Iperstoria
2024, no. 24
ISSN: 2281-4582
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DOI: 10.13136/2281-4582/2024.i24.1537
iperstoria.it

Negotiating Pride and Vulnerability in Maud Howe's *Roma Beata – Letters from the Eternal City*

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Keywords

American studies

Travel studies

Maud Howe Elliott

Women's travel writing

American imperialism

Abstract

Women's travel narratives have long occupied an ambivalent position within dominant cultural frameworks, simultaneously supporting imperialist discourses and offering critical insights into ethnocentrism and cultural biases. This essay examines the intersections of domesticity, gender, and imperialism in Maud Howe Elliott's *Roma Beata: Letters from the Eternal City* (1904), focusing on her portrayals of post-unitarian Italy (1884–1900). By positioning Howe's perspectives within the broader transnational currents of 19th-century travel writing and its marketplace, this essay draws on postcolonial and gender theories to analyze her negotiation of the traditional American / Anglo-Saxon gaze on Southern Europe. At the same time, this essay pays attention to Howe Elliott's complex relationship with emergent US imperialism and her own roots in New England's culture, by adopting the emotional framing of pride and vulnerability. Finally, by emphasizing the critical interplay between domesticity and the imperialist thought, this essay explores Howe's evolving engagement with the Italian scene (symbolized by the terrace of her Roman home).

Whenever women force the social system to impose their presence on the public sphere, problems of *inclusion in* and *representation of* the dominant culture start to emerge. This is the case of western women's travel writings of the colonial era, which have contributed to the problematization of women's role in the construction of the imperialist imagination and raised contrasting reactions among critics. Women's Studies have highlighted how travel and travel writing enabled women to challenge and dismantle the myth of domesticity, whereas postcolonial scholars have in fact noted the persistence of hegemonic structures within these narratives. As Glenn Hooper observes, the relationship between a travel writer's identity and the dominant culture's beliefs is inherently complex: although travel writing often serves as a vehicle for colonialist discourse, it also provides "a useful medium for interrogating ethnocentrism and for estranging received ideas about 'other' cultures" (2016, 10). Recognizing such an ambiguity, Sarah Mills (2001) situates Western women's travel writings at the

crossroads of privilege and marginalization, subjectivity and objectification, dominant discourses and resistant narratives. Similarly, my analysis of Maud Howe Elliott's *Roma Beata – Letters from the Eternal City* (1904)[1] employs the categories of pride and vulnerability to delve into textual complexity and ambiguity, highlighting how dominant discourses intertwine with discourses of resistance. With "discourses of dominance," I refer to those narrative moments in which Howe's interpretation of the Italian context betrays traces of exceptionalism, Anglo-Saxon imperialism, internalized categories, and moral values rooted in her New Englander upbringing as well as in her parents' *Weltanschauung*. Such moments of "cultural pride," characterized by hegemonic structures of thought, may be also read as strategies of self-inclusion in the travel narrative tradition. Conversely, I also emphasize those rare but significant moments of resistance, in which the author negotiates such hermeneutics with personal experience, to the extent of calling into question key concepts of the American ideology and developing her own forms of encounter with local people. With "discourses of resistance" I therefore refer not so much to her inherited social progressivism and republicanism, as to her constant inclination to boundary-crossing and independent thinking. Such an inclination, I argue, is connected to the (gendered) experience of being not a simple tourist, but a sojourner: a situation of cultural in-betweenness which requires constant negotiation between old and new values, hierarchies, and identities.

Roma Beata is a collection of letters that Maud Howe Elliott (Boston, 1854 – Newport, 1948) wrote during long stays in Rome between 1894 and 1900.[2] Published four years after her return to America, the letters seem to have undergone a deep editing process, which erased addresses, salutations, and references to certain real individuals. Moreover, although they are organized in a chronological order, they are thematically arranged into fifteen titled chapters that, as Marilena Giammarco observes, blend personal reflections ("Looking for a Home") with observations on Roman public life ("The King is Dead, Long Live the King!") (2001, 246). Without an introduction by the author to provide historical context, literary objectives, or interpretative keys, the construction of Howe's public persona in *Roma Beata* relies exclusively on controlled narrative voice and the nuanced separation of private thoughts from what could

[1] In the following analysis, I will refer to the text as *Roma Beata* and to the author as 'Howe,' opting to use her family name rather than her married name.

[2] Howe reached the Italian capital in 1894 with her husband, the English artist John Elliott, who was seeking inspiration for his artwork, *Triumph of Time*, which he completed a year after his return to Boston in 1901. A prominent figure in Boston and Newport, Howe was a writer, artist, art critic, political activist, philanthropist, Pulitzer Prize winner (1917), and the founder of the Newport Art Association. Howe was also involved in the development of Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party, in 1912. Other prominent works by Maud Howe Elliott include *A Newport Aquarelle* (1882); *Phillida* (1891); *Mammon* (1893); *The Eleventh Hour in the Life of Julia Ward Howe* (1911); *Three Generations* (1923); Lord *Byron's Helmet* (1927); *John Elliott, The Story of An Artist* (1930); *My Cousin, F. Marion Crawford* (1934); and *This Was My Newport* (1944).

