

THE INVENTION OF ITALY AS AN
IMAGINARY HOMELAND ON THE CANADIAN
SOIL: STORYTELLING, LANGUAGE, MEDIA

edited by Oriana Palusci and Maria Cristina Seccia

Collana Dialogues

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THE INVENTION OF ITALY AS AN
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Introduction: The Many Italias of Italian-Canadian Writers

Oriana Palusci and Maria Cristina Seccia

The study in Italy tends to be focused on US writers of Italian origin, ignoring, with a few exceptions, the existence of a flourishing literature of Italian migrant writers to Canada or born in Canada with an Italian family background. As Canada is officially a bilingual country, the authors write principally in English or in French, and only rarely in Italian. Thus, the texts analyzed in this volume are in one of the above languages, even though Italian, or one of its dialects, characterizes and enriches them through an articulated dissemination of terms or expressions, names and toponyms connected to a real or an imagined Italy. Culture-bound words in Italian – *espresso*, *gnocchi*, *ricotta* – often function as objects of desire, opening a window or closing the door leading to the homeland. They semantically load the novels, plays, poems, films with cultural references for a multicultural Canadian reading audience, but also for those Canadians with an Italian origin, who are still vibrant and alive.

One first element to bear in mind consists in the labels to indicate the authors of Italian origin living and working in Canada: Italian writers in exile / Italian-Canadian writers / Canadian of Italian origin / ethnic writers / diasporic writers, which reflect the different phases of criticism in the last fifty-sixty years. For instance, are Italian-Canadian (italo-canadesi) writers, artists, directors hyphenated people, underlining their double identity? Or does the “Canadian” indicate where they live and work and “Italian” partially modifies the noun, emphasizing the hybridity of these persons who live in-between languages and cultures? What does it imply on the level of artistic creation or of identity, or of perspective and point of view? What about the French labels: des écrivain(e)s italo-canadien(ne)s or les Italo-Canadiens sont des citoyens du *Canada* d’origine *italienne*, or italo-quebe-

cois ? The question is: are they first and foremost Canadian, and what function does the modifier have? Does 'Italian-Canadian' assert that the writer is a migrant and that the theme migration is pivotal, and does the writer shed this label when they make a transition to other themes? Or is 'Italian-Canadian' a sensibility, a distinctive cultural point of view, that is retained through the transition?

Due to massive waves of migrations in different phases from Italy during the twentieth century, with an increase especially after World War Two, the first and second generation of writers born in Italy, are followed by those born in Canada, who have attended school there. The works investigated in this volume from a critical point of view, or from a creative one, have Italian names and surnames (women writers generally keep their fathers' surnames), which makes them less 'alien' when they are in Italy. For instance, if in Canada Nino Ricci is a difficult name to pronounce, in Italy it becomes quite familiar. The papers deal with Gianna Patriarca, Mary Melfi, Mary Di Michele, Marco Micone, Fulvio Caccia, Filippo Salvatore, Pasquale Verdicchio, and, of course, Nino Ricci. Yet, it is not a volume about Italian literature. It is instead a book on how the Italian languages and cultures seep into the English or French texts, making them feel foreign, estranged, translated, while at the same time enriching the Canadian literary landscape. Contemporary critical approaches consider these writers within Diaspora Studies, which focus on, among its structuring discourses, the concept of 'homeland'. In our case, Italy for many writers represents the homeland of birth or of the family roots, that is the ancestral homeland, which is often depicted as an imaginary homeland. We are referring to the concept developed by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson argues that the nation is not something incontrovertibly given for granted. It is rather «an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.» The concept is later taken up and expanded by Salman Rushdie in the essay "Imaginary Homelands":

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures, at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be,

it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective, may provide us with such angles (1991: 15).

The imaginary Italy imagined by Canadian writers of Italian origin is not easy to sum up because «each writer deploys a specific kit of techniques difficult to place in one homogenous frame» (Palusci 2013: 22).

Taking Salman Rushdie's notion of «imaginary homeland» as a starting point, this volume, which is divided into three parts, brings together critical essays and creative texts shedding light on how Italy is constructed as an 'imaginary homeland' in Italian-Canadian literature and media. The critical essays included in Part I highlight how memory, (anti)nostalgia and (non) belonging are at the core of the representation of Italy in anglophone and francophone literary texts and TV programmes by Canadian artists with Italian origins. Some of these essays focus on how the transnational nature of these products is reflected at a linguistic level and how this is re-constructed through the translation into Italian. Part II focuses on Nino Ricci's trilogy from a linguistic, media and translation perspective.

