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‘In the Heart of the Roman Metropolis’: an Italian Prologue to Synge’s Investigative Journalism

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1 Synge in Rome

John Millington Synge throughout his career was an attentive travel writer and a keen journalist – as a brand new re-edition of his topographical essays has emphasized¹, historicizing the pieces in the context of their original publication in newspapers and literary magazines. In this perspective, the investigative reportage that Synge wrote in 1905 for the English newspaper «The Manchester Guardian» – originally titled *In the Congested Districts*, and edited in the *Collected Works*² as *In Connemara* – becomes particularly interesting. It was commissioned from Manchester to Synge and the painter Jack B. Yeats who produced a series of line drawings for it, in order to witness poverty and distress in the West of Ireland and to assess the work of the Congested Districts Board (CDB). The Board, which was the practical result of Lord Arthur Balfour’s Constructive Unionism policies³, was active in the most impoverished areas of the western seaboard and aimed at relieving the distress with the implementation of local enterprises such as fisheries, kelp-making, textile industries. As this article will analyse, Synge’s investigative reporting has an interesting antecedent related to the Italian political situation at the end of the 19th century, and specifically to Synge’s sojourn in Rome. The antecedent dates back to March 1896 when Synge witnessed the riots in Piazza Montecitorio, caused by Prime Minister Francesco Crispi’s resignation after the defeat against the king of Ethiopia Menelik, following the Italo-Abyssinian War, and posted an article on the riots to The Irish Times. This essay will explore also some literary echoes and Joycean connections in relation to Synge in Rome.

Almost like Joyce’s Bloom, ‘in the heart of the Roman Metropolis’, the traveller J.M. Synge happened to be in Rome since the first of February 1896, indulging in leisurely and artistic activities such as touring between the «Colosseum and the Fori Romani» (February 5th, 1896), «San Pietro and Lunch in

the Pincio» (Saturday 8th, 1896), or visiting the «Sistine Chapel and Raffael's Stanze» (February 17th, 1896), and going «to a conference in the Collegio Romano» (February 20th)⁴.

He had arrived from Paris where he had started taking Italian lessons a couple of months earlier «with a Dr Meli, planning a two-month trip to Italy»⁵. In Rome he kept taking language classes and reading widely on Italian literature. In the list of authors mentioned in his diaries, among the Italians, we find Edmondo De Amicis with *Cuore* and *La vita militare*, Petrarca, Tasso, Dante, Manzoni with *I promessi sposi*, Leopardi and Boccaccio. In his notebooks we also have compositions like short essays, such as one on Michelangelo's Mosè that Synge saw Saturday 14 March⁶ and that does not seem to fully satisfy him: «Non ho trovato il Mosè così piacevole come le altre opere di questo maestro, per esempio gli affreschi nella cappella sistina»⁷; or else letter drafts, and jottings with words translated in three languages, Italian, English and French, such as «sprecare, gaspiller, to waste»⁸.

2

The Demonstrations in Rome (by an eye witness)

In the diary entry dated Wednesday 26 February, in Italian, Synge wrote: «Visto i soldati che partivano per Abyssinia» (Saw soldiers about to leave for Abyssinia). In German, in the same diary, for Tuesday 10 March Synge noted again: «Wrote description about the present situation for newspaper»⁹. The newspaper in question is «The Irish Times» that would publish an unsigned article on Monday 16 March titled *The Demonstrations in Rome (by an eye witness)*. About Synge's presumed authorship of the piece, commentators are cautious, since in his papers, drafts, typescripts, notes or any sort of *avant-textes* do not exist. Therefore, we do not have any direct evidence that the article that appeared in «The Irish Times» is what Synge actually wrote. We only have the indirect source – Synge's own diary entry – that confirms the presence of it. For instance, W.J. McCormack states in his biography «[the article] may draw on his report»¹⁰. Ann Saddlemyer, too, does not say overtly that it belongs to Synge, but simply notes the presence of it in the newspaper, emphasizing the coincidental time frame with the diary entry in German that names it¹¹.

Unfortunately we do not have enough evidence to confirm that the piece is 'an original Synge'. However, the attribution *sine dubio* of the article to the Irish playwright is not the main focus of this critical piece: I do believe it is worth conjecturing that Synge is the author of it especially in relation to his successive reportage for «The Manchester Guardian». Therefore, for the purposes of this article, I will assume that Synge is the author of the piece. The juvenile *désengagé* report can be reminiscent of a certain descriptive style with a tendency towards nuances and a keen spirit of observation that will

become hallmarks of Synge's subsequent prose productions. Furthermore it engages overtly with political affairs and reports from the field and from direct testimony, a similar methodological approach endorsed for «The Manchester Guardian» series *In the Congested Districts* (1905).

