

Italian Canadiana

And My Immigrant Ship Sails On: Returning on Deck with Ricci's Lives of the Saints Trilogy

Gabriel Niccoli

Volume 35, 2021

Patterns of Nostos in Italian Canadian Narratives

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087607ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v35i0.37224>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (imprimé)

2564-2340 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Nicoli, G. (2021). And My Immigrant Ship Sails On: Returning on Deck with Ricci's Lives of the Saints Trilogy. *Italian Canadiana*, 35, 153–164.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v35i0.37224>

Résumé de l'article

This article addresses the theme of nostos and of immigrant journeying by locating the author and his memories on the very liner *Saturnia* that brought, in an eerily fanciful quirk of fate, Ricci's young protagonist and his mother to Canada. The writer frames his reading of Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* with a testimonial to the authenticity of the world the novel evokes, the world of the author's own childhood and adolescence. The essay that follows traces the convergent lines of critical insight, memory and the imagination.

And My Immigrant Ship Sails On: Returning on Deck with Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* Trilogy¹

Gabriel Niccoli

St. Jerome's University, University of Waterloo

Abstract: This article addresses the theme of *nostos* and of immigrant journeying by locating the author and his memories on the very liner *Saturnia* that brought, in an eerily fanciful quirk of fate, Ricci's young protagonist and his mother to Canada. The writer frames his reading of Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* with a testimonial to the authenticity of the world the novel evokes, the world of the author's own childhood and adolescence. The essay that follows traces the convergent lines of critical insight, memory and the imagination.

Keyword: Nino Ricci, *Saturnia*, Atlantic Ocean, memory, *nostos*, immigrant

If this brief account of my own personal connectedness to Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, indeed to his entire migratory trilogy, has to have a beginning, a sort of rubrical incipit whose seemingly immutable features inscribe significance and identity both to the text and to this privileged reader, then that beginning, which is in itself an end, a return, occurs on a misty cold day toward the end of March in the year 1961, on the high open seas of the Atlantic.

I was but an adolescent when I broached the crossing of those mythical seas, at once real and imagined now through the prism of a fragmented memory, an oceanic journey replete with all its metonymic filiations, like an ancestral palimpsest whose ritualized shadings beckon spirits of old to preserve and recall some long lost oracular code. Yet, this classically anointed immigrant journey remains for me the liquid compass, the one undulating marker that best controls my reading, both of Ricci's text and of my own life-text, guiding my very ship *Saturnia*, at once real and imagined, toward what I conceive to be a distant and ambiguous, yet friendly, shore; a seemingly stable, reassuring, and enduring significance.

Broaching Ricci's text not as a literary critic but as an engaged textuary, as a reader, that is, whose basic premises and digressions are but fragmented relics of his own personal migratory memory, I am licensed to take *Lives of the Saints* out of its intra-referential discourse, out of the

¹ This is a modified version of an article that appeared in *The New Quarterly* (2005).

sphere of multiple meanings suggested by its constant allusions to other currents, traditions, and works, in order to make it speak to me, thus placing it in the wake of my own life-text, as Nabokov's meaning-producing memory, as Claudel's Christmas Day Vespers conversion, or as Dante's self-serving allegorical hermeneutics in his *Vita Nuova*. A sort of naïf reading, as it were, with no critical skepticism or vigilance on my part; a re-reading, if you like, of lived and imagined reality with no theoretical or practical application outside of its own construct. Vittorio Innocente's voice echoes mine, his sombre silences articulate mine, as in an uncanny twist of fate we are both crossing the Atlantic at precisely the same time in recorded history, on the same ship *Saturnia*, and it is difficult for me to say which part is real, which imagined.

