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The Clash of Languages in the Italian-Canadian Novel
By Licia Canton

In recent years, ethnic minority writing has played a major role in shedding light on the complexity of the Canadian identity. Italian-Canadians figure among the numerous communities active on the Canadian literary scene. In the last decade in particular the Italian-Canadian literary corpus, which traces its development alongside the growing Italian-Canadian community, has seen numerous publications, especially novels.

This paper discusses language, specifically the tension arising from the Italian word invading the Canadian text, as a representation of hyphenated identity in the following Italian-Canadian novels: Frank Paci’s The Italians (1978), Black Madonna (1982) and The Father (1984), Caterina Edwards’ The Lion’s Mouth (1982), Mary Melfi’s Infertility Rites (1991), Nino Ricci’s In a Glass House (1993) and Antonio D’Alfonso’s Fabrizio’s Passion (1995). The novels trace the process towards defining an identity which is torn between two conflicting cultures, the Italian and the Canadian. The analysis of these narratives shows that the tension and the negotiation between the Italian and the Canadian components of the bicultural identity represented at the level of the events narrated are also at work in the texture of the writing. Language causes friction between the two cultures presented in the narratives: the question of identity is played out in the weaving of the words.

In the Italian-Canadian novel, Italian elements are an impediment in the quest towards Canadianness. Although the new generation embraces Canadianness through education, friends and lifestyle, the presence of the old country remains through the influence of parents, customs and language. Othertimes as represented by the old country can never be completely erased even in the second generation. The Italian component, therefore, is something of a weed which keeps resurfacing. The same occurs at the level of the writing. The novels discussed are written in English-Canadian English as opposed to American, British or Australian English—in a Canadian context and for a Canadian audience. The Italian word surfaces now and then thereby breaking the flow of the English-Canadian text. The presence of the heritage language in the English text is what Francesco Loriggio calls “the device of the stone” (39) or, to use Enoch Padolsky’s words, the “linguistic stone” (56). The Italian word within the English text is like a stone or a stumbling block. The presence of the “heritage” language within the “ethnic text” is a device used by the writer to illustrate the tension and negotiation at work in a bicultural identity.

Italian may take up as little space as a word or as much as a sentence, but in each case there is a noticeable effect on the narrative. Italian surfaces in different forms to break the flow of the English text: as a translated or un-translated word; as a literal translation of a phrase or sentence given in English; and as an English sentence having a Latinate structure. There are two major reasons for the Italian word “contaminating” the English text: the first is purely to give the text an Italian flavour—
to mark l’Italianità of the writing; the second, which I focus on in this paper, serves a specific function in illustrating the duality inherent in the Italian-Canadian identity. The Italian word is present when there is no appropriate English equivalent: this points to the difference and, in extreme cases, to the incompatibility between the two cultures expressed within Italian-Canadian
real. And, the Italian presence, either as a word on the page or in the nuances of the sentence structure, points to the fact that within an Italian-Canadian reality there exists a constant process of translation.

The tension existing between elements of the Italian culture and the Canadian society in which the characters must constantly negotiate a space for their identity is especially evident in what I call “the irreplaceable Italian word.” In such instances the English translation would not do justice to the Italian original. Examples include the following discussion of polpi in Frank Paci’s The Father, polenta in Paci’s The Italians, calle and vaporetto in Caterina Edwards’ The Lion’s Mouth, and Ia busta in Antonio D’Alfonso’s Fabrizio’s Passion.

In Paci’s The Father, Oreste Mancuso who represents Italy, wants to instil a strong sense of the Italian heritage in his sons, whereas his wife Maddalena upholds Canadianness or the Canadian way. The tension between these two characters, and therefore between the two cultures, is illustrated in the following passage:

He [Oreste] brought up a bowl of dark grapes and set them on the table beside the polpi, a dish of fish stewed in large quantities of oil and red peppers...The dish was so strong that no-one else in the family could eat it. A fresh loaf from the bakery rested beside his favourite dish. (63-64)

In this passage, the word polpi breaks both the English language and the Canadian culture by highlighting the Italian one. The word polpi refers to Oreste’s favourite dish, something from the old country that he will not give up, like making his own bread and wine. In this scene the bread was made by Oreste in his bakery, and he has just finished making wine. The word polpi also emphasizes the tension between the members of the family: Oreste who represents the ways of the old country, and Maddalena and Stefano who want to become Canadianized. It is significant, then, that no one besides Oreste can eat the polpi because they are too strong, signifying “too old country.” The rejection of the polpi by the rest of the family is symbolically a rejection of Oreste and of the old country.

In The Italians, the narrator (speaking from Alberto’s perspective) comments on Giulia’s tendency to prepare too much food: “To judge from the meal’s size, she still hadn’t got over the years in the old country when they had been forced to eat polenta almost every day. They had scarcely seen meat then...” (74). The word polenta disrupts the English passage in two ways. First, the mere presence of the Italian word causes tension within the first sentence. Second, the word polenta causes a shift in setting, from the overabundant Christmas meal that Giulia had prepared in the present to the poverty experienced in the Italy of the past. The presence of the Italian word results in the juxtaposition of the Italian setting and the Canadian one, thereby pointing to the fact that the Italian past (the poverty which caused a diet of cornmeal and bread) is an undeniable component of Italian-Canadian identity. In other words, the Italian past is responsible for the behaviour of the present, in this case Giulia’s fear of regression.

The inclusion of specific Italian words in Caterina Edwards’ The Lion’s Mouth also takes the reader back to the Italian setting. In the subordinate narrative (Marco’s story), the author uses nouns such as vaporetto and calle that are specific to the Venetian setting:

Seeing the floating station for the vaporetto before him, Marco realized he had been going in the wrong direction...

(21) Stopping at the top of a bridge and gazing down at the twisting calle, he saw the last of the evening crowd...He began running, pushing his way down the calle, then turning off down a narrow, empty fondamento (30). He broke into a slight run. Calle. Bridge. One more—the last narrow street was blocked off. (37)

In this passage the Italian words which describe Marco’s Venice cause the reader to experience the Italian component of the novel. The vaporetto is a common means of transportation in the water city. An English equivalent such as “boat” or “little steamer” could have been included, but no English word could do justice to the image created by the word vaporetto. Similarly, the word calle could be replaced by “narrow street,” as in the last sentence quoted above. The calle, however, is one of Venice’s specific attributes. In fact, The Collins Concise Italian-English Dictionary gives the meaning for calle as “narrow street (in Venice).” The fondamento refers to the platform or quay at the edge of the water—where manmade construction meets one of the natural elements, water. The fondamento represents stability, a product of man’s rationality, whereas water represents nature’s uncontrollability and unpredictability—as in the recurring Venetian floods, one of which is described in Edwards’ novel.

The presence of Italian words in the above passage, as in the novel itself, which are very specific to the city of Venice, creates an image of the setting inhabited by Marco, a setting which is at the root of Bianca’s (the Italian-Canadian protagonist) quest for identity. Venice—the calle, the vaporetto, the water—is an irreplaceable component of Bianca’s identity as well as Marco’s. The passage quoted above reflects Marco’s unstable and precarious situation: his lack of direction, psychological and physical (given that “he had been going in the wrong direction”), and his sense of panic are indications of his impending nervous breakdown. The words italicized in the above passage are simultaneously associated with motion—the constant motion, therefore instability—and the maze which qualifies Marco’s psychological state. The author has chosen these specific Italian words to create a detailed image of the Italian water city and to illustrate the vulnerability of an individual’s identity.

In the last chapter of Fabrizio’s Passion, the narrator takes the time to explain the connotations of the busta (the envelope) which is an integral part of Lucia Notte’s wedding as of many Italian-Canadian weddings:
Peter is tripping over Lucia, their hands encumbered by white envelopes handed to them by the guests after the handshakes. Those famous Italian envelopes...La busta. How to describe this seemingly simple object intrinsically linked to Italian-American weddings? This tiny white envelope seals what consideration or dislike one family holds for another...Each envelope is a potential time bomb. It can celebrate a friendship or insinuate a subtle disenchantment. All confessed, yet nothing ever openly spelled out—one family’s unbreakable loyalty to you as well as another’s hypocrisy. (226-7)

The busta holds nuances and connotations that the “envelope” does not. What the narrator does not spell out is that the busta is the carrier of a monetary amount given to the newlyweds as a gift. It is the specific amount of money contained in the envelope which “can celebrate a friendship or insinuate a subtle disenchantment.” The word busta in the above passage is more than a simple envelope; it is a symbol of the traditional Italian wedding in Canada. It brings together the friends and relatives from the old country in the setting of the new country.

The word paesano, or paesani in the plural, which appears in several instances in the novels has several connotations. In Italian a paesano is a person who is from the same town, or nearby town, in Italy. For instance, in commenting on his first weeks in Mersea the narrator of In a Glass House points to “the strange half-familiar faces of the paesani who came to visit” (3). Here, the word paesani refers to people originally from Valle del Sole, Vittorio’s hometown, or from neighbouring towns. For the Italian living abroad, such as the Italian-Canadian, the word paesano has taken on a broader meaning to refer to Italians of the same region. And, in regions outside of Italy inhabited by few Italians, paesano refers to Italians in general. This meaning of paesano has also been adopted by non-Italians to show kinship or goodwill, be it sincere or not. It is sometimes used to make fun of the Italian as well. Mario Innocente (In a Glass House) comments on the non-Italian’s use of the word paesano in the passage below:

“Mario,” he [the German] said. “Mario, Mario, como stai, paesano?”...
“That was the guy I bought the farm from,” he [Mario] said. “Those Germans —paesano this, paesano that, everyone’s a paesano. But the old bastard just wanted to make sure I don’t forget to pay him.” (31)

The passage shows the Italian’s mistrust of non-Italians who try to ingratiating themselves by relying on the inherent friendship implied in the word paesano. Although Mario Innocente is not fooled by this, his young son Vittorio is lured into a false sense of friendship by the bullies on the school bus:

“Italiano,” I [Vittorio] said, clutching at the familiar word. “Ah, Italiano!” He thumped a hand on his chest.
“Me speak Italiano mucho mucho. Me paesano.”
When the other boys got on the bus and came to the back, the black-haired boy said they were paesani as well, and each in turn smiled broadly at me and shook my hand. (49)

Vittorio soon discovers that the pretence of friendship is simply a way of making fun of him.

The word paesano, then, brings together the Italian and the non-Italian, be it positive or negative, sincere or not. For the Italian-Canadian, the word creates a link between the new country and Italy by defining and uniting those of the same origin; at the same time the word allows the non-Italian, or the Canadian, to enter into the Italian culture albeit under false pretense. The word paesano brings together the two components of Italian-Canadian identity in uniting the true sense of the word with the meaning adopted by non-Italians. In each of the examples quoted above, the presence of the Italian word highlights something specifically Italian within Italian-Canadian reality and emphasizes the fact that this component cannot be erased or replaced within a Canadian context.

The author’s choice to include the translation of an Italian word or sentence renders the text accessible to the reader who does not read Italian. It therefore establishes a certain openness—the will to reach beyond a minority audience. On the other hand, the absence of the translation renders inaccessible certain sections of the novel to readers who do not read Italian. In this case, it can be argued that the author risks alienating the non-Italian speaking reader, thereby establishing a certain degree of elitism for the novel. Arun Mukherjee distinguishes between the two by labelling the reader a “cultural insider” or a “cultural outsider” (44). Of course, in certain instances in which the Italian word appears without the translation the meaning is not lost for the reader. In other cases, the translation is necessary to understand the allusion made and the nuances of the action. In The Italians, for instance, it is necessary for the reader to know the meaning of the words ero ubriaco” (20; “I was drunk”) in order to understand the reason Lorenzo gives for raping his wife. Another such instance occurs in The Lion’s Mouth; Stasera mi butto is the title of “the silly pop song” Marco and his bride-to-be had danced to the summer before their wedding (30). The reference to the pop song has a number of implications that the reader who does not read Italian will miss. The English equivalent of Stasera mi butto is “Tonight I throw myself” or “I abandon myself tonight.” The meaning is very important because it refers to Marco’s status in his marriage: by marrying Paola—a wealthy but overly demanding and domineering wife, whom he does not love—Marco abandons “his” self, losing his own identity in order to improve his social status. At the same time, the reference to the song foreshadows Marco’s one night stand with Elena, the woman he has loved since childhood:
Marcia has abandoned himself to Elena that same night (stasera), thereby unknowingly entangling himself in a terrorist plot and jeopardizing his marriage and his reputation.

The process of translating is an undeniable step in writing for the Italian-Canadian author. Joseph Pivato makes this point in Echo: Essays on Other Literatures: “Independently of the language or languages the Italian writer uses, he or she is always translating. It often seems that the translating process becomes more important than the distant Italian reality that it may be evoking” (125). Translation is a way of bringing together the two worlds which make up the Italian-Canadian reality. Bianca, the narrator in The Lion’s Mouth, is very conscious of the activity of translating inherent in the process of narration and in her Italian-Canadian reality. Edwards’ novel highlights the complexity of the presence of Italian words, and their English equivalents: Bianca simultaneously reads her aunt’s letter written in Italian and translates it into English for herself:

“Bianca, se sapessi, Se sapessi,” if you knew, if you knew. “Que [sic, Chel disgrazia di Dio.” God’s disgrace? I must be translating incorrectly, a disgrace from God. “Barbara scossa.” Barbara has been shocked? hit? shaken?...Worse, Marco (you, you) suffered a nervous breakdown.” Esaurimento nervoso, the words translated literally as an exhaustion of the nerves. (9-10)

This passage illustrates the interplay between levels of the text and the complications resulting from the presence of Italian as well as the negotiation involved between “the Italian” and “the Canadian” components of the narrator’s Italian-Canadian reality. The narrator translates for her own benefit: to ascertain that she understands the written Italian word, she feels compelled to find the English equivalent. This illustrates the constant need to bring together the two components of her reality in an attempt to better understand herself. The narrator points to the importance of the translation process necessary when the Italian word, in this case her aunt’s letter, enters her own Canadian context. The narrator takes her role as translator very seriously in finding the appropriate word, which testifies to the notion that the Italian-Canadian lives in a state of constant translation.

Fabrizio, the narrator in Fabrizio’s Passion, shares the same attention to detail in the act of translating: “When I finish the pasta, faccio la scarpetta. (Literally, this translates as ‘to wet one’s shoe,’ that is, to soak a piece of bread in the tomato sauce, and wipe clean one’s plate!” (65). In the two examples mentioned, the act of translating is an attempt to unite the two worlds which comprise the narrator’s reality, that of the Italian-Canadian. This is done in two simultaneous ways: first, by stating in Italian that which has its origin in the Italian world (the aunt’s letter; the way one cleans the plate with bread); and second, by giving the English equivalent so that the non-Italian reader, rather than feel alienated, feels connected to that Italian world being described.

The tension existing between the Italian and the Canadian is rooted as deeply as the structure of the sentence, virtually beneath the texture of the writing. The stilted sentence is an English sentence which sounds Italian—a sentence which has a Latinate structure as opposed to an Anglo-Saxon or Germanic structure. It is important to stress that the stilted sentence is different from the literal translation. In Infertility Rites, for instance, Nina is asked “When are you going to buy your baby?” (11), which is a direct translation from the Italian idiom meaning “when will you have a baby.” This is a literal translation purposely used to maintain the Italian flavour and to indicate that the words were spoken in Italian. The same is true of the following: “I pour myself another cup of American coffee—what mother calls coloured water” (137). The expression “coloured water” is a direct translation for the Italian cliché on American coffee. In The Lion’s Mouth, Bianca reads in her aunt’s letter that her cousin Marco has had “an exhaustion of the nerves”—the literal translation of esaurimento nervoso meaning a nervous breakdown (10). In these examples, the objective is not to sound English but to transmit the Italian idiom into English words without remaining faithful to the nuances of each language. This is usually done to indicate that the words are originally spoken in Italian.

In the stilted sentence, on the other hand, Italian is not present as words but at the level of the sentence structure, a characteristic which has been criticized as badly written English, or simply bad writing. I would suggest, instead, that the presence of Latinate structures within the Italian-Canadian novel represents, to use Pasquale Verdicchio’s words, “the utterances of immigrant culture” (214) and mirrors the reality of the Italian-Canadian experience.

The following passage from Black Madonna illustrates the Latinate structure present in a conversation between Assunta and Marie, who represent polar opposites of the Italian-Canadian duality:

“Ma, I’m going to Toronto,” Marie said abruptly. “They... She couldn’t find the Italian word for “accepted.” [sic] “They took me... “Ma, I have to go. More times I go to school, better job.” “You tell to your father...These things, I don’t understand...You go to school—good. You smart—good. But you crazy. Your head in the clouds. The older you get, the crazier you get. I don’t understand you. To Toronto you want to go?” (70-1)

In order to communicate with her mother, Marie is forced to speak like her. Although Marie’s “More times I go to school, better job” is not correct English, the structure is correct in Italian. Likewise, Assunta’s “These things, I don’t understand,” and “To Toronto you want to go?” (where the (in)direct object precedes the verb) have an Italian structure. The sentence “You tell to your father,” on the other hand, is a direct translation of the Italian. Moreover, the subject of their conversation consists of
the “push and pull” characteristic of the old way versus the new way: the traditional Italian mother does not want her daughter to leave home, whereas Marie wants to experience the freedom of Canadian society.

In Fabrizio’s Passion, Fabrizio uses an Italian sentence structure when he says “I am fourteen years old but am thirty in my head” (72). This does not work grammatically in English but is often used in Italian. Likewise, in The Lion’s Mouth: “But where have you been... We waited an hour, but since you didn’t have the courtesy to even phone...” (37-38) and “So loud you have to have that record?” (42) have an Italian sentence structure. Such a structure is appropriate here given that the sentences are spoken by an Italian, Marco’s mother. Bianca, too, is guilty of using the Latinate sentence structure: “Her bedroom, that evening I visited, was sparse, cell-like” (116). The following passage appears at the end of The Lion’s Mouth, in the Epilogue:

This week, Barbara arrived and I must play the wise aunt with a trunkful of distractions. Poor child—as I write she is standing in the living room, staring out the window at the still leafless trees and mud-filled garden, wondering what place is this... So I begin again my life in this city, this land. (my italics, 178)

Even though narrating her tale has given Bianca a clear focus on both components of her cultural makeup, the stiltedness of the italicized words emphasize the influence of Bianca’s Italian heritage. It is also significant that the first phrase, “wondering what place is this,” refers to Barbara, the Italian girl visiting from Venice, taking in the novelty and difference of western Canada.

The presence of the heritage language within the “ethnic text” has led to accusations of bad writing, and the use of the stilted sentence may be perceived as the writer’s inability to master the English language. On the contrary, these “ethnic markers” or “linguistic stones” are devices purposely used by the writer to illustrate the tension and negotiation at work in a bicultural identity. As Pasquale Verdicchio argues:

By stressing Latinate vocabulary, by the insertion of Italian syntactical forms, and by the inclusion of linguistic elements that represent the utterances of immigrant culture, these [Italian-Canadian] writers have altered the semantic field of English, thereby denying expected meaning. (214)

The fact that the Italian word interrupts the flow of the English text is a way of illustrating the symptoms of otherness which are an undeniable characteristic of Italian-Canadian reality. The presence of the Italian word within the English text should not be interpreted as a barrier between the two (Italian and Canadian) cultures. Rather, the meshing of Italian words with English words should be seen as the negotiation necessary in order to bring the two cultures together. Arun Mukherjee writes that “Ethnic minority texts inform their readers, through the presence of other languages... about the multi-cultural and multilingual nature of Canadian society” (46). Through their fiction Italian-Canadian writers suggest that in order to come to terms with the element of “schizophrenia” inherent in a bicultural identity; the individual must undertake the process of re-evaluating the heritage culture. By using the “device of the stone,” the Italian-Canadian writer attempts to illustrate the continuous transfer from one culture/language to the other experienced by bicultural individuals.


Works Cited


Roman Holiday Summer Studies
Nino Ricci: The Novelist as Anthropologist and the Links Between Literature and Social Sciences

By Howard A. Doughty

“Thou shalt not sit
With statisticians nor commit
A social science”
- W. H. Auden

Reviews and discussions of Nino Ricci’s popular Canadian trilogy commonly focus on two themes. One is the inner conflict and psychological anxiety of the protagonist, Vittorio Innocente. The other is the accuracy of Ricci’s “thick description” of the supporting characters and settings. Beginning with Lives of the Saints, the “customs and narrow ways” of the Italian village of Valle del Sole are meticulously disclosed. Its “rural, superstitious, clannish, pagan” inhabitants are genuinely depicted and sensitively rendered “with a tenderness that avoids sentimentality.” Ricci, we are told, “has created a real place, has populated it with real people.” ricci himself described Lives of the Saints as “written in a high realist style” and added that it “relies on a detailed representation of the world of the story for its effect.” The world that is represented in the first novel is defined by one commentator as “an inbred little community” wherein “peasant Catholicism” melds “with paganism.” It is the second theme, the delineation of the collective social context, rather than a complex individual psychological symptomatology, that most concerns us here.

Cultural anthropology is, of course, not at all a clearly defined social science. In broad strokes, it can initially be painted as an inquisitive eye looking at human attitudes and actions from within and from without the social community. Some (usually epistemologically materialistic and objectivistic) interpreters look at societies from the outside in an attempt to create a science of culture approximating the methods of natural science. Others (usually epistemologically idealistic and subjectivistic) insist that genuine understanding (verstehen) must give strong recognition to the meaning of thought and behaviour as it is experienced and understood by the people under study. The first is commonly called an “etic” approach; the second, “emic.”

Nino Ricci’s method is epistemologically congenial to the emic and particularistic strain in anthropology that seeks to reconstruct cultural history accurately without yielding to the temptation to employ the comparative or evolutionary framework that would facilitate the development of general laws of cultural development. In Lives of the Saints, the mores and folkways of Valle del Sole are recollected from the childhood memories of Vittorio, then living through his seventh year. The sequel, In a Glass House, shifts the setting first to an immigrant Italian farming community in south-western Ontario, next to a suburban university in Toronto, and then to an African boarding school. The stops along the way are mediated through Vittorio’s increasingly mature gaze. Despite radical shifts of place and circumstance, and notwithstanding the personal growth and development of his narrator, Ricci’s admirers say that his powers of observation are abidingly keen and that his precise representations of community life stay accurate and evocative. Even in the third novel, Where She Has Gone, the increasingly intense psychological dimensions of the story, emanating from the violation of the antediluvian taboo of incest, do not detract from the persistent attention to cultural detail as Vittorio, now a young man, returns to his birthplace, a reluctantly modernizing Valle del Sole.

There, he encounters half-remembered characters and ghosts from his childhood, including his former playmate Fabrizio with whom he shared the original venial sin of smoking cigarettes. Fabrizio has worked in Roman restaurants, but has chosen to pass his life under the clear Apennine sky. Given more attention, he might have been a character in an unwritten novel by Albert Camus, grounded and contented under a clear Algerian sky. Self-consciously choosing the security of a government job and the vocation of tending his “Garden of Eden,” Fabrizio is happy to be a mailman and delights in being a missionary gardener caring for his little, uncorrupted local parcel of land. Seeking reassurance from Fabrizio, Vittorio finds dissonance instead: “Every contradiction of how I remembered things was like having a part of me torn away.”

The reality of “high realism,” it seems, is to be a negotiated reality. A traditional community is not necessarily a static community. In Valle del Sol at the time of Vittorio’s birth, automobiles may be unreliable, but they do exist. So, the emic understanding of the community depends upon an awareness of differences in subjective perceptions between women and men, old and young, to say nothing of individual personalities. The emic anthropologist and the novelist thus share an interest in the unique, the richly textured, more-or-less distorted, psychologically repressed or simply false apprehensions and memories of individuals; the more scientific interrogators of meaning shun the singular and look always for patterns.

Nonetheless, setting aside the personal, mental and spiritual aspects of the novels, even Ricci’s detractors acknowledge that “the superstitions, politics, hard work and dreams of America that pervade the village are rendered with an almost anthropological rigor.” Some may quibble that sociology, not “applied” anthropology, is the academic discipline most concerned with contemporary immigration, acculturation and the experience of return; still, a major element in all three books continues to be the author’s capacity to give imaginary life to cultural environments that are both true to his characters and accessible to readers who lack personal knowledge of rural Italy, Leamington, York University, and Nigeria.
The Task at Hand

This essay was written in reply to a request to comment on Nino Ricci’s trilogy from “the perspective of cultural anthropology.” I took this to mean that I was to assess Ricci’s work in terms of two basic questions. First, did his novels conform to the findings of social scientists who study life in traditional Italian villages, the cultural dislocations of immigrants in a new and different society, the travails of expatriate school teachers, and the adjustment problems encountered by those who attempt to go home again? Second, did Ricci’s work contribute any insights that might be useful to social scientists researching these and related questions? In short, was Ricci’s self-professed high realism “realistic”? This seemed, on the face of it, to be just barely doable. While it is true that those duly accredited to pass judgement on such matters have told me that I have the aesthetic sensibilities of a sea slug, I have taken their verdict to be, in sweet Martha Stewart’s words, “a good thing.” My critics, I hasten to explain, meant neither that I am hostile to the arts nor that I have exceptionally bad taste, but rather that I am almost totally indiscriminating and display practically no taste at all. It’s not so much that I know nothing about art; I don’t even know what I like! Open to nearly everything and disdainful of almost nothing, I delight in the Apollonian, feast on the Dionysian, and play with the Protean while at no time pronouncing a sound or even consistent doctrine of artistic merit. Thus lacking an arguable opinion about whether or not Nino Ricci is a good writer, I am inoculated against the infection of my social scientific commentary by fixed standards of literary criticism (my own or anyone else’s). What’s more, prior to accepting this assignment, I had not previously read (nor heard of) Nino Ricci. So, as innocent as Innocente, I could approach the project fresh, with no residual analytic axes to grind nor predetermined literary oxen to gore.

At the same time, while my credentials in literature are flimsy where not altogether absent, I do possess some formal qualifications in scientific methodology: I have taken oodles of graduate courses on empirical analysis and techniques, and I have conducted and published some original research. As well, I teach not only cultural anthropology but also race and ethnic relations courses in the bureaucratic domain of sociology. Familiar with ample anthropological and sociological research on at least three of the pertinent topics (life in traditional societies, the immigrant experience, and the emotional conflict encontered by returnees), I imagined that my background and the task at hand might be a promising fit. After all, some congruence has already been established. Undergraduate textbooks now commonly connect forms of literary criticism and socio-anthropological approaches.12 Literary critics including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco and Northrop Frye are frequently cited by anthropologists, and anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Claude Levi-Strauss sometimes gnaw their way into discussions of literature. Thus encouraged, I supposed that as long as I attempted to shoehorn the novelist into the categories of the anthropologist (and successfully finessed literary concerns), I might get away with it.

Questions of Definition

I was quickly disabused of my abstemious optimism. A problem arose when I began to consider more seriously the ambiguities and intramural antagonisms within domains of literature and social science that I was invited to link. It was immediately apparent that two preliminary questions had to be asked, and that neither allowed an easy answer:

(1) "What is literature?” (or, more narrowly, “What is creative writing in the form of fiction in general and the novel in particular?”);
(2) “What is social science?” (or, more precisely, “What is cultural anthropology?”).

In the absence of either a provisional reply to those questions or a good excuse to avoid responding to them, any attempt to construct an equation connecting work in one to work in the other would be futile.

As far as anthropology is concerned, there are plenty of textbook answers. None are very helpful. Most boil down to this: classically, anthropology “sets for itself the general problem of the evolution of mankind.”13 Currently, its “goal” is identified as “the comparative study of human societies … to describe, analyze, and explain … how groups have adapted to their environments and given meaning to their lives.”14 By these lights, whether as particularistic ethnological history or as universalistic social science, a triumphant anthropology would certainly be no small feat! To make its endeavours at all manageable, the discipline is divided into two main areas, physical (or biological) and cultural (or social) anthropology. Physical anthropology has somewhat stronger claims to the status of a natural science; cultural anthropology is where the emic/etic division is most relevant. These fields are, of course, arranged into ever more sub-speciated patches.

Physical anthropologists poke about in our bodies and the remains of our ancestors. They investigate biological evolution and derivative topics ranging from palaeontology and population genetics to contemporary forensic anthropology and evolutionary psychology. At their most preposterously ambitious, writes English teacher David Hawkes, they suggest “that competition for Stone Age sexual favours continues to dictate our behaviour, despite the enormous historical and cultural distance which separates the postmodern from the Pleistocene, leaving “middlebrow” readers awash with claims about the discovery of the “rape module” or the “aggression gene.”15 They suffer, however, from a lack of consensus as to the parameters of their subject matter, which is to say our species. What, unambiguously, is a human being? Do we mark our origins in terms of physiological characteristics such as brain size (intellect), vocal chords (speech), or the use of technology (an opposable
thomb)? Is there an uncontestcd line that separates Homo sapiens sapiens from our primate kin? What is the precise structure of our “family tree”? Cultural anthropologists play with our minds. Under its rubric, cultural anthropology shelters archaeology, political anthropology, anthropological linguistics and as many more specialties as can win grants for conferences, establish professional associations and achieve accepted organizational places as departments or within departments at accredited universities. Cultural anthropologists study cultural evolution, whatever the much-debated and much-debased term “culture” may be said to mean. Even more than the biological definition of humanity, the muddle over the meaning of human culture is perpetually troublesome.16

As for literature, almost any attempt at a stable definition is bound to come to grief. What may presumptuously be called “ontological” issues are often at stake, as in debates about whether or not literature is necessarily restricted to imaginative or fictional writing. Some scholars still worry about whether The Holy Bible or Machiavelli’s The Prince count as literature. As Terry Eagleton points out, “nineteenth-century English literature usually includes Lamb (but not Bentham), Macaulay (but not Marx), and Mill (but not Darwin or Herbert Spencer).”17 According to Eagleton, literature is defined according to socially determined and historically variable structures of belief. So, literature is whatever is deemed literature according to criteria that are consistent with dominant social ideologies which, in turn, reflect the material interests of powerful social groups. In modern practice, literature is whatever teachers of literature teach, and teachers of literature teach pretty much what they are told to teach.

Those unhappy with such blatant socio-economic determinism may invoke aesthetic standards. They may seek to judge some works as “good” literature (which is usually preferred to “bad” literature), and may superciliously exclude much science fiction, detective stories and popular romances, all comic books, and the entire oeuvres of Jackie Collins, Danielle Steele and Jacqueline Suzanne as not rising to the high cultural standards of true literature. They may concede that “folk” culture merits study, but will remain convinced that it is of mainly of antiquarian interest. In music, by analogy, an awareness of antique Hungarian and Polish tunes is sometimes thought helpful in understanding both Liszt and Chopin, without imagining that such melodies match the artistry of either Liszt or Chopin (for that, perhaps, is needed the civilizing influence of George Sand). “Popular” culture, they will add, ought not to be considered “culture” at all.18

Still others, focusing on the writer as artist, take literature to be the product of a distinctive kind of activity which, whether its product be reckoned superior or inferior, at least has a prima facie claim to be called “art.” It exists in “its concreteness.” It is “faithful only to itself.” Standing firm in support of ars gratia artis and in the face of deconstructionism, post-structuralism, new, old or middle-aged historicism, post-colonialism, feminist theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis, the several ruminations of Jacques Derrida, uncounted culture studies perspectives, the immense assortment of semiotic speculations still trickling down from the spent intellectual vineyards of France, and the several strains of Marxism still under repair, Peter McHugh, for one, contends above all that literature must be treated “independently of its history, context, or social circumstance.”19

Additional views have their supporters but, exhausted by only a small excursion into the academic wilderness, I decline to join the fray. I acquiesce instead in the belief that literature is, to borrow a phrase from W. B. Galle, an “essentially contested concept.”20 Its definition involves controversies derived from first principles. Some debates can be resolved by appealing to empirical evidence. Such contests normally assume agreement on the concepts in question: what remain to be argued are the facts. So, using an illustration favoured by Galle, we may test the proposition that “this picture is painted with oils” by relying on the physical evidence, for we can probably agree on what we mean by the nouns “picture” and “oils” and the verb “to paint.” We are, however, on unsteady ground when we move to the proposition that “this picture is a fine work of art,” since there is unlikely to be agreement on what properly merit the honorific “art”, much less on what are the proper criteria of “fine” and “poor” art. It is, in short, the definition of what we are talking about (here, literature and cultural anthropology) rather than the object of discussion itself (Ricci’s trilogy) that is apt to be contested. Accordingly, if the lexical problem can be resolved, the rest should fall nicely into place.21 Lacking a dominant theory, the best for which we may presently hope is a preliminary taxonomy (or metatheory) of literary theories.

Although a formidable project, it would be possible to construct an exhaustive inventory of altercations among critics and scholars just as it would be conceivable to generate a comprehensive account of conceptual conflicts among cultural anthropologists concerning the correct scope and proper methods of that discipline. But, à quoi bon? I care far less about what, if anything, art and anthropology definitively are than about what they do, what company they keep, what they can teach us about remaining lucid and composed while staring into the hideous face of mindless postmodern technology out of control, what encouragement they can give us in the playful quest to become what Henry S. Kariel styled “connoisseurs of the abyss.”22 Unable to “touch some holy realm of being, some other world, some transcendent order,” we need instruction on how to confront our own mediocrity, to accept the banality of our existence while faithfully chronicling the purposelessness and amorality of life in what we tentatively embrace as the real world.23 Acutely aware that we may be relentlessly moving toward a self-affirming, self-satisfying and self-justifying global corporate state in which local cultures will be put gently to sleep in that good homogenious night of the humanoid soul, we still have the opportunity to stay attentive to personal stories of duress.

Of course, not everyone is consumed by the hyperbole of global hyperreality. Defenders of cultural diversity continue to mount what may be quixotic protests against technological hegemony. Resisting “coca-colonization” and the discovery of aboriginals adorned by the Nike “swoosh,” they insist that the “new world order” is merely the fantasy of bloated cultural imperialism, a daydream of patriotic Americans who, at the first sign of trouble, will retreat into the “homeland security” of
their increasingly gate-guarded nation. Or, more apt for this discussion, whether in the form of Madame Butterfly, Truffaut’s Domicile conjugale or the recent reproduction of Victor Segalen’s Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity, the eroticism of exotica can display imperialism as a colonial aesthetic’s wet dream with military ejaculations sloshing over Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan and Iraq. Whatever may be our fate, like Vittorio Innocente, we are painfully aware of our surroundings, and both anthropological and literary story-tellers have it in their power to articulate accounts of deprival, thus alerting us to what we are missing.

Moreover, we may be pleased that Nino Ricci imposed no therapeutic, ersatz Freudian closure upon young Innocente. We may be thankful that Vittorio makes no suspiciously expiatory confession of primordial transgression to be traced vaginally back through his half-sister Rita to his mother’s fickle womb. Unlike consummate redemptees such as Eugene O’Neill’s James Tyrone, Jr., in A Moon for the Misbegotten, we may be grateful that Vittorio Innocente will not be entirely forgiven. Tyrone, we may recall, was poised incongruously between peasant Irish giants and foppish Ivy-League sophisticates, and went willingly to his peaceful sleep at last. We may hope that no such fate awaits the similarly situated Vittorio, that he will become ever more clearly conscious of his place, and will come to exemplify clarity and balance in the role in which he is inexorably implicated. Though there may never be a fourth Innocente novel, we may speculate about what he could do should he successfully shake off the narcotic of anonymity. We could see how he is fixed and how he will be poised to emerge in our own readerly imaginations (without the guiding hand of Nino Ricci, who will have already retreated down a path of less resistance). To see how he might take some sort of control of his own life and cease to be passively buffeted by strangers and archetypes, we must take a step or two back.

Common Origins

Anthropology arose naturally enough from questions about the origin and nature of humanity, questions that were of special interest in the centuries following the early exploration and settlement of America, Africa and Oceania by Europeans. Of course, within the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition of YHWH (a.k.a., Yahweh, Allah, Jehovah, etc.) worship, Genesis had long provided a superficially satisfactory account of human origins in Eden, of human nature in the garden, of original sin and the fall from grace. Accounts of supernatural interventions and interpretations fixated on sin and redemption, however, could not survive scientific thought, secular explanation and what has come to be called the “enlightenment” unsullied. Contact with exotic cultures and especially cultures that Europeans would long regard as primitive, gave rise to speculations about “natural man.” Engaging works such as Shakespeare’s The Tempest (1611) and Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) nicely illustrate the literary attention paid to those “natural societies” that predated or existed apart from what modern Europeans were pleased to call civilization. The contrast between civilized men such as Prospero and Crusoe and aboriginals such as Friday (good native) and Caliban (bad natives) helped to shape colonial, anti-colonial and post-colonial ideologies for centuries to come. 25

The related topics of innocence and barbarism also engaged philosophers from Hobbes (Leviathan, 1651), through Locke (Two Treatises on Government, 1689) to Rousseau (The Social Contract, 1762). They took the idea of the “state of nature,” whether metaphorically or literally, as the condition of human beings prior to the development of political authority, and they constructed elaborate social and political theories about the origins of community, culture and the state upon it. Of particular interest was the origin of civil society. How, it was more than rhetorically asked, could creatures like Shakespeare’s Caliban or Defoe’s cannibals, albeit with innumerable false starts, ultimately enter into a social contract and produce refined, eloquent and prosperous civilizations like Prospero’s, to be enjoyed by the inhabitants of seventeenth and eighteenth-century London, Paris and Rome? The idea of a social contract was, of course, not novel. The Bible, wrote Sir Ernest Barker, “taught that the powers that be are ordained by God; but it also taught that David made a covenant with his people.” 27 The idea cropped up in Aristotle’s Politics. It was an important doctrine in Roman law. It found its way into the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. The discussion of a social contract (and the promise of progress that it implied) acquired special urgency, however, at the outset of the age of European expansion and eventual global hegemony. There had, it must be remembered, always been aliens, foreigners, barbarians, savages and “others,” but they had normally been found “beyond the pale” and of interest mainly when they threatened “vandalism.” With the conquest of the Americas, Africa, Oceania and much of Asia, the “other” became more problematic, and protoanthropological writings sought to solve the problems.