On Thursday 5 March, 1896, Synge witnessed the mob in the streets of Rome after Crispi's resignation. The article is not politically judgemental, but paints faithfully the riots from the perspective of an 'eyewitness', as is remarked in the title. Synge's piece integrates another one on the same newspaper page, reproducing Reuter's reports to the press about the peace process, following the Italian defeat in the Battle of Adua. The title of this second article reads: *Italy and Abyssinia / The Peace Negotiations / Reinforcements Countermanded*, and explains the whole situation day by day, starting from Saturday 14 March. Four of these are Reuter's telegrams, three coming from Rome and one from Paris: they faithfully reconstruct the political and military events quoting also from many Italian newspapers. As historians have reconstructed, the reason why hostilities between Italy and Menelik's Ethiopia – at that time engaged in diplomatic discussions for the Italian expansion in Eritrea – rose, was the disagreement on the Treaty of Uccialli (1889) that was meant to regulate the commercial and colonial relationships between the two kingdoms. War started however, a few years later (December 1895), probably because of the Italian instability in its internal politics and the continuous scandals that were plaguing the brand new kingdom. This gap of time allowed Menelik to heavily strengthen his army that ruthlessly pulverized the Italian one in the Battle of Adua, on 1 March, 1896. Historians talk about the bloodshed with losses «more severe than the ones in the Italian Independence Wars»¹², a massacre authorised by Crispi who did not want to give in to diplomacy, despite the advice of his military forces stationed in Africa¹³. The echo of the *débauche* in the peninsula was incredibly loud and public opinion was manifesting its dissent with mobs in every square. On «The Irish Times», in the news agency reports, it is recounted how «desertions from the Italian Army are becoming more numerous, and many soldiers are crossing the Swiss frontier into Ticino»¹⁴.

It is from Piazza Colonna that Synge seems to have reported to his fellow countrymen. A concise opening describes the political and historical background that led to the mob and presents the facts in chronological order, counting them as already known by the public:

On the day of Crispi resignation (March 5th) Rome was in ferment from an early hour. The main events are already well known. A mob of over a thousand persons awaited the fallen Minister at the door of the Chamber. His arrival was greeted by hostile whistling and jeering with some applause. At 2.30 o'clock he rose in the Chamber, and announced that the Ministry had sent in their resignation, and that it

had been accepted by the King. His statement was followed by an outburst of hostility, to which the veteran statesman replied by repeated bows¹⁵.

The body of the piece, after setting the preparatory scene for the agitation, follows the pattern of a simple chronological narrative of cause and effect. Subsequently, the outburst of the disorders and the crowd protesting against the military are painted with a striking image of a 'semi-Ministerial paper' pro-Crispi – «Il Capitale» – burned to ashes in the air, the spark that ignited the whole real mob:

Before many minutes an enraged patriot put a light to one of the numbers, and threw it into the air. It was caught up by the wind and burned to ashes, while the mob yelled and howled with delight. Soon the whole Piazza was filled with smoke and burning paper, as this initiative was eagerly followed¹⁶.

After the crowd was dispersed by some military troops that had reached Piazza Montecitorio in order to help the other soldiers de-congest it, 'Reporter Synge' follows one of the many directions they had taken, presumably the more newsworthy, since that part of the mob was going towards Crispi's private house. The article gains momentum again at the end of the paragraph in the recognition of Prince Odescalchi¹⁷, and his patriotic declaration: «He was instantly surrounded and told to cry "Abbasso (down with) Crispi, viva Menelik"». He answered "I am an Italian. I will cry nothing but Viva l'Italia!" and forced himself free»¹⁸.

