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# Fuga e ritorno: Italian-Canadian Narratives

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Résumé de l'article

Many Italian-Canadian authors have been stimulated to explore their dual identity after a return trip to Italy. They confront the myth of nostalgia as an emotional blind-spot to the harsh realities of past miseria and present-day conflicts in Italian society. Women writers such as Mary di Michele, Caterina Edwards, Licia Canton and Rina Cralli are particularly critical of the position of women in Italy and the whole nostalgia sentimentality promoted by Italian popular culture and music. Pasquale Verdicchio's whole writing career has been a systematic rejection of the thematics of nostalgia.

# *Fuga e ritorno: Italian-Canadian Narratives*

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*Abstract:* Many Italian-Canadian authors have been stimulated to explore their dual identity after a return trip to Italy. They confront the myth of nostalgia as an emotional blind-spot to the harsh realities of past *miseria* and present-day conflicts in Italian society. Women writers such as Mary di Michele, Caterina Edwards, Licia Canton and Rina Cralli are particularly critical of the position of women in Italy and the whole nostalgia sentimentality promoted by Italian popular culture and music. Pasquale Verdichio's whole writing career has been a systematic rejection of the thematics of nostalgia.

*Keywords:* Fuga, Ritorno, Morte, Italian-Canadian authors

"By the end of the summer I started to dream in Italian." These are the words that poet Mary di Michele uses to describe the re-awakening of her psychological ties to Molise during her first return trip to Italy (di Michele 1984). How can anyone of us escape the powerful pull of the mother country? And yet many millions of people managed to leave Italy in the last century. The 'fuga' in my title suggests that they never returned, not even for a short visit. Like Rina Cralli in her Friulan poem, "Nostalgie e Tulipans," they could lament, "Nostalgie e pos bes," homesickness but little money for an expensive trans-Atlantic voyage (Cralli 20).

In his book, *Un Popolo in Fuga* (1991), Pasquino Crupi writes about the millions who left to escape the "miseria" of their regions. Crupi documents the history of mistreatment that many Italians of the Mezzogiorno suffered, before, during, and after Italian unification. There was only one way out and that was emigration to North or South America. This migratory experience is reflected in the work of many contemporary Italian writers such as Giovanni Verga, Mario Rapisardi, Bruno Pelagi, Saverio Strati, Corrado Alvaro, Rocco Scotellaro and others. Crupi points out that in some of these immigrant narratives "la nostalgia è rovesciata: è nostalgia dell'America dalla quale si è tornati, alla quale si vorrebbe tornare." (35)

Despite the poverty and mistreatment many did dream of a return to Italy and so my title has both terms, fuga e ritorno. The two terms are closely related because the departure implicitly anticipates the return or at least the dream of a return. Both the escape from Italy and the obsession to return have become part of Italian immigrant culture, a culture found in many parts of the world. The narratives of immigration are explored in the works of many writers of Italian origin or background

(Pivato 1985). I will focus on some Italian-Canadian writers who have treated the themes of escape and return in particular ways. We also discover that a third term enters the equation, the term "death". And so we now have: Fuga, Ritorno e Morte.

We know that in some remote Italian villages the emigration of a member of the village was marked by a ritual similar to a funeral. Poet Alexandre Amprimoz writes about the prominence of images of death in his seminal essay, "Death Between Two Cultures: Italian-Canadian Poetry" (1985), and links this poetry to the ancient atavistic funeral practices. There must be a deep psychological fear of travel and disruption. In his *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud explained that "Departing on a journey is one of the commonest and best authenticated symbols of death" (507). In Nino Ricci's first novel, *Lives of the Saints*, the main character, Cristina, dies on the immigrant ship before reaching Canada. It is as if she were being punished for her transgressions, her sexual transgression, but also her attempt to escape the restrictions of the small village in the Abruzzi.

In her first Italian language novel, *Made in Italy* (1982), Maria Ardizzi also deals with death. Nora's husband, Giovanni (Vanni) returns to Italy to show off his wealth to the people in his home town only to die suddenly and unexpectedly. Or was it a psychological need to return to Italy to die? Nora suspects this deeper motivation when she herself must return to Italy for the first time to make the funeral arrangements for Vanni. Speaking to Vanni's body for the last time she says:

Sei tornato a morire qui... L'avresti mai creduto? Io non potrò tornare a morire qui invece... e non perché non voglia. Semplicemente perché tra me e questi luoghi s'è spezzato il filo... Riconosco i luoghi, ma i luoghi non riconoscono me... I miei luoghi sono rimasti intatti solo nella fantasia, e non posso possederli che con la fantasia... Vuoi saperlo? Non ho più un vero posto. Non appartengo a nessun luogo... ed appartengo a tutti i luoghi... (125)

In this Italian language novel Nora, as an old woman, looks back on her life in Italy and in Canada and articulates a profound love-hate relationship with Italy. Despite all of the hardships of immigration she prefers the freedom and the self-determination that she was able to achieve in Canada over the barriers in Italy. In some ways Nora speaks for many Italian-Canadians. It is revealing that Ardizzi's second novel is entitled *Il Sapore Agro della Mia Terra* (1984).