Finally, Part III brings together different forms of creative writing by anglophone and italoophone writers of novels, poems, plays, most of whom migrated from a number of areas of Italy to different parts of Canada. The starting idea of this volume goes back to a Conference on the same topic held at the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' in October 2018. As Nino Ricci was present at the Conference, we have begun the creative writing section with him. The following pieces are arranged according to the date of the contributing authors, with the place of birth and date of migration to Canada listed at the beginning of each brief bio-sketch. In order to add a further point of view on the question, we have concluded the volume with a Coda by Martin Stiglio, one of the Directors of the "Istituti Italiani di Cultura" in Toronto and in Montreal, who has shared his experience with the Italian-Canadian communities.

Each Italian-Canadian author has shared what Italy means to them in a different way: through personal essays, scattered reflections, short stories or poems. The fragmentary and hybrid na-

ture of some of these pieces reflects the discontinuity between the authors' – or their parents' – past in Italy, and their present in Canada, their being elsewhere, wherever they are. It is precisely this sense of in-betweenness that stands out as the *leitmotif* of these pieces of writing. Interestingly, their narrators and characters often perceive this in a negative way, as if they were «fall [ing] between two stools» rather than «straddling two cultures», to put it in Rushdie's words again (1991: 15).

This is what contributes to their conflicting relationship with Italy – one more recurring theme shared by these texts. In fact, as different as their migrant or diasporic experiences might be, on the one hand most of the narrators and characters seem to associate Italy with the past, and, as a result, with loss, which causes a sense of void. On the other hand, they feel the need to fill this void with memories, to look back to the past, to reclaim their lost homeland. As their narratives reveal, they do so by returning to Italy, establishing connections with the Italian-Canadian diasporic community, studying the Italian language and culture. Most significantly, they reclaim their 'lost homeland' precisely through their own writing, and often through translation, thanks to which their works 'travel back' to Italy. However, as Rushdie warns us, the cultural displacement experienced by migrant authors prevents them from «reclaiming precisely that thing that was lost» (1991: 10).

The matter is further complicated in the case of those authors with Italian origins who were born in Canada and had long experienced Italy only through their parents' memories. In both cases, the Italy represented by Italian-Canadian authors is their 'imaginary' Italy, the fictitious place associated with roots but also with uprooting, their own version filtered through their parents' memories and inhabiting their own memories of joy and sadness, the 'invisible' villages, towns and cities experienced on a holiday or on longer stays. As Rushdie reminds us, being in-between does not mean having simply a «partial» but also a «plural» identity (1991: 15), and this is reflected in the external perspective from which our authors look at Italy by stressing the interconnections between the emigration of the twentieth-century and contemporary immigration, pointing out the transnational nature of Italian culture in Canada and debunking cultural and gender stereotypes.

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Part I
RETHINKING THE
ITALIAN-CANADIAN HERITAGE

Pasquale Verdicchio and the Poets of Anti-Nostalgia

Joseph Pivato

1. *What is Nostalgia?*

In my many years spent pursuing the works of ethnic minority authors, I have often come across the notion of nostalgia or *la nostalgia* or in French *la nostalgie*. How do we translate these words? Each word has a similar spelling so there is apparently little need for translation. But do the three words each capture the same idea? Superficially they all mean nostalgia, homesickness for another time or place. But on closer examination we are soon made aware that the Italian term *la nostalgia* carries many complex levels of meanings: spiritual, familial, cultural, historical, artistic, musical, etc. which can never be captured by the English word, nostalgia with its single level of meaning. The French, *la nostalgie*, also has a different cultural context which includes French nationalism, French culture, French language, French food, and other levels of meaning. Seen with the eyes of nostalgia, what kind of imaginary or real homeland do Italian-Canadian authors create for themselves outside of Italy?

Italian nostalgia is a dominant theme in popular Italian music, *musica leggera*. The signature song of Andrea Bocelli “Con te partirò” (1996) reminds us that Italian immigration of the post-war period inspired, and was inspired by, a number of songs of nostalgia: “Vola colomba” (1952), “Terra straniera” (1953), “Arrivederci Roma” (1955), “Nel blu, dipinto di blu” (1958) and “Al di là” (1961). Even old songs such as “Mamma” (1940) and “Non ti scordar di me” (1935) were give new readings as immigrant songs.

In his early poetry Pier Giorgio Di Cicco has many references, Italian phrases and titles demonstrating the influence of Italian *musica leggera*: *donna italiana*, *ricordo*, *momento d'Italia*, and *primavera*. In a poem entitled “Immigrant Music” Di Cicco writes:

I play the tunes my father used to know, my father used to
sing in the attic of his loneliest thought,
thinking up a street in Italy, or carry a daughter
into an autumn park, you know these songs over and over
the songs of sun (1978b: 26).