Who were (indeed, what were) these natives? How were they to be treated? What could they reveal to Europeans about the nature of the species (if, in fact, they were members of the same species)? Rational philosophical reflection, appeals to the “gods” of the Western canon, advocacy of principles such as “natural law” and similar devices were employed by scholars, but the taste of queer and quaint customs and ideas (often overlain with the obvious odour of racism) flavoured the intellectual rutogat. The tales of travellers and the creativity of writers drawing on themes older than The Odyssey gave piquancy to learned argumentation. The spices provided by Defoe, for instance, are noteworthy. Disdaining a fastidious distinction between fact and fancy, he “preferred to describe his tales as ‘true histories’, faking his fictions to read like facts, and filling in the broad sweeps of his adventure stories with minute circumstantial details.” 28 While making no claim that Hobbes took direct instruction from Shakespeare nor Rousseau from Defoe, it can hardly be gainsaid that these entertainments contributed greatly to popular talk about the state of nature, the social contract and the origins and evolution of humankind. They contributed much to the cerebral flavours of the time.
The Lure of Science

Soon enough, the proximity of the colonial and the native furnished sufficient evidence about many topics to permit the growth of systematic studies of human cultures. Speculative philosophy, romance writing, travellers’ accounts, administrative reports, early missionary narratives (including the invaluable Jesuit Relations and later methodological investigations by civil servant/scientists (notably with the United States Geological Survey) branched off, sought their own languages, audiences and claims for veracity. This mélange was not easily transformed into a coherent discipline. Like the distinction between weekend butterfly collectors and certified lepidopterists, hobbyists of humanity dominated ethnography well into the nineteenth century. It was disproportionately the preserve of inspired (and occasionally uninspired) amateurs of independent means who resisted the professionalization of their arcane activities. Not until 1892, for example, did that burgeoning degree mill, the United States of America, award its first doctorate in anthropology.

The supervisor of that pioneering work was Franz Boas, who almost single-handedly “would successfully raise anthropology from its infancy as a profession to a respectable, exacting and complex science by the early twentieth century.” This transformation did not sit well with a number of racists, anti-Semites and eugenicists. Thus, almost from the outset, cultural anthropology was rent by political divisions. Boas led sustained attacks on racism and incurred venomous attacks from luminaries such as Charles Walcott at the National Academy of Sciences and his own colleagues at the American Museum of Natural History and Columbia University. He was berated for his liberal views and for his German ethnicity, a telling complaint during the last months of World War I when the US finally became a belligerent. Michael Pupin, a Columbia physicist, denounced Boas as “an objectionable public nuisance,” and openly longed for the “good old days of absolutism where the means were always at hand for ridding oneself of such a nuisance as Franz Boas.” Also out of sorts were those who, as soldiers, traders, missionaries or colonial administrators had a practical interest in “backward” peoples and sought only pragmatic advice about how best to deal with them militarily, economically, spiritually and politically. Neither government-sponsored research expeditions nor university-based programs of instruction won immediate applause from those who ventured into the field for purposes other than academic research.

None the less, while much early anthropology gave succour to imperialist exploitation of what would later be called the third world (or, with unseemly irony, “developing nations”), anthropology was also employed in defence of radical causes. The researches of Louis Henry Morgan into Iroquois and Algonkian societies, by way of illustration, were the base upon which Engels built his initial application of Marxist thought to the explication of the lives of indigenous North Americans. As Bruce Cox relates, “it is a moot point whether Morgan himself was a materialist; Engels’ paraphrase makes him one.” Fiction, politics and anthropology are plainly connected.

The broad social landscapes painted by many early social scientists also had much in common with romantic poetry. Its preoccupation with the life of the city and the country, with tradition and progress, and with the loss of community and the triumph of market society, emerged in a number of theories and became central to Tönnies’ concepts of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. Indeed, much nineteenth-century social science fell squarely in the radical tradition that began with William Blake’s condemnation of the “dark, satanic mills” of industrialism. It viewed the factory system of industrial capitalism as an historically unprecedented, wicked and tyrannical exploitation of mind and body. By casting an eye back to simple societies, untainted and untarnished, anthropologists furnished social reformers with the kind of contrast they needed to facilitate a moral censure of the proletarian misery and bourgeois decadence of life around them. If such progressives entertained unrealistically romantic ideas of sturdy peasants and idyllic pre-industrial life, Ricci’s “high realism” is certainly unsentimental, though the failure of Vittorio to find happiness in the big city of Toronto and the return of a young man such as Fabrizio to tend his garden in the old village suggests that the promise of an upscale urban lifestyle is likely to disappoint as well.

Intimations of Convergence

Cultural anthropology, like most modern social studies, had its beginnings in the belles lettres. However much it currently mimics the methods and seeks to attain the respectability of a science, it is worth remembering that, despite its materialism, its mannered displays of empiricism, and its expressed goal of statements of causality, contemporary work in anthropology had its origins in concerns that were primarily those of the humanities. So, Nino Ricci’s relationship to cultural anthropology must first be seen in the context of the traditional relationship between literature and human studies, and in the varied paths that have been taken. Some hope for a reconvergence and imagine that one day these paths may be mapped according to the principles of “sociological criticism” originally laid out in the 1930s by literary theorist Kenneth Burke:

What would such sociological categories be like? They would consider works of art, I think, as strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off the evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another. Art forms like ‘tragedy’ or ‘comedy’ or ‘satire’ would be treated as equipments for living, that size up situations in various ways and in keeping with
correspondingly various attitudes. Their relation to typical situations would be stressed. Their comparative values would be considered, with the intention of formulating a 'strategy of strategies,' the 'over-all' strategy obtained by inspection of the lot.  

Such an inclusive taxonomy is little closer than when Burke offered his challenge. Still, we can reflect upon his ambitious project, and ruminate also upon the utility of a literary analysis that would disclose the grammar and rhetoric of anthropology for, just as with literature, the anthropological path is cluttered with dangerous traps, pitfalls and occasional ambushes. I propose here a modest probe that does not aspire even to the status of a preparatory exploration (much less an outline of a complete anthropology of anthropology), but which may hint at the general direction to be taken. Along the way, we will encounter conflicts and implacable enemies whose frequently bitter bickering centres not simply on scientific questions that might admit of resolution based on appeals to dispassionately collected evidence, but on deeply held and essentially contested cultural assumptions and beliefs. Although it would be reassuring to say that these beliefs are about what Thomas S. Kuhn famously called scientific “paradigms,” it would be more accurate to say that social science is in a pre-paradigmatic stage of evolution.  

What are really being contested are inchoate interpretations, hunches and minimally educated guesses that are insufficiently capacious and empirically verifiable to count as much more than self-justifying stories, sometimes with nefarious political purposes behind them. In any case, such conflicts belie the ideal of disinterested scientific talk and threaten to leave blood on the floor of many a senior common room. So long as claims to “normal science” are premature, a conscious re-engagement with the literary imagination may be in order.

The Truth about Cannibals and the Joy of Cooking

Little of this talk appealed to students of literature. While Boas was transforming anthropology at the beginning of the last century, teachers of literature, increasingly freed from their attachments to the classics and willing to embrace the vernacular simultaneously recoiled from the late nineteenth-century triumph of science. A few took up the romantic exaltation of the “stupefied peasant.” In this they were the fellow travellers of Martin Heidegger, the “Black Forest philosopher,” to whom Terry Eagleton attributes the “sinister … downgrading of reason for the spontaneous ‘pre-understanding’, the celebration of wise passivity” that would lead, “in 1933 into explicit support of Hitler” or, in Lives of the Saints, to the support of Vittorio’s grandfather for Mussolini. This is not the tradition that Nino Ricci follows. While Heidegger’s thought and actions remain matters of intense debate, the fading life of the old mayor of Valle del Sol, is deadened and bathetic. His portrait of peasant life is far more authentic.

For Ricci, more salient roots may include tales and occasional fantasies written by author/adventurers. The example of Herman Melville’s Typee (1851) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s first published short story, “The Mystery of Sasassa Valley,” (eventually collected in Stories by English Authors: Africa, 1896) come prominently to mind as does, a half-century later, Farley Mowat’s The People of the Deer (1951). Although both raised questions of what was fact and what was fantasy in reports of traditional societies in the South Pacific, South Africa and northern Canada, each in its own way raised public awareness of traditional peoples.

More likely antecedents, however, are social scientists who looked with a sober gaze at the conditions and cultures of “others.” With some exceptions, those who tell rude tales are commonly associated with physical anthropology. One of those exceptions is sociologist Edward Banfield, who wrote a very nasty account of bucolic Italian peasants and thus turned the evil eye of academia back upon tales of ignorance in the recesses of European development.

Banfield used a combination of neo-Freudian psychology and structural-functional analysis, duly confirmed by the application of Thematic Apperception Tests, to explain the economic, political and social problems of a Montegrano, a town in Southern Italy, not all that much different from Valle del Sol. Like the later work of Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” Banfield engaged in work that has been condemned for starting the contemporary trend of “blaming the victim.” Banfield attributed the “backwardness” of the town to “amoral familism,” by which he meant a tendency to look out for one’s immediate relatives and not contribute to the general good. Fittingly, a quote from Hobbes stands proudly and prominently at the front of his book; controversially, a speaking engagement at the University of Toronto was only one to have incited considerable student protest.

More than merely economically backward, Banfield’s subjects were pseudo-scientifically shown to be morally inferior to the bulk of Western Europeans who had embraced modern technology, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. For his part, Nino Ricci, while telling a tale similar to Banfield’s (and about a similar people and time), portrays himself as less explicitly judgmental. His purpose, after all, is neither to condemn, nor to reform social arrangements but to set the stage for a psycho-morality play.

More liberal souls than Banfield’s (or even Ricci’s) usually inhabit the tents of cultural anthropology. Their tiffs come down to this. Is there a biologically based “human nature” that universally determines the character of individuals and the structure of society, or are human beings socially malleable and determined by the “environmental nurture” of cultural restrictions and enthusiasms. In either case, as Levi-Strauss has observed: “Anthropology … is the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other, and during which millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered and their institutions and beliefs destroyed, whilst they themselves were thrown into bondage, and contaminated by diseases they were unable to resist.”
As for anthropologists themselves, their subject matter has varied but their subjects remain the same. Sometimes they are interested in the deconstruction of certain specific events and other times of enduring practices. Often they will address larger themes such as human aggression, gender relations, racism, and imperialism. Still, they will typically be more concerned with the investigation of the “other” than with a critical encounter with themselves. Until recently, there has been a little work done on the anthropology of anthropology. Instead, as US author and essayist Larry McMurtry has baldly put it with reference to the ongoing investigation of the Zuni Indians in the American southwest, anthropologists constitute a horde of “bloodsucking leeches.”

Both anthropology and sociology emerged in the same industrializing society. Anthropology looked outward, sociology looked inward, and both looked downward for their material, with hands extended, palms upward for their research grants. If, then, Ricci’s trilogy can be construed as an imaginative exercise in participant-observation, the anthropological technique of becoming seemingly one with the natives in order to produce a more absorbing account of the meaning of their lives, neither aficionados of creative writing nor scientific description are apt to be impressed. At the same time, if we pay direct attention to the politics that underlie contemporary scholarly practices, we may get what I promised as “a hint” of “the general direction to be taken” in any attempt to locate the work of Ricci the novelist in relation to cultural anthropology.

Anthropological Politics

Two case studies will prepare the way. First, there is example of Margaret Mead, a soft-hearted, progressive “culturalist” whose Coming of Age in Samoa was the most popular anthropological work of its time. It quickly sold close to half a million copies and remains in print today. Mead captured the public imagination and pretty much set the direction of academic research for the next fifty years. She contrasted the lives of the carefree and natural children of Samoa with the repressed and restrictive experiences of their counterparts in the United States. Together with Growing Up in New Guinea, her Coming of Age in Samoa provided a stark contrast between the purity and simplicity of the Melanesians and the puritanical neuroses of modern adolescents. While never denying the material advantages of industrial society, she criticized the repressive pathologies of its culture and held out the practices of a less complicated child-rearing practices with intimations of what Robert Redfield famously called a “folk society” to be in many ways superior. Mead’s popularizations led directly and indirectly to a re-evaluation of North American child-rearing practices, education and, by extension, to new thoughts about co-operation and competition in the larger society, all well before Dr. Spock told us about baby and child care and various experiments in “progressive” education became the innovations de jour in both public and private schools. For almost a half a century, Mead was the unchallenged Queen of Cultural Anthropology.

Over the past twenty years, however, Derek Freeman has written devastating critiques that affirmed that Mead’s idyllic account was false. In Margaret Mead in Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth and The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead, Freeman exposed what he persuasively demonstrated were crucial flaws in her research, defects that revealed her ideological biases more than the actual lives of her saints. Mead had insisted that, in Samoa, adolescent sexuality was open, happy and psychologically healthy when, statistically, her South Pacific paradise had one of the world’s highest rates of violent rape. This was not simply a matter of disputed findings of little interest outside academia. Mead’s story had an influence on educational and social policy innovations for decades. It was at least partly responsible for the growth of what critics have called the “permissiveness” that is said to dominate current thinking about parenting. Not only did she get the facts wrong, according to Freeman she was actually taken in by some amicable Samoan girls who, like many other subjects of social scientific inquiry, told Mead only what she wanted to hear. One, Fa’amotu, features prominently in Mead’s autobiography Blackberry Winter (1972) and, though of advanced age, was one of Freeman’s most important sources. The “hoaxing” of Margaret Mead, it seems, was a kind of gentle practical joke by a couple of girls with whom Mead had become quite friendly; if so, its unintended consequences were extraordinary. In Mead’s story and Freeman’s story about her story, an important ethical question is intertwined with methodological concerns related to the issue of “subjectivity.” How reliable are studies in which the observer becomes intimate with the observed? Who, in the end, is kidding whom? Of course, it is possible that the judgement of Paul Shankman will prove correct: “Freeman will be remembered for his tireless assault on Mead ... his ... fifteen minutes of fame will expire.” Otherwise, “his contributions are limited.” Margaret Mead was an iconic figure, the centre of a bold story and efforts to rehabilitate her reputation (for those who think rehabilitation is needed) continue.

Compared to what follows, the Mead-Freeman controversy seems quite light-hearted. In fact, the academic magazine Lingua Franca reported in its July/August, 1996 issue that the entire matter has taken to the stage. Robert J. Theodonatus reports: the staging of David Williamson’s play Heretic to sell-out audiences at the Sydney Opera House in Australia. In this play, Derek Freeman is depicted as a “lone-wolf” eccentric under attack by the anthropological profession. Margaret Mead appears in various guises of her “soul-sisters”: Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Onassis and Barbara Streisand. Franz Boas is dressed in a salmon coloured suit, yellow and black cowboy boots and a red bow-tie. The 80-year-old Derek Freeman loves it and has sat through the play five times. He has also reissued a second edition of his book now retitled, Franz Boas and the Flower of Heaven: “Coming of Age in Samoa and the Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead and has dedicated this edition to David Williamson.

Such good-natured sport, however serious the intellectual disputes that prompted it, would be utterly out of place in the next controversy, except perhaps as a remake of Mel Brooks’ The Producers, set in the Amazon, re-named The
Anthropologists and featuring natives in loincloths swinging from vines and singing “Springtime for Chagnon.” What is at stake is no longer a conflict about anthropological theory and method, but a battle about anthropology and genocide.

In the case of Napoleon Chagnon, we have a hard-hearted, reactionary sociobiologist whose Yanomamo: The Fierce People was the big anthropological hit of the past quarter-century. First published in 1968, it sold over 400,000 copies in its first year of publication alone, it has gone on to replace Coming of Age in Samoa as anthropology’s all-time marketing success. Widely praised, particularly by the likes of sociobiologist E. O. Wilson, it is the most conspicuous item in a series of works (including three prize-winning films) that catapulted Chagnon to international fame. The Fierce People described and to some degree perversely idealized an Amazonian tribe that Chagnon declared to be among the most aggressive and vicious societies known today.

Considered the largest “in tact” and “untouched” aboriginal population on earth, the Yanomamo were regarded as a unique and invaluable resource for anyone interested in probing the character of “natural man.” The picture was not pretty. Originally commissioned to take blood samples from this genetically pristine community as a control group for studies of radiation sickness among survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Chagnon went on to compose a full-scale ethnography of the Yanomamo people. According to standard anthropological textbooks, his account revealed that violence by men against women, violence among men in the same village, and warfare between villages are part of their daily life and the focus of their culture. The Yanomamo myth of origin self-identifies them as a violent people coming from blood. Motivated largely by the desire to obtain women, the internal warfare among Yanomamo villages was described as almost constant, a Hobbesian war of all (tribes, villages and individuals) against all.

In 2000, however, Patrick Tierney published a denunciation of Chagnon that went much farther than Freeman’s almost respectful demolition of Margaret Mead. Tierney accused Chagnon of deliberately falsifying his data, of staging local conflicts to demonstrate the ferocity of the Yanomamo, of precipitating actual conflict by playing favourites in the distribution of machetes and other goods, by countenancing rape, and by ignoring the fact that, over a period of thirty years, the rate of violent death among the Yanomamo was only about two persons per year in a population of about 15,000 with most of the killings taking place in three outbreaks that took place immediately after white men (twice including Chagnon) had taken themselves into Yanomamo territory. Indeed, Tierney stopped just a libel suit short of charging Chagnon of spreading, through no less than negligence and possibly malice of forethought, an epidemic of measles that killed hundreds and possibly thousands of aboriginals. (Chagnon, of course, was not alone; James Neel, his mentor and head of the Department of Human Genetics at the University of Michigan, as well as several unsavoury local characters including mining executives and corrupt politicians do not come out well either). The matter has prompted a special inquiry by the American Anthropological Association and has become the focus of debate on numerous websites, some of which defend Chagnon and some of which assail him.

At the end, Mead emerges as a naïve social reformer whose gullibility (or, perhaps, ideological blinders) set her political goals back a good deal because her scientific work was shown to be sloppy. Meanwhile, in Tierney’s account, Chagnon comes close to meeting the clinical definition of a sociopath whose efforts were consciously directed toward one of the most appallingly mendacious research programs in the history of social science.

The two cases involve two of the dominant anthropologists of the past century. Their legacies and those of their critics offer a caution about social scientific research. Both Mead and Chagnon employed the language (and, to various degrees, the legitimate methods) of their discipline in the interest of pre-existing political goals. Mead wanted to show that repressive North American social values led to unhealthy psychological development. Chagnon wanted to demonstrate that North American society had gone “soft” and that only the recovery of the aggressive attitudes and warlike behaviour of our tribal ancestors could bring us back from the edge of the abyss to which pacifism, socialism, feminism, postmodernism and a serious shortage of testosterone has led us. (Asked by one ingenuous graduate student if he did not find even one pacifist among the Yanomamo, Chagnon thundered that he did not go there to study cowards!).

Rising to Our Level of Mediocrity

What I have briefly outlined are only two of the most famous instances of controversy in modern anthropology. My point is to cast in high relief the image of a science in which opinion is nothing if not diverse, in which many different schools compete for government grants and graduate students, in which even corporations such as Kraft Foods have been known to finance anthropological expeditions into Generation-X kitchens to find out why post-adolescent Canadians (possibly including some of Vittorio Innocente’s classmates at York University) are so willing to eat the overpriced faux pasta known as Kraft Dinner™. It is now time (or past time) to shift toward the assigned subject of this essay, Nino Ricci. To do so, I would like to retrieve from the endnotes the name of another famous American, Kurt Vonnegut, a rightly respected novelist and a one-time aspirant anthropologist. Having completed undergraduate work in chemistry, he was drawn first to graduate work in physical anthropology at the University of Chicago. He describes his conversion to cultural anthropology thus:

I began with physical anthropology. I was taught how to measure the size of the brain of a human being who had been dead a long time. I bored a hole in his skull, and I filled it with grains of polished rice. Then I emptied the rice into a graduated cylinder. I found this tedious.
I switched to archaeology, and I learned something I already knew: that man had been a maker and smasher of crockery since the dawn of time. And I went to my faculty adviser, and I confessed that science did not charm me, that I longed for poetry instead. I was depressed. I knew my wife and my father would want to kill me, if I went into poetry.

My adviser smiled. “How would you like to study poetry that pretends to be scientific?” he asked me.

“Is such a thing possible?” I said.

He shook my hand. “Welcome to the field of ... cultural anthropology,” he said.”

To help us make the connection more explicit, it is well to consider the words of social scientist Robert Nisbet. Speaking of the unity of the creative act, he describes the way in which our common enterprise is divided into the “logic of discovery” and the “logic of demonstration.” The second, he says, is subject to rules and prescriptions; the first isn’t. “Of all the sins against the Muse,” he continues, “... the greatest is the assertion, or strong implication, in textbooks on methodology and theory construction that the first (and utterly vital) logic can somehow be summoned by obeying the rules of the second. Only intellectual drought and barrenness can result from that misconception.” So, although “the really vital unity of science and art lies in the ways of understanding reality, we should not overlook the important similarity of means of representing reality in the arts and sciences.”

This flies in the face of those who hold that “the rule of art is that it is nothing but itself, i.e., not to be confused with whatever else than itself it brings to mind. There is no ‘operationism’ in art in the technical sense ... art need not ‘represent’ anything whatsoever: the reality of art is in no way contingent upon its connection with something else that is real.” It says, instead, one of the prime tasks of art and, hence, of literature is the act of representation. Nino Ricci consistently achieves this in the opinion of one reviewer who wrote that Lives of the Saints “finds its fullness in a particular and peculiar time and place,” where Ricci displays his “brilliant descriptive powers.”

The representative or demonstrative dimension of Ricci’s work builds on his own experience. “At university,” he tells us, “I interviewed approximately 150 Italian immigrants as part of a project.” Vittorio, at the same university, does likewise. He becomes engaged in a small research project in which he must interview Italian immigrants about their lives. His work is self-absorbed, purfrectly and academically inept. He is powerless. He asks sterile questions. His subjects pretend to answer them. He pretends to believe their answers. All the while, “sensitive questions” are “thrown out from the start.” The interviews are mediated by technology. “Whatever eccentricity there might have been seems levelled by our recorders -the mood changed at once when they clicked on ... The recorder itself became a presence, a silent official in the room ...” Vittorio himself is less intrusive. He is no one. He feels an “unease” that grows “more insistent.” He is a lousy social scientist.

Transferring Allegiances

This does not mean that literature must strive to reproduce authentically what passes for reality. It remains an imaginative exercise equally at home in factories, in brothels, on streetcars winding their way through crowded cities. But even when the dealing with utopias, drug-induced hallucinations, or self-conscious language games like those in Christian Bök’s Eunoia, something (an act, a perception, or a desire) is being represented.

Regarding our ability to compose portraits, explicit efforts in art or science to represent an artist or a young man, Princeton anthropologist Clifford Geertz states unequivocally that “our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions are, like our central nervous system itself, cultural products.”

This leads anthropologists such as Bob Scholte to the “working hypothesis” that “intellectual paradigms, including literary theories and anthropological traditions, are culturally mediated, that is, they “contextually situated and relative.” From this, he infers that if “anthropological activity is culturally mediated, it is in turn subject to ethnographic description and ethnological analysis.” This puts anthropology in a “deeply problematic situation,” its activity is never only scientific. In addition, it is expressive or symptomatic of a presupposed cultural world of which it is itself an integral part.” Accordingly, “we must subject them (anthropological traditions) to further reflexive understanding, hermeneutic mediation, and philosophical critique.” We are also invited to understand the line between science and art, anthropology and literature to be essentially opaque. The literary guide to such an understanding encompasses such diverse sources as: Truman Capote’s “nonfiction novel,” In Cold Blood (1966), a book that told a true story except for certain changes made to improve upon reality; Norman Mailer’s proudly blurred book, The Armies of the Night (1968), which was cleverly subtitled History as a Novel; the Novel as History; Carlos Castaneda’s The Teachings of Don Juan, a gateway to the “new age” that purported to bring the wisdom of a Yaqui Indian sorcerer to the remnants of the “new left,” left many in doubt that Don Juan actually existed, and led Castaneda’s admirers to applaud Ronald Sukenick’s epistemological anarchism as displayed thus: All versions of “reality” are of the nature of fiction. There’s your story and my story, there’s the journalist’s story and the historian’s story, there’s the philosopher’s story and the scientist’s story ... Our common world is only a description ... reality ... is imagined.

In 1973, Hunter Thompson let us share some variation of his experiences in Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’73. Adds Louis Lapham: “In 1977 Alex Haley won a Pulitzer Prize for Roots, a romance passing as history. In 1980, Norman Mailer returned to win a Pulitzer Prize for The Executioner’s Song, a supposedly factual account of Gary Gilmour’s death,
Sometimes called “the new journalism,” sometimes called “memoirs,” fact and fiction have easily blended. Social scientists, by reconfiguring their narratives in scientistic rhetoric, have merely presented old stories in new forms. They may be presented in language appropriated from engineering (“systems theory”) and accompanied by mysterious mathematical formulae presented to persuade the initiated of the gravitas inherent in studies of the superficialities of social life. In all cases, what are put forward are “stories” intended to make a point, or possibly a career.

SavingAppearances in a Backward Society

Stephen Amidon writes: “Lives of the Saints is an honest and well-detailed story, evoking the everyday life of an Italian peasant community with commendable accuracy. The superstitions, politics, hard work and dreams of America that pervade the village are rendered with an almost anthropological rigour.” Ricci’s own attribution of importance influences on his work, however, bring his “realism” into question. “Realism,” says Terry Eagleton, “aspires to a unity of subject and object, of the psychological and the social.” On balance, though, Ricci’s ethnography, is less concerned with the community than it is with the individual. It is less obliged to anthropology than to psychology. He pays homage to Robertson Davies’ Fifth Business and acknowledges his debt to Northrop Frye, who taught him to weave the story of an individual into larger mythological patterns. As well, when acknowledging his intellectual debt for assistance in creating the community of Valle del Sole, he confesses: “I drew from my reading of Freud and Jung in imagining how that kind of community would operate.” He acknowledges his primary debt to Freud insofar as the key event of Where She Has Gone is concerned. “You could argue,” he says, “that civilization began when this [incest] taboo was created, that the guilt that created led to civilization. And there’s something formative about the incest taboo. Anthropologists have found that it was one of the first taboos.” If not quite “original sin,” Ricci’s encounter with incest comes close. The entire trilogy, says Roland Merullo, “is a brilliant study of the way shame is passed down through generations. Like any inherited illness, shame grows silently in the innocence of childhood, then stifles the victim’s own blossoming, never allowing him to see this beauty in himself or to allow others to see it.” According to Merullo, “Nino Ricci understands this dynamic, and gives it its rightful place in the pantheon of human misery.” The misery he exploits is never fully explained. Ricci’s depiction of the Innocente family is “without a tinge of preaching, without the mercy of even a momentary joy,” yet Merullo concludes that at the end, poor Vittorio is allowed to “reach a sort of peace.”

I cannot agree. Vittorio is used up and abandoned. Ricci has bigger fish to fry. He also lists among his influences Shakespeare, Dostoevsky and Proust. “Northrop Frye,” adds Jeffrey Canton, “provided a key for Ricci’s exploration of myth, ritual and superstition.” So, Ricci’s Lives of the Saints is declared a “lyrical and evocative portrayal of rural life in the Apennine mountains of Italy.” We believe in the “palpable concreteness of the world he creates.” We accept his description of “incomparably provincial, narrow, ignorant” peasants.” We allow him to “make sense of how rural, superstitious, clannish, pagan Italy buffets a young boy’s psyche and poisons his innocence.”

Aspiring to Alienation

Says contemporary American pragmatist Richard Rorty: “In my sense of ethnocentrism, to be ethnocentric is simply to work by our own lights. The defence of ethnocentrism is simply that there are no other lights to work by. Beliefs suggested by another individual or another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs which we already have.”

Says political theorist Henry Kariel: “For social scientists to begin their projects where they are located—in their forums, classrooms, committees, corridors, offices, institutes, conventions, conferences, or journals such as this one—is to engage in a form of politics in which they proceed pragmatically to test their capacity for welcoming strangers.” The novelist and the anthropologist try to tell stories about the “other.” They merely choose slightly different means to do so.

Rising to the Fall

Ricci, unlike anthropologists, is content to display the symbolic and material culture and to illustrate the personality configurations in different infrastructural settings. In so doing he effectively demonstrates the plasticity of human behaviour. He shows how, in a remarkably short period of time, not only Vittorio Innocente but most of the characters in his novels are compelled to adapt to changing circumstances. What he does not explicitly provide are explanations of the relationship between those circumstances—ecological, economic, reproductive and technological—that anthropology seeks to generate. He gives us fanciful data to which anthropological theory could be usefully applied. It is not his task to go further; the language game of the fictional writer is different from the language game of the social scientist.

What he might have done, however, would have been to confront Vittorio’s genuine dilemma. Still connected by memory to the traditional world of Valle del Sol yet implicated in amorality of postmodernity, Vittorio is silenced by the predicament of seeking defining not his moral code but the his ambivalence in choosing among the structures of moral codes themselves. Conflicted between a morality based on ahistorical verities such as are embedded in the religious language of sin and what has
Becoming Political

The truth of the matter is that it is impossible for an artist or a social scientist to claim to express an unassailable, to say nothing of an unalterable, truth about any aspect of the human condition. As Umberto Eco, among many others, has written: "The idea of the universe, as the totality of the cosmos, is one that comes from the most ancient cosmography ... But can one describe, as if seeing from above, something within which we are contained, of which we are a part, and from which we cannot escape?" Natural scientists came to understand this necessary modesty decades ago and now speak cautiously of probabilities rather than inescapable causalties. On a useful spectrum, science is concerned with questions, religion is concerned with answers, and anthropology and novel writing waver tentatively in between. This is not to embrace unqualified relativism. There most likely is a real world that is not simply the product of my, your or Bishop Berkeley’s imagination. It is filled with crabgrass and wildebeest and artists; it is linked by the process of evolution and family obligations. There are plenty of phenomena the existence of which have been so fully demonstrated that only the innocently ignorant or the contumaciously perverse would deny. There are patterns of thought and behaviour that we can at least provisionally identify. For many artists and social scientists, this is not enough. They are offended by their own lack of finality. They want their art and their research to get somewhere. They want to be something. They wish for their journey to be over. When distressed by the absence of finality, when eager to state something (anything!) with confidence, when eager to close debate, the defensive authors of what librarians are compelled to call either fiction or non-fiction make claims they can never redeem. In the alternative, when liberated by the knowledge that there is no final resting place, that nothing can be said with complete certainty, when indifferent to making claims at all, those same authors are released to assume a more playful pose, to remain lucid without being committed, to see things not as competing realities but as diverse. There are, of course, limits. One cannot be totally disengaged. Actions, even verbalizations, have effects and morality is called into play when one's actions have public consequences. Social science and imaginative writing are not entities with firm and fixed definitional boundaries. They are activities. They are what cultural anthropologists and novelists do. At the present time, their respective doings have important ethical and political dimensions. Anthropologist Marvin Harris is quite right to strike a judgmental note when he denounce irresponsible epistemological relativity:

The doctrine that all fact is fiction and that all fiction is fact [as] a morally depraved doctrine. It is “a doctrine that conflates the attacked with the attacker; the tortured with the torturer; and the killed with the killer. It is true that at Dachau there was the SS’s story and the prisoners’ story; that at My Lai there was Calley’s story and kneeling mother's story; and that at Kent State there was the guardsmen’s story and the story of the students shot in the back, five hundred feet away. Only a moral cretin would wish to maintain that all these stories could be equally true.

Nevertheless, both the anthropology of culture and the art of the novelist are modes of political action. Each differently has the capacity to shed light on previously undisclosed possibilities. So, the Ricci trilogy could have emerged into an openly demonstrated strategy for political action, and not “beached up” poor Vittorio to brood plaintively on a bushy sandbar off the coast of Kenya. Henry S. Kariel might have been writing about Nino Ricci when he said: Exhilarating as well as depressing experiences remain unconnected. The private self-denying language of the social sciences is matched, it would seem, by artistic ventures: novelists, movie directors, playwrights, painters, and poets seem to be equally unable to make explicit the explicitly political dimensions of their works. Neither social scientists nor artists create public structures for the feelings they release the malaise they exploit, the little excitements they keep generating. Nor do journalists, culture critics, social commentators, and political polemicists; they fastidiously document prevailing miseries but fail to relate them to the underlying forces of political life.

Deprived of usable myths and rituals, it is telling that Nino Ricci has fled not only from the surface facts of modernity but also from the suppressed, deflected, and ultimately wasted impulses at the political margin where public transactions fade into our unshared private lives. Uncommunicative and impotent when confronted with the disconnected, pervers e and banal facts of life, Vittorio Innocente departs in silence, disaffected and narcotized by dying sparks in the night. He murmurs: Language seems sometimes such a crude tool to have devised, obscuring as much as it reveals, as if we are not much further along than those half-humans of a million years ago with their fires and their bits of chipped stone; though maybe like them all we strive for in the end is simply to find our own way to hold back for a time the encroaching dark.

Leaving Vittorio Innocente alone to fret in the darkness, Ricci has taken off to explore Jesus from whom he seeks “some bit of hope, some secret he might reveal that would help make the world over... a doorway he would have had me pass through, from darkness into light.” Whether or not this demonstrates other than traditional escapism is far beyond my judgement, and so I must wait to see what happens next. Ricci may continue to chronicle the alienated within society, reach for inspiration above society, or emerge politically as one of the “artists manoeuvering in a postmodern manner, actors treating all the world as stage, espionage agents prevailing in no-man’s-land, and children playing with reality [who] are at one in enacting their lives in the darkest of times. Unheroic, amoral and composed,” says Henry Kariel, “they are our last best hope.”
Coda

“We evade death-oblivion when we interact with those of the world’s powers which, once touched and expressed, combine their vitality with ours. The difficulty is that we get to know our resources for such manoeuvring only when we draw on them, as we learn to walk by walking or, less precisely, as we reduce the distance between an abstract notion of what it means to act and being in action. ...Success in such politics demand’s the performer’s detachment from the dregs of empiricism, from what he has come to know excessively well: the results of past action. To change these results—the prevailing patterns of behaviour—he must distrust what he knows; that is, he must free himself from the epistemology of empiricism by treating all evidence as mere provocation. Accepting no fixed definition of reality, he is loyal only to an unsymbolized whole in which to live is to die, in which the process of dying is intrinsic to living. Ambivalent toward all divided segments of experience, toward all parts being played, the performer’s commitment, in short, is to endless play itself.”

For at least this Ricci reader, Vittorio’s room for play is terminated in an unsatisfying endgame as Innocente is left, not musing on “the veranda of a flat ... above a food shop in the island’s single town,” but flopping—an exhausted cuttlefish on the beach.


Endnotes

1. Nino Ricci, Lives of the Saints (Dunvegan: Cormorant, 1990), In a Glass House (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), Where She Has Gone (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1997).
7. The emic strain in cultural anthropology is given philosophical sustenance in Peter Winch, The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958). It includes a legion of cultural idealists, structuralists, symbolic interactionists, phenomenologists, ethnomethodologists, and sundry eclectics and obscurantists. Within this broad tradition was the meritorious Franz Boas (1858-1942) of whom Marvin Harris said: “It is obvious from the research strategy [Boas] followed throughout his career that he was perfectly content to continue his particularistic studies in complete independence of their nomothetic payoff.” The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture (New York: Crowell, 1968), p. 262. From the mind of Boas grew the more ambitious Margaret Mead.
8. Ricci, Where She Has Gone, p. 199. Fabrizio has not gone to America nor taken university classes, but he is among the more sympathetic characters in the trilogy. The “path not taken” by Vittorio may lead to genuine grace.

Regarding academic turf wars, I empathize with Kurt Vonnegut, former anthropologist and novelist: “I visited the Anthropology Department of the University of Chicago a few months ago. Dr. Sol Tax was the only faculty member from my time who was still teaching there. I asked him if he knew what had become of my classmates ... Many of them, ... he said, were practising what he called ‘urban anthropology,’ which sounded an awful lot like sociology to me. (We used to look down on the sociologists. I couldn’t imagine why and can’t imagine why.) If I had stayed with anthropology as a career, I would now be doing, probably, what I am doing, which is writing about acculturated primitive people (like myself) in Skyscraper National Park.” Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage for the 1980s (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1991), p. 126.


12. Similarly, generic definitions can be found in most introductory texts.
13. Evidently fed up with postmodernists, subjectivists in general, and the aforementioned Clifford Geertz in particular, Craig B. Stanford joins with other “biological anthropologists” who say that “in an era in which the concept of culture has been
so widely appropriated by groups all over the intellectual and political spectrum” and in which “attempts by anthropologists to define culture have devolved from a lively, genuinely intellectual debate into a petty squabble over whose thinking is in fashion and whose is outmoded ... it may be a good idea [to] ditch the word altogether.” See “The Cultured Ape?” The Sciences (May/June, 2000), p. 43.


19. In anticipation of the objection that I am uselessly indulging in “merely” semantic concerns, I hasten to say that if we do not concern ourselves with semantics, we will quite literally not know what we are talking about.


It should be remembered that the formal study of literature (other than the classics of Greece and Rome) was also disdained by many leading universities until well into the nineteenth-century, but even then the parting of literature and anthropology was becoming apparent. As A. L. Gérard said at the time: “The belles lettres fragrance that clings to the humanities repelled the social scientists, and terms such as “belletrist” and “belletristic ... assumed a faintly derisive shade of frivolity and inconsequence.” Quoted in René Wellek, “Literature and Its Cognates,” in Philip P. Wiener, ed., Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Vol. 3 (New York: Scribner’s, 1973), p. 83.


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Eagleton, op. cit., p. 64.
44. Though both Margaret Mead and Napoleon Chagnon were influential within professional anthropology, they are cited here, however, because they have arguably had the most effect on the attentive public. Other contestants for the prize of chief authority in the academic discipline would include Franz Boas, Claude Levi-Strauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and a host of others, depending on when and to whom the question was asked.
47. More to the intellectual point, the fountainhead of sociobiology, E. O. Wilson, recalls that Margaret Mead invited him to dinner in 1976: “I was nervous then,” he confessed, “expecting America’s mother to scold me about the nature of genetic determinism. I had nothing to fear. She wanted to stress that she, too, had published ideas on the biological basis of social behavior.” E. O. Wilson, *Naturalist* (Washington: Island Press, 1994), p. 331. Of course, had Wilson paid more attention to Mead’s early work with her second husband, the biologist Gregory Bateson, he might not have been so surprised.
48. Napoleon Chagnon, *Yanomamo:* The Fierce People, 4th edition (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1992). The tribe in question has had its name variously spelled. Chagnon uses Yanomamo, as will I; others, however, write Yanomami and Yanomama.
50. Two of Tierney’s supporters (though Tierney is more restrained) announced that Chagnon’s research “in its scale, ramifications and sheer criminality and corruption is unparalleled in the history of anthropology... beyond the imagining of even a Joseph Conrad (though not, perhaps, a Josef Mengele.” Quoted in John Leo, “Savage Fantasy,” U.S. News and World Report, Vol. 129, No.23 (11 December, 2000).


