

## Nostalgia Versus the Love-Hate Relationship with Italy: Italian-Canadian Writers

JOSEPH PIVATO  
*Athabasca University*

People in the United States and Canada who have Italian immigrant roots love to take trips to Italy. Despite the pull of a powerful nostalgia for Italy many would never want to live there. Because of my work as a writer and critic I have particularly noticed this among Italian-Canadian authors who demonstrate a love-hate relationship with Italy and with its popular culture. One reason for this is the experience and legacy of World War II and its long shadow into the 1990s. The context for this discussion is post-colonial theory: the analysis of the subaltern position of immigrants of the first and the second generation in the new country, experienced as temporary and in contrast to the powerless condition in the old country.

In this essay I will explore the work of Italian-Canadian authors and their relationship with Italian *musica leggera* and Italian films. Many of these writers were either born in Italy and emigrated to Canada in the 1950s and 1960s with their parents, or were born in Canada from recent immigrant parents. All grew up in households speaking Italian or an Italian dialect for the first ten years of their lives, with the gradual adoption of English at home during junior high school. This is when they are obliged to learn to write in English. Those living in Quebec often adopted French. They grew up knowing that their parents had to leave Italy after the devastation and deprivation of WWII. Some of their fathers fought for Italy in the war, and some were taken prisoners by the Allies or the Germans. Their entire families suffered under the Italian Fascists, the German occupation, the Allied bombings, and the deaths of family members. Every town or village has one or more war memorials to remind us of the First and the Second World Wars. Some Italian-Canadian recall grandfathers who fought in the First World War. In his poem "Elegia dell' Ontario" Janni Sabucco recalls his father who returned from Canada to Italy to fight in WWI. In her poem, "A Streetcar called Nostalgia," Mary di Michele deals with her grandfather's similar return trip to Italy from Canada.

These Italian-Canadian writers are close to the first generation of immigrants who hold the living memory of these experiences. In contrast to this most Italian-American writers are one or two generations removed from their immigrant grandparents. They grew up with parents who wanted to assimilate into American society as quickly as possible in order to be successful. They lost their Italian language and dialects quickly. I realize that I am simplifying the contrasts between Italian-Americans and Italian-Canadians, but this is merely to establish the overall context for my exploration of how, generally speaking, Italian-Canadian authors use Italian popular culture in more critical ways than their American cousins. An example of this is how many Italian-Canadian responded to films such as *La strada* (1954) by Fellini and *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) by Vittorio di Sica as if they were documentaries, since they experiences similar situations in Italy. The stark black and white landscape in *La strada* is not the work of special effects but a graphic record of how the post-war world looked in many parts of rural Italy.

This harsh reality remembered and sometimes forgotten is an ironic contrast to the popular music. When Andrea Bocelli sings one of his signature songs, *Con Te Partirò*, we are

often reminded that there is a tradition of Italian songs of departure which can be called immigrant songs. These songs of departure, nostalgia, longing and return dominated the imagination of Italian music and films in the 1950s. Examples are *Terra Straniera* (1953), by Luciano Tajoli, *Vola Colomba Bianca Vola* (1952), by Nilla Pizzi, and *Binario* (1951), by Claudio Villa.

These songs also influenced the work of Italian-Canadian writers who began to publish in the 1970s and 1980s since they heard these songs at home on recordings and on Italian radio. I will briefly look at the work of writers; Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, Mary di Michele, Caterina Edwards, Nino Ricci, Licia Canton and Pasquale Verdicchio. There are over one hundred active Italian-Canadian authors who publish in English, French or Italian. I have selected only a few here to support my arguments. I have listed a number of other titles at the end of this essay. There are now about one thousand titles by these authors.

