

# Problems for the Italian–Canadian Writer and Critic: A Discussion in Three Parts

by Joseph J. Pivato

## Part One: The State of the Art



Multiculturalism is an invention of the 1970s. When I was growing up in Toronto in the 1950s and 1960s there was actually strong pressure to assimilate. For example the nuns in school translated all Italian first names into English names. Giuseppe became Joseph, Mario became Mike and Maria became Mary. Students were discouraged from speaking their heritage languages on school property. Even after Multiculturalism became official government policy there was still pressure on newcomers to blend in with the majority culture. Those of us who attended colleges or universities in the 1960s and 1970s assimilated into the majority culture even more rapidly than the rest of our communities. As a result we perhaps lost touch with our past more readily than some of our peers.

In 1970 I left my family and Italian community in Toronto and moved to Edmonton, to do graduate work at the University of Alberta. Was this a search for new horizons or an escape from my immigrant roots? Or was I just going west to search for myself like so many other young men before me?

In 1976 Pier Giorgio Di Cicco wrote to me in Edmonton about his anthology of Italian-Canadian poems, *Roman Candles*. I was drawn back into the new culture of Italian-Canadians who were searching for a voice and a space in the literary landscape not just of Canada but of North America. I began to write about these writers. I presented the first conference paper on these writers in May, 1981 at a major conference on Canadian Literature in Halifax. It was well received, I thought. But maybe it was just the novelty of the idea: Italian-Canadian writers. When

I submitted this paper for publication, nobody wanted to publish it. One editor said it was 'too exotic' for their Canadian literature journal. In the end I published this first paper not in a literary journal, but in a social science journal, *Canadian Ethnic Studies* in a 1982 issue.

In the 1980's I had little credibility as a literary critic of Italian-Canadian writing. Why? Was it because I was from at a small university in Alberta? Athabasca University was formally incorporated into the universities act in 1978. Would I have had more success if I had been at a large university in Toronto or Montreal? No, other Italian-Canadian writers were finding the same resistance.

What were the real reasons for dismissing this new writing by young authors whose names ended with long vowels? Was it because this new Italian-Canadian writing was indeed too exotic? It existed in three languages: English, French and Italian. And who were these new writers any way whose parents could not even read English or French? What could they possibly have to say to the rest of Canada?

This repeated rejection from the Canadian literary establishment made us realize that we had to do our own book reviews and book promotions if we ever hoped to have a voice within the larger Canada. Antonio D'Afonso called for us "to criticize ourselves." *In The Other Shore* he wrote,

Criticize yourself because others cannot, will not. They too need to be criticized. How to accept that which we do not know? A word of faith? Those who are not frightened to criticize themselves know their way to freedom. Have they come from the shadows? (124)

The results of this was the 1984 collection of literary essays, *ontrasts*. It had 10 different contributors from across Canada. We now see this first collection as an important breakthrough, but at the time it was not seen that way. We all still had doubts about our future directions.

When the first Italian-Canadian writers conference was organized in Vancouver in 1986 Dino Minni identified the theme as, "Writers in Transition." Transition is a euphemism for assimilation. So it was very ironic that we founded the AICW at that meeting full of self doubts and insecurities. I have already written about the ironic founding in our collection, *Strange Peregrinations* in 2007.

In the 1980s some books by Italian-Canadian authors began to get reviews in major newspapers and were nominated for literary prizes. One of the first prizes went to Mary di Michele's *Mimosa and Other Poems* which won the du Maurier Award for Poetry in 1982. Slowly a few books by these minority writers began to be used in literature courses in colleges and universities. Back in 1988-89 I used Paci's *Black Madonna*, and Dino Minni's *Ricordi* anthology. Later I used books by Caterina Edwards, Marco Micone, Mary di Michele, Antonio D'Alfonso, Gianna Patriarca, Peter Oliva, and Paul Tana. In recent years I use *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*. At the University of Waterloo Vera Golini used a number of books by Italian-Canadian authors in her courses. At York University Jana Vizmuller-Zocco also used some of these titles in her courses. In my experience, nevertheless, the 1980s was still a difficult time for the promotion of Italian-Canadian writing, despite the growing number of titles published.