The description of the crowd in action seems to mirror Synge's tendency for nuanced particulars. The crowd in its collective and fluid state embodies the demonstrations themselves, and takes all the stage, especially after the burning of the pamphlet. It is described acoustically more than with visual connotations, despite Synge being the 'eyewitness': «the mob yelled and howled with delight», «the hoarse murmur of riot grew more and more threatening», «the mob howled and vociferated»¹⁹. It is the crowd that asks Prince Odescalchi to cry out loud «Abbasso Crispi, viva Menelik»²⁰. In emphasizing the aural nature of the crowd, more than its spatial distribution in the two Roman squares, Synge gives us a depiction of a chaotic entity not orderly arranged in lines like the soldiers: «Two more troops of military arrived at a double, and forming a line before the Chamber, began working the crowd down the streets»²¹. Furthermore, the crowd of protesters cannot even recognize the same sounds that imply order such as the bugle: «Every time the bugle sounded an advance, there was almost a panic and the crowd came rushing back tumbling over the orange and flower boys, who brought up the rear»²². The mob is therefore primarily noise and chaos. If Synge had read Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* (*The Betrothed*) we could have gone as far as arguing that his depiction owed something to the Italian novelist and his portrayal of the masses – «la folla manzoniana»²³: in the book, the masses achieve the

status of a full character, in some cases very much effective in the characters' resolutions and happenings. Unfortunately, Synge's diaries do not help commentators to indulge in this literary fascination: the entry that coincidentally refers to *The Betrothed* is dated 'after' our article, on Saturday March 18 1896, when Synge visited the Vatican as well. In these circumstances, since we are not supplied with direct documentary evidence, we could only but praise Synge's original musical ear: the same musical ear well stimulated by his training as a professional musician which, later on, will help him create the Aran Islands' «soundscape»²⁴ with «a faint murmur of Gaelic»²⁵ and the cries of birds and cormorants among the rocks. Furthermore, Synge's *penchant* for crowds' dynamics is evoked in *The Aran Islands* at the end of his second trip. At the train station in Galway, Synge describes «a wild crowd» standing on the platform and compares it with previous specimens he had encountered in Europe. Rome's mob is well etched in Synge's memory: «The tension of human excitement seemed greater in this insignificant crowd than anything I have felt among enormous mobs in Rome or Paris»²⁶.

The last paragraph of *The Demonstrations in Rome* starts with Crispi's house being already secured by the police and continues with the subsequent movements of the mob when the protest seems to grow in tone. Synge however, breaks the rhythm with an interesting digression for his Dublin readers, talking about electric trams: «It may interest Dubliners to hear that three electric trams, which arrived on the scene during the blockade, behaved most admirably, although they came on the crowd round a corner and down an extremely steep incline»²⁷.

The brief digression sounds almost like a sort of interpolation in the rhythm of the whole piece, and almost causes a switch in style, from current events to the colours of a lifestyle report. Nonetheless it reveals a very interesting detail about modern material culture and the way technological innovations in the field of transports were assimilated by public opinion at that time. According to historical notes about Dublin and its system of transports:

On 16th May 1896, Dublin's first electric trams began running between Haddington Road and Dalkey. Initially operated by the Dublin Southern District Tramways Company, the line was sold a few months later to the Dublin United Tramways, at that time running about 170 horse cars over 33 route miles. Despite concerted opposition, a reconstituted Dublin United Tramways Company (1896) Ltd. immediately set about total electrification²⁸.

Coincidentally, two months before the actual setting off of the first electric tram in Ireland, the author of the article with his digression, hints to the fact that Dublin public opinion at that time could have been concerned with this issue. It is my guess that probably, in the popular press, there had been a lot of talk about the new system of transportation. Therefore, from his Irish perspective, Synge decides to offer the reader another European metropolis,

suggesting that electric trams can work even in the most awkward situations such as that of a mob.