My connectedness to *Lives of the Saints* begins then, quite canonically, *in medias res*, or, wishing to map it, in the middle of the great immigrant ocean, as mentioned. A middle liquefying locus which stages the unstable state of suspension that at once connects and disconnects, illumines and obscures both shores, of adolescence and maturity. An unstable sense of journeying that blurs the line between leaving and returning, compromising their very meaning, as the frothy long white wake old *Saturnia's* stern inks on the open ocean page traces an umbilical cord that will never be clamped or cut. I cross the ocean on my Saturnian vessel, and it occurs to me, now as I wester, that I am merely following in the footsteps of previous generations of immigrant mariners, remapping their journey's fate and pasting it unto mine. My seafaring vessel, as I wade through the dense murky waters of a disjointed memory, is the great immigrant ship that pulled anchor under the drooping eye of that ancient somniloquent giant Vesuvius, carrying with it its usual human cargo of unfulfilled dreams and renewed hopes, of ancient blue and brown immigrant trunks filled with fine white linen, and of cheap blotted black and white photographs of the loved ones left ashore, each blot or smear as if initiating dolorous lapses of memory. Immigrant memories that, not unlike a will, become operative the moment the ship of one's life sets sail, as if the harbourless vessel were somehow henceforth destined to navigate solely on an ocean of oblivial oscillations cadenced to the liner's turbulent swaying back and forth. Propelled by the unruly winds of a recalcitrant sense of recall and by the aura of a solemnly forlorn meaning that perhaps only ships can ascribe to an immigrant's life, my large seafaring vessel is etching the deep, carrying aboard, as stated, a little boy a few years younger than me, and whose name is Vittorio. Art and life, history and fiction mingle and, again, it is not easy for me to say with any certainty which is which.

A soft-spoken, adolescent melancholian from a desolate village in Calabria, in the deep south, one of those faceless villages identified in immigration studies as sending towns, a village eerily similar to Valle del Sole, I cross the Atlantic along with my perennially black vested mother, quasi funereal in her dignified bearing, in order to join my father, a stranger really but one whom I had learned to love through his letters and gift laden *pacchi dall'America*.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century both my father's and mother's ancestors had crossed this very ocean in search of a much sunnier life. My great grandparents had returned to the village just in time to inhabit their freshly minted graves, proudly decumbent under the ornately southern Baroque tombstones their Canadian sacrificial dollars had provided, clay cadavers forever mapping the landscape's ostentatious topography and the village's sepulchral topography. Their epitaphs, duly inscribed as they are above the wavering glow of a sacred *lumino*, summon to this day the errant solitary *promeneur* to stop and pay homage, and a simple prayer, to the perpetual memorial of their final return "home". Laden with years of toil and solitude, they had braved the vicissitudes of the long oceanic return voyage, their sole and final one, in order to spend their last waking hours with their long-lost darling ones, no longer recognizable, nor indeed comprehensible, to each other. They had kept their faith, had lived their rituals, and had returned home, even though centuries earlier Dante had persuasively debunked the regulating valence of the return to Ithaca, the canonical homebound voyage. In the twentieth century, my maternal grandfather, not willing to honor the sacrality the *nostos* ritualization would impose, had been punished by some unclassified immigrant gods for this act of defiance by having to carve his own grave within the East Kootenay coal mines of British Columbia, while my paternal one, having challenged the peaks of Mt. Revelstoke, had returned home to fight a meaningless war. Not unlike the Odyssean hero, though, and tired of the squalor the first great war had left in its ashes, he retrenched under the reassuring shadows of the Rocky Mountains, leaving a new baby in the old decrepit Italian village as a token and testimonial of his final presence there. They had both somehow relived the ancient flame that keeps burning in immigrant hearts, had negotiated with their dead and had prepared the way, ancient prophets of my father's and my own becoming.