be "sent to the world" (Favret, qtd. in Gilroy and Verhoeven 2000, 1). As a hallmark of the epistolary genre, such an exercise of selective self-presentation situated women in a free but also precarious space "beyond their sphere" (Beatty 2000), which pushed their prose to continuous advances and retreats. Accordingly, Howe alternates moments of assertiveness (or *pride*) – using her cultural knowledge and narrative skills to construct an authoritative and credible voice in the competitive market of travel writing – with moments of withdrawal (or *vulnerability*), in which ambiguities and uncertainties emerge, revealing both her need for negotiating old ideas and the vulnerability of inherited ideologies. I employ the analytical categories of pride and vulnerability as tools to situate the writer within or outside the framework of dominant discourses on gender and cultural imperialism, while also acknowledging the emotional weight that such (self-)positioning carried for the author, particularly in shaping her public persona. Moreover, the different meanings – as well as the positive/negative connotations – that these terms can acquire in context or in relation to the reader's perspective, allow me to use them for different critical purposes, by preserving the fundamental ambiguity of the general relationship between women and dominant culture that *Roma Beata* conveys.

1. Negotiating pride and vulnerability in the epistolary genre

The exploration of dominant as well as resistant discourses in women's travel narratives should include, as Cheryl McEwan (2000) suggests, a Foucauldian analysis focused on the relationship between power and the production of knowledge: this approach involves investigating the gendered, class-based, and cultural conditions under which women wrote, conceptualized, mapped, and "imagined" their own geographies, while also considering the contexts in which their works were published and received. Thus, it is relevant to notice that, by the time *Roma Beata* was published, women comprised a significant portion of the approximately one million Americans visiting Europe annually. Many of these women supported themselves abroad by working as newspaper columnists or guidebook writers, contributing to a female-dominated travel book market. Travel writing, by then considered a largely female genre, was seen to reflect American women's experiences more than the places it described (Schriber 1989, 269), and, as women increasingly dominated this genre, its literary prestige began to decline. Thus, in the 1860s, Bret Harte lamented that travel writing had fallen entirely into the hands of "young and impressionable […] ladies and clergymen" who had displaced the more traditional (male) *Sentimental Journey* (Schriber 1989, 268). Although Howe had published several novels and essays that likely established her readership in the United States, entering the travel writing market was challenging for any author, and she was not exempt from its demands for

authenticity and originality. Hence, from the very opening line of *Roma Beata*, Howe is determined to demonstrate that, for her, Rome was not merely "a place of pre-existent familiarity, known through literature and art, and constructed in advance through the romantic imagination" (Foster 1994), as was common among armchair travelers of her time, but a city she knew personally from prior visits: "Rome, which we reached Thursday, is very much changed since I last saw it; imagine the Fountain of Trevi, all the principal streets, even many of the smaller ones, gleaming with electric lights!" (RB 1904, 1).[3] Years earlier, when women travelers were still pioneers of the genre, her mother, Julia Ward Howe, had employed a similar tactic to establish credibility in *From the Oak to the Olive* (1868). As M. S. Schriber notes, Julia Howe "presumes to enter the masculine domain of the travel book only after she has qualified as a seasoned traveler" (1989, 270). Ward's tone, though, is distinct from her daughter's: being aware that demonstrating a certain vulnerability or modesty could prevent women from being labeled as narcissistic or overly bold, she "[apologizes] for her inadequacies only to defend herself vehemently against them" (Schriber 1989, 273). In contrast, Howe's breezy voice sounds mostly confident and insightful, especially when she self-distances from the masses of American visitors and guidebooks writers: "The great church has greeted me like a friend. Tourists criticise the architecture: I do not deny faults, I do not see them" (RB 1904, 64), says the author, assertively. However, traces of vulnerability in the author's tone emerge whenever Howe ventures into the predominantly masculine spheres of political and social analysis. For instance, when discussing the German Kaiser's popularity among Bavarians and Prussians, she tiptoes among unusually cautious judgments, letting her intuitions timidly emerge: "*I am learning all I can* about the German Kaiser. *I am inclined to think* he plays the strongest game at the European card-table. The Bavarians *I have talked with* seem rather bored by him…" (RB 1904, 47, italics mine). Similarly, when addressing Italy's political and social conditions, she chooses her words with care, emphasizing her position as a foreigner: "Somebody is blundering somewhere, *I am too rank an outsider to know who*. Some foreign writers lay every ill Italy endures to the heavy taxes the government imposed. *I am not so sure* that what Italy has got in the last quarter century is not worth the price she has paid for it" (RB 1904, 35, italics mine).[4]

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[3] After Samuel G. Howe's death, Julia Ward and Maud Howe traveled through Europe for two years; in England, they were the guests of Henry James (who was a close family friend and who read and praised Maud's early writings), while, in Italy, they were guests of Julia's sister, mother of the writer Francis Marion Crawford, who resided in Rome (Sheerin 1946, 17).