While he was paying tribute to the sacrifices of his immigrant parents, Di Cicco was also questioning the immigrant condition of lost identity. In the “Preface” to *Roman Candles* he begins with this lament:

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 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 (1978a: 9).

In Maria Ardizzi’s first Italian novel, *Made in Italy*, Nora’s husband, Vanni, returns to Italy to show off his wealth to the people in his hometown 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 must return to Italy to make the funeral arrangements. 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... e appartengo a tutti i luoghi... (1982: 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 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-Canadian women.

In a similar vein, Mary Di Michele's collection of narrative poems *Mimosa and Other Poems* has a cinematic scene in which the immigrant father, Vito, listens to Italian music:

Sentimental music is being sucked up
from the stereo system in the basement
like a sweet gaseous pop
through a straw.
He listens to an Italian tenor sing Mimosa
and savours his banishment
with ginger nostalgia (1981:1).

The critical eye and ear of the Canadian-educated daughter makes this scene capture the lazy sentimentality of this music of nostalgia and exile. Di Michele returned to this musical question once more in her novel *Tenor of Love*, which deals with the famous tenor Enrico Caruso and his trips back and forth between Italy and New York. This work was inspired by Lucio Dalla's popular song "Caruso" (1986), which has the singer slowly dying in Italy with the lines «Vide le luci in mezzo al mare, pensò alle notti là in America.»

In a narrative poem entitled "How to Kill Your Father", 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 (1980: 35-36).

The narrator in this poem is trying to assert her individuality, to separate herself from her parents and their life choices. Traveling 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. In her poetry collection *Bicycle Thieves*, Mary Di Michele returns to the deprivation of post-war Italy as captured in Vittorio De Sica's 1948 film alluded to in her title: «[She] can no longer get past that scene...» (2018: 65) because it reminds her of her family's poverty. For many of the authors I refer to in this essay, these early experiences colour their view of Italy forever. In this collection, Di Michele has this striking image:

Mi manca l'Italia

but when you return it's as if you'd never been
born in that country (2018: 47).

We can look at other Italian-Canadian authors who return again and again to the questions of dual identity, languages and their relationships with Italy. These topics have been explored in many publications through the works of Antonio D'Alfonso, Alexandre Amprimoz, Gianna Patriarca, Romano Perticarini, Rina Cralli and Filippo Salvatore among others.

A striking collection of Italian poems was sent to me anonymously in 1988. Entitled *Tristezza* and written by Baldassare Savona, it includes poems about nature, spirituality, and immigration in Canada. In the middle of this collection of sixty poems we find this lament:

Furon Quattro anni,
quattr'anni di gran pene
quattr'anni lunghi penosi e tormentosi,
in questo selvo Canada e la gente,
s'ignorante, incolta e materiale,
pesava sempre più su le mie spalle;
con quello loro fare sì barbarico,
e con l'ipocrisia loro maestro (1961: 39).

Savona published this collection of poems in Toronto in 1961 and shortly thereafter returned to Italy for good. The poem deals with

a Toronto of the 1950s in which new immigrants normally did manual labour. Just one decade after the devastation of WWII Savona seems to have an idealized view of life back in Italy.

At the conference of Italian-Canadian writers in Vancouver in 1986 Pasquale Verdicchio presented a paper which outlined his poetic style as distinct from that of most other Italian-Canadian poets. In "The Failure of Memory in the Language Re-Membering of Italian-Canadian Poets" (1990c), Verdicchio discusses the problems of languages, of choosing to work in one of Canada's official languages while the Italian language acts as interference with the memories of Italian culture. He points to the use of Italian words and phrases within poems written in English or French as a way of reclaiming a language and a culture that have become distant. This is a common stylistic practice among many Italian-Canadian writers, but one which Verdicchio rejects as "contradictory and self-defeating" (1990c: 118). He explains that this style underscores cultural and social alienation since the Italian words are isolated among English or French words. To Verdicchio the process of remembering, of piecing together the fragments of a culture, is undermined since it expresses difference within itself. He sees the mere act of trying to possess Italian at a distance as self-deceptive:

When the instinctual search takes place in the language of poetry it turns away from English or French to find emptiness. And though the mother-language makes itself felt, it is distant, out of reach. The need for its expression manifests itself through an act of will, the voluntary, though irrational, use of one Italian word or another (1990c: 119).