Let me use my personal experience to explain some of the concepts expressed so far. My family emigrated to Canada in 1952. When we got off the ship in Halifax harbour that July we still had Italian music ringing in our ears. Our ship the *Conte Biancamano* was an Italian ocean liner and they played Italian music on board. Nilla Pizzi, the queen of Italian *musica leggera*, brought out the very popular song, *Vola Colomba Bianca Vola* which won the San Remo prize for number one song that year. The singer addressed this love song to a distant lover and asks the white dove to fly to her. Many of the men departing from Italy and leaving their wives or girlfriends behind could identify with the lyrics of this song. Another song of this period was *Binario* sung by Claudio Villa. The singer laments the departure of his lover who is leaving by train. These trains often took people to ports where the transatlantic ocean liners docked.

To give us an idea of the number of people who left Italy we have the evidence of ships manifests of the Italian ocean liners of the 1950s such as *MS Vulcania*, the *MS Saturnia*, the *SS Conte Grande*, the *MS Giulio Cesare*, and the *MS Augustus*. Some of these ships made as many as seven ocean crossings a year carrying over 1,600 passengers on each voyage.

In 1952 the film, *Terra Straniera* was released which tells the story of immigrants working in a mine. In 1953 Luciano Tajoli was singing the sad song, *Terra Straniera quanta malinconia*, to capture the nostalgia of Italians abroad. Also in 1953 Nilla Pizzi sang the new song, *Campanaro* at the San Remo music festival. In the song the old church bells ring out for the departure of the immigrants. In the lyrics the singer names many specific villages and towns. There are many other songs which make references to the *emigrante* and the desire to return home such as *Porta un Bacione a Firenze* first sung by Narcisio Parigi in 1957. The Italian singer Claudio Villa sang these songs with an operatic drama and long notes in the finale.

These songs reflected the social reality that was taking place across Italy with the departure of thousands of people from both north and south. It was the first great “fuga dei cervelli” an exodus that was having a profound effect on Italian society. It was a great loss of talent from Italy that would benefit other countries. We have the Italian expression: “Parte anche chi rimane.” which means even those who remain in Italy experience a departure. The immigrant sentiments of reluctant embarkation, regret, nostalgia, longing to return, became so dominant that it influenced the interpretation of songs that were not about immigration at all. An example is how the 1935 song, *Non ti scordar di me* by Carlo Buti about a lover wishing to be remembered, was turned into a immigrant song about a lover who is departing abroad. Another was the very famous 1940 song, *Mamma* sung by Ferruccio Tagliavinni and later Claudio Villa. It becomes an

immigrant song about a son who longs to return home to his old mother, “Mamma, son tanto felice perche ritorno da te.” This song to mamma was re-interpreted by many young men and women who were leaving their mothers behind in Italy. These personal re-interpretations were reinforced by the general experience of the immigrant community.

A strange example of this re-reading of a song is *Arrivederci Roma*. It first appeared in the 1955 film by that name and was sung by Mario Lanza. The song is about tourists to Rome who throw coins into the Trevi Fountain and make a wish to return to Rome. Because of the strong nostalgia in the lyrics it became almost an anthem for Italian immigrants and travellers longing to return to Italy; in the song Rome symbolized Italy.

Another song that was given an immigrant re-reading was *Al di là*, Luciano Tajoli’s most famous song from 1961. It is a love song to a woman, who may be far away, and is full of superlatives about the lover’s devotion, but these lines about the ocean give it that immigrant aura:

Al di là del mare più profondo, ci sei tu.  
Al di là dei limiti del mondo, ci sei tu.

Immigration was given a positive treatment in the 1957 song, *Casetta in Canada* first sung by Carla Boni. Here the returning Italian immigrant is admired by Italian girls because he has a “casetta piccolina in Canada.” He has achieved success and has come back, perhaps to find a wife and return to Canada. In 1956 the film, *Canto dell emigrante* was released in which Luciano Tajoli sings the very sentimental title song.

In 1958 Domenico Modugno wrote and sang his most famous song, *Nel blu dipinto di blu* which is better known in North America as *Volare*. It begins:

Penso che un sogno così non ritorni mai più  
Mi dipingo le mani e la faccia di blu  
Poi d'improvviso venivo dal vento rapito  
E incominciavo a volare nel cielo infinito...

