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Article abstract

The article addresses the theme of nostos by referring to the journeys of three authors of Italian heritage: Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Mary di Michele, and Gianna Patriarca. Their poetry allows the possibility to revisit their journeys and to consider migration as a source of knowledge, and positive change, despite the many challenges involved in the mutation process, and the difficult hermeneutic of losses, necessary to reach awareness and a new sense of belonging.

Italian Heritage and the Experience of Migration and *Nostos* in Canadian Poetry

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Abstract: The article addresses the theme of *nostos* by referring to the journeys of three authors of Italian heritage: Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Mary di Michele, and Gianna Patriarca. Their poetry allows the possibility to revisit their journeys and to consider migration as a source of knowledge, and positive change, despite the many challenges involved in the mutation process, and the difficult hermeneutic of losses, necessary to reach awareness and a new sense of belonging.

Keywords: *nostos*, journeys, migration, poetry, translation, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Mary di Michele, Gianna Patriarca, multiculturalism, Italo-Canadian poets, post-racial society

As teachers and scholars, our work on poetry and translation is a very important cultural heritage and patrimony to protect within the field of the Humanities. Canadian cultural landscapes are particularly rich, despite the fact that Italian Canadian writers had to face the specificity of Canadian multiculturalism within North American English-language societal hegemony. In his preface to *Roman Candles*, the first Anthology of Italo-Canadian poets published in 1978, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco recalled:

In searching for contributors, I found isolated gestures by isolated poets, isolated mainly by the condition of nationalism prevalent in Canada in the last ten years. However pluralistic the landscape seemed to be to sociologists, the sheer force of Canadianism had been enough to intimidate all but the older "unofficial language" writers. (*Roman Candles*, 9)

Ten years later in his *Italian-Canadian Writers. A Preliminary Survey*, commissioned by the Multicultural Sector of the Department of the Secretary of State, Joseph Pivato specified that in Canada "Italian is a minority language with only a limited readership" (13). It is a fact that Italian language and its ethnic literature were still inhibited in 1988, as Pivato lamented, specifically referring to translation:

It is a pity, therefore, that so many writers seem unable to find either the funds to have their work translated or publishers to publish such translations. This may be the result in part of the absence of a tradition of literary translation in Canada, a factor that has tended to inhibit the development of ethnic literatures that depend on translation in order

to reach the majority audience. Also, the study of literature in North America is dominated by English departments which have staff who are not favourably disposed towards translations. It is only in recent years that academic prejudice against the use of literary translations has begun to abate. (13)

Decades went by since these important texts were published, and yet these testimonies are still relevant and indicative today, in the XXI Century. In a 2013 interview, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco recalled his *Roman Candles* anthology, and how that project had motivated a generation of Canadian poets and intellectuals, who all had in common Italian heritage, and migration:

Credo che Joe sarebbe d'accordo con me — ho letteralmente dato vita al fenomeno etnico italo-canadese in poesia. Intendo dire che non c'era niente, non succedeva niente e non si parlava di niente in proposito. Usai la mia notorietà, semplicemente nell'ambito della poesia canadese, come un mezzo per disseminare interesse nella metafisica dell'etnico-italo-canadese. E non mi sono nemmeno spacciato per un poeta italo-canadese. I miei compagni canadesi mi vedevano come un poeta canadese di estrazione italiana, o forse come un italo-americano. (Cadel e Giovannone, 20)

Hyphenated or not, I would like to begin this brief journey / *nostos* with a question: is this “metaphysic of ethno Italian-Canadian”, as Di Cicco called it with great affection,¹ still the same today? Has not the complex global village where we function as immaterial workers—teachers and scholars producing immaterial labor—reduced Italy itself to the tiny province of a wider empire? Is the existential experience of Italian Canadian migrants, intellectuals, and poets not emblematic of a wider metaphysic we could finally read with a different lens? Or maybe is this simply the journey and condition of humanity since biblical times and before? “You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the native born among you; for you too were once aliens in this land” (*Leviticus*, 19:34). Immigration is still a very important issue, yet we might agree that the children of Italian Canadian immigrants (Pasolini would call them “figli dei figli”) are now mostly wealthy and educated. As proved most recently in Abruzzo, the Italian region hit by earthquake in 2016. In 2017, Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, visited Amatrice, announcing that the Canadian government would

¹ The interview with Pier Giorgio Di Cicco was conducted via email, in English, and published in Italian (*my translation*). This is its original wording: “I think Joe [Pivato] would agree I initiated the ethno Italian-Canadian phenomenon where poetry was concerned. I mean there was nothing happening or even talked about in the area; my notoriety in simply Canadian poetry I used as a handle for disseminating interest in the metaphysic of ethno Italian-Canadian. Nor did I advertise myself as an Italian-Canadian poet. My Canadian peers saw me as a Canadian poet of Italian extraction, or maybe Italo-American.”

match up to \$2 million in donations to the Italy Earthquake Relief Fund, thanks to the Italian Canadian community. Today, many among this vast and diversified community represent new role models. For instance, the businessman Joey Saputo and his American colleague Joe Tacopina succeeded in bringing Bologna, a much beloved Italian soccer team, back to a high degree of dignity in the Italian soccer league (Serie A). Many children of former immigrants are reinvesting their Canadian dollars in Italy (and elsewhere), helping a situation “back home” that became, and remains, difficult.