[4] Indeed, Howe's tepidness toward Italian political affairs is quite surprising considering her constant commitment to the progressive cause at home and her relentless participation in the struggle for women's emancipation. Moreover, Howe was probably well acquainted with the revolutionary ideas of the Italian Risorgimento that, as Daniele Fiorentino (2017) points out, had circulated especially in the big cities of North-Eastern states, where Garibaldi and other Italian political exiles had found shelter. In fact, thanks to the translation of Silvio Pellico's *Le mie prigioni* by Pietro Maroncelli, to the spread of Fourierist ideas, and to the success of politics-infused Italian opera, Italian republican ideas had permeated Boston more

Yet, even here, she concludes with a certain assertiveness that: "[t]here are also abuses, steals, a bureaucracy, and a prodigious *megalomania* (swelled head), but the people are learning to read and write!" (RB 1904, 35). Negotiating authority within what William Stowe calls the "empowering practice" of travel chronicles (2017, 55), Howe cautiously leaves to the reader's judgment her perceptions and, unlike contemporary guidebooks, does not present her experience as a comprehensive understanding of local realities (Stowe 2017, 56); instead, she displays a distinctive, independent approach that, on some occasions, resists stereotypes.[5]

2. Negotiating New England's cultural borders

Howe's upbringing in post-Civil War New England (which was still culturally tied to Great Britain, but also proudly asserting American republicanism) shapes her perspective as both a woman traveler and an American abroad. Her constant search for revelation reflects the influence of Emersonian transcendentalism: the pursuit of 'understanding' – the rational capacity to grasp reality – and 'reason,' the divine intuition that enables one to perceive ideals beyond materiality which, in her writings, converge in a continuous pursuit and contemplation of beauty, coupled with a profound sensitivity to the highest forms of human expression: "We have put in some days of hard sightseeing. Did I say hard? No, splendid, soul inspiring. I feel as if I had put my lips to the fountain of life and drawn deep draughts of inspiration" (RB 1904, 149). Also due to her parents' influential voice on the Boston's scene, traditional New Englander values such as individual freedom, social and technological progressivism, philanthropy, abolitionism, patriotism, Protestantism, and women's autonomy, define the lens through which she interprets and experiences the Italian society. It is, of course, a gendered lens: having absorbed the tenets of transcendentalism from her mother's intellectual circle (composed mostly of women), she appropriates the male model of the American Scholar – the "active" soul who refuses to be a "satellite" of someone else's genius (Emerson 1901) – only to challenge Emerson's early conception of the self-reliant wise man as one who pursues self-understanding by staying at home (Emerson 1841). For women – particularly those of her mother's generation – traveling often served as a means to challenge the "central convention of domesticity," epitomized by "the

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than any other place in the U.S., influencing the most radical abolitionist front and inspiring a wide range of intellectuals, among which Charles Eliot Norton, Henry Tuckerman, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Henry Longfellow and, of course, Margaret Fuller – the latter of whom were close friends of the Howe's (see Fiorentino 2017).

[5] For example, she rejects (while indeed reinforcing) the trope of indolence, which in the Anglo-Saxon perspective is an anthropological trait that belongs both to the Indies and to the European peripheries (Cazzato 2001, 37) and which had becomes widely shared in the United States, because of mass migrations from Southern and Eastern Europe: "I have seen oranges and lemons rotting under the trees in Sorrento […]! This is not because Italians are lazy – 'lazy Italians!' there was never a more unjust reproach borne by any people – the Italian peasants are the hardest-worked people I know" (RB 1904, 34).

contrast between the home and the world" (Cott 1977, 64). However, such challenges frequently gave rise to discursive tension: on one hand, the pride in cultural traditions and the social imperative to uphold them, and on the other, the willingness to engage with and potentially be transformed by new contexts. Being more affected by the new positions occupied abroad, women travelers often demonstrated greater openness to self-redefinition, self-relocation, and self-adjustment than men. As a result, the travel writings of distinguished women travelers who preceded Howe – including her mother, Louisa May Alcott, and Margaret Fuller – combined the practice of self-reflection with an exploration of alternative articulations of femininity.

Interestingly, Howe's processes of introspection and transformation often emerge in the text as an inner dialogue with her mother's real or interiorized voice, whose influence shapes both her aesthetic sensibilities and her moral judgments. This is reflected in her constant oscillation between identification – "Am I not my mother's own child?" (RB 1904, 3) – and intentional self-distancing. For instance, the ironic representation of her first meeting with Pope Leo XIII, which her mother did not approve, marks her distance from an old anti-Catholicism, typical of early American travelers, which still persisted at home (exacerbated by the ever-greater presence of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe):

> I have a very clear impression of my presentation to Pope Leo in the winter 1878, very soon after he became Pope. The mother refused to go. Those stubborn Protestant knees would not bow down to Baal or to the Pope. Our generation takes things differently, not half so picturesquely. We say, "An old man blessing is a good thing to have, whether he be a lama from Tibet or a priest of Rome." Two young American girls went with me […] We wore black, with such diamonds that our mothers would lend us, and Spanish mantillas. (RB 1904, 78-79)

Advocating for a cosmopolitan relativism that aligns with her desire to cross cultural borders and fully enjoy her stay, Howe's letters enthusiastically describe Catholic paraments, music, rituals, as well as her participation in events in honor of Italian royal personalities. However, for most of the narration, her attendance to the Roman social and religious life remains on the level of an exoticist "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990) betraying forms of cultural imperialism, as when she portrays an "impressive" Holy Week procession in Sorrento as marked by "primitive" (1904, 62) chanting and symbols, which were accessible to poor and illiterate devotees. Contrarily to the superficiality with which the author approaches the social life of the eternal city, deeper reflections are elicited by its everyday life, which she observes from the top of her terrace with curiosity and feminine sensitivity. Thus, she comes to realize that Rome, the most crowded place in the world, is indeed populated with a number of lonely people, especially men: "Do you suppose the vast hive of celibates is the magnet that draws to Rome its hoards of codgers and solitaries?" – she asks in one of her letters – "I assure you their habits may be studied better

than everywhere in the world. Though many of the Roman codgers are more or less connected with the Vatican, there are scores who have no relation with it, Protestants, Greek Orthodox, Hebrews, and the like" (RB 1904, 167). Against such a background of human vulnerability, the figure of the Pope emerges, filtered through a gendered gaze and in contrast with its institutional power, as the loneliest and most oppressed of men:

> I keep thinking of him, my neighbor in Rome, the Prisoner of the Vatican, shut up between walls of his vast garden through all the long summer. I used to look at his window and I wonder if he felt the heat as much as I did in those last August days before we came away on our *villeggiatura*. No *villeggiatura* for him, he is still there! (RB 1904, 46)

Subverting gender and social perspectives, the author presents a feminized representation of the Pontiff, depicting him as an individual oppressed by material and social confines. Such a depiction of Italian masculinity aligns with the French and English tendency to feminize the Italian man – a characterization attributed not only to "natural" traits (such as his often-emphasized "gentleness and flexibility" (Cronin 2003, 39)) but also to political factors. As Richard Cronin observes, in de Staël's *Corinne*, the vulnerability of Italian men during the pre-Risorgimento period is explicitly tied to their marginalization in the public sphere, wherein they "have been denied the lot of being a nation" (2003, 39), making them less likely to "acquire the dignity and pride characteristic of free, military nations" (2003, 39). From this perspective, Howe's depiction of the Pope as imprisoned within his residence may serve as a metaphor for his diminished political authority following the annexation of Rome into the Italian Kingdom. Yet, the theme of confinement as a "manly" condition resurfaces later in the text, this time applied to a lower-class figure:

> When you stop to think about it, nobody is quite free. The freest man I know is Scipione, the traveling knife-grinder. He carries his tools on his back, the open street is his shop, the people he meets his costumers. As I sat at work this morning I heard the welcome sound of his cracked bell. […] "You have not told me what kept you so long away." "My grandmother has been ill. *Poverella*, there is nobody but myself to look after her." Scipione is not so free as I had supposed! (RB 1904, 96)

By applying the categories of domesticity to these two men, the author is undermining the idea of the separate spheres across all social levels, reframing the discourse of freedom from a socio-political domain to one centered on intimate emotions and internalized roles – that is, to the domain of the ever more emancipated Western women whom she represents. Moreover, her interaction with Scipione incorporates cultural elements that further complicate this narrative, ultimately engaging with and negotiating American traditional values. In fact, Scipione embodies an archetypal American conception of freedom rooted in entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and individualism – qualities seamlessly integrated with a strong, family-centered

tradition, which is never seen in contradiction with men's right to the pursuit of happiness. The universalization of Scipione's lack of freedom ("nobody is quite free," not just women or Italian men) challenges American core beliefs in a way that overcomes both gender and national binaries: it normalizes a different masculinity while deconstructing both the American myth of freedom and the tenets of American exceptionalism.

3. Home and the public: vulnerable borders?

As is well known, for Anglo-Saxon women travelers, the mild Italian climate was not merely an exotic allure; it also afforded them more opportunities to cross domestic boundaries and engage in extended cultural or recreative outdoor activities. In the narratives of such experiences, which respond to the so-called "exit" paradigm,[6] Italy played the role of a "cultural" or "environmental" liberating force, as exemplified by the following passage:

> You will like to hear about a day of pure delight. I left home, duty, and family, and went off with Donna Primavera for an outing at Ostia. We started at ten in the morning, returned at six at night. I had been there before on my bicycle – it is a capital road – but on that occasion I saw nothing except the view. […] I felt that I was penetrating the business life of Romans as never before. […] I was not prepared for the illumination I received in wandering through the old warehouses… (RB 1904, 89)

However, Howe's narrative often diverges from the commonplace connecting Italian good climate to women's increased freedom and it is precisely when adverse weather restricts the author's mobility that the "permeability of the border that separates the spheres" (Kaplan 1998, 581) becomes evident, prompting a reimagining of home not as a restrictive space, but as a complex domain that encompasses both private and public spheres:

> June 9
>
> Thirty-six degrees centigrade for the last three days! Those clever children of yours will know how hot it really is. […] It troubles me very little; […] only I can't do much of anything out of doors. Yesterday, I went to see the friendly Countess C., who has a small city garden with shade-trees, under which we sat and consumed iced wine and cakes, and talked about the Pope. She is an American and very Black in her politics, though her husband is a White and fought for Victor Emmanuel. (RB 1904, 14)

In comparing the two passages above, what emerges is that the first scene suggests that women achieve "illumination" and self-improvement (both alluding to the masculine/rational sphere) through physical and psychological movement beyond the domestic space, whereas the

[6] On the theorization of the "exit" paradigm in connection with Victorian women's Italian journeys, in addition to the works cited, I have drawn on Scaramuzzino 2020; Brilli 2020; Frediani 2007; Robinson 2001; Russel 1994; Birkett 1989; Bianchi 1985.

seemingly static second scene reframes the domestic sphere as a site where private relationships are subjected to external forces and intrinsic dynamism stems from dialectical exchanges. Here, the house is represented as a third space where the political and private converge, whereby the hybrid location of a city garden reinforces the in-betweenness of women's position. This second scene, therefore, calls into question the idea that emancipation is directly connected to and achievable only through the physical occupation of public spaces. It blurs the distinction between spheres by illustrating the permeability of domestic boundaries while rehabilitating the domestic space as a space that can host political dynamics.