It is a love ballad in which the singer compares his feelings for his lover to the sensation of flying, *volare*. This too became, in part, an immigrant song, because it marks the beginning of air travel for Italian immigrants. The first passenger planes had piston engines and had to stop to refuel in London and Newfoundland. In August 1959 non-stop flight began between London and New York with Boeing 707 jets. By 1960 Alitalia airline began jet flight in Europe and later international flights. It might have cost more to fly but many immigrants made this choice because it was faster and more convenient. In his poem “Giovanni Caboto” Filippo Salvatore contrasts the comfort of his DC 8 Alitalia flight to Canada with Caboto’s perilous ocean voyage.

*Volare*, the song became very popular in the 1960s, as more and more people were flying between Europe and North America. The beginning of air travel marked the end of ocean liners. My ship the *Conte Biancamano* was decommissioned in 1961, the *Vulcania* was sold in 1965, the *Saturnia* was scrapped in 1965, the *Conte Grande* was scrapped in 1961, and the *Giulio Cesare* was scrapped in 1973.

In one short decade we moved from train and ship travel with *Binario* in 1951 to *Volare* in 1958 and the beginning of mass air travel. Air travel also marked the end of sea terminals like Pier 21 in Halifax which ceased operation in 1971. Some of New York’s ports of entry were also decommissioned in the 1960s.

This popular music from the 1950s and 1960s had a profound influence on Italian-Canadian writers; both positive and negative. First, we must note that it is the music of the immigrant parents. So it was sometimes heard at home on records, Italian radio, as well as the odd Italian film and TV program. Claudio Villa sang on the Perry Como Show in the 1950s, and other Italian singers appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show. Some popular Italian singers like Luciano Tajoli came to Canada and United States on singing tours. Tajoli made about 10 trips to North America in those two decades and often brought over other Italian singers. And we must remember that many Italian restaurants played this Italian *musica leggera* as they now like to play Andrea Bocelli. The 1950s and 1960s was a post-war, cold-war period and this *musica leggera*, as its definition implies, was a form of escape.

Second, there is a disconnect between the nostalgia of Italian immigrant parents for Italy and their Canadian-educated children who know little about the *paesi* of their parents and do not share the sentimentality. We must remember that many Italian immigrants of the 1950s came to North America with the intention of returning home in 8, 10 or 12 years. A few did return. The vast majority stayed so that with time this nostalgia became a sentimental fiction in a song, and no longer a real longing that parents deeply felt. One of the reasons that many families stayed in Canada was that the women often refused to return to the old country. These mothers saw better opportunities in Canada for their sons, and most of all, for their daughters. In the late 1960s and the 1970s many families made return trips to Italy to visit relatives and so they critically judged the many changes that had taken place both in towns and in the country. It was the time of the economic miracle of the new European Economic Community. This financial progress tempted some to return permanently, but only later, once there was no turning back did they fully realize what they had lost, what they had left behind in Canada including the Canadian birth-rights of their Canadian-born children, making this return culturally and legally problematic.

Growing up in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s as students who later became writers we often heard this music and the sentimental lyrics of nostalgia for Italy. What follows is a selection of examples from Italian-Canadian literature that demonstrate the influence of this music.

Works referencing this nostalgia for Italy, whether real or only symbolic, were in sharp contrast to the new Canadian Literature by mainstream writers and their preoccupation with national themes and Canadian landscapes such as Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* (1971). Canadian novelist, Rudy Wiebe, speaking to Caterina Edwards, dismissed Italian-Canadian writing as "Whoring after palm trees!" I have also noted that Italian Studies programs in Canadian universities have given no support to Italian-Canadian writers. (Pivato 1996) Despite these negative biases, Italian-Canadian authors persisted in exploring their experiences in numerous publications in three languages: English, French and Italian. These authors see themselves as speaking for their communities and to their communities, more so than teachers in Italian Studies who are still preoccupied with Dante and the Italian Renaissance.