This tranche of immigrant family narrative, which ought to integrate more fully the heroic deeds and the plaintive plight of the faceless women in black left behind, is a fundamental part of my sense of connectedness to Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*. It is the part that any immigrant from the Italian south instinctively recalls the moment history oversteps its bounds, overlapping with literature. It is for me personally the *falsariga* of Ricci's text, the subtle fabric that weaves through the trilogy's language, chasing the words, appropriating them once caught, and giving them my own sustenance and life, like the enduring and enlightening trait of white pigment to the transformative point in Masaccio's frescoed miracle. But it is also more. The family narrative, the untold tale of immigrant solitudes, is the sanguification of the new world, of a new life. Abundant streams of blood flow through Ricci's trilogy, from the snake's primeval bite in the stable to Vittorio's first death in the ship's cabin, in bed with his dead mother Cristina, his corpse alongside hers already wasting away on the ocean floor, through the bloodied incestual linen, to his second death...in a cave, in a warm dark pool. And then water...

water everywhere—*Acqua, acqua, dappertutto*, notes Cristina—from the ocean to the father's "drowning" in the irrigation pond, to the quasi baptismal tub/fount at the end of the trilogy. Blood and water, blood and water gushing out from Christ's pierced body, as if the very text were written with them, consecrated by them. But it is blood, both in its literal and figurative sense, the true vessel, the chrismatory that ascribes identity to the migratory text, that gives it a sense of stability. It is blood the primitive tool that writes down the errant condition of humanity, that injects in it a prophecy of redemption, as language *per se* can only obscure as much as it reveals, as Ricci confides in the trilogy's epilogue, a language always at risk of falling off the margins of the page, much as Vittorio's coin running off the body of the ship, tumbling into a black deep sea. A bloody redemption that will turn the ship's stern to where the prow is now, "*le poppe volgerà u' son le prore*", as the divine poet asserts in *Paradiso* XXVII (cxlvi). The limitations of language, and of immigrant language especially, are the silent utterances which, like the poignant musical absences between notes, Ricci masterfully plays on throughout the trilogy, distant melodic grace-notes that keep me evocatively connected to the text. These textual murmurs compose *Saturnia's* primordial oceanic rhythm as it interweaves myth with history, engraving from stem to stern its flowing narrative of journey onto the pages of the ocean. These gothic and deep distant silences are the immigrant's true speech acts, eloquent in their primitive code, articulate in their very lack of proper articulation. Like Ricci's half-humans of a million years ago, they speak without proper speech. And so it is with the stray interconnectedness of my memories.

Returning to my state of suspension in the middle of the Atlantic in late March of 1961, on my ship *Saturnia*, I find myself inexorably woven in the echoing ripples of my life's journey, and of the text's own hermeneutics, without wanting to, in this mysterious cryptic whirlwind of transference and transfiguration, and from stem to stern I play with both shores, never arriving, never returning, struggling to confine myself to the unique self-present moment of meaning, both shores claiming a part of me; yet, both resenting my suspended state. Perhaps, I ask myself, the sense of *nostos* does not lie in reaching the new shore, nor, indeed, returning to the old one; perhaps it is operative solely, as inconclusively mentioned, in the sense of journeying *per se*. Thus from stem to stern I reach out for both shores, first one, then the other. From a phenomenological meridian, on ship's time, as it were, *Saturnia* is once again my present state of awareness, the privileging locus whence memories, both Italian and Canadian, are recalled from both shores, hurriedly organized and hastily attributed to their real or fictive sequential meaning. Coming out of myself for an instant in order to mimic the literary theorist or art historian, as Saint Bartholomew in his morbidly deconstructive treatment of Michelangelo's hanging skin in the last judgment, I sense that it is here that Derrida's notions of writing as orphan (as Vittorio's state on the ship after his mother's burial at sea), as well as his deconstructive folds of *différance*, come forcefully into play, reminding us of writing's

inability properly to unfold memory's pages, relying instead on its innate relationship with space, and time.² And so I am a young adolescent again, Vittorio still a child. At that age I was really too old to befriend him, though our paths on the great immigrant ship had often crossed. As in a fragment of a dream, I recall once gazing at him, as on the other side of an ancient family credenza mirror my mother had left behind in the old abandoned house in the village, as he walked on the promenade deck with his mother, a dark, long haired pregnant woman who carried herself with a certain nondescript pride, typical of the southern half-literate peasant mondaine, a Samnitic umbrage of fiercely heroic readiness measuring her every stride. I remember being struck, as I could not help keeping my curious gaze on them, by how protective and jealous this child Vittorio seemed to be of his mother. I remember forming the clear impression he was greatly distressed by the indiscreet glances the crewmen on deck would incautiously fling against her, his contorting body clinging even closer to hers, almost unnaturally for a child toward his mother, as if embracing her in order to shield her from what he sensed were sexually coded signs.