52. Chagnon is not alone among anthropologists accused of brutality. Described as “exploitative,” “paranoid,” and just a little “mad,” the career of mid-twentieth century British anthropologist Tom Harrisson has recently been returned to the attention of the public. Judith M. Heimann’s The Most Offending Soul Alive (London: Aurum, 2002) presents the misogynist, colonialist Tom Harrisson (“thief,” “drunkard,” resistance leader in Japanese-occupied Borneo, curator of the Sarawak Museum who was subsequently banned from Sarawak for life) in a remarkably redeeming light. Though boorish and relentlessly ambitious, Harrisson’s politics were not those of Chagnon. Among other things, this complex and difficult man was an innovator whose Mass-Observation movement, begun in 1937, was dedicated to a populist anthropology. Among the first works of this people’s ethnography was a survey that sold over 100,000 copies within ten days of publication making Harrisson a “pioneer media personality” and, temporarily, “a household name.” See Jeremy MacClancy, “Cage Me a Harrisson,” Times Literary Supplement (August 14, 2002).


55. Ibid., p. 6.

56. Peter McHugh et al., op. cit., p. 155.


58. Ricci, loc. cit.


60. Ibid., p. 275.

61. Ibid., p. 276.


63. Clifford Geertz, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man,” in J. R. Platt, ed., New Views of Man (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965). It is not surprising that Derek Freeman, calls this “the most egregiously absurd formulation of the tabula rasa assumption of Boasian culturalism to be found anywhere in the literature of anthropology. Boasian culturalism,” he adds, “has been rendered ineffectual and obsolete by fundamentally significant advances, since the 1930s, in all of the life sciences.” The Fateful Hoarding of Margaret Mead, p. 213.


72. Ibid.


76. Bencivenga, loc. cit.

Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*:
Walking Down Both Sides of the Street at the Same Time
By Marta Dvorak

It is now a commonplace that a large part of the writing produced in English-speaking Canada today is being done by immigrants and by the children of immigrants. This voice, generated by people from all corners of the globe - Nino Ricci, Mary di Michele, Pier Giorgio di Cicco (Italy), Dionne Brand, Austin Clarke, Neil Bissoondath (the Caribbean), Rienzi Crusz, Michael Ondaatje, Yen Begamudr, Bharati Mukherjee (South Asia), Joy Kogawa, Fred Wah (Japan and China), Josef Skvorecky, Andrew Suknaski, George Faludy (Central and Eastern Europe), has finally been acknowledged by critics and a wide reading public.

The postmodern assessment valuing diversity and plurality is undoubtedly linked to the visible role that ethnic and racial minorities play in Canadian culture today. From a centralizing culture identifying the concept of centre with that of the universal and the eternal, there has been a shift to reassert the local, the regional, the non-totalizing, through a flux of contextualized identities, defined in terms of difference and specificity. Since ethnic and racial minorities can neither totally assimilate nor entirely separate from the dominant culture, torn between the old generations and the new, they resort to complex, creative cultural negotiations designed to confront that dominant force with the history and traditions of their parents. For these writers working within minoritized groups, Canadian critic Janice Kulyk Keefer suggests that Janus, the Roman deity with two heads looking in opposite directions, would be a particularly appropriate daemon.

In *Splitting Images*, Linda Hutcheon observes that the modes of representation of these writers range from the elegiac to the ironic, from nostalgic yearning devoid of any distance, to ambivalence and paradox, and beyond to the distance and separation an ironic mode implies. Joseph Pivato points out that Canadian writers of Italian origin who continue to write in their native language generate a literature of exile, tending to focus less on the contrast of the two cultures than on their nostalgia for the homeland they have exiled themselves from. Filippo Salvatore goes further to claim that Italian Canadian writing belongs to the elegiac mode of loss and mourning whether the writing be in the old language or in the new.

This study will focus on a novel that caused a sensation in the literary world. First published in 1990 by a totally unknown young writer, Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* won both the Governor General’s Award and the Smithbooks/Books in Canada First Novel Award, became the No. 1 bestseller of 1991, and has been published in eight languages and eleven countries. *Lives of the Saints* retraces a family’s emigration from Italy, focusing on the ethnic roots of its child narrator, particularly on his attachment to his mother. Nevertheless, Canadian-born Nino Ricci does take sufficient distance to stamp his work with ambivalence and paradox. In a process he continues in the sequel *A Glass House* (1993), he first sets up a world of duality, a solid dichotomous structure organised round the juxtaposition of binary oppositions, but then subjects them to a shifting perspective, a paradoxical double positioning.

The text is based on an accumulation of opposites that set immigrant generations in Canada against the ancestors that have been left behind. We find the juxtapositions: east/west, town/country, medieval/modern, the agricultural/the industrial, public/private, saint/sinner. But the major oppositions seem to be those concerning space and time. The contrast Old World/New World corresponds to the juxtaposition past/present. The “hot July day in the year 1960” corresponding to the narrator’s childhood and the beginning of the narrated events contrasts with the implicit narratorial present. The narrator as voice, an older voice (as opposed to the narrator as character) is made explicit through tense only rarely. But the narrator’s
discursive practice often fluctuates from the deliberately limited point of view of the naive narrator to the perspective of an older, wiser speaker, wielding sophisticated imagery.

This shifting back and forth on the axis of temporality occurs again and again in the narrative itself both on a historical plane and a mythical one, in order to depict and magnify a common generational experience. The narrator abounds with tales of past migrations to America, his grandfather's own father leaving Italy and his family, wandering through Africa, then Argentina before heading on to North America, where he promptly disappeared. Those left behind can but muse on the new generations that may be multiplying on the other side of the ocean: “a brood of creamy-brown cousins who prayed in African but swore in Italian” (p. 160). On the historical plane, a distinction is made between the migration before World War II, when after an absence of months or years the father would come back home with his foreign earnings, and the subsequent one-way departures:

The men left, and a few years later wives and children and sometimes ageing parents followed, land and livestock sold off; clothes and old pots packed up in wooden trunks made by the village carpenter, houses left abandoned, their doors and windows boarded up. (p. 161)

Although the new Americans are still attached to their roots, sending back money to their families, financing projects of their community, and even come back to visit on special occasions such as the annual festival of their village's patron saint, it is evident that the attraction of the New World implies the death of the Old. Allusions abound to what amounts to an exodus to the west, the new, the future, leaving behind images of decline, decay, and rot.

Paradise Lost

The historical decline finds its parallel in the mythical dimension the narrator creates for the land of his ancestors. As Claude Levi-Strauss points out in his Anthropologie Structurale all myth refers to past events (before the creation of the world, or at the dawn of humanity: in any case, “a long time ago”). But the intrinsic value attributed to myth derives from the fact that these events that allegedly occurred at some moment in time, form a permanent structure that refers simultaneously to the past, the present, and the future. Myth, like political ideology, actually has a double structure: both historical and a-historical, as demonstrates the reaction of the first generation English Romantics to the French Revolution, both event and promise of regeneration (best illustrated by Wordsworth's famous line, “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive”).

Nino Ricci's use of myth, as we shall see, performs this double function, allowing generations of children through tales at their grandfather's knee to connect with their ancestors removed in time, allowing generations of immigrants to bridge the gap with those removed in space, and operating for both groups in an anticipatory and prophetic fusion that attempts to make sense of both old and new land experience the better to confront their respective futures:

Once, my grandfather had told me, long before the time of Christ, the land around Valle del Sole had all been flat, unpeopled jungle, rich and fertile, the trees a mile high and the river a mile wide. At last a giant named Gambelunghe had come down from the north and cleared the land with his two great oxen, then planted his crops - a thousand hectares of grain, a thousand hectares of vineyards, a thousand hectares of olives, a thousand hectares of vegetables, and a thousand hectares of pasture for his sheep. But in the winter, when Gambelunghe was asleep, wolves came and broke into his stores, then fell finally on Gambelunghe himself and tore him apart, his head dropped into the river, where it floated down to the sea, and his limbs scattered pell-mell across the countryside (...) In the spring, a strange thing happened - the fingers on Gambelunghe's severed hands began to grow, those on the left growing into five women, those on the right into five men. When they were fully grown the men married the women and began to farm Gambelunghe's land, one couple for each field. (pp. 52-3)

The double dimension, historical and a-historical, can be perceived in the references to a historical/chronological temporality, that of a pre-Christian era, events occurring even during specific seasons, the historicity reinforced by the geographical precisions (“from the north”). Yet simultaneously, we are confronted with an a-historical lexis evoking a vague past (‘once’, ‘long before’), a pre-Adamic Eden characterized by dimensions larger than life (‘the trees a mile high, the river a mile wide’), an age of giant beings equal to the task of creating a culture commensurate with the superlatively bounteous nature. With its incantatory repetition of ‘a thousand hectares of, (a sign of unlimited plenty rather than numerical precision), the pentad of variations (“grain”, “vineyards”, “olives”, “vegetables”, “pasture”) signalling opulence, the legend, in fact, relates the creation of the Garden. It differs from the Biblical account in that there are five Adams and five Eves in an Eden that has already known violence and death, and no longer offers all that is desirable:

But soon jealousy broke out among them: the one with the sheep was jealous of the one with the grain, for though he had meat and wool, he had no bread; the one with the grain was jealous of the one with the vineyards, for though he had bad bread, he bad no wine (p. 53)
and so on throughout the pentad. The legend is in effect the story of Paradise Lost, a paradise that is actually lost twice. Lost a first time through external agents (wolves), then rebuilt, but already less than perfect, unity having given way to division and deprivation, and the extraordinary to the ordinary (one giant replaced by ten humans), then lost a second time through an internal agent (invidia). The fighting that follows results in divine intervention, but rather than expelling Adam from Eden, God destroys the Garden itself “to punish them He caused mountains and rocks to grow up out of the ground, and made the soil tired and weak” (p. 53). The myth actually structures the perspective that the narrator gives us of the country of his parents, providing the framework for lyricism, a nostalgic yearning for a golden past, a complaint for a society that is at once timeless and yet a pale shadow of its former splendid self. If Nino Ricci’s work does belong to the elegiac mode of Italian-Canadian writing as claimed by F. Salvatore, the mourning over the loss of roots, the sorrow for the distance that cannot be bridged between two irrevocably different generational experiences is magnified to include mourning for a different loss, sorrow for the tarnishing of archetype, made possible through the new perspective of his adopted land. Double allegiance? Lucidity of the immigrant gaze? We cannot help but remark the omnipresence of decline and degradation.

The mythical dimension finds its historical equivalent in the narrator’s “factual” description of the neighbouring town of Rocca Secca, death “had once been a great centre, renowned for its goldsmiths and bronzeworks”. But “in recent times its fortunes had declined”. The a-historical has given place to the historical, with its economic and political lexicon: the wolves have been replaced by tax collectors, law-makers, and industries. It is because people now want to “buy things made in the city by machines rather than things made by hand that whole sections of the town stood abandoned”(p. 60). Ricci once more depicts a particular generational experience by relating the “true” story, reinforced through historical details, of the last member of the Giardini family, a powerful landowner who served as an officer in the war in Abyssinia, wandered home as a beggar (the Odyssean parallel is striking), then proceeded to remodel the grounds of his estate “in the image of a primal paradise, importing tropical trees, flowers, shrubs and building a great conservatory to house them in winter, beginning next on the fauna, monkeys, gazelles, strange tropical birds, until he had turned his hill into a small piece of Africa, the air at night resounding with strange jungle sounds” (p. 61).

As can be expected, the primal paradise, having been rebuilt through human, not divine intervention, is lost again, and at Giardini’s death, the property falls into decay. The contrast between the present participle enumerating human acts, the various steps in “setting up” the paradise (“remaking”, “importing”, “building”, “beginning”), and the subsequent accumulation of past participles to form passives (“abandoned”, “left to ruin”, “overgrown”, “left to warp”, “allowed to grow unchecked”) suggests that striving is vain, since there is no future generation to carry on. The estate functions as a synecdoche, representing Italy, a nation in decline because she is losing her children to the New World, but representing as well a mythical Golden Age and a world of traditional values doomed to a process of degradation, yet always just tantalizingly out of reach.

Our narrator, we learn at the end of the novel, is relating his story from that part of the New World his village calls the Sun Parlour, i.e. a new part of America called Canada’ (p. 162). The term is ironic for a landscape that reveals itself to be rather barren as our hero rides off into the sunset with his new-found father in a “coal-dust-filled train”, rolling across “a desolate landscape, bleak and snow-covered as far as the eye could see” (p. 234). A whole ocean now separates him from the land of his birth, the enormity of distance explaining the undercurrent of the elegiac mode throughout the novel. There is a constant dialectic between the lyricism of the pastoral descriptions of the homeland as garden, with its allusions to fertility, and the matter-of-fact references to the slums, sooty factories, and bug-infested shacks (p. 162) of America. On the one hand the sublime, the natural, on the other the trivial, the artificial. The outside, the world of scarlet suns and golden wheat (food in its natural state), is contrasted with the inside, the world with telephones in every room, whose greatest gift to mankind is houses so warm you can “walk around in your socks even in the middle of winter” (p.163), where the bread (food transformed by the manufacturing process), tasteless and so further adulterated by the addition of sugar, “sticks in your mouth like glue” (p. 163).

The lyrical tone applied to the Old World, the world of his parents, associates female sexuality with water, at times allusively: “At the river, which was swollen from the rains, we waded for a while along the shore, the hem of my mother's skirt catching the water and clinging to her thighs, translucent”(p. 32), at times simply and naturally, the warm water of the hot spring gushing out of the entrails of the earth evoking simultaneously the womb and the origins of primeval life: “My mother and I bathed together in the pool, my mother letting her dress full casually to the cave floor and standing above me for a moment utterly naked, smooth and sleek, as if she had just peeled back an old layer of skin, before climbing into the water beside me” (p. 33). What a contrast between this private bathing scene in a natural setting, and the public, even perverse, situation of the modern North American bathroom:

Fabrizio, ready with facts on any subject, had told me once that in America everyone lived in houses of glass.

“When you’re taking a bath anyone can come by and look at you. You can see all the women in their underwear. People look at each other all the time, over there, because nobody believes in God” (p. 163)

And what a contrast between the narrator’s mother, another Eve, mother of mankind, naked, smooth, and sleek, her womb swollen with life, and the women in America all walking around in underwear and socks!
The frequent use of bathos in the novel, the passage from poetic diction to prosaic terminology, from the sublime to the trivial, derives from the narrator's double allegiance and thus double positioning. The bathetic process can be at the expense of his adopted land or of the land of his fathers. Ricci generally sets up a dichotomy, but then blur the borders, bridges the gap. There is a constant shifting of perspective, resulting in ambivalence and paradox. The narrator's village, for example, has still not been endowed with electricity. But thanks to money that American relatives have donated to make the annual festival a triumph, the village has obtained a rock band with electrical equipment. When they turn on the lights, Valle del Sole's "medieval square" is transformed into "a pocket of rich modernity" (p. 99). The villagers, in shock, speak of la luce (a term with Biblical resonances) as "magic" a "miracle", an "oracle". The author chooses to deflate the exalted description through the use of the rhetorical figure of the anti-climax, parallel to a shift in point of view. It is Cristina, the narrator's mother who, standing out from the beginning with her superior education and cosmopolitan world view, deflates the effect with her remark: "As if no one has ever seen a light bulb before" (p. 99). What indeed can be more trivial and lowly than a light bulb, and what could be more ridiculous than a society that elevates it to the rank of the divine?

Throughout the novel, the explicit message of the discourse is that Italy is the land of the marvellous, the magical, the miraculous. The cult of the saints is but one such manifestation, the school teacher affirming to her pupils that "the saints were not merely the ghosts of some mythical past but an ever-present possibility", the mundane and everyday verging always on the miraculous—"Who knows," she'd said once, "if there isn't a saint among us right now?" (p. 40).

It is on this plane that the reader is to receive the parallels drawn between the narrator's mother (whose name Cristina, particularly the diminutive Cristi, already suggests a female Christ figure), and Saint Cristina, who was persecuted for breaking the conventions and defying the superstitions of her time, proving herself as defiant and irrepressible as our heroine. To reinforce this dimension, parallels are suggested by a figure of supreme religious authority, the bishop, who points out the shame the Virgin Mary must have endured on account of her extramarital pregnancy, the hardships she had to undergo, and the mother's pain she must have felt when her first-born son was maltreated. The comparison with Cristina, who was impregnated during her husband's absence, becomes explicit in an ironic remark that the narrator "overhears":

"Still holding her nose up like a queen," I overheard Maria Maiale say at Di Lucci's. "Quella Maria! Maybe it's a virgin birth."

"Maybe it's the other Mary, Magdalena, you're thinking about," Di Lucci said.

The irony is a double one, for the verbal irony deliberately intended by the speaker is counteracted by the dramatic irony of the reader: who knows indeed, if this is not the incarnation of the ever-present possibility, the saint among us now.

Constant Flux

The opposition made between saint and sinner, yet the simultaneous blurring of borders, the constant flux, is part of the continuous interplay of text and counter-text. On an explicit plane, the narrator's grandfather and community set themselves up in opposition to the generations that have exiled themselves in godless America. Yet on the undercurrent implicit level, we can remark that their relationship with their patron saints is a purely commercial one. We learn that "the villagers, jealous that Castilucci's patron, St. Joseph, had been more powerful than their Michael, had applied to Rome for a change of saints. As their replacement they chose the Virgin, who had a long history of successful intercessions with a God who was sometimes distant and unapproachable; and though Rome had denied their request, they had finally made the change on their own authority" (p. 73). A saint is but a consumer product: if you are dissatisfied, you exchange it for a better model.

In the same way, the society of the narrator's birth seems on the surface to be permeated with religious values. Religion functions even as a measurement of time. Events are referred to, not according to the calendar, but according to saints' days. Language is studded with invocations to the Deity. Even the swearing is of a blasphematory nature; in other words, it is a violation of the Biblical prohibition against pronouncing the name of God. Breaking the linguistic taboo, which is acknowledged in the act of defiance, in itself demonstrates a preoccupation with the sacred. But let us look more closely at the circumstances in which God is invoked. As E. Benveniste points out, society requires the name of God to be invoked in solemn circumstances—this is the sermon:

"Car le senent est un sacramentum, un appel au dieu, témoin suprême de vérité, et une dévotion au châtiment divin en cas de mensonge ou perjure, C'est le plus grave engagement que l'homme puisse contracter et le plus grave manquement qu'il puisse commettre, car le perjure releve non de la justice des hommes, mais de la sanction divine."

How odd then, that this most serious commitment that a human being can make, this most solemn sacred promise, should be so consistently linked to violence:
I swear by God I'll throttle you with my bare hands. (p. 182)
…so help me God, I'll pray every day of my life that you rot in hell. (p. 182)
I swear I'll kill her, even if I have to rot in hell for it (p. 109)
I pray to God that he wipes this town and all its stupidities off the face of the earth. (p. 184)

If we pierce through the religious veneer, we find in fact that the world of the ancestors is not a paradise, but a world of superstition, ignorance, bribery and corruption, poverty, hatred and envy, a world of violence. Violence is present at all levels of society, present within the family, within the community, and among communities. Husbands beat and mutilate their wives, fathers routinely whip their sons, neighbours do not hesitate to shoot a fellow citizen's hand off in a quarrel over a chicken, mothers come to blows over the quarrels of their children, children brutalize their schoolmates to the point of driving them to self-violence. The community attacks non-conformists, those who, like Cristina, transgress the social code. When they learn electricity will be brought to another town but not extended to them, townsmen go on the rampage and set fire to all the machinery. Even their God is violent: the grandfather's death is described as 'an act of God: some invisible fist' strikes him down just as he is about to strike his wife with a fire-poker (pp. 26-7).

In the narrative discourse, we can notice the abundant recurrence of a lexis based on the verb “to kill”, with all possible variations: break heads, throttle, crack skulls, slit throats, cut out eyes, destroy, etc. The greatest concentration, ironically enough, is to be found in the stories of the lives of the saints, who are systematically mutilated, their breasts cut off and their tongues torn out, skinned alive, beheaded, pounded to death in a marble mortar, tom to pieces with iron hooks, or thrown into tubs of boiling oil. This is Nino Ricci's counter-text at work, counterbalancing the paradise of the elegiac mode of representation with the depiction of a violent, repressive society, a hell.

A New Eden

The place where Cristina has decided to take her son and unborn child is not only an Eden before the Fall (“an unfallen world without mountains or rocky earth” [p. 162]), but an Eden that extends into the future, an Eden that will never know a Cain and Abel. Canada is a land where violence actually abates: the narrator's father, whose only method of communication in Italy was 'with the back of his hand' (p. 95), has been transformed - the 'black-haired ogre' has become “a tired-eyed man” (p. 234). That Canada the Sun Parlour is a land where people learn to live together in peace and harmony is illustrated by an allegorical little anecdote:

Before the war two men from our region, Salvatore Mancini of Valle del Sole and Umberto Longo of Castilucci, had smuggled themselves across the ocean and settled there- and it was the first time in history, people said, that a man from Valle del Sole and one from Castilucci had been able to work together without slitting each others throats- and now one by one their relatives had begun to join them, every year the tide increasing. (pp. 161-62)

Do these people cohabitate here in peace because they share a bond, the courage of having left behind “the familiar comfort of family and village for an uncertain destiny across the sea” (p. 163)? Or is it because they, like the narrator, accept paradox, are capable of double positioning, acknowledge that there are two Americas: the first the world of hard work and economic realities, the other “more a state of mind than a place, a paradise that shimmered just beneath the surface of the seen”, never entered into but always looming around “as a possibility” (p. 162). For the generations of immigrants having arrived and still to arrive, as well as for their children, the New World, not the Old, is the true place of myth. America, independently of its national components Canada or USA, is a word that conjures up a world, “like a name uttered at the dawn of creation” (p. 160), a world that belongs to yet transcends history. It evokes a mythical past with all of eternity in front of it (Genesis), and a glorious future (Corinthians). Its double structure, historical and a-historical, the seen and the unseen, the surface and the depths, that allows the past, the present, and the future to coexist, is what makes it an ‘always potential’ paradise. What could be more natural than that such a land should produce a writer who is a master of ambivalence and paradox, yearning yet rejecting, adept at shifting modes of representation, bridging states, who actually manages to walk down both sides of the street at the same time?

Dvorak, Marta. (Fall 1994). “Nino Ricci’s Lives of the Saints: Walking Down Both Sides of the Street at the Same Time.” Commonwealth (Dijon); Vol. 17, 1; Periodicals Archive Online. pg. 58.

Notes
Getting Weird and Ugly with Nino Ricci

By Brian Gorman

"Are you saying my book is wholesome?" Nino Ricci demands.

His mock indignation is a response to a question, couched in diplomacy, about many Canadian storytellers' affinity for subjects that some people might consider weird and unwholesome.

In the case of his latest book, the Giller Prize-nominated Where She Has Gone, the "weird and unwholesome" subject is incest, between the narrator and his half-sister. It occurs to one that this would not be out of place in a Canadian movie, as beguiled as our film-makers are with the weird and the unwholesome.

He quotes Freud, about taboos being the foundation of civilization.

"You could argue that civilization began when this taboo was created, that the guilt that created led to civilization. And there's something formative about the incest taboo. Anthropologists have found that it was one of the first taboos.

"But there's a lot of it going on in our society. Incest occurs a lot more often than we care to acknowledge—usually as part of an abusive relationship. One person is always unwilling.

"Obviously, since there's such a strong taboo against it, people want to do it."

The incestuous relationship in question comes at the end of a trilogy—Lives of the Saints, In a Glass House and now Where She Has Gone—that constitutes a sprawling, ambitious immigrant saga drawing equally from Ricci's Italian heritage (his parents were immigrants) and his Ontario "Calvinist" upbringing.

"I didn't start out to write an immigrant saga," he says. "I started out to write anything but an immigrant saga. My original idea was to explore an intense relationship between a brother and a sister."

"It started out as a piece of erotica. A friend told me that you could write erotica and sell it for $200 a pop in New York. "I didn't want to talk about ethnicity. I was primed to be an immigrant storyteller." I was interested in exploring the idea of the reserve—"our strict Calvinist heritage.""

Which brings us around to Canadianness, film and the weird and unwholesome.

He says maybe it's a reaction against the reserve imposed on us by "our strict Calvinist heritage."

This is a very strange irony—Ricci, a Catholic, talking to another Catholic about "our strict Calvinist heritage"—and it doesn't go unnoticed.

The distant, unemotional and introspective nature of much of our storytelling, then, "may just be the result of our living in a cold climate," he shrugs.

"Maybe it's much more banal than we think."

Magical Complexity
By Naomi Guttman

Nina Ricci has already received much deserved acclaim from writers across the country and abroad for this book, and I can only concur. Lives of the Saints, a book which any writer would be glad to have accomplished at any time, is all the more praiseworthy for being a first novel.

The year is 1960, but in Valle del Salle, the poor Appenine village in which the novel is set, you would not know it: there is no electric power, grain is still cut with a scythe, and a snake bite is a sign that the evil eye has paid one a visit.

Vittorio Innocente is the adult narrator telling the story of his boyhood: when the action begins Vittorio is turning seven. His father has left to seek his fortune in “America” several years before and Vittorio and his mother, Cristina, live with her father, Valle del Salle’s old mayor, in relative comfort.

But Vittorio’s parents are estranged by more than an ocean and though Vittorio, with his innocent eyes, provides the filter through which all is told, it is really Cristina who is the central figure of the novel. It is she who is bitten by a green snake during a rendezvous in the barn with her nameless blue-eyed lover; she who wages a battle f pride with the village in which she was born; and she who eight months into the pregnancy which has become a symbol of her scorn and thus the source of this battle, engineers an escape to Canada, taking her son with her.

As always, with a first-person narrative, there is a delicate balance between what can be told and how. Vittorio is an expert listener, and because he is a child during the action of the tale, he gives very little in the way of interpretation. And so, as with all well-made things, the novel has the effect of appearing to be simple, which it is not, for it is terribly difficult to maintain that balance between the point of view of an adult regarding his childhood with adult insight, and that of the intuitive knowledge and fantastic distortions of the child he was at the time. Yet Ricci has been able to negotiate the distance between those voices with grace. The novel’s tension is cunningly built, the language is beautiful, and the symbolism plainly in view without coyness or flag-waving.

Through Vittorio’s eyes we learn about the village, its characters, its colour, its superstitions and the envy, “invidia,” that distances villager from villager. The life of the village and the drama that is unfolding in Vittorio’s home is told with precision, care, a wonderful eye for detail rendered through the child’s experience, as well as a perfect ear for dialogue. In fact with his gift for translating the specific idiom of the people of Valle del Solle—the true-sounding syntax, the well-chosen Italian word of phrase—I felt as though I were reading in Italian and translating for myself, an experience much like watching a wonderful foreign film with sub-titles and feeling that one has actually understood the words as they were spoken.

And it may be said that this novel is filmic. In its use of colour, place and time, its ability to tell the story not only of Vittorio and his family but of an entire village, it conveys the magical wisdom of childhood and the complexity of what are supposed to be simple lives in such a compelling narrative that, in the right hands, Lives of the Saints could be as grand and sublime a spectacle as Fanny and Alexander or My Life as a Dog.

Of course no film could capture the lyricism of Ricci’s descriptions: the image of the sun rising “round and scarlet, sucking in the dawn’s darkness like God’s forgiveness, the mountain slopes slowly changing from a colourless grey to rich green and gold.” And then there is silence:

...the silence of the house would wash over me, filling my head like a scream, crowding out my private thoughts.

The silence seemed to issue from every nook and cranny of the house, to dissolve furnishings and leave me suspended in a pure, electric emptiness, so volatile that the crunch of my mother’s hoe threatened to shatter the house to its foundations.

Without giving away the ending, I will say that my only qualms about the book came in the very last chapters where, though I understand its fictional necessity, as a feminist I question the implications it engenders.

Early in the novel “la maestra” tells Vittorio and his classmates that a saint can be found anywhere at all, even among their ranks. Ricci reminds us in this novel that all lives, no matter how common they appear, are the locus for turmoil, the stuff, if not of sainthood, of drama, and can be fashioned into that category of novel to which Lives of the Saints certainly belongs: the novel one wishes for will not end. Fortunately for us, it is the first of a trilogy and so the end will not come so soon.

The Hyperbolical Project of Cristina: A Derridean Analysis of Nino Ricci’s Lives of the Saints
By Roberta Imboden

Jacques Derrida’s “Cogito and the History of Madness,” catapulted him into the centre of the French intellectual world. This essay, a commentary in Michel Foucault’s book, The History of Madness, is seen as an excellent example of the deconstructionist method at work in relation to metaphysics. What Derrida examines from this rather large tome is a few passages that Foucault writes about Descartes. Foucault’s thesis is that Descartes, in his analysis of the Cogito, was the first philosopher to separate reason from non-reason, from madness, and that this split was either a cause of, or at least, was representative of, the attitude which resulted in the first interment of mad persons within institutions in human history. That Descartes is responsible for all sorts of divisions, of separations, in the modern Western human psyche, such as that between pitt and matter, between reason and the emotions, is common in philosophical analysis, but Foucault’s thesis is unusual in his emphasis upon the reason/madness split. If one then applies Derrida’s subsequent insights to Nino Ricci’s prize winning novel, Lives of the Saints, an understanding of the novel will appear that should not only further illuminate the power of this first novel, and the talents of its author, but also explain to students of literature what I was not able to explain to my own students, not until now, why Cristina, the heroine, had to die in the prime of life when a world of love and of freedom beckoned to her for the first time.

Derrida, who prefaces his remarks with a special tribute to his teacher and mentor, Foucault, claims that in the Cogito of Descartes, in its pure moment before it attempts to reflect, to articulate, this bipolar split never took place, and that the Cogito is valid for both the mad and the sane person. What this Cogito is about is “the hyperbolical project” (52) which is “an unprecedented excess” (52) that “overflow the totality of that which can be thought...in the direction of the non-determined, Nothingness or infinity” (57), toward non-meaning or toward meaning. This project takes one beyond all limits, all barriers, all contradictions, all opposing opposites.

It is the element of excess that causes Derrida to claim that the Cogito involves madness, derangement (57), since the hyperbolical project seeks to move beyond what the world would refer to as that which reason, logos, can itself attain, but it is not clinical madness, that is, what psychiatrists would consider to be a chemical disorder of the brain. It is the madness of the Cogito which simply refuses the limitations that the world of common sense says are necessary in order to be sane. It is madness in which doubt is a central element, since it is a state of mind in which all things are possible, in which, in a sense, the figure of Ivan Karamazov looms, shouting his now famous, “Everything is permitted.” But, for the distraught Ivan, this phrase refers only to the world of morality. For the Cartesian Cogito of Derrida this phrase is more far-reaching, since it is primarily epistemological: all visions of reality, and of one’s response to that reality, are possible. Such a state of mind is madness in the most fundamental sense.

Not surprising is the fact that this state of the Cogito, when reason and madness have not been separated, is also an intense moment: consequently, this is simultaneously a state of mind in which reason is at its apex of intensity, as is madness. It is the moment of the full power of reason, and therefore the moment of a mad reason, an ancient, all powerful reason that is very different from the reason of which Foucault speaks in relation to Descartes. The reason of which Derrida speaks is not a truncated, chained and bound reason, but rather, a reason of “mad audacity” (55).

That this project is a movement toward the non-determined means that it cannot be “enclosed in a factual and determined historical structure” (60), cannot be captured within a concrete world that demands clear delineations, separations, within a history that must move from the past, through the present, toward the future, “for it is the project of exceeding every finite and determined totality” (60), the project of exceeding “all that is real, factual and existent” (56). Consequently, Derrida refers to this project as demonic, probably because it violates the ancient codes of both the Judaic-Christian and the classical Greek worlds. Both the warnings of eating the apple of the tree of knowledge and that of succumbing to hubris are warnings not to follow the hyperbolical project, not to attempt to grasp with one’s mind all that is and all that could be.

But the excessive moment of the hyperbolical project ends when one reflects upon and communicates the Cogito to oneself and then to others. One cannot be mad if one is to communicate this meaning in discourse. It is at this moment, when one breaks the silence, in reflection in speech that one safeguards oneself against the epistemological madness of non-distinction among infinite visions of reality, of beyond reality, and of the infinite possibilities of responses to these visions. Now is the basic, fundamental moment of separation of reason from madness, the moment of difference. Speech violently liberates, differs itself from madness and simultaneously imprisons it (60). Only then can finite thought and history reign (61), for finite thought is dependent upon a process that must involve exclusion, as is history, which is dependent upon concrete events, and the exclusive choosing of events in order to make up the story that is history.

This articulation of the hyperbolical project, the “attempt-to-say-the-demonic-hyperbole...is the original profundity of the will in general...is a first passion and keeps within itself a trace of violence” (61). That is, the attempt to communicate the intense moment of the hyperbolical project is the human will’s passionate attempt to make concrete this project of excess. This moment of intense passion is doomed forever to failure, but its titanically gargantuan effort founds the world and history (57). No wonder that it carries traces of violence. The actual creation of the physical universe, according to the big bang theory, was certainly violent.
Speech, language, is that which regulates the “relationship between that which exceeds and the exceeded totality” (62). Speech separates the world of the hyperbolical project, the world that exceeds the world of excess, from the world in which we live, the world that is exceeded by the hyperbolical project. Speech emerges from the silence and separates us from the pure Cogito, makes a difference between us and its project, and forces us to make choices, to decide. Since we can no longer have the possibility of grasping all possibilities, we must decide what finite possibilities we must choose. We no longer can live in a world of hyperbolical doubt whose condition is that all is possible. We now are thrown into a world of dazzling light where certainty emerges as a safeguard against madness, for communication functions in such a manner that it “inspect(s), master(s), limit(s) hyperbole” (59), since reason knows that the total denegation of the hyperbolical moment “will bring subversion to pure thought” (53).

It is most probably because of the implied suffering in the action of speech that Derrida says that speech operates within a “caesura” (54), a “wound” (54) that “opens up life as historicity” (54). Furthermore, the moment of communication, of speech, is one of crisis for two reasons. Firstly, reason is in grave danger, since in moving from its origin, the pure Cogito of the hyperbolical project, it is in danger of forgetting its origins, of “blanketing them by the rationalist and transcendental unveiling (of) itself” (62). It is then, ironically, that reason is “madder than madness” (62), for reason moves toward oblivion of this origin, and therefore toward non-meaning. Madness is at this moment closer to “the wellspring of sense” (62), and, subsequently, is closer to the rational, however silent it is. Reason is now “separated from itself as madness, is exiled from itself” (62). Thus, the communication of the Cogito is the choosing of reason, an act which divides the reason of meaning from the labyrinth of non-meaning; but the price is the loss of identity with itself and the loss of the possibility of infinite possibility. Secondly, in this moment of crisis, hubris is born of articulation, and although hubris is coincident with creation, its major quality is in excess that must operate within finitude, a quality that the concrete world of history is likely to punish severely.

My thesis is that reading Nino Ricci’s Lives of the Saints in the light of this particular Derridean essay is essential for the understanding of the main character, Cristina, the woman whose presence, through the narration of her young son, Vittorio, dominates the entire novel. She lives in a hill-town in the Italian Apennines with her son and her father, the mayor of the town, who is accused of having sold out to the fascists. Her husband, absent for four years since he emigrated to Canada, supposedly to create a new life for Cristina and Vittorio, writes monthly letters of wild scribble, but, for Cristina, he is simply absent and for Vittorio, he is simply a shadowy, violent memory. The tension of the novel revolves around a scene, from Vittorio’s perspective, which is composed of a stable, a muffled shout (1), followed by a green snake escaping from the stable and a pair of blue eyes that run away toward a car. The combination of these events results in the pregnancy of Cristina, and in the very traditional and superstitious people of the village shunning her.

To establish Cristina as the Cartesian-Derridean Cogito, it is best to begin by analyzing her silence, as it is observed by the narrator, Vittorio. From the perspective of the reader she tells us nothing of what she truly thinks or feels. What happened in the stable? We can only guess, but that is exactly what we must do. Her only comment is to Luciano, one of her friends in Rocca Secca, “Anyway I have my own trouble to worry about. I hope he didn’t leave me a little gift—he got very excited when he saw that snake” (66).

After this incident, “a deep silence...descended on the house the very walls, the floor, the splintered table, seemed to have grown strangely distant and mute, as if guarding some secret themselves” (57).

Cristina “withdrew into shadowy silence” (74), broken mainly by her “quiet sobbing at night mingling with the sigh of the wind, like something inhuman” (77). “The silence seemed to issue from every nook and cranny of the house” (77). Of his mother’s relationship to himself, in particular, Vittorio says, there are “no words now to bridge the silence” (74). There are only “silent meals” (74) and the silence between Cristina and the grandfather, her father, more or less extends until the end of the novel.

A second characteristic that marks Cristina as the embodiment of the Derridean Cogito is the strange non-delineation between reason and madness that surrounds her. In relation to the element of reason, she is one of the best educated women in the village. But most outstanding is her absolute contempt for the superstition of the villagers who seem to have inherited an ancient pagan superstition that intermingles with Catholicism and erupts every year in the procession of the Virgin Mary whose statue is carried throughout the town. All the doors and windows of the houses of the village are open except for those of Cristina. Their being steadfastly shut makes her a living testimony to rationality itself. But this rationality is strangely interwoven with madness in the snakebite incident. First, at the very beginning of the book, when she is bitten by the snake in the stable, she waits quietly in front of her house for the ride to the hospital. Di Lucci, who gives Cristina the ride, says to her, “You’d think you were just going to the market” (16). He seems disconcerted by her “unexpected calm” (16). Then, Vittorio says that the tourniquet “sank into her leg...but my mother did not wince or grimace” (17). Finally, she slowly succumbs to a trance-like, rigid state which sends her into the deepest possible form of physical silence. She is literally outside of what one would normally refer to as a rational state, but, she never rants, raves or rambles. Instead, she is inhumanly calm. She seems to transcend both fear and pain. Before the onset of the results of the venom she is “rationally silent,” telling her father again and again that what she was doing in the barn was feeding the pigs, and when she overcomes the venom and fully returns to her conscious state, she is “bright and alert” (18), again “rational,” but silent. It is almost as if the brief period of the rigid trance-like state is simply a deepening of the rational/mad silence that will surround her throughout most of the novel.