In her first novel, *The Lion's Mouth* (1982), Caterina Edwards depicts a young woman, Bianca, who has spent many summers in Venice, Italy, visiting her mother's extended family. Over the years Bianca falls in love with Venice and with Italy, a love personified in her Italian cousin, Marco. At the critical moment in her life Bianca realizes that she cannot really return to Italy. She writes to Marco:

Why have I spent the winter telling your story? I needed to exorcise my dream of Venice. I needed to rid myself of the ache of longing that

I carried for so long. And you—you are the grain of sand that began the pearl that is my dream... With me, it is always stories. And in the end it is all I can offer you—your story. Still. Still. I cannot write in Italian, and you do not read English. I will never touch you at all. (179)

Here too we have a death: the death of a love affair and the death of a dream. In her play, *Homeground*, Edwards dramatizes the hardships of an immigrant family struggling in Edmonton. The father, Cesare, is only in Canada to make enough money so that they can return to Italy to start a new life with a new house. At the end of the play Cesare and Maria return to Italy with their friend Lucio who dies in his hometown. Did he have a death wish? In Italy they come to a critical realization:

Cesare: We stayed a year.

Maria: It didn't work for the children who saw Canada as home, or for Cesare who had changed. Lucio was right. We no longer fit our place. We returned to Canada. (92)

In the original production of this play, Edwards' title was "Terra Straniera," a clear allusion to the Italian song of nostalgia, longing to return and perhaps to die. Furthermore, in her non-fiction book, *Finding Rosa* (2008), Edwards re-examines her obsession with Italy. Here she returns to Italy to investigate her mother's life story, the history of her family and the lost region of Istria. Caterina's mother has Alzheimer's disease and is slowly losing all the memories of her past, literally erasing her personal identity. The author draws a parallel between this personal loss of memory and the lost culture and identity of a former region of Italy, Istria. Here too appears the spectre of death: the murder of many Italians in Istria at the hands of Tito's partisans and the cultural genocide that followed so that there would be no record of their existence. By reconstructing the story of her mother and some of the lost history of Istria, Edwards is trying to recover the identity of a lost people now scattered around the world. With the translation of *Finding Rosa* into Italian Caterina Edwards will not personally move back to Italy, but will return to a small part of her lost and forgotten history.

On one of my many trips to Udine, my cousin Angela invited me on an excursion to the beautiful city of Trieste. It is a port city on a bay with beautiful buildings and squares. There are churches, museums, theatres, an opera house, hotels, and so on. But on the edge of this city of art and culture my cousin took me to see Risiera di San Sabba, a Nazi death camp. I was shocked to learn that there was a death camp in Italy during WWII. From October 1943 until April 1945 the Nazis used this former rice mill as a concentration camp with a crematorium. It is now a museum to the WWII and a national memorial to the approximately 3,000 people who were killed there. In recent years Italian school children are taken there to learn about the atrocities of the Second World War. The Risiera di San Sabba, along with the Holocaust monument at the new railway station in Gorizia, are all part of the dark history of Istria behind the silences of the people that Caterina Edwards meets

during her research into the lost stories of this border region.

Not all return trips to Italy result in happy memories with family and friends. In a narrative poem entitled "How to Kill Your Father" Mary di Michele uses the element of death to explore a family conflict during a road trip in Italy:

You abandon the car and walk  
into a Roman afternoon,  
you know how to kill your father,  
he knows how to kill you.

You are alone on the highway to the sun.  
Your North American education  
has taught you how to kill a father,  
but you are walking down an Italian  
way, so you will surrender  
and visit him in the hospital  
where you will be accused  
of wishing his death  
in wanting a life  
for yourself.

A scorpion sting darkening  
your heart buries July in Italy. (*Bread and Chocolate* 35-35)

The speaker in this poem is trying to assert her individuality in order to separate herself from her parents and their life choices. Travelling back to Italy may draw her back under the influence of her parents and extended family. She sees her North American education as a liberating force in her life. Many women writers articulate this conflict between family duty and self-determination. This poem alludes to the position of women in Italian society and law, acknowledging that a return to Italy would involve a loss of agency for the female members of the family.