I had made a couple of new friends more or less my age, one of them, Corrado, even before we embarked, at the old indistinct *albergo* in Naples where we had arrived by train the night before our departure. He was from another Calabrian village called San Luca, and was going to Port Arthur with his mother to join his railroad-gang father whom he had heard about more from his town folks than from his own mother. The other was a girl named Isabella, a precociously nubile Lucanian *signorina* from Valsinni whose destination was Kapuskasing, a forbidding exercise in English pronunciation for the three of us then. This Cree named northern frigid outpost was where her father worked, a father she had never seen (the all too common sort of *pater noster qui es in america*), except in the blur of an unframed and half-ripped photograph her mother kept pinned inordinately high on the cold and damp kitchen wall, next to the sacro cuore, the sacred heart of Jesus, both pictures showing darkly staining blotches of water on them, as if rain had sipped through them, or perhaps tears, the type of sign that often made those poor people of the south cry miracle, in the absence of any other type of entertainment that could alleviate their sorry plight. Isabella, too, was accompanied by her black clothed mother, a frail and grief bearing figure of a woman whose resemblance to the *Addolorata*, the sorrowful mother of my town's processions, was indeed startling. The three of us formed a sort of unholy trinity, as it were, Corrado and I pubescently and clandestinely lusting after the virginal laughter of our siren Isabella, both hopelessly lost in the sweetness of her voice beckoning us with that singularly southern salutation of veiled eroticized saintliness. And so we journeyed, on the high open seas of the Atlantic, unaware of the structu-

² In the sense that, echoing some of the deconstructionist parlance, meaning is by its very nature both unstable and contextual, as, indeed, is this textuary's precarious state on *Saturnia*.

ral symbolism of our voyage, unaware of our journeying within the nar-ratological confines of a macrotext, waiting to reach with our beloved Isabella what I now know to be the mythologized Pier 21 in Halifax, but what was for us then a distant and strange shore which we, in our complete lack of English, very fluently and quite innocently pronounced "Ali fucks."

In re-reading Ricci's trilogy I find myself, very much like Vittorio, reorganizing my *cimelia*, treasured markers of my life-text, in the book of my memory, confronting swarms of ghosts from my bicultural and hyphenated station, the hyphen representing with its minus sign a fracture, a negation of both shores, the impossibility of ever arriving at a new identity and by syllogism the irreversible abandonment of the old shore. By locating myself on the solarium of my *Saturnia* as a real (past) and fictional (present) event, as if I were glossing *in limine*, I am able to isolate textual signals as personal phantoms and arrange them in *mise-en-abyme* structures, in an endlessly receding rotation, hence loosening their shackles, as in some sort of specular dialogue, mirroring fragments of my own life. As I re-read Ricci, I become thus aware of the essentially flawed, yet vital, connection between ship and ocean, between writing and reading, and between departing and returning. They all seem to function as revolving doors, and inadvertently they all seem to point to an indeterminate axis of return. So here I am, body and sign, *soma* and *sema*, upon the vessel of my own page, and again from stem to stern I wander, from west to east, from one margin to the other, recording events between two distant and strange shores. Yet, at times the thought of my great oceanic ship tracing the lines of the immigrant's fate fills me with a peculiar sense of despair, as it does now, when language fails me and I stand alone at the ship's rail, gazing out over an endless sea. And I fear that perhaps no great ship is this vessel of my wakening senses; rather, a little bark buffeted by stormy winds, heading for shipwreck and oblivion, the immense length of the great blue hulk which was my *Saturnia* rapidly vanishing like a ship of death, reduced, like my soul melting away in the vortex of its distress, to the mere minimalistic cinerary inseity of an ancient urn, as if stem and stern had connived to be one in one. No salt of inspiration sprays against my skin, in this oceanic poetics of citation. Suddenly though, waves of sepulchral imagery rush to mind like a mind's month over decades of silence, an oceanic great tomb opening up its dark voracious mouth, swallowing a mother's corpse. Yes, of course, I remember it vividly now. Corrado was too fainthearted to witness it, but Isabella and I awoke early that clear cold morning in late March. We met on the quarter-deck, overlooking the stern, and that familiar sense of despair rushed like a cavernous wave toward me again as the sun was just edging above a still sea. We had heard about the burial at sea the evening before from a deckhand we had befriended and who, though older, had also been dazzled by Isabella's blazing eyes, as if she were the very incarnation of the ghostly *stella maris* he had always longed to see all these years at sea. Isabella and I were both afraid to view the macabre event. Yet, curiosity overtook