What is fascinating in this strange *captatio benevolentiae* towards the Dublin reader is the narrative perspective of the writer and the obvious literary echoes that this angle suggests. Synge seems to become an almost *ante-litteram* Joycean character strolling and witnessing a political event that will make history – ‘in the heart of the Roman Metropolis’ – recording also more or less extemporaneous details such as the tramcar and the different sounds of the crowd. Synge is an onlooker mixed amongst the crowd of the rioters, a sort of ‘Man in the Macintosh’ watching the Viceroy Cavalcade, and a Leopold Bloom *flâneur*, living in the city with its more recent technical innovations in transports. In Joyce, for instance, public transports are taken by his characters and become an essential way to explore the city. In *Wandering Rocks* the episode *par excellence* where the city becomes mobile, explored and framed from different points of view, Father Conmee takes «an outward bound tram»²⁹ getting off at the Howth road stop and making comments on his fellow passengers, on his readings and various thoughts that come up to his mind during the ride. Synge, in a sense, is captured by the stimuli of the city, in his case amplified by the helter-skelter of the situation. In a sociological study applied to the Joycean stream of consciousness, Franco Moretti quotes Georg Simmel and his *The Metropolis and Mental Life* where he describes the «metropolitan type of individual» and his psyche which «consists in the *intensification of nervous stimulation*, which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli [...] the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions»³⁰. Synge’s article can be seen as mirroring this phenomenon especially in the quick switch of style. However, while Moretti refers to the Joycean hero as possessing a «sociology of absentmindedness»³¹ because of this metropolitan over-exposure to nervous stimulation, we cannot realistically apply the same definition to Synge as narrator of the article, since his own stimuli in the end are conveyed and rationalised for the purpose of accurately reporting a fact, and in order *not* to overload reality with them. Furthermore, what struck me in terms of a Joyce/Synge parallel was, in a biographical sense, a coincidental time frame and their having partaken metropolitan experiences such as the one in Paris when they met. They both shared a certain degree of similarities in their cosmopolitanism and in their travelling in Europe, although it is an undeniable fact that they expressed their displacement very differently.

Joyce, ten years after Synge, spent some time in Rome, (from 31 July 1906 to 7 March 1907), although being a different kind of *flâneur* himself. He had arrived in Rome with Nora and Giorgio to take up a position as a bank clerk, and his experience with the Italian capital was that of a professional and not of a tourist. Joyce’s Roman months have mostly been described by some critics with a sense of failure in terms of his artistic achievements, the same

sense of failure that characterizes the tone of the letters to his brother Stanislaus at that time. Joyce laments not having enough time to write since he was working until late and was taking private tutoring in the evening in order to make ends meet; he was sarcastically disillusioned by the bourgeois working environment of the bank and, while there, got a couple of refusals from editors that said no to his *Dubliners*. Other commentators³², on the other hand, emphasized how Joyce, nonetheless, achieved some sort of «aesthetic gain»³³ in terms of readings such as the socialist daily «Avanti» or the Italian thinker Guglielmo Ferrero with *L'Europa giovane*. Most importantly, the Roman months are connected to John Millington Synge by a sort of chiasmic twist of fate: while Synge witnessed and wrote about the riot for Crispi's resignation, in 1896, Joyce commented on the *Playboy* riots in early 1907, in his private correspondence with his brother Stanislaus. Here, Joyce elucidates the whole controversy which he had read in Dublin newspapers that were sent to him, with details on the different positions taken by each part, bitterly remarking in the end that «This whole affair has upset me»³⁴.

3

Conclusion

To conclude, in 1896's Rome, 'Tourist Synge' became 'Reporter Synge' for the occasion, using his vantage point to create a piece of journalism for an Irish newspaper, presumably to make a little bit of money out of it, and to break the ice with 'the world and the job' of writing, in the same way as Yeats did³⁵. Eddie Holt in studying Yeats's journalistic prose, keenly points out how Yeats's «involvement came at a time when print journalism *was* the media. The golden era of print journalism [...] is generally estimated to have occurred between the 1880s and the 1930s, the precise half century he did it. Yeats understood its power»³⁶. If journalism was at that stage *the* media, it must have seemed almost unavoidable for people engaging their career in literary writing, to undergo a 'journalistic baptism'. Yeats did it, and even a reluctant James Joyce wrote articles for the *Irish Homestead* that he despised. For Joyce in particular, journalism on the Italian newspaper «Il Piccolo» of Trieste, was one of his scarce sources of income, while he was trying to make ends meet in the Italian city with a family to support. Synge apparently broke the ice in Italy with this relatively light piece of journalism, to engage almost a decade later with the reportage on the Congested Districts of the West of Ireland.

Endnotes

¹J.M. Synge, *Travelling Ireland: Essays 1898-1908*, ed. by N. Grene, The Lilliput Press, Dublin 2009.

²J.M. Synge, *Collected Works. Vol. 2 Prose*, ed. by A. Price, Colin Smythe, Gerrards Cross; Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1982.

³ Nicholas Grene in his *Introduction* to the new edition of Synge's topographical writings explains how the CDB had been «instituted by a conservative administration [...] and associated with the politics of Constructive Unionism by which the government of the time sought to reconcile Irish people with the Union by an amelioration of their social condition». J.M. Synge, *Travelling Ireland: Essays ...*, cit., p. xxiii.