This narrative poem is just one example of the many references to death in Italian-Canadian poetry. And often the references are associated with family members back in Italy, such as Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's dead brother. When you return to your hometown or village one of the duties you perform is to visit the graveyard with the graves of your dead relatives. Di Cicco has this image in a poem, "Donna italiana":

ghosts, wishing me well. They are my grandfathers,  
and my great-grandfathers,  
and the ancient men that kept my ribs burning at  
Monte Cassino, in the  
air above my brother's corpse,  
and the shelled house in Arezzo... (*Tough Romance* 68)

It becomes evident in many poems by Di Cicco that they are addressed as much to the dead in Italy as to the living in Canada.

As we explore the many different voices of Italian-Canadian authors we become aware of the problems associated with the return

trip to Italy, and with the corresponding theoretical questions that such issues raise vis-à-vis our obsession with the concept, and variant dynamics, of *nostos*. I can state categorically that the first return trips to Italy that many Italian-Canadian writers made in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s were major stimuli to the development of Italian-Canadian writing in English, French and Italian. The clearest statement of this is from Pier Giorgio Di Cicco:

In 1974 I returned to Italy for the first time in twenty-odd years. I went biased against a legacy that had made growing up in North America a difficult, but not impossible chore (or so I thought). I went out of curiosity, and came back to Canada conscious of the fact that I'd been a man without a country for most of my life. And I became bitter at the thought that most people carry on day after day deeply aware that they do so on the land upon which they were born. It became clear to me that they had something immediately and emotionally at stake with their environment. And that phenomenon was something I had had to construct at every effort to feel relevant in an English country. (*Roman Candles* 9)

And so, Di Cicco tells us, he decided to put together an anthology that "expressed this bicultural sensibility." That anthology was *Roman Candles*, published in 1978, and it ushered in the flowering of Italian-Canadian writing for the next 40 years (Pivato 1994). But not all writers embraced the theme of nostalgia uncritically.

After 1978 Italian-Canadian writers began to explore their dual identity, their use of languages, their rejection of dialects including *Italiense*, their Catholic religion, and their relationship with Italy. Some authors began to critique the myths of Italian nostalgia. One of the dissident voices that emerged from Vancouver was that of Pasquale Verdicchio who published poems that questioned the assumptions behind the immigrant narrative. He has rejected the thematics "rooted in a misguided nostalgia" (1998, 45). Coming from Naples, the capital of sentimental songs of nostalgia, he had to consciously separate himself from this tradition of heavy "malinconia." For Verdicchio the immigrant's links with the old country are to be based on a critical view of history, a history which must also include the displaced. In many poems Verdicchio questions the role of memory and the meaning of language. In his early poems he intentionally chose a style which set him apart from other Italian-Canadian poets. Verdicchio's first book of poems, *Moving Landscape* (1985), deals with the narratives of history, often the lost narratives and the silences of stone, but not the loss of meaning. Rather it is a search for new meaning. The poem "Letter" is an elegy to the dead immigrants scattered and lost. It begins with the image of the blue envelope, that is, the letter written by the far-away immigrant. This poem captures the impulse to tell the life story, to share a life experience with family, to link one's travels with the larger village narrative. The image of the soiled immigrant hands writing the letter epitomizes the sacrifices and suffering endured, but also the need to tell

and retell the story, the lost history. The subtext in this poem is that in the official history of Italy the immigrant narrative does not exist. For the scattered immigrants it is not only a lost history but an excluded one as well. In addition to history there is also geography, new territories and strange place names on a page, "letters broken to mean a thousand words." Will the many travels of the immigrants add new meaning to their lives, or will their tracks all be washed away by the rains of time? The poem ends with the images of sun-bleached letters and the immigrant's sun-bleached bones turning to dust. The poet declares:

these I will use  
to make more names of places  
which may not even be. (12)

It is up to the writer to give meaning to the lives and old bones of these lost and scattered immigrants. This poem gives us an image of life through scattered bones. The images of place names capture the recurrent motif in Verdicchio's verse: travel and nomadism. In his essays of this period he was exploring this problem in terms of motion and plurality. "The kinetic aspect of a work comes from writing in the present, writing as *difference*: from the origin, from itself, of its multiples, of language, announcing and losing itself." ("The Intellectual Ghetto," 53). In other poems there is more travel across seas, over desert sands, through crowded cities and busy harbours. In "Barcelona", the aged immigrant returns to Europe as a tourist only to find that it has become culturally Americanized. We see the old culture of Europe in decay. Even a history of great heroes cannot save a nation from its inevitable fate. The poem ends with an image of the famous statue of Columbus, a first immigrant, turning around in surprise at all the changes. What is the meaning of Columbus today? Is he an Italian genius, a Spanish navigator, or an American icon? (23)