At this point, it is worth considering how much of this domestic permeability depended on Howe's and her friend's status as foreigners, as well as the state of women's political and social progress in Italy at the time of Howe's arrival. Notably, one of the most compelling aspects of *Roma Beata* is its depiction of a period in Italian history that is often overlooked in American narratives, overshadowed by both the previous era, the Risorgimento, and by the immediately following period, that of the great migrations. It is well known that English and American women who had resided in Italy in earlier decades (Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Theodosia Trollope, among others) had found a unique political and social freedom – amplified by their status as foreigners – and often used Italian imagery to advance feminist agendas back home (Chapman 2015). Certainly, their representations helped challenge the static, backward-looking image that the Anglo-Saxon gaze imposed on both women and Italy. But by Howe's times, Italian society was struggling with the political and social autonomy that women had acquired by actively supporting the cause of independence and there were strong efforts to confine Italian women's roles to that of the "mothers of the country," an ideal reinforced by the 1854 proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (Salsini 2011, 603). Despite modernization efforts, the Italian government's vision of progress did not include women's political emancipation: the Codice Civile of 1865 barred them from voting, casting them as immature subjects. Thus, while the post-Civil War US was consolidating its sense of republican unity – and would formalize women's inclusion with the XIX Amendment in 1920 – post-Risorgimento Italy appeared to the author as a country that, in winning independence, had lost something in the pursuit of democracy. From the author's perspective, the groundbreaking ideas of the past now seemed dead and petrified, like "these dreadful monuments to Victor Emmanuel, Garibaldi, Cavour, and the other great men who brought about the Risorgimento" (RB 1904, 35-36).

By erasing the contributions of Risorgimento heroines who fought alongside men for republican ideals, the Italian state pushed women's political experiences out of public memory. Meanwhile, a new generation of literate women, shaped by the Casati Law's introduction of compulsory elementary education (1859), were educated in domestic duties, child-rearing,

hygiene, and norms of respectability, aided by popular periodicals like *La donna* (Salsini 2011, 603). Consequently, *Roma Beata* depicts local women primarily as confined to their roles as mothers or laborers in the fields – women who, despite assuming roles left vacant by emigrant men, were still subjected to the patriarchal rigid separation of spheres.[7] Some of these women retreated to the private sphere, while others continued to champion emancipation. Surely, in Italy, as in Great Britain and the US, an expanded domestic sphere offered a strategic alternative for feminist activism, allowing women to exercise administrative and organizational influence despite exclusion from political institutions. But most of all, the conquest of a transnational space provided greater opportunities of agency than the nation-state, enabling women to build social and political power within these dimensions (Gazzetta 2021, 11-13).

4. Imperial pride

In "Manifest Domesticity" (1998), Amy Kaplan deconstructs the theory of the separate spheres by exploring domesticity in its triple meaning of home, homeland, and space of domestication. Revealing the inherent role of women in supporting the building of a US empire, she explores the ideologies and languages that underpinned both domestic life and the imperial state. Such a notion complicates the idea that, for women, crossing national borders and gaining freedom of movement abroad necessarily meant stepping beyond the domestic sphere. She suggests instead that often women only navigated an expanded, transnational version of it. As Kaplan explains:

> […] we think of domesticity not as a static condition but as the process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien. Domestic in this sense is related to the imperial project of civilizing, and the conditions of domesticity often become markers that distinguish civilization from savagery. (1998, 582)

Kaplan's expanded concept of domesticity provides a lens through which to examine Howe's notion of "home," particularly as she declares Rome to be her home, at the book's conclusion. In *Roma Beata*, this imperialist perspective first emerges through the description of the Elliotts' first Roman apartment and its landlord: "We at once engaged an apartment bathed with sun in Piazza di Spagna, sun from early morning until late afternoon. But when we moved into it, the day was overcast. The apartment which had been tropical with the sun when we hired it, was

[7] As usually happens in women's travel narratives, Howe devotes considerable attention to Roman women's conditions. In particular, she is attracted by mothers and, contrasting American and Italian child-rearing practices, she often presents her perspective as one "from the future," at times attributing women's "backwardness" to their own choices: "I know a young American lady, married to a Roman, who imported a perambulator for her first baby. The *balia* (wet-nurse) a superb cow of a woman, refused to trundle it, saying she was not strong enough, although I saw her carry a heavy trunk upstairs on her head while I was calling at the house!" (RB 1904, 6, italics in the text)

arctic without it!" (RB 1904, 1). Howe identifies the house with a wild, inhospitable non-Western world that demands domestication. Similarly, her description of the subtle and deceitful landlord reveals her and her husband's immediate re-establishing of intellectual and moral hierarchies:

> We interviewed our *padrona* (landlady), an immense woman, and demanded a fire.
> "But, Excellency, it is not good for the health."
> We told her we understood our health better than she, and reminded her that fires had been promised. (RB 1904, 1, italics in the text)