The non-delineation of madness/reason on this rather basic level, when examined in the light of other non-delineations, leads to an extremely important aspect of the Derridean hyperbolical project, that of epistemological madness. But the major
point at the moment is to look at these other non-delineations in relation to Cristina’s being the Derridean Cogito, and to her subsequently being involved with the hyperbolical project. The relationship between Cristina and Vittorio, the most important relationship in the novel, is a good example of Cristina’s sense of lack of division, of boundary, and threatens the village’s view of what they perceive as the most fundamental of relationships, that of mother and son. The implication of the villagers who hurl accusations at her in her role as mother is that she behaves toward him more like a sister or friend than a mother since she refuses to send the seven-year-old Vittorio into the fields to do agricultural work at 4:00 a.m., as the other mothers do. The extreme case is Vittorio’s only friend, Fabrizio, whose father forces him to remain in the fields so long that he cannot go to school. Instead, Cristina and Vittorio are accused of playing together like children all the time. But this relationship of mother/sister/friend also is, simultaneously, a mother/lover relationship. At the age of seven an upset Vittorio is told that he can no longer share his mother’s bed. His grandfather says, “Next month you’ll be seven. That’s no age to be sleeping with your mother” (34). Then, when Cristina takes Vittorio to the cave of the underground pool, Vittorio discovers a pair of tinted glasses in the straw, similar to the shattered pair that he found when the man with the eyes of the blue flame ran from the s table. The relationship of mother/lover emerges when Vittorio suddenly sees his naked mother standing above him as she is about to dive into the pool. No sensuous touch ever occurs; the entire scene has a preternatural quality about it. At this moment, through Vittorio’s eyes, we see a truly beautiful woman, one, whom he says, bears no resemblance to the other village women, a “smooth and sleek” (33) woman who takes on the qualities of some ancient Greek goddess, such as Calypso or Circe. Like them, she has beauty and power for good and for evil. If Calypso, she has the power to grant men immortality and eternal youth (Homer 58), although she may also deter them from their lawful, faithful wives. If Circe, she has the power to turn men into swine (118-119)—therefore, Cristina’s reference to feeding the pigs when she was in the stable—and has the subsequent power to return them to their human form with an unearthly beauty that heretofore they had not possessed. Thus, Cristina is eternal beauty, love, and eternal faithful relationship, as well as ugliness, treachery and unfaithfulness.

This non-delineation, non-difference, non-choice, non-separation is evident also in her relationships with mature men. In being unfaithful to her long absent husband in Canada, she is faithful to her blue-eyed lover, for, in the imagination of the careful reader, the hints and fragmented pieces of Vittorio’s memory draw a picture of a youthful love of Cristina for a young German soldier, a love that preceded her marriage to Mario of her own village. The German was her first, and in a sense, her only lover. The dim memory of Mario given to us by Vittorio is anything but that of a lover. He is seen as a violent figure who hurled an object against his mother’s face, a memory that is questionable, but, nevertheless, Cristina does have a small scar on her face in the shape of a “disjointed cross” (Lives 37). But two other passages give foundation to Vittorio’s memory. Cristina says of Mario to Alfredo, “The only way he knows how to talk is with the back of his hand” (95). Then, when Vittorio sees the letter with the “small neat script of bright blue” (158), he says that this writing is not that of his “father’s violent hand” (158). Thus, her infidelity is true faithfulness. Furthermore, if the reader is tempted to see the blue-eyed soldier as a fascist, a member of a military machine ruled by fascist ideology, careful reading indicates that this young man was probably a communist who, somehow, in a way never explained, deserted the army and most likely was involved in some sort of dangerous, heroic, undercover, or partisan action against the Nazis. And Cristina, in her silent way, lives for years with secret rendezvous, probably in Rocca Secca, with this lover, while simultaneously living in harmony with her fascist father who is just as traditional in his attitudes as the rest of the villagers. She does not choose. She does not have to because she does not speak.

One can continue to multiply this non-delineation, non-difference way of living by adding that no line exists between desire/love and duty or Cristina, nor between meaning and non-meaning. She lives desire, her love for her lover, for Vittorio, for her father, but she also is a dutiful daughter and mother, and no duty exists for her vis-à-vis her husband since she appears to feel that she has been abandoned. Some men in her family had gone to the New World and returned, but some, like Cristina’s paternal grandfather, have disappeared. Her feeling of abandonment is exhibited when she hurls at her father the accusation that her husband has probably been sleeping with every whore in America (154). Furthermore, she appears to live in a world of meaning/non-meaning. The literal reading of the text sees a talented, vibrant woman living the daily life of deathly isolation and suppression of all that she is. This text is that of a meaningless life. But Cristina wishes to grasp the totality, no matter what it means, and it is here that the text of a meaningful life lies. Derrida actually claims that this action is the origin of meaning (Writing 57). What she most passionately desires in this project is to grasp the totality of freedom, a freedom that cannot really be thought. It is a freedom that “wants it all”: to be a dutiful daughter of a traditional, fascist father, to be a passionate lover of a blue-eyed fugitive communist, to be a respected educated, highly rational citizen of a traditional, uneducated superstition-haunted village, to be a loving, playful mother, yet a mother who never tells her son anything. It is a mad project of excess that can be implied by these few words, but not completely thought, for Cristina is grasping for that which goes beyond words and thoughts.

This mad project, best labelled epistemological madness, is the major mark of the hyperbolical project of the Derridean Cogito. The villagers unconsciously understand this quality in Cristina, for they, too, have an epistemology, since everyone does, and her behaviour and silence are seen by the villagers as a derangement, a displacement, a subversion of their “rationality,” their “maison d’être,” for her very existence threatens all their beliefs, their epistemology. Cristina’s existence not only threatens their view of reality in relation to Catholicism as they live it, but also their ancient superstitions, especially their complex view of the ability of one person to curse another, that is, the power of a person to exercise effectively “the evil eye.” But, most important, her existence threatens the villagers’ understanding of human relationships, especially of those between men and women, of family relationships in general, of the place of women in society, and of the consequent possibility of the
freedom. Thus, Cristina upsets the foundation of meaning for the villagers; her existence threatens the clear certainty of their lives with doubt. That Cristina’s threat is as powerful as it is, is derived from its being rooted in the intensity of an ancient mad rationality. She grapples toward all possibilities, the villagers toward none.

Not surprising, because Cristina’s very existence is perceived by the villagers to be a threat, the unspoken accusation against her is that she is mad in the sense of the supposed madness of witchcraft. Since they dimly perceive that she attempts to grasp the totality of reality, and that somehow she lives within a forbidden space, she surely must be in touch with the demonic and suffers from a subsequent dangerous madness. One could object to this analysis, saying that the witch-craze existed a few centuries ago, but it must be remembered that these villagers appear to have a completely pre-scientific mentality.

In the days of the witch craze, at the centre of all the lore surrounding witchcraft, was the belief that the Devil would assume human form and it is then that the woman witch would have sexual intercourse with him (*Malleus Maleficarium* 27). In the earliest days of the witch craze, a phenomenon that some historians believe grew out of the attack upon heretics (Russell 229), many men were accused of witchcraft (279), but many women, especially women from the upper classes, were attracted to these heretical sects because it was only there that they could enjoy something that resembled equality (282). This factor, plus many other social factors, finally made women the sole victims of the witch craze, and as this phenomenon centred more and more upon women, the accusations moved from those of heresy, toward those of sexual intercourse with the Devil. The link between Cristina’s father’s accusatory “communista” and Alfredo’s dire, oblique prediction that Cristina’s unborn child will have a serpentine head is reminiscent of the historical link between sexual relations with the devil and heresy, for to the religious, fascist father, the term “communista” implies the worst kind of heresy of his time. That Vittorio describes the eyes that he saw at the stable as turning magically a luminous blue as they caught the sunlight... (and that they were) “bright flames that held me” (*Lives* 12) is not surprising. To him, obviously, the Devil, who must take male human form in order to have sexual relations with a woman, really had ‘visited’ Cristina in the stable. Once again, Cristina lives the logos/madness nondelineation, for although the witch lore follows her everywhere, her reaction to it is that of scoffing rationality. She laughs while saying, “Stupidigagni” (57).

Although the rational reader, too, scoffs at the link that the villagers see between the Devil and Cristina, there are indications in the text that in a profound mystical sense, there is a link between Cristina and the demonic. This point is strengthened by the underground cave scene. The hot spring sulphuric waters of this underground place where Cristina obviously feels very safe and at home have reverberations, as does the river that she and Vittorio must cross, of Hades, and of the river Styx. At this point, let us not forget that Derrida refers to the hyperbolical project as demonic, for it symbolizes the pursuit of excess, of forbidden knowledge. Furthermore, of course, for the pure Cogito which Cristina at this moment, personifies, there is no division, no boundary, between reason and the labyrinth, between meaning and non-meaning, between God and the Devil.

Cristina is usually so self-contained, so stoical, so powerful in her seeming control of herself. But on two occasions before the climactic leave-taking of the village, she concretely, actively, displays the hyperbolical project’s element of mad excess, once in a violent physical fight with one of the village women, and once in the dance at the end of the festival. One day after school some of the schoolmates of Vittorio beat him. When Cristina hears of the event, surmising that one of the mothers of these boys had provoked the incident because of the rumours of the snake and of her pregnancy, Cristina races through the town and into the woman’s house and attacks her. Cristina attempts to strangle her, but the frightened, amazed woman pulls away in time. Later, at the end of the festival, Cristina grabs Vittorio’s arm and takes him to the centre of the dancing and begins to dance, to whirl very quickly. Vittorio finds the entire situation mad, wild, dizzying. Dancing/strangling: a strange dual manifestation of this project.

Finally, as she and Vittorio leave the village forever, Cristina articulates what she thinks and feels to the villagers. In a driving rain, standing beside the truck that is going to drive them to the dock in Naples, she stops, and at all the villagers who are watching her from balconies and windows, she hurls these words.

Fools...You tried to kill me but you see I’m still alive. And now you came to watch me hang, but I won’t be hanged, not by your stupid rules and superstitions. You are the ones who are dead, not me, because not one of you know what it means to be free and to make a choice, and I pray to God that he wipes this town and all its stupidities off the face of the earth! (184)

This is the moment of articulation, of speech, of separation of reason from madness, of her declaring a difference between herself and madness. It is the moment that she publicly articulates decision, her decision to leave her fascist father and his village of narrow superstitious tradition, to cease being a dutiful daughter and village citizen, and to choose to go to her lover, a man who is not her husband, according to law, and to go to a world that is radically different from that in which she has always lived. She no longer attempts to grasp the totality. She knows that definite decisions, choices, must be made, that she must declare that differences exist that cannot be lived simultaneously. The nightly sighs, and sob of hyperbolical doubt are over, and her taunting, proud shouts at the staring villagers are the shouts of a sudden manifestation of certainty, of a rational certainty that separates her from their superstition. She contemptuously declares, in her own manner, that she is the sane rational one and that they are all mad.
But this moment of ecstatic rationality is also the moment that Cristina dooms herself in the sense of the ancient Greek tragic heroes, for her shouts are from the wound of her Cogito as it opens the village and her to history and to the subsequent space in which hubris exists. As long as Cristina was silent, and made no separations, no choices, she could live in her world of non-difference. But the moment that she hurl her shouts, she enters a world that marks her with the fatal stigma of hubris and the reader is forewarned that in this world the future, represented by the New World, by Canada, is closed to Cristina, for those who enter it with traces of the hyperbolical project still faintly glowing about them, are treated very harshly. It is now that Giuseppina’s words to Cristina, “You’re too proud” (5), an accusation that has followed her throughout the book, will have ominous concrete results. Premature death, as in the case of Antigone, another bearer of hubris, awaits her. Cristina’s shouts bear strong resemblance to Antigone’s casting of bits of earth upon the body of her slain brother. At the moment that Antigone clearly chooses her slain rebellious brother rather than her uncle, the king, she exhibits hubris and her fate is sealed. Thus, the unexpected death from haemorrhage after giving birth to a daughter on the Canada bound ship is a kind of literary necessity. The forces of ancient Greek fate, now operative in the incarnation of the evil eye, a force that for the villagers, “stand outside normal categories of good and evil” (154), of God and the devil, do not take kindly to Cristina’s hubris.

But, as Derrida claims, it is this act of articulation that founds the world and its history and although this action leads Cristina to death only a few weeks after she hurl her shouts at the village, she founds a new world for her son, Vittorio, and for her daughter who will never have to endure the kind of persecution that she has had to suffer, for her daughter will be born into a freedom to evolve and change, in other words, into history, rather than into the an historical situation of stony non-change aid rigidity into which she was born.

On board ship, before the premature birth, Cristina appears to have a serenity that she had never possessed. Vittorio speaks of her “warm radiance” (202). Not only have the sobs disappeared, but so too has the violence that is part of the hyperbolical project of madness and the subsequent violence that must accompany the first articulation of this project (61). Cristina completely leaves her behind and creates warm relationships with several passengers with whom she loves to talk. At the Captain’s dinner she appears to talk more than anyone else, and says whatever she thinks. We no longer have to guess her thoughts. The warm serenity that surrounds her seems to be the result of the new freedom, but is also the result of her very recently releasing her reason from its madness. She is now the epitome of Derrida’s point that finite thought can only exist through the suppression of madness. For the first time in the novel we see her read. She is studying English. Even her death, which Vittorio witnesses at her side, is full of serenity. All madness has disappeared.

As the book closes with Vittorio reaching Canada, he is in a state of delirium in the hospital where he is recovering from the pneumonia he contracted during a terrible storm while on board ship, the storm (driven by the ancient inhuman forces) that precipitates the premature birth and the consequent death of Cristina. During this delirium Vittorio believes that a pair of eyes of blue flames stands over him, but when he finally fully recovers, it is his mournful father who sits beside him. Was Cristina’s first and true love standing above Vittorio, or is this temporary madness of Vittorio an entrance into the Cogito of his mother and her grand hyperbolical project? When he returns to pure reason, he sees before him, not a blue-eyed, demonic angel, but rather a greatly deflated, ordinary, humble human being. His new world has been founded by Cristina, but not exactly as she had chosen, for her choosing was perhaps a bit too close to the madness of the Cogito from which she had separated herself.

Cristina, through her death, in a strangely ironic way, remains true to the hyperbolical project of the Derridean Cogito from which she had distanced herself. To remember that either Nothingness or Infinity are the directions that this project takes is to confront two opposite views of Cristina’s fate. From a literal point of view, her choosing was perhaps a bit too close to the madness of the Cogito from which she had separated herself. Cristina dooms herself in the sense of the ancient Greek fate, now operative in the incarnation of the evil eye, a force that for the villagers, “stand outside normal categories of good and evil” (154), of God and the devil, do not take kindly to Cristina’s hubris.

To choose one of these views is to admit that we, ourselves, are separated from the hyperbolical project. But since this entire analysis is one of language, of speech, of discourse, to choose is simply to admit that one is involved in the articulation of the Cogito. It is the rational thing to do, and, the stuff of founding worlds and of creating history.

Works Cited


An Interview with Nino Ricci
By Paula E. Kirman

Nino Ricci is a busy full-time author—an achievement that is as precious to many writers as awards and recognition, both of which Ricci has also gained. His first novel, Lives of the Saints (Cormorant, 1990) was the number one bestseller in Canada in 1991 and earned Ricci a Governor General's Award for Fiction. Lives of the Saints introduced the character of Vittorio, a young Italian boy traveling to Canada with his mother who dies during the voyage. Ricci continued the story of Vittorio’s life through a span of twenty years in the subsequent novels In a Glass House (McClelland & Stewart, 1993) and Where She Has Gone (M&S 1997).

The first thing that stands out about Ricci’s writing is the influence of his Italian background. Born in 1959, his parents were immigrants from the Molise region of Italy living in Leamington, Ontario, the town of his birth. Ricci also has a talent for portraying emotions and scenarios which come across as very real, regardless of one’s ethnic background.

Now that the trilogy is complete, Ricci is hard at work on a new novel. Even so, he took some time to talk about character development, ethnicity in writing, and, of course, success.

Kirman: When you first started working on Lives of the Saints, did you know it was going to turn into a trilogy?

Ricci: No. At the time I thought I was working on a single novel, but one that encompassed the whole story that now comprises the trilogy. I had the whole story in my mind; I just didn’t know it was going to take me three novels to tell it all.

Kirman: At what point did it become obvious to you that it was going to turn into a trilogy?

Ricci: I wouldn’t say it was ever obvious until it actually happened. I started thinking, for practical reasons, of a way I could divide up the material partly because I was doing a master’s at Concordia and I had to submit a book-length work of fiction as my thesis. This project was ostensibly my thesis but I was a little worried that if I tried to finish the whole thing I would be there into the next millennium. So I just asked them if I could submit a third of it as my thesis and they said OK, and I thought, “Oh, maybe this would be a way to divide up the whole project.” So, it happened sort of haphazardly.

Kirman: Did the character of Vittorio change at all while you were working on the novels from how you originally perceived him when you were planning out the story?

Ricci: He did. When I started planning the story it was going to be a sort of farce. Farce maybe isn’t the right word—sort of a satiric romp. Initially, I was very influenced at that point by Gravity’s Rainbow by Thomas Pincheon which is this sort of encyclopedic novel full of conspiracy theories. That was my original intention for this trilogy, that the narrator, Vittorio, was actually someone who was delusional and believed that he was the second coming of Christ, and that there were various details sprinkled throughout the trilogy to lend credence to this belief. That all sort of fell by the wayside [laughing].

Kirman: Did this major change in your plans surprise you, or was that just the natural evolution of the story?

Ricci: It was the evolution that occurred. I think a lot of that stuff wasn’t very well thought out or didn’t have enough depth to it. I was working with a professor at Concordia and he would sort of weed out the over-the-top stuff that there was quite a bit of in the earlier manuscripts. Not that he would tell me to remove it, but he would ask me probing questions about where I was going with it and what I intended by it. Eventually I felt it wasn’t really working, so I whittled the story down to its essential.
Kirman: When *Lives of the Saints* appeared in novel form and it did so well, what did you attribute to that success?

Ricci: I don’t know. It’s very hard to analyze why some books do well and others don’t. It’s some kind of ephemeral thing that doesn’t necessarily have to do with the quality of the writing, per se. It may just be tapping into a particular kind of story that resonates with people for whatever reason. I think in the case of *Lives of the Saints*, a lot of people identified with the mother in the story, both women and men. A lot of people were attracted to the locale because it was slightly exotic. A lot of people were attracted to the child’s point of view which is often a very winning kind of way to tell a story because children are so cute. They have such a different way of looking at the world, such a fresh way of looking at the world and I think all of us long in the core of our beings for a return to some state of innocence, whether we associate that with childhood or whatever, but childhood seems the clearest example of that kind of innocence. So I think it was a combination of those kinds of things. In Canada, it was also at a time when the whole discourse of multiculturalism had actually penetrated into the general consciousness, so people were probably a little more open to writing from outside of the mainstream than they might have been ten or fifteen years earlier. So a lot of it was that kind of coming together of various factors. I hope the book was also well-written—that may or may not be a factor. One can point to any number of books that are not especially well-written and still do well.

Kirman: When you saw how well *Lives of the Saints* was doing, did you ever get worried that you would not be able to follow it with the same momentum?

Ricci: At the time I didn’t worry about it. I worry about it more now. As I get older I find my mental faculties are getting weaker and so I do sometimes wonder if there is a kind of youthful energy that can never be recaptured or recreated. Particularly with the first book you are so innocent, you don’t even really know what a book is or what you’re allowed or not allowed to do, so you just go out and do something. At the time I had no idea whether the book would ever be published; it was hard to write it for that reason because everywhere you’re thinking it might be just a waste of time. At the same time there is a kind of freedom in your early efforts that you can never get back again. I think about that now and I’m constantly looking at other writers thinking, “Well how did they do with their later books; did their books get better and better? Is it a natural progression that you improve?” There are any number of examples of writers out there who maybe have a strong first book or a strong third book; it’s very unpredictable how these things come about. I think every writer worries about every book that they write. They wonder if they’ll ever write another book again. They wonder what strange combination of factors it was that helped them write any book that they have finished. I feel that all the time. At the same time I have no shortage of ideas, so it’s not like I have to rack my brain to come up with some new project. I have a whole list of projects laid out well into the next millennium.

Nino Ricci has captivated Canada’s literary world with novels that are full of culture (particularly drawing from his Italian background), and life—especially tragedy and sadness. When I spoke with him, we discussed the role of his ethnicity on his writing, his influences, and his goals as a writer. This is part two of my interview with Nino Ricci, conducted in 1998.

Kirman: It’s very interesting that you mentioned people being more open to multiculturalism in writing. I found when I was reading your novels the fact I am not Italian was not a disadvantage. Nothing went over my head, and I was able to relate to the story and even come away from it with more of an understanding of Italian culture. Is that a challenge to be able to write from an ethnic point of view, but at the same time make sure a larger audience can relate?

Ricci: In some ways it comes fairly naturally. I think it comes naturally to most writers to do that. When Dostoevsky was writing about Russian peasants or Russian gamblers he wasn’t worried about whether or not his books were going to speak outside of Russia. I think you just try and know your subject well, and if you know your subject deeply than that generally gets you to the essence of things, and gets you beyond the stereotypes and generally gets you to a point where their dilemmas will be comprehensible cross-cultural boundaries. The danger is to set out to say, “I am going to write about the Italian Canadian experience,” because that is when you start latching on to the symbols of that experience, and to the stereotypes almost unknowingly because you feel you are sort of having to take a position. I think if you just try to remain true to your material it really becomes a non-issue.

Kirman: And knowing your subject—is that why your novels so far have been from the Italian perspective?

Ricci: Again, it happened a little bit by accident. I didn’t set out to write a trilogy about the Italian Canadian or immigrant experience, but yes, inevitably when I sat down to write a novel I went back to material that was familiar to me. When I started *Lives of the Saints* and started what would become this trilogy the issues that were important to me then were not necessarily the issues of ethnicity or the immigrant experience, but as I delved into the material I did go back to what was familiar to me, and that was what came out.
Kirman: So then to what extent is your writing autobiographical?

Ricci: No more so or less so than most fiction is; none of the storyline is based on fact or anything that happened to me or even anyone that I know. But, a lot of the details are drawn from a world that was familiar to me—the villages in the first book are based on villages that I've known. The town in In a Glass House where the narrator grows up is based on the town that I was born and raised in, in Ontario. So there are those kinds of connections between my life and work, but I just take that as a starting point. I think it's dangerous to be limited by your own experiences because then it becomes difficult to get perspective on your material.

Kirman: At many points in the trilogy you write about very painful situations. How do you separate yourself from that; how do you feel when you write that sort of thing?

Ricci: For me, to write about a painful situation is in some ways liberating, or even exhilarating. The whole purpose of literature for me is to try and give expression to the inexpressible, or find a way to get at those emotions that feel so inchoate and that really can't in a sense be put into words, but that in fiction you can find a way to sort of circle around them so that you recreate a sense of them and connect with the readers who have experienced something similar, who's experience in some ways are validated or humanized by seeing it captured in print. So for me the act of doing that in writing is a very pleasing one. Even when I write about very negative emotions what gets me depressed is the inability to express those things, or my own inability to get at the exact thing I want. When I get there, or when I get close to what I am trying to do, then that is a very positive experience for me. So even if I am describing a very negative emotion that is not necessarily what I am feeling.

Kirman: In general, what is the physical process of writing like for you? Do you have to be in a certain mood? do you force yourself to write a certain amount every day?

Ricci: I try to be fairly disciplined. I try to write daily and I try to set word quotas, but it's kind of an iffy thing. Some days are good days and I get good writing done; some days are not, some weeks are not, some months are not. My own system is just to keep plugging away, and that is how I try to get through difficult periods, even if it means just cringing as I am at the keyboard and just forcing the words out. At least then in a month or two months there will be something on the page that I can work with. I can't say, "I'll go away for a while and hopefully when I come back inspiration will strike me." I usually find inspiration comes after I've sat down and have begun work, and after working for a while the images start to form.

Kirman: Did you always want to be a writer?

Ricci: From a fairly young age, from the age of ten to eleven it was a plan. I had other plans but they didn't pan out [laughing]. Writing was the only thing I showed any talent at. I burned my other bridges.

Kirman: You mentioned that you had a lot of ideas and were working on projects. Do you plan to continue writing from an Italian perspective?

Ricci: I'll keep writing from my perspective, but like anyone that perspective contains multitudes -- I've had any number of influences in my life. My Italian influence is one, the fact that I grew up in Canada is another, the fact that I grew up close to the American border is another, that I watched a lot of TV...all kinds of things come into it. It's pretty hard to separate out those strands. One particular facet has come to the fore of my work thus far but it is possible that other facets will predominate in later books. The next series of books I am working on are not really linked except loosely in theme, but none of them will really have an immigrant focus per se, or an ethnic focus.

Kirman: That said, are you working on anything at the moment that you care to comment on?

Ricci: I am working on a novel. It's a historical novel, so it's set in the past. That's really all I have to say about it.


Can Lit Comes out of the Wilderness

By Philip Marchand
If several recent first novels are any indication, there is a radical change in store for Canadian literature.

Canoe trips up north, blizzards on the prairie, and sombre tales of life in small Canadian towns will give way to adventures under sunny skies and palm trees in the United States or on city streets wired to the Global Village. Attempts to define the soul of Canada will give way to attempts to chart the new cultural biosphere of North America. Three widely discussed Canadian novels this spring—*Miss You Like Crazy* by Eliza Clark, *Generation X* by Doug Coupland, and *Kicking Tomorrow* by Daniel Richler—suggest the nature of this change. They suggest that the observations contained in the single most influential study of Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood’s 1972 *Survival: A Thematic Guide To Canadian Literature*, do not have the slightest relevance to new Canadian fiction.

They suggest that the national soul searching prompted by Meech Lake and embodied in the Spicer Commission is of no interest to the young generation of novelists. And they suggest that the new Canadian writing will be very receptive to American influences.

Douglas Glover, another prominent new voice in Canadian fiction, and author of this spring’s short story collection, *A Guide To Animal Behaviour*, comments, “Mulroney, by agreeing to free trade, put paid the old idea of Canadian culture as an insular thing, based on this negative definition of not being American. It kind of validates the North American point of view.”

Glover, coincidentally, although born and raised in Ontario, now lives in upstate New York.

To understand how different this “North American point of view” is from the view presented by past Canadian fiction, a reader has only to recall the landmark novels and short story collections of the 1970s.

That decade, which formed our current idea of Canadian fiction, saw the publication of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*, Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*, Robertson Davies’s *Fifth Business*, Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*, Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*, Mordecai Richler’s *St. Urbain’s Horseman* and Rudy Wiebe’s *The Temptations Of Big Bear*.

Most of these works were set in rural or small town Canada. Many of them looked to the Canadian past. In this respect, they resembled the works of an earlier generation of Canadian writers, such as Sinclair Ross, Hugh MacLennan, W. O. Mitchell and Sheila Watson. If anything, French Canadian fiction, as exemplified by the work of such writers as Anne Hebert and Antonine Maillet, has been even more oriented to the past and to rural Canada. This fiction also tried to define something about Canadians. Often what these authors saw was very palatable, and justified Atwood’s comment in *Survival* that “Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed: the aim is not to see whether the patient will live well but simply whether he will live at all.”

In Mordecai Richler’s last novel, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, one of the characters diagnosed Canada as “not so much a country as a holding tank filled with the progeny of defeated peoples.” His novel also dealt in some detail with the doomed 1845 Franklin expedition in the Canadian arctic—an expedition Atwood has recently claimed still haunts Canadian writing.

It doesn’t haunt these new writers. They have other interests. They don’t bother taking the national pulse, for example. The patient may be dead by now, but the tone of new Canadian writing remains exuberant because the authors know there is life outside the holding tank. They abandon nationalist and political themes in general. If they write about Canadian history, they treat it comically. And they look south, not north.

Eliza Clark, 28, born in Mississauga and currently living in Toronto, set her widely praised first novel, *Miss You Like Crazy*, in Florida. Her second book will be a collection of short stories also set in that state. “It would be nice to get some research money to go to Florida for this next book,” she says. “It’s better than going to Saskatchewan or somewhere. Canada is a wonderful place to live, but as far as fiction you need contrast. You need sharp contrast.” She finds this contrast in Florida and its inhabitants. Many of the inhabitants of Florida are Canadians, of course. A few years ago her own mother died in Florida where she and Clark’s father were living in retirement. But it is the American inhabitants, with their gritty lives contrasting with their, soaring, sometimes foolish, dreams, that really appeal to her. “You want bad things happening to people so that you can show them rising above them,” she comments. “In the true sense of the American dream. Each character in my novel has a dream, whether it’s living in a lighthouse, or looking like Elvis, or saying goodbye to a dead mama through a psychic. They all want something. They all say, ‘I want to be happy. I want to know what it’s like to live in a big way. I don’t think that’s something you get here, the same kind of desire—maybe because the living is easy here.”

The writers who have inspired her are all American, particularly American southern writers like Harry Crews, Charles Portis, Joy Williams and Kay Gibbons.

She has read Canadian literature in university and has not been impressed. “It really turned me off,” she says, “It was wind blowing on the prairie and snow and grief about life and living. I don’t like whiners, basically, and these characters seemed like whiners to me. Come on, get on with it. There is a need to be more entertaining, more fun. Canadian literature seems very serious and takes itself very seriously. People want to have fun.”

Doug Coupland, 29, wrote his first novel, *Generation X*, which is set in Palm Springs, California, after visiting that resort town as a travel writer for the Vancouver-based magazine *Western Living*. “I thought this is really the future,” he recalls. “You have a money-heavy gerontocracy, with no middle class, and strange weather, and lots of leisure time and substance abuse problems. It struck me that this is what the rest of the world will be like in the year 2000.”

If challenged with the lack of a Canadian setting for his novel, he readily responds with, “At the height of the season, Palm Springs is more Canadian than Mexican.” Coupland, who grew up in British Columbia, has characterized Canada as “a no-name version of the States,” is sensitive about these challenges. He insists that “the 49th parallel is a membrane, not a wall.”
Like Glover, his most recent novel The South Will Rise at Noon is set in Florida. Coupland dismisses the notion of Canadian culture as an “insular thing,” as something sharply cut off from American culture.

And like Eliza Clark, he has non-existent roots in Canadian literature. “They didn’t teach Canadian literature in British Columbia,” he says. “It was so embarrassing. I didn’t even know who Robertson Davies was until I came to Ontario in 1989. In B.C. we thought of Margaret Atwood as more a Toronto celebrity than as a writer.” Coupland, who now lives in Montreal, says he has finally read, and admired, Atwood’s work. But he also feels, like Clark, that “There’s such a problem in Canada with duty reads, and there’s no such thing as a duty read in the States. If something isn’t interesting, they just say, why bother?”

At first glance, Daniel Richler’s first novel, Kicking Tomorrow, seems an exception to the trend to non-Canadian Canadian literature. Richler, who has read, and been influenced by, Canadian writers as varied as Gabrielle Roy, Leonard Cohen, Anne Hebert and Margaret Atwood, sets his novel firmly in Montreal of the ’70s. At the end of the novel, his protagonist, a rebellious teenager, commits himself to the crusade against pollution, a crusade which is certainly Canadian in theme and political in content. The real heart of Richler’s novel, however, is its fascination with the adolescent subculture of its protagonist, a subculture that has received very little exposure in our fiction. More particularly, it is the language of this subculture that fascinates Richler, a slurred, hypercool language full of slang and, from time to time, genuinely poetic figures of speech. This language, along with the self-consciously ironic speech of Coupland’s Generation X, or the down home talk of Clark and Glover’s southerners, really marks the break in Canadian fiction.

Characters in future Canadian fiction, of whatever sort, will talk very differently than, say, the characters of Laurence or Munro or Findley. As in the case of some of Richler’s characters, their speech may be heavily influenced by the Los Angeles entertainment industry. It may sound like American hillbilly. Or it may be speech derived from the language of the Caribbean or Asia or any number of places from which immigrants come to Canada.

Many of these immigrants have already found their voice in the work of several writers who constitute another major school of emerging Canadian literature. This work deals with the experience of people very much outside the French-English mainstream of Canada, whether they be the Chinese immigrants of Sky Lee’s Disappearing Moon Cafe, the Italians of Nino Ricci’s Lives of the Saints, the East Africans of Moyez Vassanji’s No New Land, or the Parsis of Rohinton Mistry’s Such a Long Journey.

These chroniclers of immigrant experience are very different in style from writers like Clark or Coupland or Daniel Richler. Where the latter are hip, playful in their use of language, and comic in tone, the immigrant writers are stolid, serious and sometimes pedestrian. What unites the two groups is their complete lack of interest in the themes outlined in Atwood’s Survival and characteristic of much earlier Canadian literature. Their characters are not overwhelmed by the Canadian wilderness, or the harshness of the Canadian winter. They settle in big cities, for one thing, not small towns or prairie farms. They never see a canoe, except in a sporting goods store. And they do not worry about the Canadian identity. In fact, many of them, as in the case of Mistry’s characters, have not even gotten to Canada yet, although some of them are clearly pointed in its direction.

Nino Ricci’s Lives of the Saints ends with the Italian passengers still on the boat to Canada. But even when the immigrants are well settled in Toronto, as in Vassanji’s No New Land, it is clear they see Canada very differently from the “disgruntled progeny of defeated peoples” mentioned in Solomon Gursky Was Here. They are dazzled by the cheap goods on display at Honest Ed’s, intrigued by the fleshsots of Yonge Street.

What writers like Ricci and Vassanji do with their characters once they have lived in this country for a considerable period of time is anyone’s guess. What is certain is that, between them, the chroniclers of the new Canadian immigrants and the chroniclers of North Americans at loose in Palm Springs and Tampa, Florida, will make all present theories about Canadian literature obsolete, in a very short time.

Marchand, Philip. (Saturday, April 13, 1986). “Can Lit Comes out of the Wilderness.” Toronto Star Ltd.

**Review of Lives of the Saints**

**By Tom Marshall**

Nino Ricci’s Lives of the Saints is a modest but impressive first novel. I’m not quite so overwhelmed by Mr. Ricci’s writing as the generous comments on the back cover from Janette Turner Hospital and Timothy Findley suggest that they were, but I admire his skilful deployment of familiar literary motifs and materials, and also the way that he paces his at first rather slow-moving narrative to arrive at an energetic and disturbing climax.

He begins:

If this story has a beginning, a moment at which a single gesture broke the surface of events like a stone thrown into the sea, the ripples cresting away endlessly, then that beginning occurred on a hot July day in the year 1960, in the village of Valle del Sole, when my mother was bitten by a snake.
Such an opening sentence-paragraph begs comparison with similar openings by such famous writers as John Irving and Robertson Davies (see Fifth Business). It is a mite portentous, I feel, for the relatively simple story which follows, but I understand that this book may be the first third of a trilogy, so perhaps the image of ever-widening ripples is completely appropriate to what will later come.

Such an opening also promises mythic motifs, beginning with the woman bitten by a snake, and these are certainly delivered. Again as in Davies, the fabulous lives of the more legendary saints offer ironic parallels to the experience both of Cristina, who becomes pregnant by her German lover while her husband is off attempting to make his way in Canada, and of her seven-year-old son Vittorio Innocente. Eight months gone, Cristina takes Vittorio and flees from the hypocritical disapproval of her fierce old father and her fellow villagers to join not her husband but her lover in the new world. In an Atlantic storm, the affecting story of this rebellious, strong-willed and unconventional woman reaches its climax.

It is a simple and moving tale conveyed via a well-known literary device often associated with Henry James: the observation by a child of adult matters he doesn’t understand very well. As narrator, Vittorio gives us straightforward observation of the life and rhythms of his Italian village, and the exploration of such a colourful world of imposed puritanical Catholicism overlying deep peasant superstition has its own interest. But such a narrative method also means that the innocent child’s-eye-view must be manipulated, sometimes in awkward ways, to convey to adult readers what the child does not quite grasp. Or does he? Vittorio sometimes has dreams that signal Freudian (or perhaps, depending upon how much credence you put in Freudian symbolism, merely literary) messages to the reader. “Strange images troubled me: my mother squatting in a field as if taking a pee, but getting up to reveal a large blue egg...some great black jaw stretching open in front of me, ready to swallow me like the whale that swallowed Jonah.” But this device is not over-used, and Ricci handles his narrative voice pretty smoothly most of the time.

San Leonardo conquered a snake. Saints Victorinus and Vittorio showed enormous fortitude under persecution. San Innocente was spared from disaster. (Vittorio Innocente perhaps translates into Innocence Victorious?) Santa Cristina was thrown into a pit with a hundred venomous serpents but overcame them, and her fierce defiance caused her tormentors anguish and death. Cast into the sea, she was raised up and carried off to heaven by the Archangel Michael. All of this lore has its parallels, usually ironic, in the lives of Ricci’s characters. His Cristina is judged guilty by her little world but may in fact be more worthy than her detractors. She may even be a Christ-figure whose tragedy will illuminate Vittorio’s future life. This seems to be the novel’s mythic import.

There is perhaps a faint political dimension here as well. Cristina is a kind of instinctive pre-feminist feminist; of her husband, whose family has a history of male brutality, she rants, “he’s probably slept with every whore in America by now, but for me it’s a disgrace. Women have had their faces up their asses for too long, they let their men run around like goats and then they’re happy if they don’t come home and beat them!” Her father, the long-time mayor of Valle del Sole, but now shamed and disdained by her kindness and its result, seems to have been happiest in Fascist times. Her lover, by contrast, is apparently a German socialist. We overhear these latter hints and intimations along with Vittorio, but he does not, of course, offer us an instant analysis. And while the adult Vittorio is understood throughout as the story’s narrator, it seems best that he not intrude himself very much into the flow of a seven-year-old consciousness.

Vittorio’s innocence ends in the book, from the moment of the snake onwards. His destination is a place called (for reasons I haven’t fathomed, unless to echo Valle del Sole) “the Sun Parlour.” (Is this an actual district? Or its nickname? I expect I’m revealing my ignorance.) It “was in a new part of America called Canada, which some said was a vast cold place with rickety wooden houses and great expanses of bush and snow, others a land of flat green fields that stretched for miles and of lakes as wide as the sea, an unfallen world without mountains or rocky earth.” Paradise regained? But that is an American myth as the ludicrous inaccuracy of “without mountains or rocky earth” may be meant to suggest: Presumably the Canadian Vittorio will discover for himself that no place is unfallen. (And perhaps that there never was any such thing as innocence, but that’s another story.)

The early part of this novel gives us a colourful and interesting look at a bit of the old world. The pace notably quickens, though, and so did my attention, as the departure of the two central characters looms and a series of farewells helps to define Vittorio’s abortive relationships with his grandfather, his teacher (who gives him her book on the lives of the saints), and his rough but sympathetic friend Fabrizio, who seems doomed to a life of peasant brutality, to repetition of the past. These and other secondary characters are lively and passionate (dare I say “Italian”?) in their mode of self-expression. There is then a rising excitement in the scenes on shipboard which lead to the book’s tragic climax, and a finely written elegiac conclusion.

All in all, an impressive debut. Nino Ricci is a new writer whose progress will, I expect, be well worth watching.