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's early poetry has many references, Italian phrases and titles which demonstrate the influence of Italian popular music. In one poem which he calls, "Immigrant Music," he 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 carrying a daughter  
into an autumn park; you know these songs over and over

the songs of sun...  
(*Burning* 26)

In another poem he used the phrase, “Italia bella, I return to you,” which echoes the many immigrant songs of nostalgia. His use of many Italian titles recall this tradition of sentimental music: “Donna Italiana,” “Ricordo,” “Primavera,” “Ritratto,” “Peccato,” “Memento d'Italia,” “Pietà,” and “Maledetto” (*Tough Romance*).

Caterina Edwards' first novel, *The Lion's Mouth* (1982), deals with immigrant nostalgia for Italy and has the main character, Bianca, return there several times. She eventually begins to realize that these sentiments of longing for Italy and Venice may be clouding her judgments about her life choices. So the novel ends with a realistic critique of this sentimental tradition of music. The last chapter includes verses from “O partigiano, portami via.” Then Bianca writes to her lover, “You are a Venetian. How can you not feel the exhaustion, the decay of the world?” (179) The child grows up and separates herself from the emotional ideas of her mother and Italian social values. In her immigrant play, Caterina Edwards used the title, *Terra Straniera* (1986), which is a reference to the song from 1953. But when the play was published in 1990 she changed the title to *Homeground*. In the play some of the characters sing lines from the immigrant songs that I have mentioned above. But the lyrics are given an ironic twist since the family returns to Italy only to find themselves out of place and then come back to Canada. A book that is even more critical of Italy is Edwards' *Finding Rosa: A Mother with Alzheimer's, a Daughter in Search of the Past* (2008), a powerful work which deserves more detailed attention than I can give it here.

In an early collection of poems, Mary di Michele used the title, *Bread and Chocolate* (1980), which is the title from an Italian film about immigrants working in Switzerland, *Pane e Cioccolata* (1974), by director Franco Brusati. Like the film di Michele's poems confront Italian sentimentality with the reality of poverty. In her collection of narrative poems, *Mimosa and Other Poems*, Mary di Michele has a 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 a ginger nostalgia  
ginger ale fizzing in a glass by his side.  
(1)

With the critical eye of the Canadian-educated daughter this scene captures the indolence provoked by the emotions of this music of nostalgia. In the poem, “How to Kill Your Father,” about a return trip to Italy during which the daughter has a big argument with the father, di Michele rejects the patriarchal values that control women in the family which she sees represented by the tradition of nostalgia:

You are alone on the highway to the sun  
Your North American education  
has taught you how to kill your 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.

(36)

Mary di Michele returns to Italian music in her novel, *Tenor of Love* (2005), about the famous tenor Enrico Caruso who sang for many years at the MET in New York and became the first recording superstar and millionaire. Caruso spent each summer in his huge villa near Florence, Italy until he became ill and died unexpectedly in 1921 at age 48. In his 25 year career he made 290 commercial recordings many of which are still available today. With the easy access to his many records he was a popular singer who was listened to by many lonely Italian immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s. Because of his annual voyages back and forth between Italy and North America Mary di Michele describes Caruso as the spiritual grandfather of Italian-Canadian writers and artists.

Mary di Michele tells us that one of the inspirations for her novel, *Tenor of Love* was the popular 1986 song, *Caruso* by Lucio Dalla which has the familiar refrain:

Te voglio bene assai, ma tanto, tanto bene sai.

Dalla's song of travel has become an immigrant song to listeners in Canada because of the image of Enrico Caruso dying back in Italy and the sad lines:

Vide le luci in mezzo al mare  
penso alle notti là in America.

The other Italian figure from popular culture that inspired di Michele is Pier Paolo Pasolini. In her poem collection, *The Flower of Youth: Pier Paolo Pasolini Poems* (2011) she explores his early life in Casarsa where he began to write poems for *La meglio gioventù* (1954). He witnessed the aerial bombings of WWII, the destruction of their house, censorship of the Italian Fascists, and his father's arrest. His younger brother Guido, a partisan, was killed in 1945 by other partisans in the mountains of Friuli. In several poems she alludes to Pasolini's films such as *Accattone* (1961) based on his novel *Una vita violenta* (1959). In a series of poems she begins to see his world with the perspective of scenes in one of his films. She ends her verse collection with three poems in which Pasolini visualizes his own death. Each is in a different year, a different season and a different city. They read as if they are film scripts for different scenes. For di Michele Pasolini is an iconic figure from Italian culture, but also a real person who is seeking to speak for himself and for those who have no voice. Pasolini's work speaks to di Michele because members of her family lived through similar experiences. Her parents even moved back to Italy for some years, only to return to Canada. The fact that Pasolini was brutally murdered near Rome gives us pause about all that nostalgia for Italy.