us. Curious and afraid as when, a couple of days earlier, together in her underwater cabin during the great storm we were reading, by the darkly lit porthole, a masterfully crafted story about a young man's self-discovery and coming of age. We were reading it as if discovering ourselves, the story's narrative vigor just carrying us along, pulling us into the very body and blood of the text. A peculiar sort of textual transubstantiative apotheosis. Then everything seemed to have gone black, either the cabin's light or the light of our senses, and that day we read no more.

But that fateful morning we stood there, unnoticed, as if we were not there at all, leaning on the rails, perched above the stern funerary amphitheatre, surrounded by the immensity of an ocean ready to swallow both of us at fate's command. Amidst the fragments of events that happened some sixty odd years ago, I do recall, as in a long dreamt dream forever tinged with that curious sense of despair, a greyish canvas body sack hastily emblazoned with the Italian *tricolore* flag, weights sewn to the canvas on either side, sliding out to sea. I recall the shroud, shoddily committed to the deep, disappearing suddenly from our view, while the four ship hands allocated to perform the gloomy disposal stood solemnly silent and still, as if incapacitated by the ship's chaplain's burial chant of the medieval *Dies Irae*, the Roman Catholic hymn of wrath and doom considered the appropriate mode of comfort for the Christian pilgrim's passage to an uncertain eternity. But as in the epilogue of a dream, when the dreamer awakens just before the inevitable, I cannot recall the dead splash of Vittorio's mother's body striking the ocean's surface, nor the long white wake rapaciously swallowing it in order to entomb it within its deep watery grave. Perhaps that image is too darkly grim to recall. Or maybe *Saturnia's* massive, high stern, with its imposing taffrail and partial bulwark effaced both sight and sound. Perhaps memory does not possess such senses. Perhaps the image has dissolved into the life-text of Santa Cristina whose body, about to strike the water, was seen hovering above the surface of the sea like a shade, before being led up into the heavens.

Similarly to Vittorio, I had had to read, as a child in the old village, the exhortatory and colour-plated narratives of the *Eternal Maxims* and of the codex *Lives of the Saints* (both tomes duly canonized by the meaning-producing *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat* of an earlier age), and my everyday life was lived in a halo of a southern brand of magic realism, a kind of crepuscular daze where saints and sinners mingled, often playing a spirited card game of *scopa* or *briscola*, and where Madonnas and snakes did share a common ground. Like Vittorio, listening to his Valle del Sole's devout processional bearers' hopes that the Virgin Mary had better not get pregnant, else they wouldn't be able to carry the extra weight, so did I hear similar blasphemous narratives that quite innocently coloured biblical events with coarse popular humour. Heresy and orthodoxy mixed in our villages, and nobody blinked an eye. After all, we Italians had brought art to a supreme degree through the mere synthesis of paganism and Christianity. Just like Vittorio, I grew up in a village lost