As Kaplan points out, the term "domestic" constructs, on a collective level, the sense of a protective sphere that shelters citizens from external aliens. She writes: "the ideology of the separate sphere in antebellum America contributed to creating an American empire by imagining the nation as a home at a time when its geopolitical borders were expanding rapidly through violent confrontations with Indians, Mexicans, and European empires" (1998, 583). Consistently with this view, Howe provides a detailed description of the difficult interactions with local servants, who resist her instructions and persist in their own way. Whether she complains about her servants' behavior or idealizes them, the objectivation of (subaltern) locals prevents her from getting into real contact with Italian otherness: "Stepping from my gondola to the water-worn stair, I was helped by one of the servants, an old man with the suave and sympathetic manners that make Italians the best servants in the world" (RB 1904, 189). Such an attitude reveals an interiorized English Meridionism (Pfister 2023, 3) – the intra-European, southern counterpart of Orientalism – which also emerges in the recurrent themes of healing light, brightness, and blossoming that contribute to the construction of an image of the South typical of the Victorian imagination. In fact, Americans had inherited both the destinations and modes of the European tour from the British, constructing their representations of Italy from British books. As Anne Hampton Brewster wrote in 1868, "[w]e all know Rome and its famous monuments from pictures we have seen in our childhood. No city is so familiar to us" (Madden 2022, 27). Since the 1840s, travel had increasingly become an aesthetic experience shaped by English and French literature, creating a uniformity of views, feelings, and interpretations among privileged Americans and their British counterparts. Americans who visited Italy, therefore, shaped their own imaginations and preconceptions through an "English eye" that, as Bonadei notes, "renounced knowing Italy, preferring to adore it and anchor it to an imaginary and mental dimension, which was indeed self-referential" (2004, 61, my translation). As Kilbride observes, one could travel around Venice completely immersed in Shakespearean reminiscences, without any actual contact with Venetians (2003, 551). Howe's perception of Italy has absorbed this view, as demonstrated by the fact that commenting on Italian cultural

attitudes – and in adopting an *us-vs.-them* perspective – she often self-identifies primarily as an Anglo-Protestant observer rather than as an American one:

> Why should the people of Catholic countries have better manners than those of Protestant lands? I know you will bring up some old saw about sincerity and truth not always being compatible with suavity! We can't be all right and they all wrong, "and yet and yet" it is known that the Pope keeps his own private account at the Bank of Protestant England! Does this mean that he, like the Italians I meet every day, is readier to trust an Englishman or an American than his own countrymen? (RB 1904, 46)

Such proud remarks on Anglo-Saxon reliability and superior financial qualities evoke the coloniality of power – a concept that divides the Western world into two distinct geographical and temporal spheres and that places the zero point of modern civilization in the "age of reason" (17th and 18th centuries), when northern Atlantic states (France and England) expanded globally at the expense of southern Atlantic states (Spain and Portugal), marking the decline of Mediterranean hegemony (Cazzato 2017, 25).[8] As a result, intra-European travel from north to south came to symbolize a journey back in time, with Italian civilization relegated to the past and set in contrast to modernity (Cazzato 2017, 27). In *Roma Beata*, such a bias emerges every time the author depicts Italian art, ruins, landscapes, and even people as frozen in an idealized past, often mythologizing them or casting them through literary lenses, with little attention to their material reality: "We came, bringing our guardian angel Victoria, the tall seamstress, to cook and take care of us. Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, must have looked like our Victoria – calm, gentle, with rare sweetness and remarkable beauty" (RB 1904, 99). Such a perception intensifies in rural Italy, where Howe increasingly interprets people and scenes through a classicist filter: for example, in Abruzzo, she imagines herself in the "pastoral age" (RB 1904, 101), comparing women carrying loads of wool to "the Caryatids" (RB 1904, 102), a wife awaiting her migrant husband to a "modern Penelope" (RB 1904, 103), and an elderly beggar to Vedder's "Cumaean Sibyl" (RB 1904, 109). Most relevantly, Howe's "English eye" reveals itself when she applies to Italians the same hierarchies that the English established within their own empire, infusing them with a touch of American pragmatism: "In some things the Italian is free from superstition compared with the Celt or the Scot [... but] the belief in the value of dreams as guides to action is deep-rooted and widespread" (RB 1904, 188). As this passage shows, Howe's journey from displacement to a sense of material and emotional belonging in Rome involves a deliberate narrative construction of "home" as both an imagined and a lived space, in which

[8] As Lord Macaulay's statement effectively demonstrates: "We doubt whether any country of Europe, our own excepted, have at the present time reached so high a point of wealth and civilization as some parts of Italy had attained four hundred years ago" (qtd. in Cazzato 2017, 27).

inherited imperialist conceptions persist, although she needs to negotiate them with first-hand observations.