We return once more to the post war period with di Michele's *Bicycle Thieves* (2017), a collection of poems that is inspired by Vittorio De Sica's film *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) recollecting events from her early life in Italy and later life in Montreal. In the poem, "The Bicycle Thief" di Michele recalls a story from her father:

and so I have seen my father before  
the World War, seen the boy my father was

before his father betrayed  
a barefoot son  
and sold his bicycle.  
(7)

In a later poem, “Di Sica’s *Ladri di biciclette*,” di Michele gives us her emotional reaction to an image in the film:

I can no longer get past the scene  
where Maria pawns her matrimonial linen,  
a poor woman’s dowry...  
Antonio needs a bicycle to get a job  
putting up posters around the city.  
It pays good money every week, they can  
even buy an egg for their first-born  
daughter—no, that’s not in the movie,  
that was my family in postwar Italy. I remember  
(65)

The film by Di Sica and work by other contemporary Italian artists and writers help di Michele return to periods in her life that she has forgotten. She also articulates the love-hate relationship that a whole generation of Italian-Canadian writers have with Italy:

Mi manca l’Italia  
but when you return it’s as if you’d never been  
born in that country.  
(47)

Italia is a life time away and an ocean away. One of the most significant novel about an ocean crossing is Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints* (1990) in which a woman, Cristina, mother of the protagonist, Vincenzo, dies onboard ship while giving birth to his sister. Vincenzo and his mother, Cristina, sail on the *Saturnia* from Naples in 1958. They make friends onboard. They are invited one evening to dinner with the ship’s captain, a dinner which is ended by a dramatic storm at sea. The captain receives a message from another Italian ship, the *Vulcania*, alerting him about the coming storm. During the storm Cristina gives birth to her baby daughter, but the mother later dies in her sleep.

These dramatic scenes of a violent storm at sea, seasickness, giving birth in a storm and finally death at sea form the climax of this novel. The images of death of an immigrant at sea are in contrast to the expectation of a new life in the new country. In another sense the sea crossing is the death of the old life and the beginning of a new life, but this time only for Vincenzo and his baby sister. Nino Ricci is questioning these immigrant ideals.

There is one sad scene in the book at the harbour of Halifax. Vincenzo later recalls that his father came to get him at the port, and they all left together:

...we rode together in a coal-dust-filled train, my father holding the baby in his  
awkward arms while we rolled across a desolate landscape...  
(234)

The coal-dust filled trains is exactly what met the immigrant families at Pier 21 in Halifax. This rather unwelcoming introduction to the Canada of the 1950s was a harbinger of that rather sterile cultural post-war, cold-war period and decades of hard work for newcomers. It

is little wonder that these songs of nostalgia that I have talked about were so popular, briefly taking our immigrant parents back to Italy and to their *paesi*, but it was an idealized Italy. In her collection of short stories, *Almond Wine and Fertility* (2008), Licia Canton has several stories that deal with women who return to Italy for a business trip or to visit relatives and are repeatedly affronted by incidents that attack their self-worth. With stories such as “Coincidence,” and “Twenty-Four Hour Conversation,” we cannot help but believe that these upsetting narratives have their roots in Canton’s many trips to Italy. She is constantly questioning our ideas about present-day Italy.