in time, where hazy somnolent summer afternoons, rhythmically cadenced to the cicada's songs, often yielded to an indolent prayer tainted by viscidly twisting temptations. A village where priest and prostitute often headed the procession of the *fiesta della Immacolata Concezione*, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, an ambulant reenactment of a medieval *sacra rappresentazione*, a curious mix of profane spectacle and religious primitivism where everybody was at once both spectator and actor, and where everyone instinctively captured, as in Byzantine iconography, the allegorical valence of each, each participant in turn playing a particular typology, a tragicomic mask whose secret *canovaccio*, whose ritual gesturing invoked superstitious linkages to the *Mater clementissima*. And so as the exalted Immaculate One, *Virgo prudentissima*, blessed us all poor banished children of Eve from her raised unstable throne, and the maculate one trudged along in redemptive prayer and song, veritable apotheosis of the popularized Mary Magdalene, the spirited curate busied himself in sprinkling holy water on all of us with his aspergillum, his bodily contortions curiously mannered, as if to expiate the many demons, real and imagined, that afflicted him, and the town.

As in the pages of Ricci's text, I grew up in a village where the obsequious observance of pagan superstitious rites was as important as religious orthodoxy, and where the Madonna's novena within the thick-frescoed walls of our southern Gothic *Chiesa Madre*, our mother church, served also as a gathering for Boccaccian clandestine rendezvous and piously calumnious conclaves. Yet, within this pagan pageantry of southern Roman Catholicism where the evil eye, the colours of the snakes, and the dramatized and personalized Savonarolan sermons of hordes of Father Nicola's—all in their way remnants of Horatian liberating modes of *delectare et monere*—are as potent as the Virgin's latest intercession, and where the proper decoding of the various signposts of life is an absolute necessity, there still lies an oasis of pastoral yore, a *locus amoenus* where the soul seeks its solace. Is this the beckoning of the sending shore? It is the ode to the soul's golden age that Vittorio insentiently sings on the deserted stern as night falls, an Icarian-coded sensual playfulness that in its whimsical "vola vola" flight, lost as it is against a vague deep bluish backdrop of sky immersed in the sea, is irrevocably bound, it too, to descend to the bottom of the ocean, upon the very greyish canvas sack that summons it.

As I look through the circular perfection of my *oblò*, of the porthole in my ship's cabin, above the fathomless depths of seemingly hushed unending waves, I see moments of self-referential epiphanies, textual and personal lexemes pointing to a desired metaphorical harbour for the storm-tossed immigrant ship of meta-literary memories. But the Saturnian text is a reliquary of memories, a floating Fellinian life-ship that will never touch shore, self-nourishing and self-contained as it is, like a medieval *mappa mundi* whose crucifixual mystical body reaches the precipice, the ship's very rails, beyond which the immigrant pilgrim risks literal and allegorical shipwreck, as Vittorio almost did in the fury of the tempest, the tall waves monstrously menacing to devour his very