5. America and Italy in transition

Alongside with the traditional immobilizing/idealizing English gaze, Howe's perspective as a writer from an emerging American empire is capable of capturing the contradictions and complexities of a transitional but important period in Italian history. By the time of Howe's return to Boston, in 1900, both Italy and the US were asserting their identities internationally through aggressive imperialist policies respectively in the Caribbean and in Africa, while facing challenges in integrating their respective southern regions into the modern nation-state (Fiorentino 2021, 171-175). Recalling Walter D. Mignolo's notion of imperial difference (1993), Italy therefore existed as both a subaltern and an imperialist country; and, as Fiorentino notes, from a cultural point of view, it represented both the ancient cradle of civilization and a young nation-state in process of modernization. Thus, after Italian Unification, American travelers began to view Italy not only through the idealized lens of its monumental past but also as a "lively and dynamic" present (2021, 175).[9] Howe's imperial imagination reflects this ambivalence, emerging both in her exoticized view of Italy and in her references to Italian colonial ambitions: "I wish that the Abyssinians might find the Italian soldiers equally invincible as in Africa" (RB 1904, 61). This textual tension blurs clear distinctions between the hegemonic and the subaltern, between past and present. Thus, it seems that, to grasp the complexity of Rome's realities, Howe needs to negotiate inherited temporal geographies with her own perceptions: as Fiorentino points out, Howe found that "both past and present had a new aspect." For instance, electricity – which she had praised for enhancing the beauty of the Trevi Fountain – operates as the irruption of modernity that occasionally challenges that sense of *temporal gap* which sustains the architecture of Anglo-Saxon superiority: "an elevator at the Vatican seems an anachronism!" (RB 1904, 166), exclaims the author. At the book's close, she in fact admits that "Ice-chest, electric cars, and telephone only bring home more strongly the feeling that life in Rome is modern, medieval, and pagan, all at the same time!" (RB 1904, 192). Italy's cultural ambivalence and the transformation of the author's perception of Rome affect the dimension of the author's domesticity, which I see as converging in the symbolic image of her Roman terrace.

[9] The author in fact recognizes and celebrates Italian technological and scientific progress. For example, during a tour in Tuscany, she admires a winemaker who countered the effects of a phylloxera infestation by grafting the native Italian grape onto an American vine to create a hybrid wine: "Here is progress for you; here is a man that is not satisfied to do as his father did; here is a country of to-day, a people with a future!" (RB 1904, 34).

6. A woman in transition: the Roman terrace

The terrace of Palazzo Rusticucci Accoramboni appears as a recurring motif in Howe's letters, constituting her primary and privileged viewpoint on Roman life, but also operating as an emblematic site of exchange, creation, and transformation. The first time the Elliotts went to see the palace, John hurried his wife through it, not allowing her time to take in the surroundings:

> [h]e would not let me stop to look at anything, but he hurried me through the entrance, along the corridor […]. They hurried me so that I could only see that the high ceilings were of carved wood, that the windows were large, and that I liked the shape of the rooms. J. kept on saying: "wait until you see the terrace!" (RB 1904, 8)

The terrace, with its breathtaking view of St. Peter's Square, was the only part of the palace Howe truly saw that night. From this vantage point, though, she felt she could "look down to" the entire city, framing its vastness and, in a sense, taking possession of it:

> The view is sublime; you look down on the Square of Saint Peter's with the Egyptian obelisk in the middle, Bernini's great colonnades on either side, the Church of Saint Peter's at the end, with the Vatican, a big, awkward mass of a building, behind it and in the foreground the twin fountains sending up their columns of powdered spray. On the left loomed the Castle of St. Angelo; it was light enough to see the time by the clock. You can imagine all the rest. The city spread out like a map, the dark masses of trees marking the Pincio and Villa Borghese, the Campagna, the Sabine and the Alban hills beyond, Mt. Soracte, our familiar friend, on the left, over and under all the soft deep notes of the big bell of Saint Peter's throbbing out the Angelus. (RB 1904, 8)

As Iain Chambers notes, 'looking at' is a performative act that shapes distances, translates geographical into historical ones, and hierarchically selects what deserves to be seen and narrated (Chambers qtd. in Cazzato 2017, 11). By adopting the colonialist trope of the *Monarch-of-all-I-survey*, Howe asserts narrative authority over the landscape, partitioning the view into sections – columns, fountains, natural elements – and unifying these components through the synesthetic experience evoked by church bells, adding romanticism and pathos. However, the terrace emerges in the text ever less as a space of contemplation and more as a place of agency and creation. In an act of symbolic "seizing" of this space – likely in response to her exclusion from John's decision of renting the house –[10] Howe decides to personalize it by covering it with colorful Roman flowers. As is well known, Grand Tour literature associates with flowers layered

[10] What the author could not see in the rush of the moment were the "discouraging" (RB 1904, 9) conditions of a 17th-century palace that had never been restored by its previous owner – she only noticed them the next morning, when the deal was already concluded: "J. let the cat out of the bag by saying, 'I was afraid if you went by daylight, and saw what an old ruin it was, you would never consent to our taking it!'" (RB 1904, 9).

symbolic meanings related to both postcolonial and gender identities. For example, in de Staël's *Corinne*, they come to signify the feminization of Italy – a land "which nature seems to have adorned as a victim" (de Staël, qtd. in Chapman and Stabler 2003, 5). However, Chapman and Stabler point out, this feminization does not necessarily imply defeat, but rather portrays Italy again as a *liberating space*, "sensual and emotional" (2003, 5). Similarly, Howe's use of flowers transcends mere symbols of vulnerability, offering instead opportunities of self-assertion. Echoing her mother's poems *Passion-Flowers* (1854), where flowers symbolized poetic liberation from marital confines, Howe reproposes the flowers-poetry-liberation relationship – "the terrace is our poetry, and we have parlous good prose downstairs" (RB 1904, 11) – symbolizing both the author's free poetic creation and her need to control the surrounding reality: "flowers are a necessity here, not a luxury" (RB 1904, 10), she exclaims. However, vulnerability peeks through her pride in gardening when she admits, "[John] had to do the work all over again" due to her lack of technical skill (RB 1904, 10-11).[11]