Verdicchio's poem, "Ancestors," begins to resonate with the echoes of a lost history. In many of Verdicchio's poems the author's attention to the lost meaning of words seems to subvert the narrative of Italian history, especially the lost history of immigration. In "Ancestors" he focuses on this lost history as in a dream, lost. The poet identifies the painful paradox of the Italian immigrant who must carry the burden of a great Italian culture with all its expectations, at the same time knowing that this culture has historically excluded him and continues to do so.

Because we were the dreams  
which ancestors carved in stone  
and described in jewels  
we are now lost and confused. (25)

The first stanza gives us the text for this situational contradiction. We have been taught about the great men of Italian history. It is a culture which promised greatness, but gave millions of us exile instead. The Italian immigrant is confused because even a life in exile is not his own,

instead he seems trapped in this dream of greatness. The image has echoes of the Renaissance, but also of the Fascist period, in the illusions it fosters about creating a new Roman Empire. The second stanza continues to critique the "incomplete mosaic" of Italian culture, ending with a note of betrayal as we see the false future painted for us. The third stanza refers to the lost culture of the Etruscans, our lost ancestors. They yet remain a mystery. In the fourth stanza we read that the imagination of our Italian ancestors promised much that was never fulfilled. The promise was forgotten and the dream lost. The art of the past is all that we have left: Italy as a great museum, with no room for surplus population. This poem is one of the first ones to articulate the love-hate relationship of the immigrant with Italy. It rejects nostalgia and the blind filio-pietism so common among Italian immigrants. The critique is all the more powerful because it is soft-spoken and un-rhetorical. It is in keeping with Verdicchio's style of using language in an unemotional manner. But if we look closely we detect the anger just below the surface.

The title poem in this first collection is "Moving Landscape," an image which epitomizes the dislocation of the immigrant. Uprooted from his home village and peasant farm the immigrant will never be at ease in the new environment. In North America the landscape is unstable, always changing. Some of the changes are wrought by the immigrants themselves who are brought to cities to rebuild and transform them. The Italians built Toronto, we are told. The landscape changes back in Italy as well. First there are the abandoned villages and farms in rural areas and then the sprawl of cities and super highways. Where is the immigrant's place in this moving landscape?

I am the only man missing  
from the landscape  
of a ready-made history. (41)

When reading these opening lines what "ready-made history" comes to mind? We may think that it is the majority history of North America, a narrative dominated by the English and the French with a few token indigenous chiefs and Spanish generals. The Italian immigrant is certainly absent from this official history. But the "ready-made history" is also that of Italy, a history of great artists and heroes: a master narrative that has not included the millions of departing emigrants. By definition they "subtract everything/ nothing must be left over." The emigrant is missing from the Italian landscape and is only evident if you look for his absence.

"Moving Landscape" is Verdicchio's major poem, illustrating as it does his main literary preoccupations: the rejection of nostalgia as well as the questioning of a national history that excludes a major part of the population and its exodus. We also note the absence of any personal references or any suggestion of a confessional mode. There is a feeling of alienation in these verses which is reflected in this suppression of the personal. Is this alienation also mirrored in the fragmented language utilized in parts of the poem?



The chapbook that follows *Moving Landscape* is titled appropriately *Ipsissima Verba*, (1986) and begins with images of the moving landscape, fragments of memory and lost voices. In the different poems Verdicchio examines the problems of language, and of home. In the poem "This House, That House" he examines the different types of home: the home of distance, the home of division, the home away from home, and the home constructed. Is the perpetual wanderer, the immigrant, dreaming of home? Verdicchio's next book, *Nomadic Trajectory* (1990), continues the pattern of moving across landscapes and across borders forever. In another chapbook, *A Critical Geography* (1989), Verdicchio develops similar travels in space and time. Some Italian locations are suggested with references to fig tree, Ionian sea, olive tree, rosary and saints. The Italian-Canadian poet continues this exploration of displacement with later collections of poems such as *This Nothing's Place* (2008).