The cultural and academic situation began to change in the 1990s. With the arrival and acceptance of post-colonial theory in North America there was a greater openness to the work of ethnic minority writers, including Italian-Canadian writers. Post-colonial writing is produced by the minority groups which have been dominated by the great colonial or military powers. These are the “others” who are now writing back to the centres of power. Italians of the modern era, and Italians of the diaspora scattered all over the world have been catalogued into this post-colonial context because they are also seen as the “others” even though they do not share a history of colonization as such. In his essay “A Primer of African-Canadian Literature,” George Elliott Clarke cites Italian-Canadian writers as “a useful model for scholars of other minority or ethnic Canadian communities who seek to affirm and reconceptualize these literatures.” (325)

One result of the changes in theories in academic circles was the recognition of minority authors through the awarding of major literary prizes. In 1991 Nino Ricci won the Governor General's Award for *Lives of the Saints*. In 1994 Fulvio Caccia won the GG for French poetry with *Agnos*. In 1995 M.G. Vassanji won the Giller Prize for his novel, *The Book of Secrets*. And in 1997 Rohinton Mistry won the Giller Prize for his novel, *A Fine Balance*. While the success of Nino Ricci did raise the profile of Italian-Canadian writers it did not increase the sale of books in noticeable ways.

What can we do to promote Italian-Canadian writing ? This is a question that has been asked at every meeting of the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers since its founding meeting in 1986. There are no quick or easy answers. My answer is for us to keep on writing and publishing. Let us focus on producing works of literary quality. Achieving the status of bestseller is a great but fleeting moment. We must focus on the long term viability of Italian-Canadian writing. If we produce works of quality people will be reading them one hundred years from now. An example of this is Delia De Santis' collection of stories *Fast Forward and Other Stories* which can be read over and over again.

As we are all aware some Italian-American writers chose the cheap way to sell books: they wrote about Italians in organized crime. Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* became a commercial success and a series of films. David Chase's *The Sopranos* followed this model of exploiting violence and betraying the immigrant community. I have always been proud of the fact that Italian-Canadian writers have rejected this way of depicting the Italian communities in Canada. They have chosen to represent all the complexities and struggles of our parents and families. And as a result they are producing a more complex, subtle and interesting literature than those who opt for action, suspense and the titillation of the libido over solid character development and the exploration of real life issues. People will be able to enjoy and identify with this kind of literature for years. Those are the reactions of my university students to this writing.

## **Part Two: Younger Writers**

When I saw the online ads promoting Desi Di Nardo's new book of poems, *The Plural of Some Things*, I was made to realize that there is a younger generation of Canadian writers of Italian background. These writers may be removed from the harsh experiences of immigration, but not from the difficulties of finding a space in the literary landscape. Desi Di Nardo might be using

the internet, but she is also promoting her work in creative ways to possible readers by personally meeting them at book readings and writing workshops.

One of these young writers, Licia Canton also wears many hats: she has written academic essays on Canadian literature, has edited anthologies and a cultural magazine, has organized writers conferences and has now turned to her own creative writing. Her book, *Almond Wine and Fertility* is a collection of poignant short stories on the domestic relationships of people with immigrant backgrounds. The expectations of the Italian family on the young couple, but more often on the young women, can be destructive. Two stories deal with women breaking off their engagement; two with husbands divorcing their Italian wives; and one with a Canadian woman escaping an abusive relationship in Italy. Some women seem trapped in bad relationships and we get the feeling of claustrophobia. Some trips to Italy, or trying to live in Italy, often reveal the burden of Italian culture and history as a restricting factor. Are there particular problems in Italian marriages and the raising of Italian-Canadian children? Many women must choose between children and a career since they cannot do both, despite the popular images of feminist liberation. In these stories by Licia Canton the autobiographical allusion seems to be just below the surface of the fictional narrative.

With all her editorial work and conference organization Licia Canton is not following the advice of Frank Paci about focusing on the creative writing and avoiding activities of book promotion. I make this observation as a cautionary note.