**Reviews of the Lives of the Saints**

*By Susan Branzzini et al*
This sequel to the well-received *The Book of Saints* again follows the Innocente family, here having left Italy to settle in a Canadian farming community called Mersea on the shores of Lake Erie. Unlike the previous novel, however, this one has only mixed success. The tale is nicely wrought and lovingly written, but it suffers from a thin plot and a morass of self-analysis from its narrator, Vittorio. In 1961, when the novel opens, Vittorio is seven; he and his illegitimate half-sister, Rita, have joined Vittorio's moody father, a greenhouse keeper, who hates the infant Rita because she reminds him of his faithless wife. Vittorio hopes desperately to make a connection with his father, who only withdraws further, living at such a remove from his surroundings that he rarely speaks even to his children. Vittorio's attempts to connect elsewhere, either in Mersea's Italian community or in the surrounding Canadian culture, meet with rejection or misunderstanding. Yet he slowly navigates through the elements of his life, gaining perspective, finding a girlfriend, attending college and traveling to Africa. Rita finally escapes from the family with an awful ruse, better left unrevealed. In places, Ricci tells his tale beautifully, but he seems to have fallen under the spell of his own prose, which, like the protagonist, turns in upon itself a little too deeply.

Kathy Broderick

In this sequel to *The Book of Saints* (1991), Ricci continues the story of young Vittorio Innocente, who has arrived in Canada from Italy to live with his half-sister and father, Mario. Vittorio's life in the New World consists mostly of caring for this half-sister Mario has rejected, she not being his own. The years pass, and Vittorio suffers an isolated and indifferent existence, eventually leaving for college and ironically directing a study of his own emotionally mysterious Italian community. After accepting a teaching position in Nigeria, he begins an uncomfortable but touching correspondence with his father and his half-sister, both of whom expose themselves in unfamiliar ways. On news of his father's suicide, Vittorio returns to Canada and memories of his painful, wasted youth. The novel ends with Vittorio's final leave-taking. Ricci's writing is strong, gaining power and emotion as Vittorio reflects on his childhood; its poignancy is nowhere more beautiful then when Vittorio studies the letters from home for their hidden meanings. "Somehow I'd missed the simplest things, the simplest possibilities, that we might have shared our lives, been human, that it would have cost us so little to be simply ourselves." A meaningful work from a talented young writer.

Victor Dwyer
*Maclean's*, Feb 4, 1991 v104 n5 p. 63(1)

First time winner: Novelist Nino Ricci wins the Governor General's Literary Award for English Language Fiction.

During the two years that he spent writing his first novel, Nino Ricci had what he describes as the ideal method for motivating himself. "I would get up every morning," recalled the 31-year-old author, "and devote a half-hour to imagining all the great things that might happen if I made myself write—things like seeing my work in print, things like achieving public acclaim, things like winning the Governor General's Award." Last week, just 10 months after the publication of *Lives of the Saints*, and in the wake of a steady stream of praise for that literary debut, the young writer realized the third of those goals. On the stage of Montreal's Place des Arts, Gov. Gen. Ramon Hnatyshyn presented Ricci with Canada's most coveted literary prize. Said the author in an interview: "All along, I have been steeling myself for the blow that will knock me down. Now, I finally feel as though I can take a little time to enjoy this."

For Ricci, winning the Governor General's Literary Award for English Language Fiction was especially gratifying because his favourite Canadian author, Alice Munro, was among the other nominees, for her sixth short-story collection, *Friend of My Youth*. A three-time winner of the award, Munro was the only best-selling author on this year's list of finalists, which also included Diane Schoemperlen of Kingston, Ont., for her short-story collection *The Man of My Dreams*, and two Vancouver novelists, Sky Lee (Disappearing Moon Cafe) and Leslie Hall Pinder (On Double Tracks). In English nonfiction, the judges chose Trudeau and *Our Times*, by Toronto authors Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall, from a strong short list of nominees.

Munro's inclusion among the fiction nominees pre-empted a repeat of the controversy that surrounded the awards last year, when the judges failed to nominate Mordecai Richler's critically acclaimed epic *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. Last week, Ricci speculated that it was his relative obscurity that gave him the edge. Said Ricci: "There must be some level at which the jurors say, Okay, so Alice Munro has written another wonderful book. But Alice Munro has already written five or six wonderful books. There may be an extra level of excitement in finding somebody new."

One of six children of Italian immigrants Virginio and Amelia Ricci, the novelist was born in Leamington, Ont., 60 km southeast of Windsor, where his parents had settled to start their own farm in 1954. During an interview in the small Toronto
apartment where Ricci lives alone, the tall, lean author recalled that it was in Leamington, and in a series of trips to his parents' home region of Molise, in south-central Italy, that he drew the inspiration for Lives of the Saints. Set in 1960, the novel tells the story of seven-year-old Vittorio Innocente, who lives in a small Italian village with his strong-willed mother, Cristina. While Vittorio's father is in Canada preparing a new home for his family, Cristina becomes pregnant by another man. Scandalized, the adult villagers harass Cristina as their children taunt—and actually torture—Vittorio. Eventually, mother and son set out for Canada.

Although some prominent reviewers were critical of Ricci's prose style (Saturday Night magazine detected a "lack of artistry"), most critics followed the lead of author Timothy Findley, who, in a blurb on the dust jacket, describes Lives of the Saints as "a novel of remarkable beauty and unforgettable power." But Ricci maintains that the response of readers—many of whom have told him that they greatly enjoyed the book—means more to him. And, he added, it has helped to justify the past few years of penury.

Ricci, who in 1987 earned a master's degree in creative writing from Concordia University in Montreal, has supported himself since then with government grants. In 1989, he lived on less than $10,000. But now, he is beginning to see financial returns from his work. Along with last week's award, the Canada Council presented him with a cheque for $10,000. And in March, Cormorant Books of Dunvegan, Ont., which published Lives of the Saints, will issue the author his first, long-awaited royalty cheque. Last September, the book appeared in Britain, and in April it is scheduled to come out in the United States.

Meanwhile, Ricci has almost finished a sequel to Lives of the Saints, which details Vittorio's early years in Canada. The author has also completed the first draft of a third installment. Ricci concedes that there are autobiographical elements to his fiction. "In writing, I feel that I'm curing my isolation—taking what has happened to me and turning it into a form that is useful to the world," he said. Official recognition, he added, also has its rewards. "I certainly feel more legitimate than I did a year ago," said Ricci. "Most of all, I just feel glad that I don't have to write a novel hoping that it will win me my first Governor General's Award."

Paul E. Hutchison

Library Journal Review.

In this sequel to The Book of the Saints (LJ 5/1/91), young Vittorio Innocente leaves Italy and his dead mother to join his estranged father in Canada. But the shame of his mother's adulterous affair and subsequent death in childbirth poisons his life with his embittered father. Emotions explode when his Aunt Theresa arrives with his baby half-sister, Rita, but then like the vegetables they labor to grow under acres of glass in a hostile climate, the Innocentes struggle to fashion a family from the wreckage of dashed hopes. Caught between his father's dark fury and his aloof half-sister, Vittorio struggles to escape the hothouse environment of an immigrant community isolated by custom and language. Ricci adroitly portrays the developing awareness of a child growing into adulthood whose emotional scars barely heal before they are ripped open by fresh revelations. Through Vittorio's brooding sensitivity, Ricci explores what binds these volatile characters into a family as well as what ultimately drives them apart. Recommended for all collections.

Kathryn LaBarbera


There's talk in Valle del Sole, a small Italian village lost in the Apennines: talk about the pregnant Cristina who lives with her seven-year-old son and his crippled grandfather, talk about her husband, who has lived in Canada for many years; and talk about Cristina's encounter with a snake—its evil presence is seen as proof of Cristina's doomed soul. Her son, Vittorio, just old enough to sense the disapproval of his peers, begins to bow under the weight of the shame his mother should be feeling. Teased at school and scared by stories of a snake-headed baby, he betrays his friend, Fabrizio, when his own conscience and fear incapacitate him. The village rivalries, gossip, and church pressure crowd around the mother and her son, and even Cristina's final act of rebellion—escaping with Vittorio to America—ends tragically when she dies at sea during childbirth. Ricci's first novel is enlivened by the Italian storytelling tradition; Vittorio's priest, his teacher, and his grandfather supply rich texture with their talk of village history and patron saints. A sobering view of the suffocating influence of religion and superstition on the life of a young boy.

Richard E. Nicholls


First-generation Canadian Nino Ricci, author of the award-winning novel Lives of the Saints, told Richard E. Nicholls in New York Times Book Review that in his writing he wants to portray "the experience of being an immigrant in the modern world." Ricci's parents emigrated from Italy to Canada, but regaled their son with stories of their native village and faithfully
observed Italian culture. During his interview with Nicholls, Ricci explained that "being raised in a tight-knit Italian community in Canada, I grew up with a sense of village dynamics." As a secondary school teacher in Nigeria for two years, Ricci found further inspiration for his novel. He told Nicholls that living in this "energetic and flamboyant land" was "like going back to an older Italy. In its strong mix of religion and folk beliefs it gave me a sense of how life might transpire in the small world of a village. My image of life in [the fictional Italian village of] Valle del Sole had at least part of its origins in Africa."

*Lives of the Saints*, which earned Canada's prestigious Governor General's Literary Award, is set in a small, theistic Italian village in 1960. Seven-year-old narrator Vittorio Innocente and his mother Cristina Innocente live alone in Valle del Sole while Vittorio's father prepares a home for them in Canada. Lonely and unhappy with her marriage, Cristina finds comfort with a.*

For Vittorio, the* Lives of the Saints* is "an extraordinary story—brooding and ironic, suffused with yearning, tender and lucid and gritty."

*In a Glass House*, Ricci's next novel, is the second instalment in what Ricci plans will be a trilogy about Vittorio Innocente. The novel begins with Vittorio's arrival in Canada with his baby half-sister—the product of his mother's illicit affair in Italy. His mother has died in childbirth on the passage to Canada, and his father is revealed as a bitter and angry man, who is part of an immigrant farming community. In an attempt to grow things in the harsh, Canadian climate, he is forever building greenhouses, which become the metaphorical glass houses of the title.

Vittorio struggles to fit in and to love his father and his sister (who is rejected by his father and eventually adopted by a Canadian family). He teaches for a while in Africa, returns to Canada, and, at the end of the novel, confronts his father's death. John Melmoth's review in *Times Literary Supplement* noted that "Vittorio's experience is, in part, representative of the 'subtle' embitterment of the migrant, forever out of place. He is trapped between antithesis: between ... self-conscious aloofness and the need to belong ... between Italy and Canada; resistance and acquiescence; dark and light."

Writing in *Maclean's*, Lawrence Scanlan declared "the operative word in the novel is 'humiliation' and noted that the novel "explores an immigrant's pain as a doctor explores a wound. It is [a] far more personal novel, even autobiographical than its predecessor." Melmoth claimed that "In a Glass House is a novel of great power, but it is almost entirely devoid of any lighter moments."

Yet Scanlan asserted that "Ricci's great gift is to capture, sometimes in exquisite prose, the texture of people and place," and David Prosser, who reviewed the book for *Quill and Quire*, commented: "Vittorio's self-discovery is one in which we all share: it is as if, in focusing a microscope on an unpromising slide, we had caught a glimpse of the human soul." Also praising Ricci's "brilliant descriptive powers," *Spectator* contributor Celestria Noel dubbed Ricci "one of Canada's best novelists to appear for a long time."

Sybil Steinberg
*Cahners Business Information.*

This debut novel masterfully evokes a tiny Italian community in the Apennines. It's 1960, the inhabitants pay tribute to the Virgin, but neither modernity nor religion has gained ascendency over popular awe of "the tremendous forces which envy stirred up, forces age-old and sacred, ones that found their incarnation in the evil eye." Narrator Vittorio, age seven, watches as the villagers ostracize his mother, Cristina, when she is bitten by a snake, which to them seems a token of certain punishment for her ongoing affair with a German soldier who, apparently, deserted during WW II. As they whisper of *lu malocchiu*, the evil eye, the schoolmistress shares with Vittorio a copy of the* Lives of the Saints*. For *la maestra*, the saints [are] not merely the ghosts of some mythical past but an ever-present possibility, the mundane and everyday verging always on the miraculous for Vittorio, and perhaps for Ricci as well, their lives, especially the discussion of Saint Cristina, furnishes an alternate paradigm for understanding Cristina's downfall. If parallels between the saint and the defiant village woman are forced, this weakness is handsomely offset by Ricci's unsentimental depictions of the sway of superstition and ritual, of the mystical undertcurrents of village life and of the overarching mystery of childhood itself. A citizen of both Italy and Canada, Ricci received the 1990 Canadian Governor General's Award for Fiction.

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*Narrating the Homeland:*

*The Importance of Places in Nino Ricci's Lives of the Saints*  
*By Judit Molnár*
Nino Ricci’s award-winning novel *Lives of the Saints* (1990) (Governor General’s Award among many others), a novel that has been translated into several languages, has already been approached and analyzed in many different ways. My intention is to focus on the importance of the various places that are depicted in the work. I would like to rely on David Staines’ idea that the question raised by Northrop Frye in the “Conclusion” to the Literary History of Canada (1965) "Where is here?” (27). More and more writers’ interest lie in their past, in their homeland. As Jim Zucchero also notes: “If the one great question that America asks of every newcomer is ‘What will you do with your future?’ Canada adds to it the more difficult ones, What will you do with yourpast? How much will you abandon everything that made you what you are and join in a sea of other pasts from Somalia, Barbados and South Africa?” (266).

In the novel we are viewing Valle del Sole, a fictional, isolated, Italian village in the Appenines through the eyes of the seven-year-old Vittorio Innocente. The novel also takes place in the neighbouring village Rocca Secca. The map of geographical locations is really large, and provides a system of discourse in the novel. I would like to quote the author at length on this matter:

> There is a Rocca Secca that exists, but I discovered that only after writing the novel. The Rocca Secca of the novel is in a different location than the actual one. I believe the actual one is is in Campania [...] I could be wrong, while my novel is set in the region of Molise. My Rocca Secca is based on a town called Agnone.

> Similarly, Valle del Sole apparently exits, or so I have been told by some Italians, though I have never been able to locate it on the map. My own Valle del Sole is based on my mother’s village near Canale (which is actually a “frazione” of Agnone, though some miles distant from it.) Villa Canale, for some reason was nicknamed Valle del Sole. When my oldest brother visited the town in 1967, he and my cousins posted a sign at the entrance to the village that read “Bienvenu alla valle del sole.” The nickname stuck in my head, and seemed right for my fictional village.

> Colle di Papa is the name of an actual hill outside Villa Canale, though most of the names used in the countryside are not official ones. They were just developed through oral tradition as a means of keeping track of the landscape and of remembering where your fields were. Every hill and valley and ravine and curve of road had a name, though I’m not sure you would find them on any map. (“Request” 1).

The notion of space and place has been discussed extensively (Bachelard, Lefebre, Soja etc.); this time I shall strict myself to one particular differentiating factor between the two, that is space and place, using Yi-Pu-Tuan’s theory, which states: “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6). (emphasis added) The places among which our narrator keeps moving are filled with fear with no exception. The reader gets to know these two villages in a retrospective narrative where two voices are used in parallel: "the narrator as a voice, an older voice (as opposed to the narrator as character) [...] (Dvorak 105). Here the space is both psychological and psychic that occupies the narrator's mind, and this space is filled with certain places the features of which the narrator remembers. Edward C. Casey calls our attention to the fact that often we remember features of places “which [are] always definite” (188).

The harshness of the landscape surrounding the village is emphasized right on in the second paragraph of the novel:

> Valle del Sole—which was not in a valley at all, but perched on the north face of Colle di Papa about three thousand feet above the valley floor—had no culinary specialties, no holy sites, no ancient ruins; forgotten and unsung, it was one of a hundred villages just like it flung across the Italian Appenines like scattered stones. (7) (emphasis added)

The village is located among the rocky hillsides where people "enjoy" poverty and a traditional way of life. But it is also the "land of the marvelous, the magical, the miraculous" (Dvorak 109). Ricci he, himself has been in the village on which the novel is based but he is a second generation immigrant born in Canada; the novel is thus semi-autobiographical. Tuan emphasizes: "They [places] need not, of course, be personal possessions. We can try to reconstruct our past with brief visits to our old neighbourhood or the birthplace of our parents” (187).

> He describes wonderfully this part of the world in his essay “Home of the Saints”, too. Ricci attributes a great importance to places; he goes as far as saying that "there is a meaning system in place" in his novel ("A Big Canvas" 12).

From now on, I shall concentrate on the significant places one by one as they occur in the novel. In his magic narrative where Catholicism, myth, superstition, and folklore live side by side the first incident that really gives a thrust to the following ones happens in a stable. This is where Vittorio’s mother, Cristina, commits adultery with a mysterious man and gets pregnant at the time when her husband, Mario, left for America. She is bitten by a snake in the stable. Snakes have specific meanings in this part of the world where pagan beliefs play as important a role as Christianity. Zucchero remarks, “the stable, traditional scene of nativity becomes the symbol of adultery” (259). Cristina is bitten by a green snake that does not necessarily bring misfortune but still is a bad omen. The stable becomes a place to be worried about both for Vittorio and his mother. Casey suggests:
Memory of place implaces us and thus empowers us: gives us the space to be precisely because we have been in so many memorable places, enjoyed intimacy in them, know such intimacy in them, known such pain there as well. (215) (emphasis added)

In Michel Foucault's terminology the stable would be an example of "crisis heterotopias": "[these] are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live in a state of crisis [...] (24). For Cristina the stable is a place for joy but the consequences of that joy result in pain for her and for her son, too. Vittorio and his father find her in the stable at another time, when she is bleeding in her early pregnancy. After each case she is taken to hospital in the nearby village Rocca Secca. First she is driven there because her ankle starts to swell; the snake poisoned her. She is cured but the swelling in her womb becomes more and more visible later on when she is an expectant mother. The sinful woman is taken care of at a place that one cannot forget; it is depressing both physically and emotionally.

The hospital in Rocca Secca was on the outskirts of town, a high-walled medieval building that had been an orphanage before the second war. We entered through massive front doors into a large reception room filled with whispers and moans, people everywhere, leaning against walls, sitting on the floor, shuffling around the room like ghosts—hard-featured peasants, mainly some dressed awkwardly in Sunday suits but many still in their dirty working clothes, nursing bandaged limbs or internal ailments that showed themselves in their low moans and pale skin. (22)

The description continues; we get a real sense of the place from different perceptions through which we acquire a real feeling of the hospital as a self-contained world in itself. Cristina's father is also taken to hospital with a fractured hip. By the time this happens the reader has become fully familiar with the physical features of the building and the mental space the patients exist in.

According to Zuccheri in Lives of the Saints "an unmistakable sense of the character of the place and the mindset of its inhabitants" can be observed (255). (emphasis added) This truly holds true for the very house where Vittorio, his mother and grandfather live. Ricci remembers that he had an obsession for drawing houses when he was a child, he "had a notion of houiness" ("Publishers" 1). In the Innocentes' dwelling the closed doors between the rooms separate the members of the family. It is an alien place; it is basically only the kitchen where they meet on which either heavy silence falls or is loud from the sharp quarreling between Cristina and her father who cannot forgive her for her pregnancy. Sunshine seems to avoid this place, and it does not invite too many visitors either; occasionally two women appear out of curiosity, whose appearance only add to the already existing stark ambiance inside. The tense atmosphere filters through the walls. The fireplace seems to be important because there Cristina could burn the letters that her husband sends her from Canada from time to time. Ironically enough, the fireplace is most often associated with warmth and intimacy. This is how Vittorio feels when he moves to his own room, which "had no history" (38) since nobody lived there for a long time.

My new mattress had replaced an old straw one, a remnant of my mother's childhood, bug-infested and smelling of mould, on a crooked wooden frame that held up planks of splintered wood for support in lieu of springs; but the frame was too big for the mattress and stuck out a foot on either side of it, making my sheets and blankets to stick out like wings. (37)

A warm interpersonal relationship exists between Vittorio and his mother but in kind of a hidden manner. Vittorio and his grandfather are also somewhat close but in their own private way. One is not supposed to show intimate feelings here. The house has a significant role to play in our identity formation as Gaston Bachelard points it out in details. This is where daydreaming starts that we take with us to other places. (3-7)

Vittorio spends much of his time at school. In contrast with the house it is described more as a lived place generating different kinds of feelings in him. He has multiple affiliations with this educational and religious institution. He likes la maestra basically for the way she teaches religion and the way she applies Lives of the Saints in her classes. But he, together with his fellow classmates, is afraid of Father Nick, who checks upon the students' knowledge of the Catechism, and who does not spare the rod if he thinks that is the best for the youngsters. When it becomes known for everybody in the school that Vittorio's mother was with child whose father was unknown he found himself in the centre of unimaginable cruelty coming from the other kids. Having been made fun of and badly beaten up at school by the other children la maestra allows him to stay there, so he did not have to leave together with the others. He helps her sweep the floor and she reads to him from Lives of the Saints. These occasions raise profound emotions in him; the school is no longer a place to be afraid of but also a sacred hide-out, an intimate place.

Another hide-out are the pastures on the mountainside where Vittorio meets his friend, Fabrizio, in secret. The hypocrite villagers do not allow their children to be friends with Vittorio because of his mother's disgrace. These people are supposedly strong believers of mores, morals and propriety. The hillsides where Fabrizio grazes his father's goats and sheep transform into pastoral scenes for their friendship and a lurking hole for them to smoke cigarettes. Later, however, this is the very spot where
Fabrizio's schoolmates torture him in a most painful and obscene way. Fabrizio catches sight of them and it is him, who saves Vittorio for which Fabrizio's father punishes him by sending him away from the village.

Vittorio regularly visits the strange church that has no organs with his grandfather even when her mother refuses to go with them. Seats are reserved there for them in the first pew because of the grandfather's position as ex-mayor of the village. In the dwellers' view, they should also carry the burden of Cristina's shame, therefore church going is layered with different meanings for them. They try to leave after mass as soon as possible and with quick steps in order not to meet the disapproving looks on people's faces. Thus the church is not only a comforting spiritual place for them but one of frustration as well.

For the grandfather the place to escape to is Di Lucci's bar situated in the centre of the village.

Antonio Di Lucci's bar stood at the point where the big S cut by via San Giuseppe widened into the village square, tucked back against the embankment that the church and the school sat on. (92)

This spot is the gathering place for the inhabitants but it is not always crowded, therefore it can serve as a peaceful location for the grandfather to ponder upon his life and the world in general.

The market place in Rocca Secca where Vittorio is taken by his mother on his birthday, is full of life, happy crowds bustle about while cracking jokes. In comparison Valle del Sole is a rather miserable and desolate place indeed. But Vittorio cannot fully enjoy his trip because he overhears a surreptitious conversation between his mother and a man that involves references to his mother's ignominious affair. Unfortunately, this place is again one that would fill his heart with topophobia.

Places both in Valle del Sole and Rocca Secca become internalized and heighten people's awareness of something that is better to flee from. People started to move to the New World decades earlier; in Vittorio's family it was his great-grandfather, who sought for fortune in America. The early settlers left these places behind for financial reasons.

America. How many dreams and fears and contradictions were tied up in that single word, a word which conjured up a world, like a name uttered at the dawn of creation, even while it broke another, the one on village and home and family. (160)

Cristina, however, decides to find the "Sun Parlour" in Canada for other reasons. She is a very proud, strong and defiant woman, the Italian Hester Prynne; so when she gets a letter from her husband that he is waiting for her despite the fact that someone informed him about her pregnancy she accepts his offer. Vittorio thinks, "The inevitable happened - someone had poured some poison in my father's ears" (152). The day before their departure some people gathered in their house which had always been ignored by the villagers. Cristina is irritable and irritated at the same time, she cannot control her emotions at all. She shouts and blames them for their "stupid rules and superstitions" adding that they could not "hang" her and wish her "dead". She claims to know how to make a "choice" and what "freedom" means wishing that God wiped that town off the face of the earth. (184) (emphasis added) They leave Valle del Sole because it is guided and controlled by false beliefs that penetrate its places, and there is no place to hide.

The second and much shorter part of the novel starts in Chapter XXVI when Vittorio together with his mother board the ship going to Halifax. According to Foucault: "The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilisations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates" (27) (emphasis added) The ship is a transit place for them, a bridge between the old and the new worlds between the past and the future; a place for dreaming indeed. They have an individualized travel experience. Because Cristina expects a child they can have their own cabin, they don't have to be part of larger crowds of people. Their cabin despite or because of its very small size immediately becomes a shared place for them; here they appreciate and enjoy their cozy isolation. When they are on the different decks that are communal places, Cristina feels free and liberated not imprisoned anymore, she makes friends very easily. Some people are invited to the captain's room, which is a luxurious place by contrast of other parts of the ship. There Cristina is released from constraints she has lived together with; she becomes an emancipated woman.

But the joy is broken because Cristina delivers the baby before time. She gives birth to her baby in the course of a violent storm. The mother dies because of the extreme conditions and excessive bleeding. Vittorio falls into a shock but, he together with his new-born sister, is met by his father on the other side of the ocean. What awaits him there is discussed in the second (In a Glass House, 1994) and third (Where She Has Gone, 1997) parts of the trilogy.

According to Edward Relph:

They [places] are important sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties. Indeed our relationship with places are just as necessary, varied, and perhaps sometimes just as unpleasant, as our relationship with other people. (141) (emphasis added)

Lives of the Saints, a place-dominated narrative, certainly demonstrates that places we live in and are surrounded by are very important in our identity formation. Vittorio Innocente (by implication an innocent and would-be victorious young man) remembers his childhood in spatial terms: the two important villages, the valleys, the stable, the house in which he was brought up, the school, the pastures, the market place, the hospital, the church, the bar etc. He meanders among ranges of experiences
and feelings: topophilia and topophobia. Vittorio Innocente can as an adult provide us with a clear sense of the places where he basically experienced fear and suffered from the pressures in his life as a child. Various locations had idiosyncratic meanings for him that had stayed with him even to his adulthood. His way of remembering is a process where places, be it private or public, play a crucial, if not the most important role.


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Neither Here Nor There: Redirecting the Homeward Gaze in Nino Ricci's Lives of the Saints, In a Glass House and Where She Has Gone

By Amanda Mullen

This paper argues that Nino Ricci's trilogy moves beyond the nostalgia for an ordinary home and expresses instead a nostalgia for origins in a new home—for origins in Canada rather than Italy. Ricci uses his trilogy to refute the myth of a homogenous Canadian identity by giving voice to the experiences, both personal and communal, of Italian migrants in Canada. The trilogy explores the complex process of forging an authenticating mythology that will allow Italian migrants and their descendants to add their stories to Canada's national narrative while establishing their place in the nation. Ricci offers, however, no definitive conclusions, for the trilogy ends in a subliminal space that reveals his own ambivalence toward the very kind of myth-making strategy in which he engages.

The novels of Nino Ricci's trilogy Lives of the Saints (1990), In a Glass House (1993), and Where She Has Gone (1997) express a nostalgic longing for a particular moment in Canada's past: a migrant's arrival and settlement in a new land. Derived from the Greek "nostos," which signifies a return home, and "algos," which refers to suffering or pain, nostalgia is a powerful impulse that awakens a bittersweet longing for the past, even for a past that evokes painful memories, since these memories show those who have suffered that they have the capacity to endure. 1 David Lowenthal observes that nostalgic longings are becoming increasingly common in Western societies, and he postulates that a mistrust of the future fuels much of today's nostalgia (1985, 11). Yet he explains, "If nostalgia is a symptom of malaise, it also has compensating virtues. Attachment to familiar places may buffer social upheaval, attachment to familiar faces may be necessary for enduring association" (1985, 13). Daniel Francis reinforces this point when he writes, "In an age of anxiety, it is not surprising to find nostalgia flourishing" (1997, 176). For Canadian writers from different ethno-cultural backgrounds, a nostalgic return to an immigrant past can be a means of establishing roots in this land. While nostalgia has traditionally played a central role in ethnic literature, this longing has typically rested on a nostalgic desire to "journey toward an originary home" (Kamboureli 2000, 132). The novels of Ricci's trilogy, however, move beyond this nostalgia for a lost homeland and express instead a nostalgia for a different kind of origins for origins in the new land, for the originary moment when Italian immigrants arrived and settled in Canada.
What Ricci's novels reveal is that the creation of an authenticating mythology is dependent upon the assertion of these originary moments. For a mythology to be authenticating, it must reconstruct and reimagine genuine historical events. It must, in other words, lay claim to verifiable historical origins. For example, in his trilogy, Ricci creates an authenticating mythology that reconstructs the historical realities of Italian migration to Canada and thus offers his ethnic group a genuine sense of belonging in the nation. Yet even as he recovers these origins, he questions historical "truths" and blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. Marie Vautier explains that many postmodern novels share:

Ricci revises Canada's British-based history and thus reclaims the past by showing how Italian Canadians helped build the nation. In doing so, he gives voice to neglected moments from Canada's history while adding these originary moments to the nation's history by celebrating victories, explaining origins, and confirming identities. Media sources such as newspapers, radio, and television play a central role in reinforcing the national narrative and in "representing the kind of imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson 1995, 25). Similarly, novels can reinforce the idea of this imagined community by telling the stories of personal and communal history. The people, places, and events that make up the nation. National narratives thus provide the members of any given nation-state with a shared sense of collectivity, identity, and belonging. As John McLeod explains, "the production of symbols is important to the construction of the myth of the nation, the function of which is to unite many individuals into one people" (2000, 72). But what happens when some groups do not see themselves or their experiences reflected in the national narrative of this "one people"? What happens when nationalist representations exclude certain groups?

Ricci's use of his fiction to remember, rewrite, and honor the past, and to reject and resist a vision of Canada that has left Italians out.
As a newcomer to Canada, Ricci's narrator expresses a migrant's nostalgia for a lost homeland and the idealized vision that so often accompanies this nostalgia: the dream of a familiar landscape and the longing to return. Joseph Pivato explains that Italian immigrants often experience a particular form of nostalgia that is derived from historical imperatives, regional associations, familial relations, and emotional and societal obligations (1999, 56). This nostalgia has its roots in the songs of rural Italy where the peasant populations have a history of migration that spans the last hundred years. Southern Italian peasants, in particular, endured long periods of separation when families were left at home while fathers searched for employment in the more prosperous regions of Italy the north of Europe, or the Americas (Pivato 1989, 846). As a result of these prolonged separations, an oral tradition evolved that laments the need for migration and reveals a migrant's nostalgia for the home left behind. This Italian nostalgia is often expressed in a typical song where "the speaker promises his sweetheart, or his wife, that he will return, or he promises his mother that he will come home, or he promises Italia (more often his paese or hometown) that he will be back. In many songs the three overlap and merge: a love song to a sweetheart could be a love song to a mother, and a love song to a mother becomes a song to il paese, the hometown" (Pivato 1989, 846). Comelled to leave home in search of better prospects, these migrant laborers cherished the promise of return, whether their travels took them as close as a neighboring village, or as far as a journey overseas. Songs of migration and the historical tradition to which they belong are thus connected with contemporary Italian-Canadian writings, especially writings that explore immigrant experiences and the longing for home.

Not a migrant himself, Ricci does not harbor nostalgia for a lost homeland. Rather, as a second-generation Italian Canadian, he expresses nostalgia for an originary moment in a new land: the migrant's arrival and settlement in Canada. In short, Ricci is interested in the process of establishing Canada as home, including the departure from the old land, the arrival and settlement in the new land, and the return journey to the former home. Although Ricci was born in Canada, he knows what it means to feel different. As he writes, "When I started school ... a lot of what we did suddenly began to seem not so normal ... It was as if I, too, had set out on a ship and arrived in another country where people did things differently, so that suddenly everything about my own little domain, the closed, autonomous world I'd been raised in until then, seemed makeshift and shabby and low. This, then, perhaps, was my true passage to Canada, out of innocence and sameness into difference" (2001, R1). Such feelings of difference will always accompany exiles, according to Edward Said, regardless of how much success they achieve in the new land (2001, 182). These feelings, as Ricci discovers, are also experienced by migrants who "may in a sense live in exile" (Said 2001, 181). That Ricci, as a child, suddenly recognizes the division between "Canadian" and "Italian" points to his affinity with those who are exiled, for he simultaneously experiences two separate cultures. As Said explains:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that to borrow a phrase from music is contrapuntal. For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (2001, 186)

For Ricci, these old and new environments are not represented by old and new lands, but by private and public spheres, namely his "Italian" family and the "Canadian" mainstream. Ricci's understanding of the old land is based on his parents' memories of this place and on the ways they translated their experiences for their children. In other words, Ricci's contrapuntal vision consists of memories of the old land that are not his own: he knows Italy primarily as a remembered and imagined place. As his personal reflections suggest, "Italian" and "Canadian" represent two separate spheres that, in childhood, he could not reconcile. Years later, however, he strives to bridge this gap by bringing Italian and Canadian identities and histories together in a narrative that imaginatively reconstructs the immigrant experiences of first-generation Italian Canadians.

Together, Lives of the Saints, In a Glass House, and Where She Has Gone explore both the debilitating effects of a migrant's homeward-looking gaze and the forging of an authenticating mythology that will enable Italian migrants and their descendants to establish Canada as home. Each of these novels strives to connect with a mythologized past and explores, in some way, a myth that Ricci says is "operative in the immigrant mind that sense of an unacceptable present and a golden future" (1998, 136). In his trilogy, Ricci attempts to secure Canada as home by redirecting the homeward gaze and mythologizing Italian origins in Canada. Yet, even as he does so, Ricci ends his trilogy with a sense of ambiguity by suggesting but not confirming that the desire for authenticity is problematic. He thus provides migrant and post-migrant generations alike with a warning about the dangers of nostalgia as well as a tentative sense of belonging in Canada. While Ricci's narrative allows for this provisional belonging, his trilogy likewise suggests that ambivalent feelings of home represent the most authentic experience available to migrants and exiles.

Canada exists as an abstract concept rather than as a physical reality in Lives of the Saints. Ricci's narrator, Vittorio Innocente, explains that his father, Mario, has been gone four years to work "in a new part of America called Canada" (Lives 1997, 162). Vittorio's father regularly sends letters, though only occasionally sends money, home to his family. The letters form a tenuous link between father and son because Vittorio is not invited to read them and, as he says, "When once I had retrieved one of them ... I'd been unable to make out anything in my father's erratic script" (Lives, 36). Mario fails to communicate in any way with his son and thus becomes an elusive absence, "a shadowy blank" whom Vittorio struggles to remember (Lives, 36). With this fictional portrait of the absent father, Ricci gives voice to the personal stories behind historical
records that state, for example, that over 400,000 Italians migrated to Canada between 1946 and 1967 (Sturino 1988, 61). Vittorio’s father represents one of these migrants, and his life-like the lives of most migrants and their families is permanently altered by his decision to journey overseas. Ricci focuses, in particular, on the movement from Italy to North America and addresses the consequences of losing such large numbers of migrants to a land so far away. This interest in migration has long been a part of the Italian psyche and a distinct theme in Italian literature. As Pivato writes, “From Roman times Italians have always been leaving home, trying to return home, or [...] trying to find a new home” (“Literatures” 1985a, 171). Indeed, Ricci acknowledges this history of migration in Lives of the Saints: “In Valle del Sole the men had long been migrants, to the north, to Buenos Aires, to New York, every year weighing their options, whether the drought would ruin the year’s crops, or a patch of land bring a sufficient price to buy a passage, whether to strike out for Torino or Switzerland, with the promise at least of a yearly return, or to reckon on an absence of years or a lifetime, and cross the sea” (Lives 1990, 160). Vittorio’s family, like many others in the village, has a history of migration that spans several generations. These families understand the sacrifices that have been made and recognize the possible outcomes both positive and negative of immigrant experiences. In Vittorio’s case, it is his maternal great-grandfather who left his wife and young children in the 1890s and eventually reached America. (2) Ricci’s fictional rendering of these migrant experiences reveals that, with their long history of displacement, Italian laborers and their families recognize both the possible financial gains of migration and its accompanying feelings of uncertainty and loss.

Mario Innocente’s reasons for moving to Canada in search of employment reflect those of Italian migrants in general who were drawn to North America after the Second World War. Although migration had long been a necessity in their country, Italian migrants only came to Canada in significant numbers when, after the deposition of Mussolini, (4) they were no longer associated with a Fascist regime and were actively recruited by the Canadian government as a viable source of unskilled labor (Jansen 1988, 25-32; Hamey 1979, 231). Italian migration to Canada peaked between 1951 and 1971, with over 22,000 Italians arriving in Canada every year throughout the 1960s (Jansen 1988, 49-51). The majority of these migrants were like the fictional Mario-seeking employment overseas as a result of rural poverty in the southern regions of Italy. In contrast to earlier waves of Italian migrants, postwar migrants planned to settle in Canada and to eventually send for their families (Padolsky 1987, 145). Ricci explains that this change had a devastating effect on rural Italy because migrants who once returned to the homeland and used their savings to foster growth in their villages were now leaving permanently for the new land. As Vittorio says, “since the war the village had known mainly one-way departures. The men left, and a few years later wives and children and sometimes ageing parents followed... Only babies and old people left behind, my grandfather would grumble. 'No one left to work the land'” (Lives, 161). The promise of return has clearly been forgotten by these later generations of migrants who will not go back to their villages to build homes and establish farms. Settlement in the new land has become an attractive alternative to the traditional return to the old land with its familiar-and seemingly outmoded-way of life. Using this historical context, Ricci depicts the changing realities of the Italian diaspora, including the effects of migration overseas. He shows that, for the families waiting in Italy, Canada exists as an abstract concept: it is a distant place that takes husbands and fathers away but that also offers the possibility of employment and financial security. As a land that takes while it gives, Canada thus embodies a paradox in the diasporic consciousness of postwar generations of Italians.

Ricci further explores this paradox in Lives of the Saints when he reveals that the villagers consider North America both a place of freedom and a place of entrapment. In this mythical new land, they expect to realize their dreams of financial success and to live comfortably free from need. Indeed, migrants have traditionally considered the new world a paradise or a promised land: “From the age of exploration and even before, the New World has been a repository for Europe’s dreams, both spiritual and material, and a significant element in the New World’s magnetism for the immigrant has been the potent mythology of North America as the New Eden” (Palmer 1990, 69). Canada thus exists as a place of longing for the villagers, since it represents opportunity and prosperity while also offering “a means of escape from their limited and limiting small-town life” (Baena 2000, 95). As a result, villagers who long for success and escape focus their dreams on Canada, this land known as the “Sun Parlour... a land of flat green fields that stretched for miles and of lakes as wide as the sea, an un fallen world without mountains or rocky earth” (Lives, 162). Not only does this description emphasize Canada’s natural landscape and the freedom it offers, but it also reveals the irony inherent in the migrant’s idealized vision, for Canada has both mountains and “rocky earth.” In Lives of the Saints, Ricci ironically portrays Canada as a paradise where migrants expect to exchange the poverty of village life for the vast resources and opportunities of life in a mythical new land.