soul. My *Saturnia* carries, along with its human dignity and misery, the phosphorescent dream of sacral myths and the cyclical stream of sacred rites, subliminal rites of passage. At the twilight of a day of blood and water, classic metonymic tools of primitive inscription, it carries still the remaining fragments of my memory, sunken relics of iridescent reflections. A text, *en clair*, as life itself, remains an inequation with a promise of infinite solutions, the untying of a knot that was never too tight. As memories become even more disjointed, almost unreliable, the village's topography is mapped again, this time by the tropography of onomastics, a poetics of allusion and verbal tropes that attempts to provide a more verifiable contact with past reality, hence a more rational return to it. Cristina's village relatives and friends, Di Lucci, Luciano, zia Lucia (all markers of light as evidenced by the tonal qualities of their names) were once able to provide interpretative modes of perceived reality that helped to shape Vittorio's imagination. But upon his first return to the village, as with mine, the protagonist finds to his dismay that both language and landscape have changed to the point where they can no longer confirm the established truth. And the lamp carriers of a dark age can no longer confirm the lived or imagined reality of a time past. Fabrizio himself, Vittorio's boyhood trusted friend, a postman with a penchant for arcane knowledge and the very carrier of the written word, cannot confirm that truth, fabricating instead for Vittorio an articulate rendering of past events as if it were read from a different book. The oneiric texture of language in the trilogy, and especially the metalinguistic discourse on its limitations to decode properly one's past in *Where she has gone*, offer a thinly veiled palinode or revolving retraction which is, in my view, a supremely artistic example of the coetaneous affinities between the immigrant state and the state of language which is by its very nature errant, (*im*)migrant. While this motif is perhaps as ancient as the first inscription in some cave, it is clearly a privileged one in contemporary Canadian narrative and, indeed, in Italian Canadian narrative. And not surprisingly, given our innately multicultural stance. But Ricci's undulating ripples of this overlay of language and structural elements are in my view particularly harmonious, and cannot be ignored. The trilogy itself is a triptych which, opening unto and folding into itself, does truly reveal as much as it obscures. Two self-referential key moments only, for the sake of brevity, might be recalled here, moments that I myself recollect from my first return to the village. One is the conviction that there was no electricity, no light, or at least very little of it in the village when Vittorio lived there; the other, his surprise at seeing a photograph of himself with his mother taken the morning of his departure. We all remember with Vittorio that it had been raining heavily that windy morning and that Di Lucci had intended, in fact, to take a photograph of the two, *per ricordo*, for memory's sake, as he had said. Yet, no picture is taken in the strict economy of memory's narrative, and there is, in fact or fiction, no sign of rain in the photograph, at least none that the reader, along with Vittorio, can properly decode, unlike the imagined miraculous tears that resembled raindrops on the rudely wall-pinned

portraits of sacred hearts, madonnas, and saints in the villages of southern Italy. Yet, the repercussions of this absence extend to the very end of the trilogy, in that glossing final glow where Ricci's authorial voice is felt most poignantly and intimately, the feeling one has of the spatial absences that populate Della Francesca's painted architecture. Perhaps Di Lucci himself, that bumbling man of light, would have been able to shed some light on the matter, although, having witnessed the performative memory-acts from both Aunt Lucia and Luciano, one rather doubts it.

Perhaps light comes not from things remembered or forgotten but simply from their suddenly being there, as the seemingly uncouth and slow-witted Marta, uncannily reminiscent of Giotto's black-clad, half-faced woman, curtly contemplates with respect to the photograph in the kitchen curio cabinet that shows no sign of rain. As the Russian formalist Bakhtin points out, aesthetic activity is perhaps nothing more than an act of self-expression, an eternal instant of self-revelation. And as I look west, beyond the stem's rails, the sun is only just setting. What does this signal? I ask myself, as beyond the stern the encroaching dark is about to envelop the ship, like the gothic folds of a darkly coloured cloak concealing the Benedictine body on the Sienese wood panel. Night will soon fall on my *Saturnia*. Like the expert hand of a consummate restorer, night will soon erase the cracked and peeling paint around its yard-high white letters on its huge flank. But before a new dawn breaks, breaking the snare of death with its iridescent eastern light, my memory's relics will still haunt the ship, drifting ancient wraiths of an adolescent mariner. A numinous *de profundis*, still fearfully obscure and arcane as when I recited it as an altar boy in my village's funeral masses, Father Petrone sternly attentive to my proper Latin pronunciation as if the poor dead one's *requiem aeternam* depended wholly on it, permeates now with its inscrutable litaneutical chant both the ship and the endless ocean like the dense dark fog that envelops my mind's last relic, a final fragment, a precious extant rhyme. Like a cruciverbalist, a nailer of words perpetually fugacious as if unable to find a stable niche, I try to seize this elusive relic by the primal intensity of its spectral image, to retrieve it from the deathly tentacles of the dark, as if in it were contained the last vestiges of a final crossword puzzle, some single ultimate factor that like an oracular scroll controls my connectedness to Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*, indeed, to his entire trilogy, safely guiding me to a privileging significance of the text. But like Vittorio's iconic one lira coin rolling into the ocean at book's end, this saving fragment of my immigrant memory, this *antiquum documentum*, it, too, reels hopelessly in the dark before tilting fatally toward the rails of my immigrant ship *Saturnia*, finally tumbling out into a dead sea.

