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Introduction

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Introduction

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The articles in this special volume of *Italian Canadiana* intend to study, through their various interdisciplinary approaches, the manner in which patterns of *nostos*, of journeying and returning, in Italian Canadian writing and other narratives are both identified and deployed. The contributors, as the reader can glean from their biographical sketches at the end of the volume, incorporate myriad branches of knowledge: from diaspora and postcolonial studies to cultural sociology and anthropology, from literary criticism and semiotics to the history of immigration, from high-ranking diplomacy to creative writing and documentary photography, and from comparative literature to translation. It is hoped that, given this array of interpretative modes, the reader will garner the dialogic and specular tenor of these texts which, while intersecting, without, paradoxically, problematizing each other, compose a thematic ensemble whose heuristic motivations grant them a common sense of literary stability and scope.

While each individual study in this volume, mapping a particular shift or ambiguity in the manner a specific *nostos* device is deployed, may be read with great profit on its own, it will also, perhaps more importantly, form part of a general trajectory, thus enhancing its significance when engaged as a vital segment of a greater narrative. A narrative whose interdisciplinarity, often attempting to question *nostos* patterns traditionally measured by journey and homecoming, invokes postmodern instances of fracture with both the dominant or canonical culture and the ensuing aesthetics. All the Italian Canadian narratives analyzed in this special issue share one common thread, that of *erranza*, of wandering, a human condition that parallels their very “migrant” writing and other modes of representation, partly dismantling, as it were, conventional discourse while advancing an alternative to the topical stylistic features of mainstream Canadian literature. An *erranza* whose exilic voice becomes the language of the migrant text itself; a text, en clair, as displaced as the voice that engenders it, a language not yet at home. A textual language, however, crafted *ad arte*, given the supreme degree of literariness that characterizes Italian Canadian writing today. Felicitous diverse colours, and profitable ones, I might add, for the Canadian literary tapestry as they weave, in an indirect and belatedly foundational manner, their exquisitely unique Italian Canadian literary weft threads through the warp fabric of Canadian literature.

In its internal structure, ideated to map a linear progression within seven broad thematic areas, the volume opens with an overarching article by Vito Teti that examines the uses and paradoxes of nostalgia and melancholy in the philosophical and folkloric literature of the West and

focuses, in the second part, on the immigrant's sense of nostalgia in the new world. Expounding on the twofold character of migration, that is, on migration either as loss of cultural identity or as renewed creative spirit, Teti argues for the importance of negotiating the mechanisms which keep us attached to the origins, to the notion of *nostos*, and to do so with an attentive and critical consciousness. This "preparatory" and all-encompassing prelude is completed, as it were, by Francesco Loriggio's philosophical analysis of *nostos* in our Western culture, an analysis which sheds light both on the notion of modernity as such and on the relevance of the theme for the critical and historical study of Italian Canadian literature. Franc Sturino offers a logical link to the opening two articles by detailing an historical account of Italian immigration to Canada, adding parallels of *nostos* patterns with Homer's epic poems. Roberta Cauchi-Santoro follows Sturino's historical journeying by providing a depiction of the 19th-century settlement of Italian immigrants in London, ON, as they forge a chain of events that shaped the so-called Latin Quarter as a means of negotiating their sense of *nostos*. Sonia Floriani concludes this segment with both theoretical and practical hypotheses of the Italian migratory condition in Canada by juxtaposing significant tenets of classical sociology with selected examples of lived immigrant experience.

