) that there was in Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century an awareness of the special historical and political conditions of Italy and of possible similarities with Ireland and that this awareness was at the root of the peculiar ambivalence which characterized Irish representations of Italy. Italy was perceived as a mirror – a dangerous mirror – in which to reflect one's identity. To the British citizens, proud of their Protestant and democratic tradition, Italy was a mirror in which to reflect the superiority of the community to which they belonged (as was the case for most of their English fellow writers). To the Irish nationals, Italy, oppressed by foreign domination yet aspiring to freedom, became a yardstick for gauging issues of subjugation, injustice, and national identity and invited sympathy from citizens of a colonized country. There lay the danger of the Italian mirror; it reflected a divided self with aspirations which were hard to confess publicly and even to oneself.

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