Although they idealize Canada as a place of freedom, Italian migrants and their families also condemn it as a place of entrapment. Migrants who leave the security of the village might soon find themselves in an unfamiliar land that is more a nightmare than a dream. Ricci suggests that a gap exists between the dream and the reality, for the dream of success is difficult to achieve while the reality of failure is a constant threat. Mario’s father believes his son has made a mistake in searching for success overseas and, enraged at the suggestion that his son has acted wisely, says, “Mario this, Mario that—he can rot in America, and all of you after him! Do you think he did a good thing to go against his father? Do you think he’s living like a king? I’ll tell you where he’s living in a chicken coop! In a goddamned chicken coop, per famore di Cristo! Meanwhile he leaves his wife to run around like a whore!” (Lives, 27). Mario’s nightmare is caused by his poverty in Canada and by his deteriorating relations with his family in Italy. His wife’s adultery and subsequent pregnancy emphasize the distance that exists between migrants and their families—a physical and emotional distance of indefinite duration. Cristina is demonized by family, friends, and fellow villagers as a whore for her actions, yet her affair is not unusual in a land with a history of absent husbands.
In fact, a friend of Cristina's later explains: "It's not as if she was the only one, with all the men off in America like that. The orphanages were full in those days" (Where 1997, 207). Ricci thus reveals that fragmented families are another reality of migration: women might not wait faithfully for men to return, and men might not be faithful either. As Cristina says of Mario, "he's probably slept with every whore in America by now, but for me it's a disgrace" (Lives, 154).

Ricci uses the relationship between Mario and Cristina to shatter nostalgic ideals of migration and to emphasize that seeking one's fortunes overseas can have enduring effects on the family left behind. Migrants like Mario strive for personal and financial freedom but often feel trapped by circumstances: in both the new land and the old: from their search for decent employment in Canada to their lack of contact with families in Italy, these migrants soon discover that the dream of success is more fiction than fact. Yet the dream persists. Ricci explains that these migrants and their families can somehow sustain two opposing ideas of one place: "for all the stories of America that had been filtering into the village for a hundred years now from those who had returned, stories of sooty factories and back-breaking work and poor wages and tiny bug-infested shacks, America had remained a mythical place, as if there were two Americas, one which continued merely the mundane life which the peasants accepted as their lot ... the other more a state of mind than a place, a paradise" (Lives, 162). For all the hardship that the new world represents, it nonetheless exists as a place of longing for migrants who dream of a "golden future."

Ricci depicts Cristina's departure from the village as absolute; no ties of any kind will bind her to her former home. She is eager to be free from a village that has placed its harsh judgements upon her, and she considers the new world an escape: she will harbor no regrets and suffer none of the migrant's nostalgia for the home left behind. For Vittorio, however, the decision to leave Italy is not so freely made. While Cristina has fixed her gaze on the new land and the freedom it offers, Vittorio endures an abrupt departure and faces the uncertainties of an unknown place, for he knows neither where they are going nor who will meet them when they arrive. As he explains, "all I could see clearly of the future was a kind of limitless space that took shape in my head as the sea, and a journey into this space that took direction not from its destination but from its point of departure, Valle del Sole, which somehow could not help but remain always visible on the receding shore" (Lives, 165). In leaving his home and journeying overseas, Vittorio suffers the double vision of a migrant who looks forward to an uncertain future across the sea and backward to a familiar past in the land of his birth.

Cristina's death en route to Canada further complicates Vittorio's uncertain future and is significant on several levels. Firstly, the migrant's departure has commonly been equated with death with what Cesare Pitto calls "the journey of the deceased" (1996, 127). Migrants leave home and are considered dead by those left behind. According to Pitto, this line of thought has its roots in "ancient Mediterranean customs that link any form of departure with death. In remote Italian villages emigrants were once sent off with funeral-like rituals. Upon leaving, these people were no longer considered part of the community; in effect, they were dead to their families and friends" ("Return" 1985b, 171). Although Cristina's departure lacks a ceremony, Ricci nonetheless reveals that, upon leaving, she is no longer regarded as part of her family or community. In fact, her father wishes her dead before she has left the house and says, "I'll pray every day of my life that you rot in hell!" (Lives, 182). With the death of the mother, Ricci reinforces the authenticity of a new world myth in which motherless children are left to begin life anew in Canada. He thus uses Cristina's death to release her children from the burden of the old world while reinforcing the finality of the journey overseas. For Cristina, migration is, like death, a final separation from which there is no return. But, for her children, migration represents a beginning and a chance to establish origins in a new land.

Secondly, the fact that Cristina dies after giving birth to her daughter symbolizes the sacrifice of the old world for the sake of the new. However, while Cristina's death offers a new beginning for her children, the repercussions of her adulterous affair live on in her daughter, an illegitimate child with an absent father. The father's name, nationality, and occupation are not known; his origins remain a mystery. As a result, his daughter has no traceable or authentic genealogy of her own. Yet her blue eyes suggest that her father is not Italian and that she is of mixed heritage. These blue eyes reveal an impurity in her family line and an impurity that worries her grandmother, for he says, "I'll not have that bastard child living under my roof!" (Lives, 155). That the grandfather calls Rita a "bastard" points to her inferior and uncertain origins—origins that are made even more questionable by the fact that the father believes her father is a communist and "a foreigner" (Lives, 154). Rita's hybrid status disrupts the supposed purity of her family line, and her grandfather would rather see her disappear as an orphanage than remain as a blight on his family name. This, then, is another reason for Cristina's death in the end: she has not only sinned in her adultery but also in tainting her family line with a foreigner's "impure" blood. Ricci kills Cristina for her sins, but allows her daughter to live on in a land where hybrid lines of descent characterize the most authentic of genealogies. To put it differently, rigid lines of descent die with the old world as a paradise. For Cristina, the death of the mother "suggests that a new order must be found, a new accommodation..."
between the old world and the new" (1989, 849). As a motherless child, Vittorio is left to establish this new order on his own. Che must locate his own origins in an unfamiliar land. Vittorio and his sister survive the mythic journey overseas and arrive in a dismal land that serves as a stark contrast to the warm hills of Italy. Ricci only allows Canada to enter the narrative in the final moments of this novel, yet his depiction of a cold, unwelcoming land suggests that Canada is not home from the moment migrants arrive. Rather, migrants must forge their own place in the nation before they can call Canada home.

But the question remains, how can this task be accomplished? How can Ricci's novels secure the nation as home? With In a Glass House, Ricci creates an authenticating myth of pain that reflects the hardship associated with the struggle to make the new world home. By depicting Italian immigrants who suffer the pain of dislocation in terms of their struggle to belong, their degraded status, their lack of opportunity, and their years of poverty, Ricci demonstrates just how much suffering they are willing to endure in order to forge their place in Canada. Ricci invokes a narrative of pain in his novel for strategic purposes: pain authenticates a people's presence because it shows them "paying their dues" and gaining a sense of belonging in a new land through their hardship, determination, and patience. In using his fiction to recreate the suffering of Italian immigrants, Ricci adds their stories to Canada's national narrative and thereby recovers a lost history and claims a place in the nation for Canadians of Italian origin.

Ricci constructs his authenticating myth of pain, in part, by illustrating Vittorio's personal suffering as an immigrant in Canada. (5) Using his protagonist's personal experiences to document the struggles of an entire community, Ricci establishes Italian origins in Canada and shows how this community has earned its place in a new land. When Vittorio begins school, for example, he immediately feels like an outsider: "everything about me proclaimed my ignorance, from my stained hands to my awkward clothes to my large hulking conspicuousness amidst the other children in the class. When I talked I couldn't get my mouth around the simplest sounds, felt my tongue stumble against my palate as if it were swollen and numb" (Glass 1993, 55). Vittorio feels trapped in his "immigrant crudeness" (Glass, 140) and fears he will never fit in. But, as he slowly learns the language, he realizes that he has the power to forge his own place in Canada. He explains that "English began to open before me like a new landscape... that initial surge of understanding was like a kind of arrival, the first sense I'd had of the possibility of making sense, of understanding, of... the new world home. By depicting Italian immigrants who suffer the pain of dislocation in terms of their struggle to belong, Ricci creates an authenticating myth of pain that re...
caged in me had been set tree" (Glass, 65). Vittorio imagines that this act will free him from his cousins and all they represent. Indeed, he does rid himself of his cousins, though he does not escape his Italian roots or achieve the sense of belonging he so craves. Instead, he admits, "In all this I was left with nothing, no reward for trying to follow out what seemed the careful, ruthless logic of fitting in" (Glass, 65). Vittorio thus remains plagued by self-hatred and suffers the personal pain of a migrant who struggles to belong. In his discussion of the Glass House, Stelio Cro expresses dismay at Vittorio's feelings of hatred and asks, "Does this mean that in order to become a Canadian an Italian immigrant must hate his family?" (1996, 147). If this were Ricci's message, then Vittorio's hatred would result in a successful Canadian identity. As it is, however, the Italians of Ricci's novels remain on the margins, unable to identify themselves as part of Canada's national history. Paradoxically, by giving voice to this marginalization, Ricci helps Italian Canadians move toward the center and succeeds in including their stories in Canada's national narrative by showing that they are, in fact, part of the nation's past.

Ricci recreates much of the pain of these childhood years when he depicts Vittorio's experiences in university. Although Vittorio longs to escape his family, the farm, and the town of Mersea, he soon discovers that he does not feel at home in Toronto either. But through his friendship with a fellow student named Verne, Vittorio is slowly drawn out of his isolation and gains a sense of belonging with his peers. However, this sense of belonging is deceptive because Vittorio's increasingly heavy drug use merely creates the illusion of belonging without any lasting effects. This drugged delusion is connected with the novel's title in the expression, "People who live in glass houses shouldn't get stoned." (7) for these words highlight both Vittorio's insecurities as he tries to make friends at university and each migrant's vulnerability as he or she attempts to establish a home in a new land. When, as a child in Valle del Sole, Vittorio was confronted with his imminent departure from Italy, he reflected on everything he had been told about the new land, including Fabrizio's theory that "in America everyone lived in houses of glass. When you're taking a bath anyone can come by and look at you. You can see all the women in their underwear. People look at each other all the time, over there" (Lives, 163). Fabrizio's words serve as a warning about the fragility of a migrant's position in the new land. Whether Vittorio is on the farm with his family or at university with his peers, he carries the burden of this vulnerability and worries that his belonging is precarious. Although he gradually distances himself from Verne, he continues to admire his friend for his quiet confidence and says that "there was a kind of perfection to him, to his generosity, his essential normalcy, and I would have given anything to live as he did, with his sense of being at home in the world" (Glass, 210). By aligning himself with Verne and imitating his behavior, Vittorio wishes to replicate his friend's sense of comfort and security in a land where he himself is still not at home.

Ricci further complicates this sense of home when he portrays Vittorio's ambivalent feelings toward the farm and his family. When Vittorio is in Toronto, he considers the farm his home; when he returns to the farm, however, this image is shattered because he realizes that it is not where he belongs. He feels like a stranger to his family and cannot communicate with either his father or his sister: both relationships are marked by strained silences and unfulfilled expectations. Speaking of his father, Vittorio says, "I had nothing to offer him, wanted to be on good terms with him but only to disentangle myself from him, to define more clearly the line that divided us" (Glass, 228). Tamara J. Palmer explains that a rejection of one's father often represents a rejection of one's ethnic heritage (1990, 75). Vittorio's rejection of his father and the farm can therefore be seen as part of the ongoing tension between accepting or rejecting his Italian roots. Although, at times, he is drawn toward his Italian heritage, Vittorio remains ambivalent about his family and his home in Mersea. Ricci suggests, however, that before Vittorio can feel at home in a physical place he must learn to feel at home with himself. Vittorio attends counseling sessions at the university and gradually begins to make friends and to succeed in his classes by learning to accept his difference. As he says, "I began to feel more at home in nay aloneness. It was the thing I'd most fought against, most hated, yet also what made me most clearly myself" (Glass, 234). If Vittorio can learn to feel secure in himself, then he can also learn to feel comfortable in the in-between space he has occupied for most of his life. With his decision to major in English, Vittorio gains proficiency in the language that set him apart as a newcomer to Canada: "I majored in English literature," he says, "becoming the expert now in this strangers' language" (Glass, 235). By mastering this "strangers' language," Vittorio moves closer to forging his place in the dominant culture and to securing this strangers' country as home.

That Ricci includes a historical research project as part of his narrative represents another means by which he authenticates the Italian presence in Canada. Yet, even as he does so, Ricci questions the purpose of such myth-making projects and reveals his ambivalence regarding his own attempts to insert Italians into Canada's national mythology.

In a Glass House thus articulates a tension between Ricci's desire to establish Italian origins in Canada and his own skepticism regarding the effectiveness of such strategies. After Vittorio completes his degree in Toronto, he returns to the farm in Mersea and accepts a position as the coordinator for a project on the history of Italians in the area. (8) The Italian Historical Committee intends to commemorate the experiences of immigrants from Italy, beginning with those who first settled farms and established homes and businesses in Mersea. As one committee member says, "What we have in mind ... is the sort of book the town put out for the centennial, you know the one. A history book, the first people, photographs, that sort of thing" (Glass, 266). When Vittorio finds Mersea's centennial book in the library, he notes that Italians are largely absent from Canada's history, a dilemma that Ricci himself addresses with his trilogy. Vittorio wonders if this absence is the result of an Anglo-Saxon bias or of an Italian self-exclusion, since the Italian community prides itself on a self-sufficiency that lies outside of the mainstream. This self-sufficiency is a means of protecting themselves against rejection because they know their participation in the public life of their town will not be well received by the dominant culture. Vittorio explains that "the Italians thought of themselves as owning the town and yet they'd never elected a member to the municipal council, to the provincial legislature, to parliament,
had hardly involved themselves in the town's civic life ... It was enough, merely, for a kind of self-sufficiency, the comfort of passing one's life outside the sphere of the inglesi" (Glass's, 271). Yet this exclusion means that their stories have not been recorded in the history books or included in Canada's national narrative: they have been denied a voice in the founding mythology of their town.

The committee's research project aims to remedy this situation by uniting this immigrant community through their common memories of displacement and dispersal and by adding their stories to the national narrative. In fact, the committee's goals parallel Ricci's own objectives in writing his trilogy, for he also intends to reclaim a lost history by recovering the origins of Italians in Canada. Furthermore, the fact that not all Italians in Mersea appreciate the committee's goals reflects Ricci's own ambivalence and allows him to introduce opposing ideologies into his narrative. Vittorio's father, for example, questions the committee's reasons for initiating the project and says, "they always want to make it seem like they're doing such a big thing for the Italians ... I said from the start they have to involve all the Italians in a thing like this but Dino's got his own ideas, he just wants to make a big deal that his family was one of the first" (Glass, 267). Mario is not sure that a project like this will benefit the Italian community in any way, and he suspects that the committee's chairman only wants to authenticate his personal sense of belonging in Canada at the expense of migrants who arrived later and whose stories also need to be documented. The professor who supervises the project, however, asks the researchers to interview all Italians in the area, not just those of the first generation. In the end, Mario agrees to participate in the project, but his sister, Teresa, refuses. Vittorio respects, even admires, his aunt's decision: "She'd refused a platform to speak, to contradict, to call attention to herself, had chosen instead instantaneous mutual admission of wrong and its flouting" (Where, 71). Rita has, in a sense, replaced Vittorio's mother and has, in her imaginings, Ricci expresses a migrant's longing for a once familiar land.

As the third book of the trilogy, Where She Has Gone further underlines Ricci's ambivalence by rejecting a conclusion that would definitively make Canada home. In this novel, Ricci heightens the ambivalence of his myth-making strategy by exploring a migrant's longing for the mother(land) in terms of Vittorio's relationship with his sister and his return journey to Italy. Vittorio admits that, with his father's death, his thoughts keep returning to his mother: "I seldom thought much any more about my father's death ... It was my mother, instead, who I found myself going back to, as if my father's death had finally freed me to re-imagine her" (Where, 10-11). With Vittorio's imaginings, Ricci expresses a migrant's longing for a once familiar land. However, it is the voyage itself, and not the homeland, that holds the most resonance for him: "It surprised me how vividly the feel of that voyage came back to me now, the sense of hovering over a chasm, poised between the world we'd left behind and the unknown one where my father was waiting, by then a stranger to me" (Where, 11). Ever since this voyage, Vittorio struggled to forge his place in the strange new land that he shared with his latter. But now his thoughts return to his mother and to the ship on which he had his last glimpse of Italy and his first moments in Canada. In a sense, Vittorio's beginnings as an Italian Canadian are located on this ship and, as he recreates key moments from his past, he becomes obsessed with this journey and with the mother he lost at sea.

This obsession manifests itself in Vittorio's relationship with his sister, Rita. Although they lived apart when growing up, (9) Vittorio and Rita regularly spend time together once Rita begins university in Toronto. Because of the distance between them, the status of their relationship is unclear: they are not sure what it means to be brother and sister or how to have a "normal" relationship (Where, 6). For Vittorio, Rita becomes his only family because he rarely returns to his aunts, uncles, and cousins on the farm in Mersea. Yet Rita also seems to symbolize the mother he lost as a child, the mother who died giving Rita life. As the siblings spend time together, Vittorio first feels protective toward Rita and then becomes possessive of her, telling her, "I suppose I always thought that you were what was mine" (Where, 69). Vittorio's feelings of possession originated at Rita's birth when his mother died and his sister arrived— one woman in his life was replaced with another. This obsession with Rita culminates the night they give in to their sexual desires. The siblings know that their growing intimacy has moved beyond what is normal, healthful, and acceptable, and Vittorio says, "There was something almost ruthless in us then, hopeless, the instantaneous mutual admission of wrong and its flouting" (Where, 71). Rita has, in a sense, replaced Vittorio's mother and his desire for her thus represents his misplaced longing to reclaim the mother that he lost.
After this incestuous act, Vittorio’s relationship with his sister is strained and they soon stop their regular visits. Vittorio remains obsessed with Rita, but cannot relate to her in any meaningful way and is instead haunted by memories of their mother’s death: “I imagined I was in a storm at sea, that I was back on the ship that had brought me to Canada, crawling up to nay bunk while beneath me my mother sighed and slept, slowly bleeding to death” (Where, 96). Now Rita is dead to him as well; in his attempt to reclaim his mother, he has lost his sister. During a chance encounter, Rita tells Vittorio that she is going to Europe for several months and that she does not want to see him again before she leaves. Rita’s departure has a devastating effect on Vittorio, and it is not until she calls him from Switzerland several weeks later that he comes out of his depression. Vittorio tells Rita to meet him in Italy and says he will wait for her there. The longing to see Rita again thus compels Vittorio to embark on a return journey, a quest for the mother(land) that will take him back to his former home.

Ricci shows, however, the impossibility of reclaiming this lost home when Vittorio returns to Valle del Sole. Immediately upon his arrival, Vittorio is confronted with a gap between memory and reality: as he views his grandfather’s house—the house where he lived as a child—Vittorio says, “I kept expecting some surge of memory to take me over but felt only the same disjunction, the sense that my memory was being not so much stirred as stripped away” (Where, 185). Ricci demonstrates that the return journey can be an unsettling experience that disrupts, rather than affirms, stable notions of home. With his return to the motherland, Vittorio is transformed into the typical migrant whose remembered home belongs to an imaginative space that can never be reclaimed. He can neither physically nor psychically transcend the boundaries of time to reconnect with the imaginary homeland or to recover the imaginary infant-mother fusion. Seiker explains that “the return journey can serve the valuable function of allowing the immigrant to say goodbye to that other, ‘might-have-been’ self whose haunting absence fragments him in Canada” (1994, 114). Vittorio confronts what “might-have-been” when he sees an old photograph of himself with his mother and is surprised by his mother’s appearance: “I could hardly fathom this image of her: it was not just her plainness that struck me, how far she fell from the ideal of her 1 had created, but that she stood so vulnerable, so grave, with such a look of the mountain peasant that I could hardly imagine I’d ever known her” (Where, 189-90). Vittorio uncovers an image of his mother that he had not anticipated—his return journey shatters his ideal and shows him the mountain peasant he might have been had his family remained in this small Italian village. Ricci thus portrays Vittorio as the victim of a flawed myth who exhibits “the endless desire to return to 'lost origins,' to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning” (Hall 1994, 402). Ricci shows, however, that migrants cannot reconnect with the origin, for the paradise at the beginning of things only exists in memory and imagination.

Ricci further emphasizes this flawed myth of return by depicting Vittorio’s reunion with Rita as another failed attempt to reconnect with the motherland. Although Vittorio has lost his idealized image of his mother, he still longs for his sister’s arrival in the village. He mistakenly believes that the simple fact of her presence will somehow bring him closer to the land of his birth. As he says, “If only she would come, then things would make sense, might begin to fall into place” (Where, 231). But when Rita arrives, Vittorio’s relationship with her remains awkward; in fact, Vittorio soon realizes that Rita’s arrival has not brought them any closer together but has actually emphasized the distance between them. Despite their awkwardness, however, Vittorio continues to long for his sister: “I wanted to move in and hold her to me, to feel her body against mine one last time, the way it fit against me like a natural extension of my own. There were just those few inches between us, that bit of air, it could not make any difference: except the longing in me would only grow stronger, then, my arms would only remember more surely the lost feel of her within them” (Where, 258-59). Although Vittorio is speaking of Rita, his words are reminiscent of his final moments with his mother, when he “nestled close against her” only to lose her hours later (Lives, 230). In both cases with his sister and his mother, Vittorio expresses an unfulfilled desire that intensifies his feelings of disconnection and displacement. He had hoped that a return journey would enable him to feel at home in Italy; instead, the return only solidifies his distance from his family, his motherland, and his “impenetrable” past (Where, 280).

The problem is that Vittorio seeks to connect with the wrong place and sees Rita as something that she is not. Despite Vittorio’s illusions, Rita does not embody the motherland or their Italian roots; in fact, she has little interest in her Italian heritage and approaches Italy as would a foreigner who travels out of interest. As she tells Vittorio, “You and I are different ... It’s as if you were born in the past, you have to go back to it, but when 1 was born the past was already over. It’s not the same thing for me, to look back. It’s not where the answers are” (Where, 277). Rita, then, symbolizes a Canadian future rather than an Italian past, and her hybrid status reinforces this point, for it represents the new world experience of diaspora and the plurality of cultures as expressed in Said’s contrapuntal approach. In the end, Vittorio is not drawn to a vision of Italy but of Canada: he simply fails to realize why he longs to connect with Rita. The truth is, however, that Rita possesses something that Vittorio has always wanted: a sense of being at home in Canada. By aligning himself with Rita—as he once did with Verne—Vittorio is trying to identify his place in this land. Although Ricci clearly intends to direct the migrant’s gaze away from the motherland, the new object of this gaze is not as clear. In Where She Has Gone, Ricci does not present Canada as a land of possibility and newfound hope. Rather, he reveals his ambivalence regarding Canada and his own myth-making project by avoiding a straightforward conclusion to his trilogy. As the novel draws to a close, Vittorio is portrayed as directionless due to Rita’s departure from the village: he has no sense of purpose without his all-encompassing desire to recover his lost mother. Vittorio’s nostalgia for a lost homeland has been shattered, and he decides to leave the village, even though he is “not exactly sure where to go” (Where, 295). It is thus clear that Ricci does not intend to turn his protagonist’s gaze immediately toward Canada; Ricci does not simply determine that, since the old land is not home, the new land is. What he reveals, instead, is that feelings of dislocation, disunity, and even
homelessness can plague those who exist in an in-between space where neither arrivals nor departures lead toward home. Indeed, for Vittorio, this is certainly the case: "My second departure from Valle del Sole, twenty years after the first, felt more final," he says. "I was on my own again without destination or hopes, with no place left now to go home" (Where, 302). Although Vittorio briefly considers returning to Canada, he rejects this option because it fills him with "an infinite exhaustion" and offers "so little purpose" (Where, 304). The new object of Vittorio’s gaze is blurred, unfocused; he does not know where to turn and suffers as an exile who never experiences "the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure" (Said 2001, 186).

Thus, while Ricci clearly indicates that the homeland does not hold the answers, he is somewhat less clear about what does. Where She Has Gone ends with Vittorio writing his story on an island off the Kenyan coast. He has gone to a place where he can live in anonymity without any demands or expectations while he tries, as he says, "to work my way back to my life" (Where, 319). Vittorio will do so, in part, by telling his story and healing himself through his writing as he returns through memory to key moments from the past. Returning to these moments is a way for him to set them aside, to let them go, so that he can finally look forward, not backward. Although Vittorio remains in Africa when the novel—indeed the trilogy—ends, he says goodbye to the village and will eventually return to Canada, for, speaking of his relationship with Rita, he wonders, "what we will be to each other when I return” (Where, 320). As for Valle del Sole, the novel's closing image reinforces Vittorio’s final separation:

I had a dream: I was walking along a mountain path ... as I walked, small flickers began to appear in the valley beneath me ... There was just a handful at first but then more, spreading across the valley like code, a slow wordless coming-together, and I stood watching from the slopes as the valley lit up with them, ten thousand of them burning away, sending their sparks up into the night that floated an instant, then died, as if bidding goodbye. (Where, 321-22)

"Canadian writers who are immigrants or the children of immigrants testify that they still feel excluded by Canada's literary and cultural establishment,” writes John Metcalf in his review of Lives of the Saints (1990, 63). With his trilogy, Ricci has included Italian Canadians in this establishment. Indeed, the attention his novels have garnered points to the extent to which he has successfully inserted Italians in Canada's national narrative. The reading public as well as the literary establishment has embraced his novels: Lives of the Saints, for example, became a Canadian best-seller and won the Governor General's Award for Fiction, and Where She Has Gone was nominated for the Giller Prize. Ricci uses his trilogy to establish the Italian presence in Canada, yet does so in a manner that reveals his ambivalence toward his own myth-making strategy. In fact, he deliberately rejects categorical interpretations of nation and national identity in a trilogy that nevertheless charts the tenuous presence of Italian Canadians in the national imaginary. Thus, while Vittorio remains in a liminal space at the novel's close, Ricci's trilogy is itself firmly grounded in Canada and in the reimaging of the nation.


NOTES

1. This type of nostalgia is also expressed in the work of Italian-Canadian poets, such as Pier Giorgio Di Cicco in Living in Paradise, Mary Di Michele in Stranger in You, and Antonino Mazza in Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's Roman Candles: An Anthology, of Poems by Seventeen Italo-Canadian Poets. 1. [a] deliberately self-conscious play with fiction, history, and myth. The overtly political character of imaginative expression found in these novels is, of course, also discernible in many nation-building novels of the late nineteenth century in European nations ... The rewriting of European-inspired history is a central concern of many post-colonial literatures: the goal is to revise, reappropriate, or reinterpret history. 1998, 32-33

2. Italian migrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to North America to work as laborers and only planned to earn enough money to send home before returning themselves. They did not intend to settle in North America, and the Canadian government did not encourage them to do so. Official Canadian policy in the early twentieth century regarded migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe as less desirable than those from Britain, Scandinavia, Germany, France, Holland, and Belgium (Jansen 1988), 22-23.

3. The Italian immigrants in Marisa De Franceschi's Surface Tension also come to Canada after the Second World War. As the narrator explains, "We sailed just after the second great war. That's what my father used to call it. It was great because it managed to annihilate populations, destroy vast cities, and create havoc all over the world ... It was a war full of rage and fury, power and force. That's why it was great" (1994), 7.

4. After Mussolini was removed from power in 1943, a distinction was made between his Fascist administration and the people he ruled (Jansen 1988), 25. By 1951, Italians in Canada were no longer considered "enemy aliens," and the largest influx of Italians to Canada was well underway (Jansen 1988), 25, 30. In fact, so many Italians migrated to Canada after World War II that they became the fourth largest ethnic group in the country after the British, French, and Germans (Jansen 1988), 1.
5. Similarly, in Made in Italy, Maria Ardizzi constructs an authenticating myth of pain through an old woman's memories of her family's migration and settlement in Canada. The narrator expresses the pain of their struggles when, for example, she says, "We left for Toronto in December of 1950. Only later, much later, I was to inhale, in the big city, a worse miasma from different sources, and discover the anonymity of freedom and the tragic heights of our destinies. But, at that point, I was released from time, from places, from our very condition. Emigrants? A word which didn't define us at all. The cage in which we moved had become ever smaller, leaving only a hole for breathing" (1999), 113-14.

6. In The Italians, the first of a trilogy, F.G. Paci records the struggles of a second generation of Italian Canadians who, like Vittorio, strive to "become" Canadian. Their father, Alberto, explains that this was not a struggle he had anticipated for his children when he decided to move to Canada: "[Alberto] thought again of Aldo and wondered whether he really knew his children as well as he should. He hadn't really envisaged them growing up in a different culture when he had emigrated. But now, as they were scattering from their home, he sensed their difficulties. He himself felt lost outside the confines of his work and his home" (1978), 29.

7. This version is a popular rephrasing of, "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

8. Ricci took part in a similar project when he was in university and says that working on the project gave him a clear sense of the dislocation that migrants experience. As he explains, "What came across most strongly was the sense of people having lost a sense of their wholeness ... They had lost a sense of a world where ... they knew they could speak to their neighbors; where they knew that people knew who they were, and shared a common history; they didn't have that in Canada. And they would never have that again— not even if they returned to Italy, because they would be outsiders there as well" (1998), 136.

9. Rite spends her early years with Vittorio's family, but is adopted by the Amhersts shortly after she begins school.

References


Ethnic Minority Writers and the Resistance to Theory: 
The Italian-Canadian Case

By Joseph Pivato

In 1992 the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers had their meeting in Montreal. At that conference I presented a paper entitled, “Teoria: A Bad Word in Literature and Film.” I examined the problem of the place of theory in the discourse of ethnic minority writing and alternative film. Theory is often an elite system belonging to the socially and culturally privileged, and meant to exclude the ethnic minority writer. In the last decades of the 20th century schools of European theory have become so powerful in the western hemisphere that they are part of a Eurocentric neo-colonialism. In addition to this question of exclusion, theory is often far removed from the concrete, particular subject matter of ethnic minority artists.

After I gave this paper I was verbally attacked by some of the writers there. One writer yelled from the back of the hall “You don’t know what you are talking about!” I had obviously struck a chord with some writers. But some of the writers also agreed with me and questioned the value of theory for their work.

This incident made me realize that I was dealing with the two groups which make up the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers. On one side are the writers who have academic careers and who often support embracing theory as part of our ethnic discourse. On the other side are the writers who have other occupations and who tend not to be open to theory. This division is also reflected in ethnic minority writers from many other cultural groups in Canada.

Writers who argue against theory often see it as a negative influence on their creative process as they are writing. They see the power of different theories as pre-empting the natural development of their writing. Theory can act as a censor (internal or external) on the subject or treatment of a subject in creative writing. We can consider some examples of this problem. A writer wants to explore and explain difficult personal relations within a family as she observed them, or experienced them. Does she have to study psychoanalytic theory first? Another writer wants to examine the language problems in an ethnic family,
problems with translation; communication within the family and outside the family. Does he have to study semiotic theory about language codes first?

We know that in many academic environments theory now dominates the discourse and even university policies and politics. The power of theory is one of the problems. There is the perception that powerful theories will overwhelm the young ethnic minority writer. These forces can disallow the natural development of culturally specific works. The writer is looking for an authentic voice, a true representation of the ethnic community, a meaningful expression of her experiences and ideas. For me the questions is: will emersion into theory help the writer? (Ganew, 17)

Some authors also fear the influence of theory on the reading and reception of their books. If a work does not subscribe to a popular theory it will be valued less, will it be seen as lacking in complexity, depth, or the elusive quality of literariness? Writers such Frank Paci, Marisa DeFranceschi, Nino Ricci and Caterina Edwards who work in the realist tradition find themselves at a disadvantage with postmodern theories which question all interpretations. When French theorist Roland Barthes declared "the death of the author" it did not seem to be very helpful to ethnic minority writers who were just beginning to get some recognition for their work, their voices and their stories.

Pedagogic practice gives us another perspective on theory. What do we tell our students in our literature classes? We advise them: first read the novel by yourself. Get your own impressions and ideas. Only after you have done your own reading, then you can read the literary critics and the essays on theory. This has been good advice which we want to apply to ethnic minority works as well. This advice is a recognition of the concerns and fears which I have expressed.

I will now look briefly at two questions: the problems of bias and ethnic politics.

1. A Question of Bias

For decades the writing of non-English or non-French immigrants in Canada was ignored, dismissed and very often lost. It seems that these texts did not fit in with current ideas about what a national literature was. From the 1950s to the 1970s the mainstream Canadian writers and critics were preoccupied with identifying the works which made up the canon for Canada's national literature. In 1978 these writers and academics held a conference on the Canadian novel at the University of Calgary called "Taking Stock." They drew up the list of the 100 most important Canadian novels. The concept that they followed was the two nations model of the English and the French as the two founding groups. Period. There was not consideration given to any other groups: not First Nations authors, not immigrant writers.

More recently this has changed. There is a growing interest in the work of ethnic minority writers. When M.G. Vassanji won the first Giller Prize for his novel, The Book of Secrets (1994) and Nino Ricci won the Governor General’s Award for his novel, Lives of the Saints (1990) we wondered if ethnic minority writing was now becoming part of the mainstream. Yes, if it was written in English, and it helps to be published in Toronto. Was theory helpful for these awards?

The use of theory is it in the end a political one, a question of power? While everyone is free to read and judge the works of minority writers, who will be the major interpreters and evaluators? How will the literary institution mediate questions of race, ethnicity, identity, appropriation, authenticity, and legitimation? Are sophisticated theory and complex terminology only new ways of disenfranchising ethnic minorities from the discourse? Is there an agenda of social action which goes along with the study of ethnic minority writing, or is it simply to become another academic area insulated by the objectivity of scientific research? Similar questions are being asked in women's studies where theory is seen as both a liberating force for women's intellectual and social agenda, and a source of power, which can corrupt the basic ideals of feminism. Do Italian-Canadian writers have an agenda for social change such as the improvement of conditions for women, for the elderly and for the handicapped?

Smaro Kamboureli in her article, "Theory: Beauty or Beast? Resistance to Theory in the Feminine," (1990) explores the debate over the role of theory among women writers in Canada. Beginning with Paul de Man's seminal The Resistance to Theory, Kamboureli suggests that part of writers' reluctance to embrace theory is that it is difficult to define and to control the different ways in which it manipulates the meanings of a given text. For some this slippage in meaning is a positive quality, which allows us to re-evaluate many texts both canonical and marginal. Kamboureli argues that "one of the primary goals of women writers interested in theory is their desire to position themselves as subjects of discourse, hence the readiness with which they question the very theories they practice. Indeed, the fact that they find suspect any appropriating tendencies that might be inherent in the ideology of a given theory is one of the main characteristics of their attitude towards theory, whether feminist or not." (9)

Many ethnic minority writers find such arguments appealing since this approach to theory may allow them to enter the discourse from which they had been excluded in the past. Nevertheless, speaking for some women writers Sharon Thesen expresses her suspicion of theory because, instead of liberating writers, it seems to be censoring them with new ideologies and prescribing the treatment of subjects, especially controversial subjects, and thus coercing writers into present an unrealistic picture of society. This is all part of the fear of the writer's loss of control over language and the intended meaning of a given literary work. For Thesen the deconstruction of a text so that it can mean anything the theorist suggests, even the opposite of the intentions of the author, is a very dangerous tendency in the theory of de Man and his followers. Like several minority writers Thesen questions the apparent liberating possibilities of theory for the creative writer while at the same time observing
the growing power of ideologies and the proclivity to totalising all meaning into master theories. She sees legitimate concerns about social inequality being buried and the possibility for individual difference and dissent being lost. (1991)

Some Italian-Canadian writers and other ethnic minority writers have become aware of the disparity between, on the one hand, the promise of the new theory for being non-authoritarian, more inclusive and devoted to free and open criticism, and on the other hand, the silencing and totalising new master narratives of theory.

2. Ethnic Politics and Identity

There are problems which arise when we apply many contemporary literary theories, especially the post-Saussurean variety, to ethnic minority writing. Caterina Edwards has observed that for Italian-American writers the use of literary theory in their work, especially postmodernism, seems to have been a way to create a space for themselves in the massive body of American literature. In the U.S. there are several groups contending for space on the literary map: African-American writers, natives, Hispanics, religious and regional groups. The historical problems of racism means that the discourse on ethnic identity and cultural differences takes a different direction in the U.S. than in Canada.

In Australia the domination of Anglo-Celtic culture is being questioned by the voices of Aboriginal authors and migrant writers. Is theory playing a role in this debate over race, ethnicity, appropriation and legitimation? In Canada, because of the historic competition between English and French writers, the situation for the ethnic minority writer is different. Nevertheless, theory, or the debate over the role of theory, has become part of the discourse on the nature of ethnic minority writing. And Italian-Canadian writers now have to deal with this question.

In the past critical theory was able to accommodate the intention and authority of the writer, but this has changed. Current literary theories proclaim the death of the author (Barthès). Reader-response theory privileges the interaction of the reader with the text. Umberto Eco claims that the author is only a strategy of the text and that the real text is a product of the reader's consciousness. Wolfgang Iser agrees and maintains that the text only exists through the activity of the reader. We can see the gap here between the sophisticated urban culture of Europe with its self-reflexive theories, which are meant to honestly do away with the cult of personality, and the basic activities of the minority writer who is trying to articulate an experience, develop an identity and find a space in society. These ethnic minority writers did not exist in the literary institution. And now that they are about to get some small recognition and raise their voice we are told by high theory that the author is dead.

In ethnic minority writing we have not only the recuperation of the author, but also the exercise of his or her authority as a voice in the, and for the community. This recognition of the authority of the author is one response to the appropriation of voice from outside the community. When we write about ethnic minority authors we are implicitly recognizing their vital role as voices from their communities which have been without a voice for a long time.

Italian-Canadian writers are not part of the elite involved in the discourse on high theory.

They are primarily trying to tell the stories of their communities and often view their role as recreating a sense of group identity for Italian immigrants. The only significant theorist of Friulano background is Linda Hutcheon, née Bortolotti. But she has not been able to help us with the inclusion of theory in the Italian-Canadian discourse.

I can try to explain my position on some of these questions. We will briefly look at two problems which are: inter-textuality and the use of other languages in minority texts.