As an extension of the home that merges indoor and outdoor space, the terrace symbolizes the expanded domesticity linking the author to the wider world through a hybrid private/public sphere: "The construction of an edifice ordinarily entails walling off the inside from the outside, but […] the distinction between inside and outside is obliterated by the expansion of the home/nation/temple to encompass the globe" (Kaplan 588). From this space, Howe connects with Rome's ecumenical nature, rooted in its identity as the city of Caesars and Popes, and now the Italian capital (Brilli 2017). Her terrace becomes a cosmopolitan gathering spot for artists, poets, musicians, local clergymen, and aristocrats, who join the Elliotts' events for intellectual discussions: "If you only stay long enough in Rome you meet everybody you ever heard of […] The best thing about the social life is its cosmopolitan quality" (RB 1904, 85). Reporting these exchanges, Howe develops a discourse of universal, albeit exclusive, world citizenship that,[12] while profiling her as a transnational figure, also reveals the structures of cultural

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[11] Elsewhere, Howe uses flowers to critique patriarchal norms subtly, even touching on the era's discourse around hysteria: "Max Nordau – cheerful person that, by the way – says that red is hysterical peoples' favorite color; violet, melancholics'. There is a boy who sits all day under my window selling bird whistles, on which he warbles pleasantly. He is never without a red rosebud worn over his left ear. I wonder if he is hysterical!" (RB 1904, 5).

[12] Howe's cosmopolitanism is more explicitly described in *Sicily in Shadow and in Sun*: "'The wall that Belisarius defended fifteen hundred years ago against the Goths without the gates has been demolished by the Goths within the gates!' exclaimed Athol. 'It's a world's crime,' I said, 'because Rome belongs to the world; it's just as much ours as the Italians!' 'Ah! so you like to think!' said the only Italian present, indulgently" (1910, 4). This "human connection through art," that is, the cosmopolitan idea that pieces of art do not belong to the single cultures that have produced them, but to the whole humanity that can appreciate them, is examined by Anthony K. Appiah in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006, 134-136).

imperialism.[13] In this sense, through the domestication of local servants and the organization of cultural events among foreign residents in Rome, Howe comes to embody the nineteenth-century cosmopolitan ideal, transforming the world into *her home* and her home *into the world*.

It has been often noticed that in women's travel narrative women's gaze on the world is filtered through glasses or windows. Contrarily, Howe's terrace is an open space, with no filter between her and the streets, except for height. Thus, sounds and voices from the Borgo neighborhood can easily reach her, gradually shifting her "standing on the terrace" from static contemplation of Roman monuments to a deeper engagement with the city's daily life. Fascinated by the songs of street vendors, Howe even requests that the composer Augusto Rotoli transcribe them, a gesture that turns the monumental city into a living force, where local people, in a more subjectivizing perspective, can eventually speak for themselves: " 'Buy a broom' is far prettier in Italian – in Romanesco, I should say – than in English. At first, we could not make out the words; the man seemed to be singing 'O! so far away!' The notes, the long drawn out, the pensive fascinating, like a sailor's chantey, haunted us" (RB 1904, 21). Later in the book, the author symbolically steps off the terrace to explore rural Abruzzo, one of Italy's most marginalized areas, where her perspective shifts, becoming more attuned to Italy's humanity. This journey within her larger journey condenses a seven-year transformation, ultimately leading her to call Rome home.[14] During this time, she occupies the ambiguous role of a sojourner – someone who, as Roland Barthes illustrates, is freer from the ethical detachment of a tourist and the full responsibilities of a citizen, blurring the line between "us" and "them" and between home and away (Bonadei 2004, 12).[15] As Bonadei points out, differently from the simple tourist, whose experience is temporally determined, the sojourning subject is kept in a precarious, indefinite status by a constant repetition of her/his desire to stay (2004, 12). Thus, Howe's oscillation between pride and vulnerability is perhaps tied to her position as a sojourner in Rome, living in a repeated dimension of desire that, while preventing her from fully detaching from her motherland or fully embracing Rome as her new home, also imbues her with a longing for transformation: "'*Bisogna vivere a Roma coi costumi di Roma*,' says the Italian proverb, 'When you are in Rome, do as Rome does!'" (RB 1904, 162, italics in the text).

[13] In this sense, her belief that "American-Protestant houses are no-man's land, neutral ground" with "visitors of every faith and all parties" (RB 1904, 85) sounds at least naive.

[14] The richness and complexity of the Abruzzo section preclude an exhaustive treatment here. For a more in-depth analysis of it, I recommend Marilena Giammarco's essay "Maud Howe Elliott, un'americana a Roma e sull'altopiano abruzzese" (see works cited). The chapters about Abruzzo have recently been translated into Italian by Martina Russo. See: Maud Howe, *Diario di una viaggiatrice tra luoghi e identità d'Abruzzo*, ed. Kristine Maria Rapino. Pescara: Ianieri Edizioni, 2024.

[15] For an extensive description of the notion of sojourn, see Rees 2019.

Bionote

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