Another rebellious voice against nostalgia is that of Rina Del Nin Cralli who writes in the Friulan language about the immigrant experience in Canada. She has many poems which seem, at first, to deal with nostalgia in sentimental ways but which often end with an ironic twist. One example is "Nostalgie e Tulipans," which has the speaker lament about her homesickness for Friuli but ends with the resolve, "e in Canada'o soi restade." (20) This ironic pattern is repeated in several poems: "Riflessions," "Il Distac," "Une Vore di Strade," and "Ricuars." (38) In other poems Cralli is critical of Friuli and the Friulan people who are abandoning the language in favour of Italian. In "La Nestre Lenghe" (46) she complains that in her visits to her home town in Friuli few people speak the Friulan language and that in order to speak it she returns to Canada where it is common at the Friuli Centre in Toronto. She complains about this loss of language in the poem "Ce Razze di Timp (Duc' la molin par talian)" (126). Cralli has many positive images of Canada in her poems such as "Canada' Pais Benedet dal Signor." (114) Thus, the sentiments of nostalgia so common in her Friulan language are subverted by Cralli's irony and adopted Canadian perspectives.

Frank Paci has written a number of novels that focus on Italian immigrants trying to adjust to Canada. The one that deals most closely with the problem of nostalgia is his second novel, *Black Madonna* (1982), in which the mother, Assunta, is left a widow and as a result begins to talk about returning to Italy. She is estranged from her daughter Marie who rebels against her Italian culture, language and food. In the middle of this conflict the mother dies unexpectedly in an accident by the railway tracks. Marie is shocked and when she dresses in black for the funeral she realizes how much she looks like her mother. She becomes the new Black Madonna and makes the return trip to Italy, a wish her mother was never able to fulfill. Again we encounter nostalgia and death as we often do in these old Italian songs of immigrant longing: "Mamma," "Terra Straniera," and "Morire di nostalgia."

In her collection of short stories, *Almond Wine and Fertility*, Licia Canton questions the sentiments of nostalgia in stories that deal with return trips to Italy. In the first story, "The Vespa Ride," a widow recalls

her early brief courtship with her dead husband; however, the emotion is undercut by the reality that he married her because she became pregnant during a casual encounter. Two of her stories about return trips to Italy recall rather negative experiences. In "Coincidence," an Italian-Canadian academic meets a former lover in Rome only to discover that he still longs for her, even though he has been married twice since their separation twenty years earlier. In fact, he still seems to want to control her life. In "Twenty-Four Hour Conversation" an Italian-Canadian writer visits an old friend by chance during a conference in Italy. She becomes overwhelmed by his stereotypical and old-fashioned ideas about women, Italian men, relationships and marriage. Such encounters remind us of how confining the position of women can be in Italy. Would an Italian-Canadian woman want to move back to Italy? The title story, "Almond Wine and Fertility," seems to be the only happy story in the collection. An Italian-Canadian couple visiting Sicily finds itself in a strange bar in Castelmola, near Taormina. The decor in the bar is a celebration of the male organ by means of erotic statues. The couple are served "vino alla mandorla," the elixir of love and fertility (26). These Canadian-raised young people are sceptical of this magic potion. They have two children whom they left back in Montreal in the care of the grandparents. They briefly discuss having a third child, but dismiss the idea. Two years later a third child is born to the happy welcome of everyone in the family. In contrast to the many stories and poems that associate the return journey to Italy with death, Canton's story leads to new life.

I will conclude with an historic example of death in Italy. Mary di Michele's novel, *Tenor of Love* (2004), deals with the life story of Enrico Caruso, the Italian opera singer who became the first international superstar and the first wealthy recording star. Caruso made over 290 recordings with RCA Victor, recordings which quickly became popular all over the world. Many are still available today in CDs, so you can listen to Caruso's voice as if he were still alive. For many years Caruso sang at the Metropolitan Opera in New York during the fall and winter season and then would return to Italy for the summer. With the money from his many international engagements Caruso purchased a palace near Florence, la Villa Bellosguardo, in 1904. It became his retreat away from the demands on his time. In December 1920, while singing in New York, the tenor became ill. There were different diagnoses and he underwent a series of treatments and operations. In 1921 he returned to Naples, Italy, to recover from the operations, but his condition worsened. He died in Naples in August of 1921 at the age of only 48. He died of a peritonitis infection. Caruso died not in his palatial villa near Florence, but in a hotel in Naples. To me this is a true example of an immigrant returning to Italy to die. For Mary di Michele, Caruso is our spiritual godfather, a creative man who epitomizes the immigrant obsession with Italy. Caruso lived and worked in North America where he made all his money, but he wanted to also live in Italy and so he repeatedly returned there during his short twenty-five-year career.

Indeed, an immigrant of many returns. In Mary di Michele's novel, *Tenor of Love*, the chapter in which Caruso dies is entitled "Come Back to Sorrento" (295-310).

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