3. Literariness as Inter-textuality

More than 20 years of training and work in Comparative Literature has taught me the importance of inter-textuality. But my work with Italian-Canadian texts causes me to question all the assumptions of inter-textuality, and such axioms as, “Works of literature are the products of other works of literature, and not necessarily a reflection of the life experience of the author.”

One problem is that inter-textuality now has at least two meanings. The first is a purely literary one; the second is sociohistorical. The first type of inter-textuality comes from French literary theory and focuses on the relations between two texts or among several texts. Often this takes the form of studies on the influence of one text or author on others. Examples of this are studies on the influence of Dante on English literature. This study of “les rapports de fait” was the foundation of la littérature comparée.

For French theorists, Michael Riffaterre and Gérard Genette, inter-textuality depends on the reader's perception of the text and is a measure of its literariness, that is, its value. How many literary allusions, or ‘rapports de fait’ are there in a work by Ezra Pound or James Joyce? This manner of close reading reduces the process to a literary salvage operation. This type of intertextuality often leaves ethnic minority texts at a disadvantage because these works are not based on previous literary texts. There is little direct influence from Canadian, American or British masterpieces in the following ethnic novels: Kogawa’s _Obasan_, Ricci’s _Lives of the Saints_, Frank Paci’s _The Italians_ (1978) and _Italian Shoes_ (2002), Marisa De Franceschi’s _Surface Tension_, and Caterina Edwards’ _The Lion’s Mouth_.

In my reading I find that ethnic minority works are grounded in the real experience of the writer, his or her family and cultural background. Reading a novel by Frank Paci, a play by Marco Mione, or a short story by Caterina Edwards as a text
grounded in the ethnic experience is not a diminishment of the work. It is not reducing such works to conventional realism or to a kind of literary sociology. This mode of reading does tend to privilege transparency over more freely imaginative writing. Does this mode of reading render these works less literary and thus of less value in terms of the literary institution? A careful analysis of ethnic minority writing leads us to question the assumptions of literariness, value, and the process of canon formation.

There is another type of inter-textuality, the socio-historical theory of Bakhtin, which sees each utterance as the interaction of several systems of signs. Julia Kristeva applied this theory of inter-textuality to literary texts. Each text is seen as a network of sign systems situating the literary structure in a social environment. This reading of the text as an interaction of different codes, discourses or voices, not only permits the inclusion of the ethnic minority work, but may in fact privilege it. Bakhtin's term for this phenomenon was heteroglossia, a way of describing the different discursive strata within any given utterance. These strata are derived from what Bakhtin called 'the socio-ideological languages' in a culture and depend on the contesting voices of a historical context.

Writing which is characterized by contesting voices, cultures and languages is typical of ethnic minority literature. The different languages in the plays of Marco Micone, Gens du silence and Addolorata are examples of this. The phenomenon of heteroglossia in the minority narrative often takes the form of various voices arguing for different points of view. We see this in Micone and in Caterina Edwards' books.

4. The Use of Other Languages

Related to the problem of inter-textuality is the practice of using other languages in many Canadian narratives.

What happens when we apply this approach to works by Italian-Canadian writers? Do we find other postmodern works? Many minority writers use words and sentences from their heritage languages in their works for a variety of reasons, but most often to define a specific cultural identity.

Some Italian-Canadian writers use two languages. Antonio D’Alfonso works in French and English. Caterina Edwards, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco and Mary di Michele use many Italian words in their works. Why do they use foreign words?

Di Cicco begins his English poem, “Italy, 1974” with the words, “nella campagna,” which make us stop and reread this poem. These Italian words are not in these poems for exoticism or for local colour. These are not tourist poems from the viewpoint of the tourist. His words are used in a very personal manner. In Di Cicco’s books, A Burning Patience and Dancing in the House of Cards there are many Italian words in the titles and in the poems: “Primavera,” “Basta,” “Rabbia,” “Ricordo,” “Pietà,” “Passato: Love,” “I Poeti,” “Peccato,” and “Ritratto.” The repeated and intermittent use of Italian titles gives these words a substance that makes them concrete objects in themselves. Mary di Michele observed that these Italian words act like stones on the smooth English road. (1986)

These Italian words have several functions which can add other levels of meaning to the poems. Sometimes they are used because there is no English equivalent. They reflect the limitations of the new language and of translation. In the case of Di Cicco we could try to apply the four levels of language described by Henri Gobard but it would not fit the model in the same way as other Italian-Canadian poets who grew up speaking a regional Italian dialect rather than the official language. Since Di Cicco is from Tuscany his regional language is also the national language. While growing up Di Cicco had only two languages to deal with: standard Italian and English. Many of his Italian peers also had one or two regional dialects to contend with which may have put them at a further disadvantage, a situation described by Antonio D’Alfonso in The Other Shore. Since Di Cicco escaped this linguistic fragmentation experienced by immigrants from other parts of Italy he was better able to exercise a leadership role in the development of Italian-Canadian writing.

The Italian-Canadian writers believe in the transparent relationship between word and world. The word used in the work refers to an object outside the work. This is not a naive belief in the one-to-one relationship between the sign and the referent since there is also a strong sense and use of metaphor, a search for the new possibilities in language. Ironically this awareness of the value of transparent language arises out of the experience of the ambiguities of language, the use of different languages and the problem of translation between them. Very often the foreign words are translated rather than used for their incantatory value. A good example of this transparency can be found in Nino Ricci's novel, In a Glass House. Gelsomina is trying to care for Vincenzo's baby sister and one evening finds that she doesn't know how to make her stop crying.

"E niend', it's nothing." she kept saying, like a chant,
"E niend', poveretta. E niend'!" (19)

The Italian phrase is translated, 'it's nothing.' The chanting of the Italian phrase by Gelsomina dramatizes that she is upset along with the baby. The Italian words if they have any magic as signifiers are meant to soothe her and the crying baby. Rather than suggesting the cryptic incantations of the postmodern novel. The use of foreign languages in the English texts of ethnic minority novels suggests the conventions of realism.
Along with questions of authenticity and identity the question of language use leads us to the problem of realism. Here we mean classical realism and the expressive theory of literature. In recent years these have taken a beating at the hands of the proponents of post-Saussurean theories.

Realism is an appealing mode of writing for both creator and reader because it offers itself as transparent. Unlike much postmodern writing, which explicitly draws attention to itself as a constructed text, the realistic work tends to efface its own textuality and its existence as discourse. Realism is most effective when it leads to the recognition of the already familiar. In ethnic minority writing realism is even more appealing because this experience is emphasized through the shock of recognition for the ethnic reader. The pleasure of the text comes not so much from the verisimilitude of the detailed depiction of events, as from the recognition of familiar experiences encountered for the first time in literature. In English Canadian literature we never saw images of ourselves as Italian immigrants, or South Asians, or Japanese, or West Indians; instead we were given images of others, the majority with whom we were required to identify.

The form of the classical realist text in conjunction with the expressive theory of writing and ideology privileges the interpolation of the reader as subject. The ethnic minority reader is given a reality, an existence, in society he or she never had before. The authority of the author with the ethnic signature reinforces this. Is this an essentialist trap?

This model of intersubjective communication, of shared understanding of a text which represents a familiar world is the guarantee not only of the truth of the text, that is, realism, but of the reader's existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of intelligent subjects.

This realist reading of the ethnic minority text by the minority reader constitutes an ideological practice. The meaning is constructed by the reader, but it is a meaning he or she can recognize. Is the reasoning circular here?

I have often written that Italian-Canadian writing began in 1978, not because that was when a number of books were published, so much as because that was when a group of writers emerged who participated in a discourse which gave this writing meaning. This discourse needed not just writers, texts and readers, but language (languages), ideology and an interaction with theory, whether that was resistance or acceptance. For these writers these publications had political dimensions which helped them to try to define the nature of their relationship with Italy (Europe) and with Canada. Long denied not only a voice but also an existence in both Canada and Italy these writers were not now about to subscribe to structuralist theories which proclaimed the death of the author. (Barthes)

This questioning of theory by some ethnic minority writers; this reluctance to abandon the conventions of classical realism is as much a political position as a literary tendency. Many of us are well aware that our subject positions are discursively constructed, and we want to determine the discourse, since it is the location of resistance. Our position is similar to many women writers; in the end all we have are our stories.


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Problems for the Italian-Canadian Writer and Critic:
A Discussion in Three Parts
By Joseph 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 1980s I had little credibility as a literary critic of Italian-Canadian writing. Why? Was it because I was from 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)
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 postcolonial 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 Giller for French poetry with Aknos. 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 conviction 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 their 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 Triulj, 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 changed 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 WWII.

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, Risiera di San Saba, an old rice mill on the edge of the city. After the fall of the Italian Fascist 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 Word 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 expose 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."


Works Cited


Representation of Ethnicity as Problem: Essence or Construction
By Joseph Pivato

“My Italian identity started to come out more and more. By the end of the summer I started to dream in Italian.”
We begin with a scene from an Italian film, Padre Padrone, a scene which helps us to focus on some of the issues surrounding the question of representation. In Padre Padrone we see an Italy of the Third World, Sardinia, an island of shepherds, olive pickers and poverty. The final scene in the film has the author of the original story, Gavino Ledda, explain to the audience why after finishing his graduate degree in linguistics he did not take up a university position offered to him in Rome, but returned to the poverty of his small town to teach the peasant children. He explains that the university position gave him power over others, and implies that this power would have made him like his father—a padrone.

I was personally moved by this film because it recalled for me the poverty of the post-war Italy which I left behind in 1952. The film is set in the late sixties when the poverty of Sardinia is in sharp contrast to the economic miracle taking place in most of Western Europe. I was shocked by this final scene. Why, after trying to escape this poverty and oppressive family advantages do these ethnic minorities earn one conscious belonging for me the poverty of the postcolonial dialects. They have not left their communities to speak about them from a distance and in a foreign language. When these writers use English or French to speak about their communities these languages come from the immigrant communities. This is exactly the point of authenticity. In the Sardinian film, these writers can speak with their community, and can do so in their own authentic dialects. They have not left their communities to speak about them from a distance and in a foreign language. When these writers use English or French to speak about their communities these languages come from the immediate experience of these people. At one point in the Canadian documentary film, Enigmatico, Antonio D’Alfonso complains that he is not happy with the quality of his writing. Though he can use English, French and Italian, he says he can not master them as well as the native speakers of these standard tongues. This is exactly the point of authenticity. In his own body D’Alfonso reflects his community and its language problems. The people depicted in the writing of Frank Paci, Dino Minni, Mary di Michele, Caterina Edwards and others demonstrate that no matter how many university degrees these characters earn they do not escape the language or identity problems of their families.

As immigrants and the children of immigrants these authors were speaking for the first time about their communities and in many cases were the only speakers from these groups and so, willing or not, they have become the authority voices for these immigrant communities. Who decides that someone speaks for a particular group? We must assume that the groups consent to these writers speaking for them. Much like Gavino in the Sardinian film, these writers can speak with their community, and can do so in their own authentic dialects. They have not left their communities to speak about them from a distance and in a foreign language. When these writers use English or French to speak about their communities these languages come from the immediate experience of these people. At one point in the Canadian documentary film, Enigmatico, Antonio D’Alfonso complains that he is not happy with the quality of his writing. Though he can use English, French and Italian, he says he can not master them as well as the native speakers of these standard tongues. This is exactly the point of authenticity. In his own body D’Alfonso reflects his community and its language problems. The people depicted in the writing of Frank Paci, Dino Minni, Mary di Michele, Caterina Edwards and others demonstrate that no matter how many university degrees these characters earn they do not escape the language or identity problems of their families.

Postcolonial theory and criticism have linked language and representation. In order to articulate, to represent the cultural difference one's own group one must speak their language. Using English or another colonial language often involves translation, a problem we can only discuss briefly here (Pivato, 1987).
In her study of marginality Sneja Gunew cites Lacan's dictum that the unconscious is structured like a language, and she asks if that unconscious may be formed in relation to a particular language, rather than language in general (1994: 13). The quotation from Mary di Michele, which began this essay, is an example of this inscription of the original language in the body. During her first return trip to Italy and to the town of her birth Mary di Michele began to dream in Italian once more, as she must have done as a little girl. Geography is another element in the problem of representation. As Canadians we have become notorious for our obsession with landscape.

Whether the immigrant writer uses the language of the old country or that of the new he/she is involved in translation. The representation of cultural difference through the old language in the new country may produce the deterritorialisation of the dominant language (Deleuze, Guattari), but it also changes the minority language in terms of context, meaning and even sound. How can it authentically represent the minority experience if it is itself changing in the new territory? The Italian of Maria Ardizzi's four Canadian novels is not the same language as that of Italy, because this process of deterritorialisation influences it. Ardizzi is translating while writing in standard Italian. Her heroine, Nora Moratti is a Canadian character who speaks Italian.

The use of the new language, like English or French, in the new country by the immigrant writer or his/her children presents other problems of translation. Representing the immigrant experience, which was originally, felt in Italian, or in Japanese, or in Bengali, into English changes the experience. The ethnic minority writer is involved in the process of translation, in the search for the authentic presentation of the experience. With Joy Kogawa the use of the Japanese culture also involves the use of silence, an element that is difficult to translate into another language, and especially a dominant language like English, which has no silences. On the other hand, Hiromi Goto uses whole Japanese sentences to capture the untranslatable in Chorus of Mushrooms: “What do you mean? Eigo hitotsu mo hanashitenal to omou kedo. Haven't we been talking Japanese all along?” (197). In Goto's narrative there are some Japanese characters and many Japanese terms, which are written phonetically in the Roman alphabet and so have already undergone one transformation.

Appropriation of Voice

Translation and the appropriation of voice are two activities, which are linked. All forms of translation have been practiced for centuries out of a variety of needs. Translation assumes that a given author or text cannot speak for themselves and need someone to interpret them into another language. Appropriation of voice, on the other hand, appears to be a recent activity, which has all kinds of undesirable political dimensions. Given the many problems involved in translation and the search for the appropriate expression of the minority experience we can understand the gravity of the problem of appropriation of voice. It is an activity, which seems to assume that the minority person cannot speak for himself/herself, when in fact they can, and should be given every opportunity to do so. When a person from outside the minority group assumes to speak about the experience of, and for the people of the marginalized group it is not just a political problem but an aesthetic one as well. It cannot be explained away by appealing to the freedom of the imagination of the artist. When power is involved there is no real freedom of the imagination for the artist. Appropriation of voice, by definition, is not a dialogue among equals, but an exercise of power by the appropriator over the minority object, who is thus made an object and not a subject.

While I am well aware of the dangers of biological essentialism, I am equally sensitive to the power relations in the major languages and literatures, which also belong to and were used as instruments by colonial powers. It would be absurd to maintain that only people of Italian blood could write about Italians. This would eliminate half the plays in Shakespeare's canon. But when we look closely at this example of Shakespeare we see that the power relations do not put Italy at a disadvantage. The powerful city-states of Italy were leaders of the Renaissance and the English playwright was simply imitating what was considered the most fashionable and popular culture of his time. Shakespeare was not appropriating the voices of Italians since their artists, writers and musicians were speaking for themselves very loudly all over Europe. There was no unequal power relationship between the languages and cultures of England and Italy at the time.

If we look at a more recent example of borrowing from another culture we may find that the power relations are very unequal. The case is that of W.P. Kinsella and his short stories about a Native community in Alberta. While the stories are fiction and the characters are all imaginary, the location of the reserve is similar to that of a real reserve near Hobbema, Alberta. The fact that the stories are humorous and depict these Native people in comical situations can be seen as degrading, and maintaining the negative stereotypes of Native people as not very intelligent. As an Italian I can appreciate the situation of seeing your own people depicted as either foolish clowns or as evil. But the problem of appropriation here depends on the disparity in the power relations of the two. Kinsella is a successful published writer with a North American audience, who has turned his books into popular movies and who has access to all the media and the most powerful publishers. And he has taken advantage of all these forms of communication to denounce his critics and accusers as “the thought police.” The Native people of Hobbema have few avenues of self-expression about this issue or any other. Their poor economic position gives them no ability to exercise their agency and to contest the representation of negative stereotypes. The very fact that the cause against appropriation in this case was taken up by other white writers and academics in Canada rather than by the Natives of the community would supports this view of their position of powerlessness. And sadly it also reveals the paternalistic position in which this particular group of Native people still find themselves. Even their white advocates are guilty of speaking for them.
Happily many native writers are beginning to speak for their own communities and to their Native readers. A Tomson Highway or a Drew Hayden Taylor can now critique their own Native problems.

In Rudy Wiebe's books, which depict Native people, we see an historical encounter between the dominant white world and that of the Natives. In Discovery of Strangers Wiebe tries to place the two cultures on more or less equal ground. But can he too be accused of appropriation of voice when he puts English words into the mouths of these long dead Native figures? For African-Canadian writer Marlene Nourbese Philip the answer to this question is yes:

For the white artist/writer/painter/musician—particularly the male—of the species the world is his oyster, and if he wishes to use Asian, African or Native culture in his work, then why the hell not? What does white mean, if it does not mean being able to lay waste and lay claim to anything you may happen to set your mind to? That is the moral turpitude at the heart of white "civilization."  

In his important book, Orientalism, Edward Said has some cogent observations about the problems of representation, which can be applied to the European depiction of Native people in the Americas and later visible minorities. For Said the way in which the West constructed the Orient was mediated by a whole set of political, ideological, ethnocentric, religious and cultural forces. (203) In addition to the violence of Western imperialism in the Orient there was the violence of the representation itself, the power to select, to exclude material, to translate and interpret in terms of modern Europe and all from positions and perspectives, which were not visible to readers. (121,207-9). Elsewhere Said has observed that this violence is also due to the contrast between the act of representation and the calm exterior of the image, the text. (1990: 95) We must also be sensitive to the fact that even the marginal, ethnic minority author is often in a dominant position in comparison to the subject.

The writer who studies other cultures cannot avoid trying to "master" them through the power of expertise. Does this acquired knowledge also give the writer the ability to speak for the marginal group, and thus appropriate their voice? Or is the writer an interpreter, a translator of the words for the minority people who may have another language? Does this privilege of speaking with them also require the writer to live with them, in the same location? Only from this position can the writer understand the differences between the Western Tradition and the local culture. The writer who speaks with the minority group, whether it is his own or from another culture, recognizes the power relations and the agency of the other. (See Fine, 1994)

Contemporary theories have made us aware that even narratives of minority experience are susceptible to all the contradictions inherent in textuality. Even innocent biographical narratives come to us textualized as representations, which may have done violence to the original events (Buss). No language is neutral. What is important is the position and power of those being depicted in the literary work. As Said observes:

What we must eliminate are systems of representation that carry with them the kind of authority which ... has been repressive because it doesn't permit or make room for interventions on the part of those being represented. (Said, 1990:95)

Many ethnic minority writers themselves articulate their own difficulty with the power relations in representation. Frank Paci acknowledged the literacy problems in his own immigrant family, their lack of access to his English language works, and wondered if film might give them the opportunity to participate in the discourse. (Unpublished correspondence, 3 March, 1981)

Representation and appropriation of voice is a difficulty for all writers. Sneja Gunew points out that we use the term representation in at least two senses: the depiction of a subject, and as delegation, when someone speaks for a group or individual. (1994: 31) Writers and critics who are delegates for marginal or minority groups may find themselves in the situation of Gavino Ledda. From their position of power in the hegemony of Western Civilization, how do they really speak for a powerless group? In using the language of the dominant culture and the discourse of sophisticated theory can they still address the concerns of the marginal community? With every university degree there comes a level of separation between the writer and his/her community. And so we can see that the only concrete links this person may have with these original roots is to try to speak with and for these people. These tasks are not unproblematic (Paci, 1985: 47).

The case of the Italian-American writer and critic Frank Lentricchia illustrates the ambivalent feelings produced by academic training on the one hand and ethnicity on the other. In his two books on novelist, Don DeLillo, Lentricchia praises him for his ability to escape their Italian ethnicity (1991:2). But in two other publications, especially his autobiographical, The Edge of Night, Lentricchia obsessively reviews the meaning of his Italian background. In an interview he confesses:

But when I write, I'm aware, at some level—not always but intermittently—that I'm writing from a position as a critic who is not in a typical position in the American academy. That fact sometimes weighs heavily upon me. I can't say that it's shaped all of my work: if you read some of my early stuff, you'll see no relationship with my Italian-American working-class background. But, these days, I have to say that one of the things I'm aware of is that I'm not a gentleman scholar. And, especially in my last two books, this has made me wary of theories of literature that avoid the kinds of differences you can't avoid. (1987: 182)

The delegated critic who tries to speak about, and for minority groups often finds that he/she must point to the norms of universality assumed by white western societies. These norms are so taken for granted as to be invisible to us. How can we understand the difference between the dominant cultures and the subordinate ones? Will the theories of European deconstruction help us here? In his work Said is critical of the separation between literary culture and social problems:

This has given rise to a cult of professional expertise whose effect in general is pernicious. For the intellectual class, expertise has usually been a service rendered, and sold, to the central authority of society. This is the trahison des clercs of which Julien Benda spoke in the 1920s. (1983: 2)
The problem of representing alterity is bound up with the questions of position and of power. Psychologist Michelle Fine advises researchers to "work the hyphen" in order to probe these power relations (1994).

Representation and the Conventions of Realism

In the not too distant past, ethnic minority writing was dismissed as work of low literary value because it was perceived as too sociological. The novels of Italian-American writers such as Pietro di Donato and John Fante were criticized as poor realism or naturalism. In general, ethnic minority writing was reduced to the oral history of immigrants or to the sociology of new settlement in ethnic neighbourhoods. I have always taken this dismissive criticism and turned it around. It is precisely because of this attention to the realistic representation of the immigrant story that the works of a Frank Paci, or an M. G. Vassanji are valuable both as literature and as story. As I have argued elsewhere, writers like Maria Ardizzi and Joy Kogawa strike a responsive chord in readers because they are reconstructing a history of immigrant women, which has been lost and neglected. To me, this biographical dimension increases the literary value of their work, rather than diminishing it.

In recent years the works of ethnic minority writers have been criticized in the context of contemporary theory. These works are often seen as stuck in the conventions of literary realism and as not experimental in their exploration of new forms of representing the subject. Some critics have tried to read these works as postmodern. And we can see how it is appealing to read many ethnic minority novels as open to postmodern theories, which promote the "decentred subject," support the fragmentation of linear narratives and show scepticism about master narratives.

I have argued that many ethnic minority writers do not want to decentre the subject but simply to find, or construct, the minority subject for the first time. They do not use anti-narrative fragmentation because they are often trying to reconstruct a lost narrative for the first time from the chaos of fragmented oral histories (Pivato, 1996).

Critical theory not only questions the intentions of the minority writer, but also the need to recognize the very existence of the author. Much contemporary criticism tries to avoid the role of the author by preferring the term "text" rather than "work," which implies the creation of an author. For Foucault and his followers, the author is merely an "author function" in the discursive analysis of art. It has become a troubling issue that just at the point when minority writers find individual voices and assert their existence, post-modern theory seems to deny the need for this existence. In response to this obliteration of identity, Francesco Loriggio has pointed out that the signature of the marginalized writer is an important marker: "The most idiosyncratic and most conspicuous feature of ethnic texts is also their most controversial one. It has to do with the function of the author" (1987: 55).

The recognition of the individual author is linked to the identity of the minority group and to their history. It is a history consisting not of momentous world events from history books, but of little stories, family chronicles, tales of displaced people, autobiographies of women and men. The discourse of feminist writers on the issues of essentialism and the body, and especially those studying life writing, has helped us to re-evaluate the work of ethnic minority writers as literary works, as texts which reward reading, study and research. (Neuman, 1991, 1993; Kadar, 1992; Verduyn, 1995)

The conventions of literary realism are the ones, which lend themselves most easily to the story telling of ethnic minority groups. Conventional narrative permits the minority writer to tell the story in the most direct manner and to develop characters who exercise some form of agency. It is this agency, which allows writers to critique the social values of both the old and the new country. It is this agency which allows people the freedom to act in conformance with, in opposition to, or without regard for biological or social determinants. (Rychlak, 50).

Agency

Along with the preference for the conventions of literary realism, often found in ethnic minority writing, is the common use of the first-person narrative. The examples are numerous: Frank Paci's novel, Black Blood, Hiromi Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms, Gérard Etienne's Le Negre Crucifie, and in Australia Rosa Cappiello's Paese Fortunato. One of the attractive aspects of speaking in the first-person, in one's own voice, is that it gives the illusion of power and control over one's life; a sense of self-determination that never existed in the real experience of dislocation. In a sense the agency of the main character in the narrative parallels that of the author with the freedom to tell his own or her own story.

In the past, critical theory was able to accommodate the intention and authority of the writer, but this has changed. Current literary theories proclaim the death of the author (Barthes). Reader response theory privileges the interaction of the reader with the text. Umberto Eco claims that the author is only a strategy of the text and that the real text is a product of the reader's consciousness. Wolfgang Iser agrees and maintains that the text only exists through the activity of the reader. We can see the gap here between the sophisticated urban culture of Europe with its self-reflexive theories, which are meant to honestly do away with the cult of personality, and the basic activities of the minority writer who is trying to articulate an experience, develop an identity and find a space in society.

In ethnic minority writing we have not only the recuperation of the author, but also the exercise of his or her authority as a voice in the, and for the community. This recognition of the authority of the author is one response to the appropriation of
voice from outside the community. When we write about ethnic minority authors we are implicitly recognizing their vital role as voices in their communities. In her study of Dionne Brand's poetry Himani Bannerji focuses on this important dimension in her writing:

Dionne Brand, born in Trinidad, in Guaguyare (1953), immigrant to Canada, woman and black is another such poet. To read her poetry is to read not only about her but also about her people. Her identification with their struggles both in the metropole of Canada and in the hinterland of the Caribbean. (24)

In her study of Marco Micone's French plays in Quebec Sherry Simon directly articulates his role in the title itself, "The Voice of Authority." The French plays not only provide Micone with a clear access to the political discourse of Quebec but also give him a voice for the Italo-Quebecois community, a voice it did not previously have. These Gens du Silence are never going to be silent again.

For Dionne Brand, Marco Micone, and Hiromi Goto the putting into print of words from the ethnic community is an exercise in the agency of these people. It is in this way that they can freely question both the biological and the social determinants they confront every day. Linda Hutcheon, despite her attachments to postmodernism, recognizes the value of intentionality in the writer and the reader when it comes to literatures of resistance. In her reinterpretation of the theory of irony she writes:

After all, the touchy political issues that arise around irony's usage and interpretation...invariably focus on the issue of intention (of either ironist or interpreter). And it is because of its very foregrounding of the politics of human agency in this way that irony has become an important strategy of oppositional rhetoric. (1994: 11-12)

The representation of ethnic difference in literature takes many forms, which combine both the biology of blood relations and social construction. Implicit in the idea of difference is the freedom to resist these factors. Helped by the example of half-forgotten immigrants, we as writers and critics should constantly be engaged in questioning the categories of ethnicity, race and gender.

We will end with an image from another film. This one is from the historical Italo-Quebecois film, La Sarrasine, by Paul Tana and Bruno Ramirez. Italian immigrant, Giuseppe Moschella is arrested and imprisoned for an accidental death. He orders his wife, Ninetta, to return to Italy, but she refuses and instead stays in Canada to plead his case. She resists the bullying of Giuseppe's older brother and remains in Canada even after Giuseppe takes his own life in despair. In contrast to her husband who gave up Ninetta is a paradigm of agency in a weak marginalized figure. As a powerless immigrant woman in turn-of-the-century Quebec Ninetta's resistance is of three kinds: first, she wants to fight the legal system in order to get justice for her husband, second, she wants to decide for herself where she is going to live, and third, she wants to tell her own story in her own words, which in this case are Sicilian. The film ends with an image that is a combination of Canadian and Italian elements: the black clad Ninetta standing in a field of snow gazing out at the horizon. It is by representing herself as visible that Ninetta can become a part of the new landscape.


Works Cited
Nino Ricci: A Big Canvas
Interview by Mary Rimmer

Nino Ricci was born in Leamington, Ontario, and holds degrees from York University and Concordia University. His first novel, Lives of the Saints (Cormorant, 1990), won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and numerous other awards, and became a national best-seller. He has also published stories and articles in a variety of magazines and journals, and taught English literature and Creative Writing in Canada and elsewhere. His second novel, In a Glass House, which is also the second book in the trilogy that Lives of the Saints began, was published in 1993.

Nino Ricci now lives in Toronto, and is a full-time writer. I spoke with him after his February 1993 reading at the University of New Brunswick.

MR: Lives of the Saints is the first volume of a trilogy. For a first novel, or a first group of novels, that seems a very daunting format. Are there problems involved with working on such a big canvas? Do you lose track of things?

NR: Well, the biggest problem is committing yourself to that much work and that long a time, having no idea at the outset whether you'll ever be published, whether the work has any value, whether it will ever see anything other than the inside of a drawer. Certainly I wouldn't have started this project if I'd known I'd be working at it for this long—it was mainly foolish innocence that kept me going. I was working with Terry Byrnes at Concordia University when I began, and I remember telling him around 1985, "Terry I think it's going to take me another year to finish my trilogy." He thought I was being a little
optimistic. Apart from the length of time, it is hard to hold that much material comfortably in one's head all at once—it's hard to carry through strands of imagery, motifs, and themes. I'm trying to let it work as memory might. I didn't re-read Lives of the Saints until a few months ago, and I hadn't read it for almost three years at that point, so I was working a bit in the dark on the second book. Yet there were things from the first book which stuck out as salient to me, and I tied those in and referred back to them. That seemed a useful way of doing the writing: I took whatever came to the top of my head, both aesthetically and thematically, instead of imposing things that didn't seem to arise spontaneously. So far that seems to be working. My biggest fear, when I was moving from the first book to the second, was about tone. The tone has changed substantially in the second—though there are all sorts of justifications for that. I hope that someone reading the two will still be convinced that the narrator is the same person. If I had been able to write all three of them at once, and then make them consistent, perhaps that would have been better, but as it is, I'm stuck with the fact that I was at a certain stage in my writing in the first book, and I'm at a very different stage now—and will be at still another in the third. But I've conceived a way to work that process in: the narrator as he writes the story will become more understanding of it, and as he does so he will become more complex—and more difficult to understand.

MR: Of course, Vittorio does presumably age, as character if not as narrator, so we'd expect a somewhat different voice to emerge.

NR: Yes, and there will also be a change in him as narrator. At the end, there will be an epilogue where he talks about the writing process, what he's gone through, and so on.

MR: Lives of the Saints reads a bit like a bildungsroman. Even if you don't intend to make Vittorio a writer or an artist, do you think that's part of the way the book works? Can we read it as the portrait of a young artist?

NR: To an extent, yes. Initially that was exactly where it was going, and it was partly because of the advice of my adviser at Concordia that I removed that. Vittorio was going to be a writer in adulthood. Removing that freed me up a lot—it meant I didn't have to have all paths leading to one clear goal, and to reduce everything to that. But that said, there are a lot of issues that can still tie into that motif. I was very much influenced by Lives of Girls and Women, which is a portrait of the young artist, and a lot of the issues which come up in Alice Munro's book come up to an extent in my second one. So I would say yes, the bildungsroman idea is there in a sense, but I didn't want to limit it to the creation of a writer. The sense of being an outsider, or on the margins, is often how the artist is portrayed—it is also applicable to many other situations—that of being an immigrant, for instance. I wanted to play across the field on that one.

MR: Lives of the Saints won you lots of awards, of course, including the Governor General's Award for Fiction. What if any effect has winning those awards had on you as a writer?

NR: It's hard to say. I take myself more seriously than I used to. I do feel a greater sense of legitimacy as a writer—although one always wonders about these awards and what they really mean. It's three people sitting in a room, and usually it's a compromise decision. They choose the one book that nobody disliked, although they all had their real favourites, which nobody could agree on. When the award is presented they always say the winner is "the best book of the year," but you have to remember those three people in that room. So I've tended to look at the award practically, instead of seeing it as a final judgment on my writing. And practically it's been a great boon, partly because the Canada Council has now made it their mandate to promote the award, and the winners of the award, and to make the public aware of them. So I think it's made my life as a writer easier, in terms of getting readers, getting publishers, and knowing that I'll be able to continue doing that.

MR: That may have something to do with the fact that after a decade of teaching, studying, and writing, you now describe yourself as a full-time writer. What are some of the rewards and problems of writing full-time, without a back-up occupation?

NR: Well, the rewards are that I can do what I want to be doing every day, which is a luxury very few people seem to have. The beauty of that is that it's much less stress-provoking to sit down and write every day when I know that if I don't get it right today I've got tomorrow and the next day. When I was trying to write in little chunks of time, there would be a tremendous anxiety— "If I don't get it out now, then I have to do such-and-such and the time will be gone." It's opened up my writing process to have that space to explore every avenue, and finally arrive at the right thing. And thought, "Well, I really did what I wanted to: I got the book published, I won this award, and everything's going well, and I've achieved my goals, so what else is there? This is the rest of my life now?" So I think there's a real danger of stagnation. I keep thinking about a comment that somebody made about Genet, who was a criminal and did all sorts of interesting things before he started writing. But he never had anything to say about his life after he started writing. Nothing interesting happened to him after that.

MR: In Lives of the Saints the young Vittorio recounts his experience up to the point of his arrival in Canada. As someone born in Leamington, did you find it hard to use him as a narrator? Was it difficult to think yourself into his mind?
NR: I think initially it was—initially, because I started with the idea for a different book (the third book). I was resistant, first of all, to going back to a child's point of view, and to spending much time on that village. I could handle everything else, but these two things I thought I couldn't do very well—perhaps that's why I ended up doing both! So I spent a lot of time trying to get that right. I did have a certain background to draw from: I'd been to my mother's village, which Valle del Sole is based on—I was there when I was twelve, when my mind was still fairly impressionable, and I took away a lot of images from that trip. I also went back a number of times after that, and I'd been part of a research project that involved interviewing a lot of Italian immigrants from that area. So I had a sense of the general sociological context, and since I was raised in a town with a fairly large Italian community, I also had an intuitive sense of the dynamics of a village like Valle del Sole. I wasn't sure how intuitive that would be when I started writing, but in the end it worked and I went with it. There's a lot of material that was eventually cut from the book. Where it starts now used to be about page 72, and the first 71 pages were just description of the town, and historical background, that sort of thing. Once I had learned all that material, it was possible to get rid of it, because it was present in the story—but I had to go through the process of writing it out and getting to know it.

MR: In their reviews of Lives of the Saints, Tom Marshall and Constance Rooke both suggest that Cristina is conceived along feminist lines. Would you agree with that assessment, or did those comments come as a surprise?

NR: No, they didn't come as a surprise. At Concordia I had to do courses in literary theory, as part of the academic side of the degree, and what interested me most in that was feminist theory, simply because, much more than a lot of postmodern theory, it was trying to engage with the world and to restructure the way we live. Feminism is causing quite a significant change—it's bringing about one of the largest revolutions we've experienced in a couple of thousand years. I wanted to find a way to deal with that in the book. That said, I couldn't make Cristina a feminist, because she wouldn't have had access to that ideology. But my own experience contradicted the stereotype that people tend to have of Italy, particularly Southern Italy, as being a very macho culture and very repressive towards women. That's one aspect of Italian culture, but I think it's largely there because that society has been so poor, so that men have traditionally not had much power in it. They've often been oppressed by governments; they've been forced to leave home and find work, and have often had to stay away for months at a time. Long before the emigration overseas started, they would leave to work in Northern Italy, say. And then with the emigration overseas in the twentieth century, that absence could be for five years or more. Before World War II the tendency was for men to leave, work for several years, come back perhaps for a winter, go back, work again, and come back home again. So they didn't have control over their wives or families. A lot of the misogyny that we see in those men comes from fear of the power that their absence gave to women. A tradition of very strong women developed: at least within the narrow domestic and village spheres, women had a lot to say, and a lot of power and control. That was something that I wanted to deal with, because it conformed to my own experience of Italian women—in my own family and among my relatives.

MR: Did the choice of Vittorio as narrator have anything to do with needing to legitimize the handling of Cristina? Because we are getting her through the obviously naive eyes of her son, no one's likely to accuse you of trying to "do feminism" from a masculine perspective.

NR: I may have been trying to do that. Every boy has had a mother, after all, and so there is a certain legitimacy in the voice of a boy reflecting on his mother. The son's perspective also made it easier to see Cristina as a humane and sympathetic character, because we have such strong associations with the mother-child bond. She obviously does cause problems: the grandfather loses his reputation, and her son also goes through difficulties. Her actions do have negative consequences, and there's nothing strictly altruistic about the way she behaves. But having that strong relationship provides an emotional counter to the more negative aspects of her behaviour.

MR: What my last question touched on, of course, is the appropriation of voice issue. Is it appropriate for an author to write from the perspective of another gender or culture—or is that even possible?

NR: Yes, I think it's both appropriate and possible, and lots of writers do it successfully. I don't think I would—and I haven't. We don't enter the mother's head in Lives of the Saints. In earlier drafts, I did have a few chapters where I tried to but I couldn't—I could have faked it, but it seemed truer for me to stay outside her mind. And I think I would be very wary as a writer of entering characters whom I didn't feel I knew well. In the second book there's a section that takes place in Africa, where I lived for two years, and the same issue might arise there. I was in Africa long enough to get a fairly good overview of the culture, and to have a sense of it, but I don't think I would be able to write credibly or responsibly from the perspective of someone who was born and raised there, based on that two-year experience. Still, as I said, I think some writers do that sort of thing very well. For instance, Thomas Pynchon in Gravity's Rainbow moves across a whole spectrum of different cultures and perspectives, and generally does it credibly—although not with women, actually. Women are his weakest spot. But I don't see anything immoral about doing that. It seems almost a basic freedom of expression issue: you shouldn't fetter the imagination.
MR: What motivated you to choose saints' lives as the mythic structure of your first novel? I know it's been hinted that Lives is imitation Robertson Davies (though it didn't strike me that way as I read), but from your perspective, why the interest in saints' lives?

NR: Well, I certainly was influenced by Fifth Business, and probably some of my interest in saints goes back to that book, but it also comes out of my own Catholic background. Oddly though, being raised as a Catholic in Canada, you hear very little about the saints. We had mainly the standard biblical stories, and after Vatican II not even much of that. From my experience of Italy though, it seemed that Catholicism there had a much more Pagan base than it tends to in Canada or in other countries. That's manifested through the adoration of the saints, whose stories tend to play a much larger role than the biblical ones do. So the saints' lives in the book are partly an attempt to enter into the mentality of that world, and to find a correlative in it for the formative influences on my own imagination. Whereas for me those influences were the story of Christ, and wanting to be a priest, it seemed that in an Italian village the same imaginative energy would go into the saints' lives. Once I had decided that, there was all sorts of material to draw from, material that tied into other issues as well. When I was doing my undergraduate degree I was influenced by Northrop Frye's idea of the monomyth which underlies all narrative, and by various other mythical interpretations of literature. Writing Lives of the Saints, I was looking for ways to integrate that level of myth, and the saints' stories were one way of doing that.