⁴ MS 4417 in Synge's papers held in Trinity College Library. I thank the Board of Trinity College Dublin for granting permission to quote from Synge's manuscripts (for further details see also *The Synge Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College Dublin: a Catalogue Prepared on the Occasion of the Synge Centenary Exhibition 1971*, ed. by N. Grene, Dolmen Press, Dublin 1971).

⁵ W.J. McCormack, *Fool of the Family*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2000, p. 141 n.

⁶ MS 4417.

⁷ MS 4378, folio 7.

⁸ MS 4378, folio 8.

⁹ J.M. Synge, *Collected Letters Vol. 1*, ed. by A. Saddlemyer, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983, p. 36.

¹⁰ W.J. McCormack, *Fool of the Family*, cit., p. 453 n.

¹¹ J.M. Synge, *Collected Letters Vol. 1*, cit., p. 36.

¹² P. Rossi, *Il Decennio Crispino e l'Era Giolittiana*, in *Storia d'Italia dal 1815 al 1914*, Mursia, Milano 1972, p. 294. See also G. Sabbatucci, V. Vidotto (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Vol III. Liberismo e Democrazia. 1887-1914*, Laterza, Roma 1995.

¹³ In the telegram that opened the hostilities, Crispi wrote «[...] we are ready to any sacrifice to save the honour of the army and the prestige of the monarchy». See P. Rossi, *Il Decennio Crispino ...*, cit., p. 294.

¹⁴ See «The Irish Times», March 16th, 1896. Historian Rossi writes: «In Pavia's station the demonstrators tore the rails to prevent a group of artillery to leave for Africa. In Milan the crowd was walking the streets shouting "Crispi go away". The result was of one dead and five wounded. In Florence, Naples and even Rome in Piazza Colonna, anti-Crispi riots were organized». See P. Rossi, *Il Decennio Crispino ...*, cit., p. 297.

¹⁵ «The Irish Times», March 16th, 1896.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Prince Baldassarre Odescalchi was a political deputy in one of the Roman districts; in the election of 1894 he was defeated by the socialist De Felice. The Odescalchis were also one of the families of the Roman high-nobility. See P. Rossi, *Il Decennio Crispino ...*, cit., p. 298.

¹⁸ «The Irish Times», March 16th, 1896.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ For further details see L. Nicoletti, *I personaggi dei Promessi sposi con uno studio sul mondo poetico, morale, e religioso*, Le Monnier, Firenze 1969.

²⁴ A. Saddlemyer, *Synge's Soundscape*, in N. Grene (ed.), *Interpreting Synge: Essays from the Synge Summer School 1991-2000*, Lilliput Press, Dublin 2000, p. 177.

²⁵ «The Irish Times», March 16th, 1896.

²⁶ J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*, Penguin, London 1992, p. 75.

²⁷ «The Irish Times», March 16th, 1896.

²⁸ See The National Transport Museum of Ireland website <<http://nationaltransportmuseum.org/b005.html>> (01/2011).

²⁹ J. Joyce, *Ulysses*, Hammersmith, London 1994, p. 284.

³⁰ G. Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, quoted in F. Moretti (ed.), *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, Verso, London-New York 1996, p. 124.

³¹ Ivi, p. 137.

³² G. Melchiori (ed.), *Joyce in Rome. The Genesis of Ulysses*, Bulzoni, Rome 1984.

³³ C. Kaplan, *Question of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 1996, p. 36. Particularly, she is referring to the «aesthetic gain through exile» where «the modernist seeks to recreate the effect of statelessness – whether or not the writer is literally, in exile», and where «exilic displacement occupies a privileged position, legitimating points of view and constructing a point of entry into a professional domain».

³⁴ J. Joyce, *Letter to Stanislaus 11 February 1907*, in R. Ellmann (ed.), *Letters of James Joyce. Vol. 2*, The Viking Press, New York 1966, p. 212.

³⁵ Eddie Holt in his paper *Yeats, Journalism and the Revival* written for the first series of UCD Scholarcast *The Art of Popular Culture: From The Meeting of the Waters to Riverdance* has noted about W.B. Yeats: «He also, because he was poor, with a notoriously feckless father, made a little money from journalism. It was very little really. His letters show him waiting to get paid and looking for a rise. It’s the typical life of a young freelancer. Until he became an established poet, he couldn’t command the highest fees». Accessible online: <http://www.ucd.ie/scholarcast/transcripts/Yeats_Journalism.pdf>, p. 4 (01/2011).

³⁶ Ivi, p. 3.

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