Narrami un sogno, raccontami la tua vita, tell me a dream, tell me about your life, Isabella might have asked, as in the epilogue of a journey,

from the Lucanian chiaroscurant folds of her past, as if not decades but centuries of fragmented memories had suddenly turned liquescent within the confines of a single page, perhaps a single sentence. And I would have told her, as a beginning which is in itself an end, a leaving which is in itself a return, that I once wrote her a letter, to an almost illegible address in Kapuskasing. The irregular fragment of letterhead paper on which it had been scribbled—bearing the faded phantasm of part of a ship's bow etching a line—still venerated like a saint's relic, the material illusion of an immaterial dream. But like a boomerang, the sinuous limbless recoiling of a snake, within the time arch of a few days the letter had returned to me, its envelope never unsealed and bearing the cryptically-coded inscription: address unknown. Just like that, like the last vital fragment of memory's book, like Cristina's body sliding off into the abyss without a sound, unseen, just like that, Isabella had vanished from my life-text.

Isabella's voice, my saintly siren's voice, is no longer audible now through the labyrinth of my memory, nor is Corrado's, nor indeed Vittorio's, though their still silences still echo mine, their spectral dancing aboard *Saturnia*, at once fictional and real, still fuelling my imagination. Yet, I often think of them, now that they're old, like me. And wonder what they're up to. Are they still alive? What life-texts are they sketching? Could I still meet Isabella in Kapuskasing? I wonder if she's aging well. And Corrado, is he still in Port Arthur? Perhaps he has returned to Italy, as he once confided he would one day, while still on the immigrant ship. And what about Vittorio? Has he returned again to visit Valle del Sole? Has he returned from the island off the coast of Kenya, back to Toronto, or perhaps even Mersea? What has become of them all? No, I no longer hear their voices. I suppose their lives, their tales must be retold, must be rewritten, even if the fire that first sparked their creative narrative in the woods can no longer be lit.

What I do hear now clearly, as if finally awakening from a bitter-sweet dream of encircling folds of burning pages, is Nino Ricci's authorial voice, this time sternly reminding me of the grave risks I am taking on the high open seas of the Atlantic, in the midst of that boundless immigrant ocean, with all its metonymic filiations, aboard the little vessel of my intellect. I attempt to read properly this austere, yet gracefully flowing voice, reminding me once more not to overstep my bounds, to turn back, to return home. And suddenly that frightfully recognizable feeling of despair assails me once more as I can sense imminent shipwreck. I had best heed Ricci's firm voice for he is, supreme mariner and skilled craftsman of the word, at once delighting and admonishing me, at once offering salvation and prophesying shipwreck in the immortal words of another errant textuary and haunting narrator of the migrant soul's perilous journey:

*Ye weary mariners in your little barks,
Rowed by desire to heed my ship's own course
That weaves its luscious song into the deep,
Turn back to sense your shores yet once again,*

*And do not sail onto my open seas,
Lest, losing sight of me, you lose your senses.
(Paradiso II, i-vi; translation and italics mine)*

Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante. *La Divina Commedia*. A cura di Carlo Dragone. Alba: Edizioni Paoline, 1968.
- Alighieri, Dante. *Vita Nova*. A cura di Stefano Carrai. Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2009.
- Angelier, François. Paul Claudel. *Un mystique à l'état civil*. Paris: Pygmalion, 2000, 112-128.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Transl. David Allison & Newton Garver. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, 141-156.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory*. New York: Everyman's Library, 1966.
- Niccoli, Gabriel. "Between Two Strange and Distant Shores: Fragments of Personal Connectedness to Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* Trilogy". *The New Quarterly. Canadian Writers and Writing*. Number 93 ("The Writer Abroad"), 2005, 131-142.
- Ricci, Nino. *Lives of the Saints*. Dunvegan: Cormorant Books, 1990.
- Ricci, Nino. *In A Glass House*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994.
- Ricci, Nino. *Where She Has Gone*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997.