On the heels of Floriani's hypotheses, the reader will find five articles that deal in meaningful ways with journeying, emigration, biography, and autobiography. Raymond Culos starts this off with a deeply felt story of *nostos* as a purely "spiritual" return, a homecoming for grandma's soul, as the writer himself, laden with memories, travels back to Italy in order to accomplish nonna's old dream. Tullio Guma follows with a novel rendering, and variant, of *nostos* as his life as a high-ranking diplomat in the Italian government was punctuated by many returns from different areas of the globe. Sergio Piraro, intertwining the story of Maria Buggé with the evolving political and cultural scene in Québec in the 60's and beyond, describes the vicissitudes normally associated with displacement and identity, adding the role *nostos* played in Maria's journeying. Salvatore Bancheri studies how the concept of *nostos* might have affected an entire Italian Canadian community, including his own academic career, by delving into the artistic production of Stefano Vilardo and Lina Riccobene. Niccoli ends the section with an imagined, yet partly autobiographical, rereading of Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* trilogy. In step with analyses of Ricci's work, Carmen Concilio's study, while invoking textual Oedipal nuances, maps the trilogy's structural grid, configuring it as a cartography of the "altrove" (elsewhere), and illustrating how departures and returns are conditioned by it. Gabriella Iacobucci concludes this part with an essay on translation as a tool for a diverse deployment of *nostos*. For Iacobucci, translating Ricci's trilogy into Italian is bringing his writing home.

A thematic component almost completely dedicated to Italian Canadian women writers follows. Joseph Pivato leads the way by

focussing on four women writers (Mary di Michele, Caterina Edwards, Licia Canton and Rina Cralli) who have treated the *topoi* of leaving and returning in particular ways, ending his article with Pasquale Verdicchio's work as an example of fracture with the "classic" idea of nostalgia. Licia Canton herself follows suit by analysing the *nostos* patterns as utilized by thirteen established and emerging women writers from Ontario, Quebec, and Alberta, suggesting that for some writers the very act of writing is *per se* a pattern of return. Francesca Cadel looks at some of the work by Mary di Michele and Gianna Patriarca by considering the role of *nostos* in its relationship with language, while elaborating on what Pier Giorgio Di Cicco called the "metaphysic of ethno Italian-Canadian." Veronica Austen and Sylvia Terzian end the section by delving into Italian Canadian writer Genni Gunn's autobiographical travelogue. The two Canadian Literature and Diaspora Studies scholars interpret selected rhetorical modes through which Gunn is able to subvert traditional patterns of *nostos*.

Broaching the structure of two Italian Canadian works written in Italian, considering notions of impossible returns articulated in them, delineates the theme of the next two articles. Konrad Eisenbichler offers us a reading of Gianni Angelo Grohovaz's poetry which, interwoven with the hauntingly dramatic journeying of the exiled Giuliano-Dalmati, speaks to the impossibility of enabling any type of real *nostos*. Niccoli follows with a critical reading of Nino Famà's novel, *Il sogno di Toloma*, discoursing on modes of narrating through which the Italian Canadian writer proposes variants to the *nostos* pattern. The volume ends, I believe quite appropriately, with three articles that, seeming to steer the discourse on *nostos* slightly away from the purely literary sphere, deal concretely with aspects that concern representations, media, and documentary photography. All three are very much embedded in the literary realm in that the evocative language used (anthropological, mediatic, photographic) still echoes the exilic voice mentioned above. Sam Migliore's essay on the Racalmutesi's *Festa*, expanded in other parts of the world, shows, among other issues raised, how a religious representation can become an epic narrative, a tale that reconstructs identity and a positive sense of *nostos*. Simone Casini, in discussing, numbers at hand, the positive role media have had in terms of proper identity construction both in Italy and Canada, proposes an innovative *nostos* paradigm as a symbolic system for future generations. The final word goes to Vincenzo Pietropaolo. In his article on photography and *nostos*, illustrated by documentary photographs of migrants and of ritual depictions of *nostos* patterns, Pietropaolo, while questioning the possibility of real returns, muses on his own immigrant trajectory as well as on the collective migrant experience he has documented over the years.