Today publishers expect writers to help sell their books. They will send authors on book promotion tours to cities across Canada. If you enjoy this kind of travel and public performance activities the experience can be an ego boost. But there is the other model for young writers to consider. Frank Paci abandoned self-promotion early in his career. He saw it as distracting from the creative process itself. For him the focus of the writer should be on the act of writing, on producing quality work. This is a humbling experience which leaves little room for ego.

For Paci the book promotion is the task of the marketing department of the publisher and the booksellers. In practice he avoids literary readings, conferences, and book launchings. The result of this reserved approach is that Paci, after publishing more than 12 novels, is almost completely unknown in Toronto, the city where he has lived for over 30 years.

In a 2003 book of essays on Paci I entitled my introductory essay, "Invisible Novelist," in recognition of his self-isolating approach to writing. Should young writers consider this model? In this age of instant celebrity and unbridled self promotion it is often wise to consider some balance. I always recall the advice an old professor gave me when I was just beginning my university courses. She advised, "Keep the proper humility before the subject." Writing takes time, even with all the speed and technological wizardry of computers. And creative writing also takes humility.

## **Part Three: The Burdens of History for the Italian**

In Expo 1967 the huge French pavilion was the biggest on the island on Montreal. It was literally filled with books and original manuscripts by French writers, works by French artists and music

by French composers and performers. It was literally overwhelming with the massive amount of artistic and historical exhibits. The French were trying to make an impression in North America and they succeeded. It is easy to be, or to become, Eurocentric once you immerse yourself in the cultures of that continent.

Why the great longing to return to Italy? In her book, *Tenor of Love*, Mary di Michele has Caruso struggle with the attractions of the old world and the new. Caruso travels every year back to Italy after the end of the opera season at the Metropolitan in New York until he suddenly dies in Italy. Di Michele sees Caruso as a kind of spiritual godfather for Italian artists in North America. The choices that we make determine our fate and that of our families. Is Italy not more often a weight on our shoulders than a wonder for our spirit?

European writers sometimes declare that there is nothing left to write about, that there is nothing new under the sun. The implication here is that anything worth writing was already written about by European authors. Between ancient and modern Europe all the important plots and characters have been explored. The Eurocentric arrogance of such pronouncements is astounding to people from other parts of the world.

This idea of Europe as the centre of all culture is extended to the visual arts as well. All contemporary art is an imitation, an echo, an adaptation, a reaction to, or a rebellion against European art. In effect there can be nothing new beyond European art, and all the more so nothing new beyond Italian art. This was brought home to me recently as my family attended our daughter's graduation with an MFA degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. During the convocation SAIC bestowed an honorary doctorate on Renzo Piano, a well-known Italian architect who has designed major buildings all over the world with about 14 in larger American cities. His works include the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the opera house in Athens, structures in Australia and London, and the new Kansai airport in Osaka, Japan. I found out later that this famous Italian architect, who maintains an office in Genova, has designed only one major building in Italy. It seems that Piano cannot compete with the historical buildings of Italy's past. It is as if there is nothing new to design in Italy.

This cultural burden of Italy is one that Italian-Canadian writers must deal with in their own work. This is all the more troubling since in a sense we (or our parents) are the population Italy rejected. Italy lost the war and then it lost millions of its people. Yes we decided to leave, but we were left little choice. In the years that followed Italy changed with progress and dysfunctional politics. It has become another world. What could we possibly have to say now to our Italian cousins? Our audiences of readers are in North America rather than in Europe.

There is another burden of history, a much darker one than that of cultural arrogance. Caterina Edwards' book, *Finding Rosa* deals with many things: a difficult mother-daughter relationship, memory and the loss of memory and identity through Alzheimer's disease, war and the lost history of Istria. To me it brought home two family events.

I am going to briefly talk about these two experiences in my own family which may reflect on the complex and very troubled history of this lost part of Italy. The two large cities on the peninsula of Istria are Trieste in the northwest, and Fiume in the south. Both are port cities on the

Adriatic Sea. My mother's family comes from Friuli, the region just north-west of Istria. Many people from Friuli went to Istria to live and work. My uncle, Janni Sabucco was one of these people. He was in the city of Fiume, before, during and after the WWII. At the end of the war Italy lost Istria which became part of Yugoslavia and is now part of Croatia.