Leaving geopolitics aside, I would like to go back to poetry, and consider the way things might have changed. I believe it would greatly help us to see the entire world as a network of sprawling relationships between different countries—without resentment, nor fear. Belonging is not necessarily a condition referring to one place only, suggests Peter Carravetta, addressing migration and identity in a challenging new way—a way that implies a fascinating hypothesis and its radical consequences:

If globalization and post-Modern capitalism are dismantling the certitudes and guarantees of the democratic Welfare State, which includes stability of domicile and labor and equal representation before the law, then we ought to look at how people managed before the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, on the one hand, and at the lives of all these different transnational travelers, on the other, in order to grasp what it means to negotiate reality, to *survive* first and then manage to live with constantly shifting sets of social, linguistic, and economic forces. In a way, *we should attempt to think as if we all were migrants*, even when we reside stable for several years at the same domicile. (*After Identity*, 26; italics mine)

“Mediterranea”, a poem Di Cicco published in 2013 in *clanDestino* (see Cadel e Giovannone), is a poetic text where I find expressed the possibility of an after identity that could inspire all peoples, by indicating a reinforcing *nostos*, one open to the real, as “intelligible”, in an interesting negotiation with reality. I would like to quote some stanzas:

you come from mediterranea,
and it is not a place, but a way of
feeling

you come from a place where earth meets sky, through
the maritime pines, and lands gently,
like words from a gentle mother.
[...]

the journey is back to mediterranea.
italy is the “intelligible”, for
the peoples lost in time, in a metaphysic more ancient than greece,
than rome, who were the gods of poetry
before the schema of thought.

the mythic, who lust in you,
like the awful will to make things whole.

these are the gods who despised
the brokenness of the apparent world
(*clanDestino*, cit. in Cadel e Giovannone, 26-28)

This journey of awareness—this return back to the “intelligible”—invites us all to consider a post-racial society, or at least a society where time and space can reach their destinations through the flows of all peoples and languages, marching towards a liberated sense of the self, of memory and identity, going beyond the “brokenness of the apparent world”:

ethnos is dead, shall we say it?
goodbye to the memorabilia, the
old postcards and even father’s tapes
and the uffizi and ponte vecchio.

Instead, the verrazzano and bits of stone on
mulberry st; steel mills, the new desert
lacquered with California—

these, like morning,
like trees with no names
on them, and the lights of

cities
and the gesture of passion. [...]

and i too am a terra nuova.
what arrives in me
is transmuted.
i am the america,
and my rivers are blood, and my mouth,
the new language, [...]

for what speaks to me
is what i speak (*clanDestino*, cit. in Cadel e Giovannone, 32)

As Herman Melville would put it in his masterpiece, *The Chapel* (Chapter VII):

In what census of living creatures, the dead of mankind are included; why it is that a universal proverb says of them, that they tell no tales, though containing more secrets than the Goodwin Sands; how it is that to his name who yesterday departed for the other world, we prefix so significant and infidel a word, and yet do not thus entitle him, if he but embarks for the remotest Indies of this living earth; why the Life Insurance Companies pay death-forfeitures upon immortals; in what eternal, unstimulating paralysis, and deadly, hopeless trance, yet lies antique Adam who died sixty round centuries ago; how it is that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss; why all the living so strive to hush all

the dead; wherefore but the rumour of a knocking in a tomb will terrify a whole city. All these things are not without their meanings. (53-54).

As in the wonderful pages of *Moby Dick*, and as Di Cicco expressed in a recent text, "There were Americans," published in his 2016 book *My Life Without Me*, the "seedy and marvelous anonymity of Americas" is key to many legacies, since it is inclusive, it came from us, and will survive us:

I yearn for standing under the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge. Not that I ever have, but it's as close to the seedy and marvelous anonymity of Americas I care to think about today [...]. This is the legacy of a Baltimore boyhood [...]. It gave me a taste for the indiscriminate and dejected. (*There were Americans*, 39)

I will briefly refer now to a book I am interested in, thanks both to my own Friulian roots and field of studies: *The Flower of Youth*. Pier Paolo Pasolini Poems, published in 2011 by Mary di Michele, a poet Di Cicco had included in *Roman Candles*. Di Michele fascinates me with her perspectives on space and time, navigating the entire world as a global village, as in her poem "Across the Atlantic": "All the world is a village lost/in time, suspended/in space, / even a continent's/so much jet-sam." (*Roman Candles*, 60)

Her book is a travelogue that interestingly enough is built on a representation of Pasolini's poetic self and authorship, for which I have ambivalent critical reactions. If on one hand I find this choice rather invasive, and somehow manipulative of Pasolini's own intellectual rights, on the other, hers is a brilliant poetic narrative; a novel in verse. This literary choice allows di Michele to express her own personal *nostos* with great freedom, by including the possibility to "perhaps" identify with Pasolini's friend, Pina Kalc, whom I had the honor to meet in person:

My poems, this book, form a kind of novel in verse based on the experiences, feelings, Pasolini describes in the memoir [*Atti impuri*, first published in 1982] [...]. When I first approached this material, I imagined writing the story perhaps from the point of view of his female friend at the time, Pina. (*Flower of Youth*, 84)

I will consider the extraordinary first text of this travelogue as one of the best examples of *nostos* I could possibly think of, since it includes the relationship with language. di Michele's brilliant representation of the shift between space and time, in any self, is comprehensive of the different idioms and languages implied in such a shift, beyond the limits and boundaries of origin and/or belonging. In order to contextualize the possibilities enabled by this shift, I will briefly refer to my own personal connection to Friuli, the Friulian language, and a joyful coincidence: the 2020 75th anniversary of the *Academiuta di lenga Furlana*, founded on February 18, 1945, by Pier Paolo Pasolini. I have been invited to commemorate Pina Kalc, in Pasolini's maternal home in Casarsa, and other members of the *Academiuta*, among them Nico Naldini,

Pasolini's cousin, who will be in attendance. What is an anniversary? Where do space and time meet? Di Michele's use of toponyms helps us to visualize the uncanny dislocation she is representing, not intended as alienation, but rather as a bi-logic visual journey and itinerary,² like in a dream, instances suggested by the sophisticated use of chronotopes in her poetic narrative. The idea of writing this book had begun with a dream, as di Michele recalls in her *Prologue*:

When, in the spring of 2004, I visited Pasolini's grave in Casarsa, he whispered a few lines of verse to me. Although I poorly transcribed them as I cannot write in Italian and my ear filtered the words through the *abruzzese* dialect, my first language, I have corrected the errors in spelling and grammar [...] clearly what I heard was totally imagined, but imagined through poetry [...]. Home again in Canada I woke up one morning dreaming of the pink house. The pink house was his mother's ancestral home [...]. (83)

Technology and modernity open di Michele's book, with a specific soundscape: it is the spring of 2004, and yet the meaning of her forbidden journey could only be revealed back home, in Canada, once she reconnected with the unfolding of all her memory gaps, *significant lapsus linguae* (*Salice* instead of *Sacile*), Freudian slips and oblivions:

Vietato (A Town Called Forbidden)

After the hum of the transatlantic jet
 the earthbound jerk and rattle of a train
 pulling in and out of small town stations
 en route Venezia—Udine—
 there's the heat of the sun high
 in a May sky, there's the haze
 of humidity or my sleepless eyes
 see now as if submerged
 underwater, I understand
 nothing, not the time of day,
 not the names of towns:
 Salice, Pordenone, Vietato—
Vietato, not the name of a town at all,
 but a warning sign, Forbidden—
 as if this flat and sun-lit terrain could take me
 back to the prairie, to Saskatchewan,
 where a town called Forbidden
 might join one called Forget. (11)

I would like to conclude my brief contribution to the theme of *nostos* with a poet to whom I am grateful for addressing with great clarity, and

² I use the term *bi-logic* with reference to Ignacio Matte Blanco's work on dreams and their bi-univocal correspondences. See Ignacio Matte Blanco (1975).

a graceful irony, unpleasant truths many have faced in our journeys, especially women: Gianna Patriarca. I find her representations of the cultural clashes connected with migration quite illuminating, or at least they helped me to better understand Canadian society. Her first book, *Italian Women and Other Tragedies*, needs to be read with an understanding of the comedic use of her poetic narrative, beginning with the book's title, which I find hilarious and liberating. Besides the trauma of displacement, Italian women are connected by Patriarca to many other tragedies, and represented with a very symbolic use of words and adjectives, often alluding to the conditioning bias of religious assumptions and beliefs, internal and external to the social groups represented. As in a movie, a good comedy, Patriarca's poems are an invitation to smile. There is a text in this book, entitled "Returning", also connected to dreams, but in a rather different way from di Michele's use of oneiric references: "we don't discuss the distance anymore/returning is now/the other dream/not American at all/not Canadian or Italian/it has lost its nationality" (21). Patriarca's *nostos* is "Dolce-Amaro" indeed (72-73), like the title of a poem, where she provides a limpid acknowledgement of class struggle and hegemonies within the new Canadian environment: "there was no insurance then/and little interest/for the benefits of the immigrant man" (73). The harsh mnemonic details of her first journey to Canada are diluted by the powerfully gliding image of her arrival as a child to "the shores of Halifax/there, where the arms and legs/of my doll fell apart into the sea/finding their way back over the waves" (21). Patriarca's losses are represented by the image of her doll, a sad icon, and yet how truthful and inclusive Patriarca's words are. Even Toronto, the city itself, is included in a wonderfully humbling and wider perspective, as in "College Street, Toronto": "How strange this city/sometimes/it seems so much smaller/than all those towns/we came from" (31). Patriarca's domestic image of a huge metropolis like Toronto becoming smaller than any other Italian town or village is so cute to me: it represents a positive negotiation with reality, an intimate, childlike appropriation of space and time where *nostos*, and all possible returns, seem to have found a welcoming destination.

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