We will conclude our exploration of the love-hate relationship with Italy with Pasquale Verdicchio who originally comes from Naples, the Italian capital of sentimental and nostalgic music. In his early poetry Verdicchio reacts in a negative way to this tradition of sentimentality. For Verdicchio it is not just youthful rebellion but is a conscious move away from cloudy emotion in search of a clearer vision of the reality for Italian immigrants in North America. Verdicchio rejects the themes “rooted in a misguided nostalgia.” (1998) In his 1985 poem collection, *Moving Landscape*, he deals with the hardships of immigrants. In the poem “Letter” we have the image of far-away immigrants writing back to Italy to tell their stories, their lost history. In the poem, “Ancestors” the poet explores this lost history of the exiled and forgotten immigrant:

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

In the title poem, “Moving Landscape” the poet gives us the image of the immigrant excluded from history both in Italy and in North America:

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

There are many other examples in Verdicchio's poems and essays in which he rejects the sentimentality and nostalgia of immigrant culture and music. We can see that this immigrant music is still having an effect on him. But Verdicchio is writing against this tradition which he sees as stereotyping the immigrant in North America. See his book of essays, *Devils in Paradise: Writings on Post-Emigrant Cultures* (1997).

Like Mary di Michele, Verdicchio is also inspired by Pasolini and he expressed this in his collection of poems, *The Posthumous Poet: a suite for Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1993). Here we find many critical reactions to life and social values in Italy. Verdicchio expanded his criticism to contemporary Italian cinema in his essay “Revelatory crises of the real: *Before the Revolution* and after *Reality*,” Verdicchio critically analyses social, political and cultural contradictions found in periods of crisis in Italy’s post-war period, the Berlusconi trauma, and economic collapse by reading Bertolucci’s film *Before the Revolution*, Paolo Sorrentino’s *Il Divo*, and Matteo Garrone’s *Reality*.

Verdicchio also participated in the publication *Vice Versa* and so we will end there. Since 1982 the editors of *Vice Versa magazine transcultural*, Fulvio Caccia, Lamberto Tassinari and Giuseppe A. Samona have carried on the critique of Italian culture and politics with interviews of

film-makers like Giuseppe Bertolucci, brother of Bernardo, reviews of Italian young cinema, and books such as Giorgio Bocco, *Noi terroristi* (1985), Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra* (2006) and Michael Day, *Being Berlusconi* (2015). These are all events which have coloured the conflicted relationship of Italian-Canadian writers with Italy, what I call the on-going love-hate relationship.

We will end our exploration of this love-hate with an ironic twist. The powerful image of the blind Andrea Bocelli comes to us as he sings, *Con Te Partirò*, which echoes the voice of the traveller with these lines:

Con te partirò,  
su navi per mari  
che, io lo so,  
no, no non esistono più  
con te io li vivrò.

Bocelli first sang this song in the festival of San Remo in 1995. This song written by Lucio Quarantotto with music by Francesco Sartori is a love song, but we Italians in Canada read it as a song of *viaggio*, if not migration, to new “paesi che non ho mai veduto e vissuto con te.” It is a song that for many Italian-Canadians is an invitation to leave Italy.

To me the influence of these films and music is an indication of the powerful effects of the Second World War, mass immigration and the Cold War on our lives, our culture and our writing even now in the twenty first century (Pivato 2006). Will these historical events continue to impact on our writing in the future? I will end with that question.

## End Note

Here is a list of other Italian-Canadian authors and their books which demonstrate the love-hate relationship with Italy and Italian culture:

Maria Ardizzi, *Il Sapore agro della mia terra* (1984), *Made in Italy* (1982).

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Licia Canton, *The Pink House and Other Stories* (2018).

Cralli, Rina Del Nin. *From Friuli: Poems in Friulan* (2015).

Marisa de Franceschi, *Surface Tension* (1994).

Genni (Donati) Gunn, *Solitaria* (2010).

Darlene Madott, *Mazilli Shoes* (2000).

Mary Melfi, *Italy Revisited: Conversations with My Mother* (2009).

Marco Micone, *Déjà l'aginie* (1988).

Gianna Patriarca, *Italian Women and Other Tragedies* (1994), *Daughters for Sale* (1997).

F.G. Paci, *Italian Shoes* (2002), *Black Madonna* (1982).

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