In rejecting this model of language retrieval through poetry, Verdicchio set himself apart from many of his Italian-Canadian contemporaries. To some, his poetry seems less Italian since it uses only English diction and, often an abstract English. The irony of this position is that Verdicchio in his profession teaches Italian at the university level. Did he feel less distant from the mother language than his contemporaries who had to work completely in English and may have felt a greater loss of their original language? In his comments on their style he repeatedly points out that they are trying to consciously recover the lost culture through the re-acquisition of the half-forgotten language.

In his diction Verdicchio does not include any Italian words, phrases or even names. Only in the odd title like “Pasqua” (1985) is there any hint of an Italian reference. While we often get the personal point of view of the narrator, there are no personal references from the poet himself. There are no references to family members or family events in Canada or in Italy. There are no grandparents. While there are powerful images and striking metaphors, there is no emotional language in this verse: no *mamma*, romantic lover, children, religion or anger. Much ethnic minority writing has the autobiographical story just beneath the surface of the poem or narrative. For Verdicchio any biographical element has been submerged. It is as if he did not trust the language of personal emotion. And maybe this reflects his experience of dislocation and of having to acquire a strange language which does not have an emotional register for the newcomer. Where are the Italian aspects of Verdicchio’s poetry?

2. *The Poet of Anti-Nostalgia*

Early in his literary career Pasquale Verdicchio began questioning the assumptions behind the immigrant narrative, rejecting 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. Therefore his construction of the Italian homeland is often a negative one. In many poems Verdicchio questions the role of memory and the meaning of language. In these early poems Verdicchio intentionally chose a style that sets him apart from other Italian-Canadian poets.

The title of his first collection of poems, *Moving Landscape* (1985), is 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 (1985: 41).

When reading these opening lines of the homonymous poem "Moving Landscape", 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 which has not included the millions of departing emigrants. By definition they «subtract everything. Nothing must be left over» (1985: 37). The emigrant is missing from the Italian landscape and is only evident if you look for his absence. In this conception of the imaginative homeland the culture of the immigrant is that of absences. The immigrants «function as an absence» (1985: 41) in both the home landscape and the new one. The second stanza begins with the image of a «city built of many departures» (1985: 41). This city could be any city like Naples or Palermo or it could be Italy itself. The immigrants who left contributed to the future possibilities of Italy as much as those who remained behind. There is an old Italian saying which is the reverse of this idea: "Parte anche chi rimane". It literally means that those who remain also leave, and refers to the lasting effects of family break-up, the loss of a father, a son or a brother (Pitto 1988). The rapid departure of hundreds of thousands of emigrants in the decades after WWII changed the face of Italy and the dynamics in rural farms, villages and city businesses. The immediate benefits were fewer demands on the limited social resources and on the impoverished economy. This contributed directly to Italy's economy recovery in the 1960s and 1970s. In the third stanza there is the metamorphosis enacted on the immigrant body by others. Displacement results in physical change, but it also causes a change in identity over which the immigrant has no control. He finds himself separated from the past with words.

The words are English and do put distance between the narrator and his Italian origins. The transformation is enacted from the outside and makes him a different person. Is this new language a mask you wear? The deeper reality, the Italian one, is now hiding:

There is no language without deceit.
A Grammar of bodies and images
grown out of false form (1985: 42).

As long as the narrator uses words, he must continue to pretend, to accept the transformation. The only escape possible is through silence. Years pass and only at night, in the black on black, can the narrator begin to recover lost memories of this past.

He asks if there is anything that remains of him in the old land, a lost sound perhaps. He can only imagine a return to the old shore. Is it an illusion, or only a dream? The poem continues with images of his dying mother and lost memory. It is a very slow and painful death as we try to recover memory and construct poems. Besides the dead mother there is the dead language and dead words. The black of burning pages turning to night to produce more poems to welcome death. Does writing poetry keep death at bay? The immigrant sees destiny in following the horizon, travelling under different skies. He asks questions about destiny, «caught between ambiguity of surfaces» (1985: 45). We are caught for a short time, our lives, between two identities and two languages. The memories of stone and fire end with the striking image of «tongue-tied ruins» (1985: 46). “Moving Landscape” is Verdicchio’s major poem of this period and illustrates his main literary preoccupations: the rejection of nostalgia, the questioning of a national history which 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 reflected in the suppression of the personal. Is this alienation also mirrored in the use of the fragmented language in parts of the poems?

The first poem in Verdicchio’s poem collection is “Red-Winged Blackbird” and in it he questions the very meaning of sounds and words: What do we hear, what do we understand and what do we misunderstand? What meaning do we bring to the sound and to

Notes on Contributors

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