As many of the articles in this volume make clear, the concept of *erranza*, with its quasi-numinous *nostos* epilogue, has as long a history as perhaps the earliest cave paintings, and many of the texts, while not returning that far back, do recall the journeying episodes of Biblical and

Homeric lore in order not only to make sense, in comparative fashion, of the Italian migratory plight but also, I would dare say, to ennoble it, albeit implausibly, with mythical allusions. The Italian proletarian immigration of the “modern” phase, particularly the post WWII wave, is the one that mostly populates the narratives treated in this volume, and the one that perhaps best exemplifies the multimodal patterns of *nostos* therein imaginatively recounted. Unlike the fabled deeds of ancient scriptural and mythological returning heroes, ours is the composite story of the silent history of our humble migrant ancestors, and partly of ourselves, whose vagaries of *nostos* (real or imagined) can only be retold, restored, through the magic of narration. As we rewrite their sense of displacement and precarious identity, their yearning for some forlorn sense of return, their sense of a place, as Vito Teti would call it, perhaps we attempt to inscribe our own unstable sense of identity on a page, endeavouring to give voice to that silence, that hush of history. I think the patterns of *nostos* visited in this volume on Italian Canadian narratives debunk the long held American immigrant axiom *ubi panis ibi patria* in that they remind us (as in Deuteronomy 8:3: “Man shall not live by bread alone...”) of the inextricable connection between leaving and returning, and of the compelling force to come full circle, a common human longing that ascribes a peculiar sense of literary dignity to the narratives, shaping a uniquely Italian Canadian aesthetics of *nostos*.

As always, diverse readings such as the ones in this volume, converging on one singular topic, and stemming, as stated, from a plurality of disciplines, may solicit more questions than supplying answers. This is a good thing. All research-based inquiries, whether scientifically or academically speculative, are bound to do just that, thus stimulating our passion for more accurate probing. And it is certainly not the scope of this special edition to be exhaustive in this ambit. It is hoped again, however, that the readings in this special issue of *Italian Canadiana* will provide a more reasoned and balanced understanding of the importance of this topological device, how it is structured, and operative, within the various modes and genres of Italian Canadian narratives. As perhaps with most literature broaching the concept of *nostos*, and its rewriting of memory and identity, immigrant or “migrant” literature has to be often confabulated, or perhaps dreamed, in order to escape its precarious state of aesthetic orphanhood. As mentioned, one can nevertheless sense discernible signs of a distinctly Italian Canadian ethos evolving in these writings. While the Italian Canadian narrative attempts on the whole to access a restorative understanding of “origins”, along with some sort of mythic recovery of the self (both textual and authorial), it is fascinating to try to imagine the patterns of *nostos* that emerging and future generations of Italian Canadian writers and artists will formulate. To what degree will they still be compelled to restore origins, to unearth migratory relics, to consecrate homecoming, in order to reconstruct identity? Will their works have gained official, permanent, entry to the canon, with all the legitimizing privileges it assures (such as fully inclusive access to grand-scale publishing and

distribution), or will they still be part of what are at times euphemistically called “demographic shifts” in the Canadian literary landscape, listed rubrically, rare notable exceptions notwithstanding, as Italian Canadian? Slightly provocative, yet refreshingly challenging, in this context, is *People, Places, Passages: An Anthology of Canadian Writing*, judiciously edited by Giulia De Gasperi, Delia De Santis, and Caroline Morgan Di Giovanni (Longbridge Books 2018). It is, to my knowledge, the sole collection of Italian Canadian writings that, despite including also texts penned by italoophone writers, has shelved the adjective “Italian”, thus choosing to perturb the binomial composure the adjective has sanctioned, a duality which, to date, as I have pointed out above, has been the defining trait of all those literatures still normally classified, here in Canada, under the general heading of “ethnic literature”, that is, at some respectable distance from the national canon. Writing, as I am, in the midst of an epochal pandemic, with the ensuing ramifications we are already witnessing in all human activities, including those pertaining to the field of knowledge, I cannot help wondering when our fear of contagion, this type of social (literary, in our Italian Canadian case) “distancing” will end.