My uncle kept a journal of what he saw during these years of trouble. The majority of the population in Fiume were Italian and they were forced to leave, through intimidation, violence, and the destruction of property. People were made to disappear. Hundreds of years of Italian history in the city were destroyed to deliberately erase any evidence of their existence. Even the name, Fiume was change to Rijeka. This is the lost history which Caterina tries to reconstruct in *Finding Rosa*, finding Istria. We later saw this kind of ethnic cleansing in the Yugoslavia civil war of the 1990s. This erasure of history is so effective that if you look up Rijeka in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* you will read about how it was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, etc. but there will be no mention of its Italian history, the Venetian Republic and WWI.

As Caterina clearly tells us in her book, these exiled Istriani were not accepted in Italy as Italians. They became people without a country and were dispersed to places all over the world: Canada, the USA, Australia, Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere.

In 1953 my uncle published parts of his Istria journal to try to record this history which was quickly being forgotten even by Italians. He called this little book, *Si chiamava Fiume*, which means 'it was once called Fiume.'

While reading Caterina's book *Finding Rosa* I found it echoed many of the experiences in my own family, and the families of other Italian immigrants who lived through the terrors of the WWII.

My second experience took place in the other major city of Istria, the beautiful port city of Trieste. This is a city of high culture with an opera house, theatres, museums, Baroque churches, art galleries, a university, yacht clubs, and sidewalk cafes. It is a city of famous writers: Rilke and his *Duino Elegies*, James Joyce, Italo Svevo, and Gabrielle D'Annunzio.

During a visit to my cousins in Friuli one of them took me to see one of the unique sites of Trieste, Risieria di San Saba, an old rice mill on the edge of the city. After the fall of the Italian Facist regime in Rome the Nazi's occupied Italy. In 1943 the Nazi's turned this old rice mill into a death camp, including the building of an oven to incinerate the bodies.

This camp is not as large as the concentration camps in Poland and Germany, but it is a death camp. It is estimated that about 2000 people were killed there. Thousands of other were transported north to the larger camps. At the railway station in the near-by city of Gorizia, now on the border between Friuli and Slovenia, there is a memorial to the thousands of people who were collected there and transported north to the death camps.

The Risiera di San Saba is now a memorial to, and museum of the horrors of the WWII. School children from many parts of Italy are brought there for history lessons. Trieste is now part of Italy and Fiume is lost forever. This is the Istria where the Rosa Pagan of Caterina's book lived

and tried to survive. It had a very troubled history. It is a history many Italians deny, or want to forget. Caterina Edwards has tried to reconstruct this lost history in her book on memory and the loss of memory.

Italian-Canadians have to live with the burdens of Italian history and culture. In a sense we are all products of the Second World War and it is always the subtext to much of our writing. Is this writing an attempt to come to terms with this dark history, or a way of escaping it, or a way of being swallowed up by it? Who are the winners and who the losers?

I have written that “Italy is a nice place to visit but...” Italy is a dysfunctional country with widespread corruption on many levels: the government, the universities and the church. This problem is so widespread that it makes anyone living there complicit in the system. Italians have become complacent with this condition. And maybe this is why they keep re-electing a white collar criminal like Silvio Berlusconi as prime minister. Reading Roberto Saviano's exposé book *Gomorrah* is both revealing and disheartening.

My grandfather left Italy and came to Canada in 1904. He returned to Italy to fight in the First World War and later remained there. We came to Canada in 1952 and left the peculiar Italian social and political systems behind forever.

I will end with an anecdote that captures some of my arguments in an image. One Italian composer and music professor, Giorgio Magnanensi, escaped from Italy to the Pacific coast of B.C. When his relatives and friends back in Italy heard that there were bears in the rural area he lived in they expressed grave concern for his safety and that of his family. His short pointed response to them was, “Better the bears than Berlusconi.”

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