MR: Ally McKay suggests in her review that Cristina is fundamentally different from Santa Cristina, even though she resembles the saint in certain ways (being surrounded by a community who despise her, for instance). To McKay, Cristina's actions are individualistic, are not aimed at improving the community, and finally lead her away from the community, into something like a retreat. Was that difference between Cristina and her namesake part of your conception of her—or does she have an impact on those around her after all?

NR: I think it's hard to give a clear schematic breakdown of that. The saints' stories are presented as didactic stories with clear morals. You know who's in the right, and you know the lesson of the story. In fiction and in life—that is, in good fiction and in life—it's never that clear. So obviously there are ambiguities in Cristina's situation that we don't see in Santa Cristina's. The saint's story is presented as a sort of alternate reading of Cristina's life. On the one hand, in the strictest technical terms of the religion that she forms part of, she is the sinner. On the other hand, as the rebel (and saints always tended to be the rebels) she's behaving more in the spirit of sainthood than the villagers are; they are simply following the dogmatic rules of the society that they belong to, as were the people around Santa Cristina. There are of course moral ambiguities about the way Cristina behaves, but then, when people live in that sort of repressive environment, they don't start out thinking, "How am I going to change the society?" They start out thinking "What are my options here? What can I do? I need some avenue of self-expression." And in that kind of community your options are fairly limited. So for Cristina to take a lover was a rebellious act within the rules of her society. Granted it's not an altruistic, other-directed act like Santa Cristina's, but it's what she had available as a means of rebellion. I would say that when someone actively rebels against and questions a narrow moral structure, there will be an effect on that structure, even if that is not the intention. The community will have to find a way to either accommodate or expel that person, and will be changed in some way. But I don't think one can draw a clear dividing line between what is morally right and morally wrong.

MR: Or between what's saintly and what isn't.

NR: Yes.

MR: Cristina's ability to laugh, at the priests for example, seems to be one of her strengths. Is that one of her gifts to her community, as well as something that helps her survive?

NR: Yes, I would say so. It's certainly an aspect of her rebelliousness, and perhaps the most constructive one because it's good-spirited.

MR: It's sad though that she can't seem to pass the laughter on to Vittorio; he is "so serious," as she says.

NR: Yes, he's pretty messed up.

MR: And going on what you read from In a Glass House, it seems that the seriousness stays with him, and gets worse.

NR: Yes—he becomes his father's son. His father's very morose, and conflicted, and somehow he manages to pick up much more of that than of his mother's qualities. His half-sister, who has neverknown her mother, picks up much more from Cristina.
MR: Is it significant that the baby born to Cristina just before she dies is a girl? She's always been in such a masculine world, despite the absence of her husband. Is the girl-child another legacy, a part of Cristina that will go on?

NR: Very much so. The mother was given birth to by the daughter, in a sense; the daughter was the first character I had, and there is going to be an obvious continuity between the two. And the daughter of course will live in the modern world, and have access to feminist ideas. I wanted to have a chance to play with the differences and similarities in their situations, and in how they confront those situations—and I wanted to carry through the spirit from the first to the second book.

MR: I've noticed that your fiction tends to centre on isolated figures, such as Vittorio, and the narrator in the short story "Going to the Moon." These characters seem to feel that they're marked out from others because of their experience, ethnic origin or language. Would it be accurate to say that isolation is a central preoccupation of yours?

NR: Yes, I guess so—in my life and in my writing. In my life, it started out as a sense of being marginalized. I perceived it as being marked out for my ethnicity or for being an immigrant, but it quickly expanded into other areas: very soon I was marked out for many other reasons! So it's certainly something that comes from my own experience, and it inevitably crops up in my writing, although when I first started writing I didn't deal with the issue—as for instance in "Still Life," my story in The Fiddlehead.

MR: Yet even there I felt the same sense of isolation, although it's not the horizon-to-horizon alienation that a child can feel.

NR: Perhaps there was more avoidance of that in earlier drafts. But even in the final draft, the characters are stripped of ethnic origins: that whole aspect of them just isn't there. Coming to Lives of the Saints, I did want to deal with what the feeling of alienation grew out of in my own background. On the other hand, in Lives of the Saints the characters' outsider status isn't the result of ethnicity, or immigration, but rather of a situation which could happen in any community. In more general terms what interests me about isolation is its connection to the formation of the artist: typically the artist is someone who stands outside the community and therefore sees it in starker, perhaps more realistic terms than those who are inside it, and don't question its rules. I think it's almost necessary in a good work of fiction to have an outsider character, who is being forced to test those rules by negative experience, or is in some other way set apart from the community, and sees things from that perspective. So maybe it's just a technical thing after all.

MR: Lives of the Saints was originally your M.A. thesis. Given the book's success, that sounds like a great advertisement for creative writing programmes at universities. Do you think that's a good way for prospective writers to go—to think of doing a creative writing degree?

NR: Yes, I guess so. The wisdom seems to be divided on this, and it's hard to say whether people who come out of a programme doing well wouldn't have done as well or better without it. Certainly for me the writing workshops provided a supportive community, and it was helpful to have advice from professors and working writers: I went through a tremendous improvement in my writing and in my understanding of writing. Programmes like that also give you an environment in which you develop the discipline to write. I had almost two years in which I was more or less free to write, apart from occasional work as a teaching assistant, and in the world at large I don't think anyone would have given me that much space. On the other hand, the value of the workshops themselves may be more questionable. First of all you tend to look only at short works, like short stories, and second you tend to fall into a certain "workshopese," into easy, empty phrases that can be very intimidating, because they sound authoritative ("I'm not sure you've earned that cliché," for instance). It may not be healthy to pass people through this mill, so that they all end up writing the same way. I didn't find that was really the case—perhaps because there was a wide mixture of people coming in, and there were several different professors teaching. Given that, it was impossible to completely repress people's native instincts, at least in eight-month workshops. So, on the whole I think Creative Writing programmes are positive. Yet I remember something that Ann Copeland said to me: she feels that they produce false expectations. People go into them expecting to come out and be writers, or to teach writing. It can be a self-perpetuating system: the graduates all go out and become creative writing instructors, teaching other people to go out and be creative writing instructors. Perhaps not much actual writing gets done, because there's no time for it. I can see a danger there, because our society is not at a point where it's willing to support many writers. Inevitably a lot of these people are going to be frustrated. But—they're adults.

MR: If workshops are one possible way of learning to write, what about reading? Should writers start off their careers reading a lot, immersing themselves in books?

NR: Yes, I think that's important. I'm sure there are lots of exceptions out there who can do without it, but it was important for me. When I was young I read a lot, and in fact in university the courses I did in literature were more useful to me than the writing workshops: I probably learned more from Shakespeare than I did from my peers. But students going into Creative
Writing programs often don't realize that reading is crucial. That was the sense I sometimes got teaching Creative Writing. I'd bring in short stories, say, by real writers and the students would ask "Why do we have to read this?"

NR: Did you always want to be a writer, or was that something you came to later on in your life?

MR: Well, it's possible to go back now and construct a story . . .

NR: "It started in Grade Two..." I do have my own little story, but there were various things I wanted to do when I was young. I did have a facility for writing though—it was something that got noticed, and because people paid attention to me for it, I did more of it. I actually wrote my first novel in Grade Five, though probably lots of people wrote novels in Grade Five, novels just as bad as mine was. But being a writer was an idea that was there, and I think I was working towards it from that age in some way. As other things fell away, it was the thing that remained.

MR: You're currently a director of the Canadian Centre of PEN International. Could you comment on your concern for writers who are subject to political persecution?

NR: Sure—but I should start out by saying that although I'm on the board, I haven't been very active recently. I think it all goes back to my Catholic upbringing. When I was in Grade Three I promised God in church that I would be a priest one day. I wasn't able to make good on that promise, but the indoctrination left its mark—it certainly left me with the impression that one's purpose in life was to do something useful for the world. That's why I went to Africa to teach for two years when I graduated from university, though I'm not sure I did anyone any good there.

MR: Except perhaps yourself.

NR: Yes. But those years kept alive the interest in larger issues. In fact, the founder of the school that I worked at was arrested by the military regime in a coup shortly after I left the country, and was adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. So I started working for them at that point, and then when I published the book it seemed a natural transition to get involved with PEN.

MR: There's been an assumption lately that censorship is a shrinking problem in the world, with the fall of communist governments and so on. From your perspective is that accurate, or are we dealing rather with a growing problem?

NR: We're dealing with an increasingly complex problem. It's true that there are suddenly great chunks of the world that we used to consider the primary problem areas which are not so now, but that's made us aware of all those other problem areas which didn't used to seem headline news material. It's quite chilling when you see all the documented cases of serious abuses of human rights and freedom of expression in different countries. China remains the most outstanding example, but there's also Burma, Iran, and many others. Iran has been a big issue for PEN because of the Salman Rushdie case, and because Western governments have been so slow to react in any meaningful way. But apart from that, there are hundreds of thousands of others in Iran who are being oppressed daily—and within the Islamic world in general we get lots of reports of writers who are being accused of blasphemy, assassinated, or arrested. The issues are complex, because first of all it's not always clear who's doing the oppressing. For instance in Egypt there are hit squads that assassinate writers who blaspheme against Islam. The government doesn't take responsibility, and in the end one suspects that it's implicitly accepted that these things will go on. Iran is similar in some ways. They claim it's a charitable organization which has offered the reward for Salman Rushdie's death, and yet this organization is legally constituted in the country and the government has never challenged them on the reward offer. And members of the government often speak in favour of the reward. Those are the more obvious examples, but then you come to countries like Mexico, where it gets very murky. Journalists in Mexico are very poorly paid, so they're vulnerable to bribery. The press agent for a company involved in a news story, for instance, may give a journalist an envelope, with money in it—which inevitably influences the story that gets written. There are all sorts of other subtle influences. For instance, the government controls newsprint, so if it disagrees with a newspaper's story it can hold back the newsprint supply. It also controls distribution: a story critical of the government may be printed, but then the paper or magazine will just happen not to appear at the main distribution spots. Often there are implicit understandings: if a particular writer insults the President in print, the President isn't going to say "Kill that man," but a person in one organization may let it be known to someone else that probably nobody would mind if the man disappears—and so the act can never be traced back to the source. These more insidious forms of oppression are going on through ownership of the means of expression, and through more subtle leverage. As human rights organizations like PEN and Amnesty International learn how to exert influence, the people they're trying to influence are becoming more subtle in the way they dispense with their enemies. There's a growing trend in many countries not to arrest people but just to have them disappear, so that there's nobody to blame. You can't ask for them to be released from prison,
because nobody knows where they are, or what has happened to them. So I would say censorship is still a major problem. PEN has something like sixty or seventy countries in which it's monitoring abuses.

MR: Of course we tend to think of Western countries and Canada in particular as having "clean" censorship records, at least recently: would you say that we do, on the whole?

NR: No, but I find this question hard, because it does seem to me that we can publish pretty well anything we want...

NR: And nobody's going to shoot you.

NR: Exactly. But a lot of the work that PEN has been doing has focused on Canada. One of the things that we took up was native custody of communications. Something like eighty or ninety percent of the funding that the federal government was giving for native communications was cut. It wasn't even a large sum of money—about six million dollars—and so it wasn't going to make a big difference in the budget. There seemed a clear political motive for the cut: it was around the time of Oka. A lot of native newspapers and small broadcasting stations closed down for lack of funding. So we lobbied against the government, arguing that under international human rights law, they had an obligation to support indigenous culture. We managed to save some, though not all of the funding. But that was one issue within Canada. There's also libel reform, and "libel chill": there have been several high-profile cases where people with a lot of money to hire lawyers prevent certain things from being printed in books or articles, more because they can afford to than because any real damage is being done. The libel laws are so complex that they don't always serve the cause of truth. We've been working to get those laws reformed.

MR: One last question: I've noticed in both Lives of the Saints and "Going to the Moon" that "America" is an important concept, and Canada tends to be seen as rather vaguely as a new part of America, or where you end up if you don't reach the real America. That's a vision of Canada which Canadians tend to think of as inaccurate, but reading Lives of the Saints made me wonder whether the distinctiveness we prize so much is significant, or even recognizable to people other than ourselves. As a writer, is it important for you to be a Canadian rather than a North American?

NR: Yes. It's important for me to say that I live in a Canadian context and speak out of a Canadian experience; that is an influence on my writing, though there are a lot of other influences as well. I do see a clear distinction between Canadian and U.S. culture. People in Lives of the Saints do not make those distinctions, but that's simply because they have no experience of that difference, and America is all one to them. Certainly within my own upbringing, the American influence was very strong. We lived close to Detroit, rooted for the Detroit Tigers, and watched American television. We only watched our one Canadian station for the American sitcoms that played in syndication in the afternoon. So there was a palpable sense of the great empire to the south, and when I was young I was much more aware of American politics, say, than of Canadian politics. But one of the things I was trying to do in "Going to the Moon" was also to deal with the disillusionment with "America." The Detroit skyline in the story represents a dream, but it's one that doesn't ultimately deliver. As a Canadian, I find it valuable to be on the outside of a big empire. One of the things I like about Canada is that it doesn't try to impose a clear sense of nationalism or national identity...

MR: Because we've always been conscious of living on the outside of somebody else's reality.

NR: Yes, and I don't think that's a bad thing. It's more of a strength. As this was going to press, In a Glass House came out. In order to bring the interview up to date, I asked Nino Ricci to answer a few more questions about this book and the critical responses it had received. He generously agreed, and I spoke with him again on October 11, 1993.

MR: In his Globe and Mail review of In a Glass House, Bill Dodge suggests that the novel fails as a bildungsroman because "the narrator's experiences seem void of any structural significance." How would you respond to that?

NR: Certainly while I was writing it, everything did have a significance, but maybe that didn't come through. The apparent absence of structure reflects the novel's situation: In A Glass House is a story of arrivals and dislocations. In Lives of the Saints there is a meaning system in place, based on the church, the values of the community, family relationships, the lives of the saints, and so on. That structure is challenged, but it's still there. In the second book it fails outright, leaving the narrator searching for something to put in its place. Saints' lives usually move from conflict, through insight and revelation to resolution. A similar pattern governs many other kinds of stories, and so shapes the expectations readers bring to any narrative. But that pattern is part of what the narrator has lost in the second book, and so there may well be a sense that something's missing. In a Glass House finds him looking for patterns rather than inhabiting them. He looks in television and movie stories, for instance—he wants his family to be like the one in Lassie. He flirts with socialism, and experiments with therapy as a substitute for confession. But none of his searches are successful, and they don't bring revelation. Of course even in Lives of the Saints, he never really arrives at a revelation, but there his mother's death seems to have provided readers with a sense of closure. I think
there's a problem of expectation here. We say we live in a post-modern world, where we question teleological imperatives, but we still tend to look for the same patterns in stories: for closure, or for the moments of insight that provide resolution.

MR: Dodge's review, and Charles Foran's in the Montreal Gazette, both charge that the Africa section does not fit the rest of In a Glass House. What is your sense of that section's role in the novel?

NR: To begin with, there's an Edenic element, but of course Africa doesn't turn out to be a simple idyll. The Africa section also continues the new world and arrival motifs that figure in both books. In fact the In a Glass House departure for Africa and the Lives of the Saints departure for Canada occur at structurally similar points in the two novels. As far as the narrator's concerned, leaving home and being away from his country and his family allow him to enter into a different type of relationship with them. Africa also brings back some of his imagination and sense of wonder. He loses those in the second book, and Africa is where he begins to recover them; it echoes the world he's left behind in the Valle del Sole. And of course, this second entry into a new world leads him to not only to reflect on the location itself, but also to see the immigrant experience from a new perspective.

MR: Does Vittorio over-analyse his experience in In a Glass House, as reviewers have said he does?

NR: Well of course, he is overly analytical, and that does distance him from his experience; he's not a well-adjusted person. The difficulty is to write successfully about characters who do this. One of the things I was trying to do with In a Glass House was to get inside a character's head—something that wasn't really possible in Lives of the Saints, because the character's simply too young there. In the second book, I wanted to capture the psychological nuances of a character, and to follow the situation of the first book—the trauma that he's been through—to its logical conclusion.

MR: Somehow I don't think we'd have believed it if Vittorio had turned out to be other than a morose and not especially likable character after Lives of the Saints. The uplift in that book has a lot to do with his mother, and it seems logical that after she dies the "always so serious" part of him should take over, as indeed it does in Lives of the Saints much of the time.

NR: And then there's the influence of his father, who turns him even more that way. I'm not sure whether ordinary readers, as opposed to reviewers, will react negatively to the tone of In a Glass House. Just from talking to people about it, there seems to be a split between older and younger readers. I've had some vehement reactions from older readers about the narrator's suicidal episode, but younger readers seem to be more positive—and less vehement.

MR: Perhaps because it's less likely to hit home with younger readers. Does the vehemence show that the writing is working—that it's getting through?

NR: I'd like to see it in that light. When I'm writing, after the first few drafts, what I'm concerned with is to get the thing right, and not directly with the effect it may have. Somehow it seems to me that if I do that, there should be something uplifting about the writing, however dark the subject. Maybe it doesn't have that effect for readers though: the subject may take over. But I hope that in the end people can get beyond that and evaluate the novel for what it is trying to do.


Home of the Saints
By Nino Ricci

Legend has it the Samnites arrived in the Molise region of southeastern Italy riding down the ridge-line of the Apennines on the great ox bequeathed to them by the gods. Where the ox stopped they built their settlements, shielding them behind imposing fortresses of rough-hewn mountain stone that the Romans, after years of bitter war, finally destroyed. Some say the region's history has remained marked to the present day by that ancient conquest—the Romans, remembering their own early defeats at the hands of a people more skilled than they in mountain warfare, were determined when victory came to leave in their wake a wasteland; and forever afterwards the arteries of their empire avoided this region that had so injured their pride.

But on entering Molise today—well-serviced now by a network of highways and superhighways leading east off the Rome-Naples expressway, and less than two hours' drive from either of those cities—the impression is one not of barrenness and waste but of pastoral allure, the mountains stretching away in almost Tuscan gentleness and the hilltop towns sitting postcard-perfect in their sun-drenched ochres and whites where once the fortresses of Samnium stood. It is hard to read in this first glance the intervening millennia of poverty and neglect, of feudal servitude, of flight, or to gather why even now the flight
continues, to the cities, to the north, a slow unpeopling of a landscape whose apparent charms have never been quite enough to hold its offspring in place. Wedged diminutively along the lower backside of Italy's boot between the mountains of Abruzzo to the north and the Gargano spur of Puglia to the south, Molise remains perhaps Italy's most forgotten region, with still the air of having been passed by; and as the towns and villages empty, becoming more and more simply the summer retreats of former residents, a way of life is quietly fading away here, one whose origins reach back well beyond the ancient Samnites to the oldest stirrings of humankind.

The first highways of Molise were the tracks formed in prehistory by the seasonal migrations of herds between the northern highlands and the southern plains. Those tracks, tratturi, hundreds of miles long and sometimes hundreds of feet across, became the lifelines of the region, their history linking the first hunters who stalked them for prey to the shepherds who within recent memory still followed them with their flocks in the twice-yearly transumanza between mountain and plain.

When my parents, natives of Molise, brought me to visit the region in 1971, it was not yet far removed from the history inscribed in those ancient paths. I remember from that trip the jarring otherworldliness of my parents' hometowns, my first child's disgust at the flies and the dung-slicked streets, the backwardness, and then the slow seeping into me of the life there like something I'd known once but forgotten. In my mother's village, Villacanale, perched above the Verrino valley along the northern slopes of Alto Molise, the sheep still passed at dawn on their way to pasture and the mules at dusk returning hay-laden from the fields. Our days there revolved around my grandfather's house, which sat with its thick stone walls and balconied windows overlooking the valley from the village's lower slopes; and within the cool of its kitchen in the midday heat and its smoky fireplace warmth at night we seemed slowed to some older, more instinctive rhythm, the world beyond our tiny familiar one receding like a dream.

Years later the images from that trip came back to me when I began writing fiction, Villacanale as I first saw it taking on in imagination the primordial fixedness of an archetype. But in real life the village has changed, under the twin forces of modernization and a creeping desolation. Its single phone at the village bar and its single television put out on a balcony for the other villagers to gather around have given way to all the modern amenities, the TV now a constant chorus to gatherings and meals and the houses redone in gleaming ceramic and stainless steel. But many of these houses stand empty for most of the year now, their owners fled to Naples or Rome or the north and returning only for their month of vacation in August, when the village will briefly assume a festive air before returning again to its usual sleepy calm.

My grandfather's house, passed on after his death to relatives in Rome, has been turned into a sort of condominium, rusting rails and rotting windows replaced with aluminum and the plain stone of its facade layered over with stucco and fresh paint. But hard up against it stands a house in ruins, the sign of a memory still followed them with their flocks in the twice-yearly transumanza between mountain and plain.

But as I wander the streets the initial sense of desertion slowly gives way to one of affable welcome, people emerging from the dark of kitchens and stables to find out who the newcomer is. There is the first establishing of lineage—I am quickly placed as the grandson of the podesta, the title bestowed on my grandfather when he served as mayor under the Fascists; and then comes the inevitable listing of relations and sub-relations in America, intricacies of kinship I usually can't follow though always the faces before me seem ghostly doubles of ones I've known in Canada. If I'm invited in I make excuses, trying to follow out the complex rules of hospitality here, the expected tussle of insistence and required refusal; and if the insistence grows aggressive I finally acquiesce, never sure at what point my refusal turns from politeness to insult.

My instructor in these rules is my Aunt Maria. At 76 she remains as tiny as a girl of twelve, with still a hint of girlish devilment beneath the mournful cast of her features. I try at one point to give her money to pass on to her sister-in-law, who is letting me stay in an unused house she owns up the street.

"Don't be silly, she won't take it," my aunt says, balancing at the outrageousness of what I'm suggesting. But then a impish gleam comes into her eyes. "I'll tell you what, you make a show that you want to give the money to her. That way she can tell everyone about how you wanted to pay her to stay in her house."

And to get by it seems enough to grasp this simple fact, that courtesy is as much in the gesture as in the act. That is the usual closing to the lists of ailments and struggles, Ma non possiamo lamentarci, "we can't complain", a statement that at once affirms and denies its opposite; and in the sense of lament implied in the Italian lamentare there seems always a
remembering of some more general pain, the whole history of peasant long-suffering and woe stretching back to the darkest recesses of time.

That sense of shared history runs deep here. It comes out first in the nicknames people have for one another, passed down through the generations, the only way of ordering a world so long inbred that surnames have lost the power to differentiate; and it comes out as well in the land, every hollow and fold of it known and named, Bellavigna, Bottavento, Valle del Porco. Aunt Maria’s son Umberto, a pharmacist now in nearby Agnone, speaks with a proprietorial fondness of the setting where he grew up.

“Everyone talks about Rome’s seven hills,” he says, “but no one mentions Villacanale’s.”

And he proceeds to point out and name them, with its particular lineage and story. One, Colle Pulito, still shows on its flank the now overgrown track of an ancient tratturo; another, the highest, Colle di Papa, probably served as an outpost for the Samnites, fires lit on its summit alerting surrounding settlements of the approach of an enemy.

The earth here is layered with the evidences of this history. My cousin Nicolino—himself a living reminder of the past, his blond hair and blue eyes remembering the blood of foreign conquerors—tells me that while doing some digging for his uncle in the contrada of San Cataldo he came upon an old altar-piece in terracotta, and beneath it a trove of human bones.

“I wanted to call the authorities,” Nicolino says, “but my uncle didn’t want the government to stop him from using his land.”

Everyone seems to have a tale of this sort, a suit of Samnite armour discovered near Castel di Croce but then dispersed, a mysterious chamber found in the mountainside near Villacanale during road construction but its unknown treasures gone before officials had had a chance to inspect it. History here has always this evanescent as pect, felt in the bones and yet something that can never quite be pinned down; and where history will not serve, legend is always quick to slip into the breach. Aunt Maria brings me to a room above Villacanale’s church where there is a 17th century statue of its central event the procession of the carts. I am there the evening of the first day, the carts just filing down toward the town framed in intricate lace decked out with electric lights and with hundreds of bright paper flowers, made new each winter by the women of Larino in their hearthside anticipation of spring.

Every year now, at the end of May, the triumphal entry of San Pardo into Larino is celebrated with a three-day festival, its central event the procession of the carts. I am there the evening of the first day, the carts just filing down toward the cathedral to collect San Pardo’s remains. There are some 120 carts in all, each pulled by two oxen in ceremonial garb and each covered over in intricate lace decked out with electric lights and with hundreds of bright paper flowers, made new each winter by the women of Larino in their hearthside anticipation of spring.

The first sense on seeing this procession is of a tourist display, with its electric lights, its carts done up with plastic-framed mock-ups of Byzantine cathedrals. But then slowly the spirit of the evening sinks in. One feels very close here to the pagan origins of such feasts—the look of the oxen with their brutish faces and muscled thighs, the hopeful passage of tiny brightnesses through the dark. At one point in the evening the procession stops for the animals to be watered and fed, and families gather around their respective carts to eat as well.

“When you start out following the carts you worry about getting your shoes dirty in the muck of the oxen,” says Domenico Pellegrino, a doctor by profession but also the cultural secretary of one of the region’s provincial governments. ‘But by the end of the day, eating there with the animals like that, you want to mess your shoes up in the muck.’

It is Pellegrino who takes me to the site near Isernia where in 1978 were discovered the oldest evidences of human life yet unearthed in Europe, dating back some 736,000 years. The discovery was made by chance by an amateur archeologist, who one day noticed the fossilized bones of large animals protruding from the wall of an excavation for the Naples-Vasto expressway. Since then, work on the area has been extensive; and while no human remains have yet surfaced, the tools and weapons found there alongside the abundant animal remains suggest a hunters’ campsite of some sort, on the shores of what was then a marsh or lake.

“Whatever the differences in the plant and animal life, the landscape then was more or less as we see it now,” Pellegrino says. “That means that what we discover here is how our first ancestors accommodated themselves to the land.”

The circle seems to close, the distance between past and present to narrow. In feasts such as the one at Larino it appears possible to read now not only the pagan vegetation rites just beneath their surface but, scratching further, the primitive hut dwellers gathered round their sputtering fires in the encroaching dark, treading the paths their unthought-of descendants would find still engraved in the land hundreds of thousands of years beyond them.

Some maintain that Molise is going through resurgence now, that its rural calm is slowly drawing people back as Italian cities become more and more unliveable. Villacanale, certainly, has made a comeback—a few years ago the village found itself...
in a situation where its school, then its single store, then its single bar, then finally even its church, had closed down. But now, under the efforts of the Associazione Culturale Nuovo Villacanale, the bar has been re-opened, the church has been refurbished, and the school has been turned into a group home to care for the elderly and the infirm.

Nicola Mastronardi, a journalist who lived for several years in Florence, is one of those who has returned, working now for the regional magazine Molise.

“I’ve always been very fond of this area, too fond,” he says, with a mixture of pride and self-deprecation. But even he admits that, in the lack of any solid industrial base here, the only hope for the region is tourism.

There are signs that tourism is in fact beginning to take root here, as evidenced by the modern hotels and restaurants springing up on the newer outskirts of towns and by the refurbishing of the more rustic ones in the historic centres. But the inevitable irony is that this new tourism takes at least some of its appeal from exactly the way of life it will replace, a life which is slowly beginning to take on the air of a thing recreated rather than real. Even in Villacanale there is a sense of being on display: coming here as a writer I find a quickness in people to share their stories that shows already the instinctive packaging of local colour for the outsider; and when the Destinations photographer comes, there is after the first unease that same half-mocking readiness to be in the picture, to show the outside world how things are done in this colourful backwoods. One afternoon the photographer and Aunt Maria and I go down to Uncle Luigi’s farm for some shots, with the warning from my aunt, who has been conspiring with me as to how to gain her husband’s compliance in this matter, that Uncle Luigi doesn’t like to be photographed in his working clothes; but when we arrive, my uncle, who is cantankerous at the best of times, is suddenly all mischievous pleasure and agreeableness, basking in this opportunity to put on a show for the foreigner. When his wife suggests he might want to change before being photographed, he scoffs.

“A farmer’s not supposed to wear good clothes! I want people in Canada to see the truth; they’ve never seen a thing like this before!”

My uncle, perhaps, is a special case—he spent twenty-four years in Canada, living in a tiny shack and shoring up his earnings and pensions to return to his wife and son, one of the few of those that left here after the war who actually came back. Now 83, he still spends his days in the fields, bringing his dog Lillo and his mule Rosie along for company and making his midday meals in a shed modelled after the shack he lived in in Canada; and his greatest pleasure, apart from his farm, seems to be when some new arrival from Canada gives him the chance to use his broken English. Yet in his pride now, and in the stooped memory of hardship beneath it as he leads us around to his tiny garden plots and through his carefully tended vines, he seems somehow a symbol of the passing life here, come back to recreate it for himself just as he does for the photographer with his delighted offering up of rustic poses.

My final night in Villacanale there is a festival. The occasion is the end of a transumanza, in this case the movement of some 500 head of cattle from their winter pastures in Puglia to their summer ones in Alto Molise. Normally these movements are done by truck now, but this one will be done in the traditional way, along two hundred kilometres or so of still-existing tratturi.

The move is being orchestrated, in part, by journalist Nicola Mastronardi, who together with his brother Lino runs a riding stable called Agrotrekking that conducts tours of the region on horseback. With the transumanza the two of them will be combining the practical job of moving cattle with their more usual role as guides, bringing along with them some half-dozen or so experienced riders, mainly from the north, who have paid to share the experience of reliving this traditional passage. After leaving the cattle off at their pasture near Frosolone the group will continue on horseback to Villacanale, where a reception is being prepared in the square featuring a bonfire and a meal of liver and tripe.

It is about seven when the horses arrive. Though it has been raining on and off, most of the villagers have gathered in the square, and during a brief respite in the weather it proves possible to light the bonfire provided for by the villagers’ donations of bundled twigs and dried gorse. For several moments the fire burns bright and fierce, the group of us lit up around it in the falling dark like huddling sojourners while the horses hover behind us with their animal rustlings and smells. But later, when rain forces us inside and the dancing begins, the horses and their passage seem already forgotten, merely an excuse for this untroubled coming together. What seems important now is just this, being in from the rain, being warmed from the wine, the way my Aunt Maria, diminutive and charming and sad, takes my hand with a heartbreaking shyness, and asks me to dance.


**Review of Lives of the Saints**

By Constance Rooke

The narrator of this remarkable first novel is a young boy whose mother is ostracized by the villagers when—shamelessly and without regard for the honour of her absent husband—she becomes pregnant by a blue-eyed stranger (or, just possibly, by the snake who bites her at the same moment). The novel begins at the moment of conception and takes us through the journey to America (or Canada) that Cristina—on the very brink of giving birth—undertakes with her young son. Most of the book
takes place in their Italian village, which the writer delivers to us in expertly crafted prose. The sentences are not (I think) overwritten or self-indulgent, although they work a very rich lode of imagery and make numerous risky forays into archetype. The place and the characters are beautifully done—especially Cristina, who is conceived along feminist lines. The structure of Ricci’s fictional world involves a tension between what is given (the village itself with its condemnation of Cristina) and various things that are hinted. These include a dark undertow of paralysis and superstition and the glow of other, potentially liberating perspectives—escape routes that the boy is not yet equipped to imagine. Ricci’s child narrator is caught between worlds, even as he thinks that his given world is immutable.

*Lives of the Saints* is a very good novel. Here is a snippet of the book that I find myself quoting to friends with some glee:

Nearby, a swan of flies hovered around a cluster of droppings on the cobblestones, the braver ones alighting and calling out to their friends.

“It’s goat, but it’s not bad!” They rubbed their hands together the way my uncle Pasquale did when he sat down to a plate of pasta all’uovo.

I like that; I find those flies very polite and cheerful and encouraging.


**Disjunction and Paradox: Lives of the Saints and the Deromanticization of the Old World**

By Marino Tuzi

As he tells the story of his childhood in Italy, Vittorio Innocente evokes a world in which actions and events transmit multiple and opposed meanings. Speaking of his Aunt Marta, Innocente observes that “her comments [were] like riddles or oracles that refused to give up their meaning that slipped away as soon as you tried to grab hold of them.” Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints* underlines the precariousness of a tradition-based peasant culture in Valle de Sole. The author develops an Italianness—as a set of identifiable cultural qualities—which is not unitary and is constantly being reshaped by an evolving social environment.

Innocente’s various interpretations of the peasantry suggest a complex and unclosed reading of the old world. The villagers are represented as the descendants of a glorious pre-Christian civilization, as vital, fanciful, and indomitable, as technologically backward, stultifying, and narrow-minded, as the victims of regional politics, and as part of a community on the brink of radical change. The ambiguity is further supported by the narrator’s own inconsistent personal attitudes, which are filtered through the consciousness of his younger self. These attitudes are often characterized by such emotional responses as sentimentality, bitterness, empathy, disillusionment, yearning, and detachment.

Francesco Lonigio states that to “reorganize the spatiotemporal coordinates [of the past] and bring into play the notion of belonging to and being away from” is “to originate [a] discourse” about the multi-centredness of ethnic identity. Such a discourse proclaims itself in “tensional strategies” which invoke the problematic of a diffused and evolving ethnic identity. In minority texts, the “tensional totality” of ethnicity “call[s] for paradigms that assert both stability and instability.”

Innocente’s troubled retrospective, focusing on a brief period of his life (a seven-year-old boy in an isolated mountain village along the Apennines), resonates with ambivalence and irony. The discontinuities of agrarianism and immigration underpin the destabilizing of the narrator-character’s self-image. Irony is at the core of the text’s exploration of ethnicity, encompassing many formal strategies. Irony is embedded in the narrative voice which continually oscillates between the “Remembering I” of the adult narrator and the “Remembered I” of the boyhood self. As Ricci himself has admitted, “there is a sense of distance and irony that comes precisely from the distance between the narrator and the child.” This textual ambiguity is built into the narrative structure of the novel. The “Remembering I” and the “Remembered I” manifest the multiple self of the narrator-character. The Italian Canadian self simultaneously reconstructs and deconstructs the story of the Italian other.

The presence of long sentences serves numerous functions. Protracted sentences evoke the overflow of memories and nostalgia for a time and place which appear to be irrecoverable. They initiate an onslaught of details which reveal the multiple gradations of experience. Long sentences provide numerous motivations for a particular action, and examine the contradictory responses of young Vittorio (a.k.a. Vitto) to a specific individual or event.

The use of juxtaposition advances conflicting images of the native country, and sets images of the old against those of the new. Juxtaposition ruptures the text’s realism; the ordinary meets the fantastic, enabling the textures of society to hover between oncoming modernity and lingering medievalism. The text relies on socio-historical description to present a specific ethnocultural context and expose the disjunctions of agrarianism. The narrator makes reference to folklore and local myths, and uses hagiography as an ironic commentary on the lives of the characters. In moving between various modes of representation, the text problematizes the narrator-character’s position and underscores the relativity of competing cultural models. The textual fabric of the novel reveals the constructedness of Innocente’s identity by pinpointing the multifarious and often contradictory
elements which compose it. According to Nino Ricci, “I wanted to play with the construction of morality of acceptable behaviour. And the values that go beyond those moral systems that society has constructed.”

Extra-Literary Modes

Lives of the Saints covers a nine-month period, from July 1960 to March 1961, and takes place during a period of significant social and economic change in postwar Italy. The eventual push towards greater industrialization and urbanization mirrors the general trends which began in Canada as well as in the rest of the industrial world. The pressures of modernity and the declining rural economy form an important part of the narrative’s background and are apparent in the villagers’ constant emigration. The recurrent picture of ruin and desolation, expressed through images of old, dilapidated and deserted homes and of an over-cultivated and shrinking land base, reflects southern Italy’s socio-economic crisis. The mother’s [Cristina] revolt against the patriarchal-matriarchal arrangements of Valle del Sole and Vitto’s accompanying dislocation are also dramatic re-enactments of the clash between agrarianism and modernity.

The novel is typified by some of the distinguishing features of Italian Canadian writing: historical references and Italian words are interwoven with pre-Christian and Catholic mythology. These various non-fictional, “extra-literary” modes play a critical part in the social reconstruction of the old world and have been revised to suit the text’s ironic depiction of the narrator’s childhood in Valle del Sole.

In Lives of the Saints, Italian identity is primarily a metaphorical and symbolic construct and only at its most basic level is it a product of historical forces. For Nino Ricci, the rendering of peasant life and the process of immigration entails the reworking of mythological structures: “The fact that there is a mythology attached to the experience of immigration connects itself to the whole history of Western mythology.

That...is very much operative in the immigrant mind...I wanted to tie into that larger mythology.”

The Role of the Narrator

The text represents Vittorio Innocente’s ambivalence in the way his consciousness simultaneously fuses with and diverges from the perspective of his younger self. Vittorio demonstrates the link to his Italianness by interpreting for the reader the meaning of what he felt and experienced as a boy in Valle del Sole. Supporting this connectedness is a sympathetic portrayal of his mother and the arresting tableaux of the hilly landscape. The narrator is dissociated from his other self, openly debating young Vitto’s words or actions. Vittorio’s sophistication also is opposed to his younger self’s naiveté. The narration underlines this detachment from the native culture. When Vitto is awakened “by a muffled shout” which “sounded like a man’s” voice (10), the implication is that, unbeknownst to him, Cristina and her male companion are making love in the barn. The text exploits this irony later as Vitto, obsessed with the idea that Cristina’s woes are the result of the evil eye incarnated in the poisonous snake, ritualistically burns a dead chicken to lift the curse placed on her. The use of irony exposes Cristina’s contradistinction, for she appears to be hemmed in by the village patriarchy and responsible for abdicating her maternal duties. This double movement strengthens the villagers’ opprobrium. The play between the omniscient voice of the narrator and the limited consciousness of his younger self leads to an ironic view of this parochial world.

The narrator’s distance from his Italian heritage is shown in the portrayal of the severe socio-economic conditions of the Apennine region in south-central Italy. The allusions to a golden age of economic, social and cultural achievement, evident in the references to the Samnite civilization, only serve to highlight the bleakness of the present. Such deprivation has instilled in the peasantry a sense of fatalism and forced large numbers to emigrate elsewhere, resulting in the dramatic depopulation of local villages. In deromanticizing peasant culture, Innocente tacitly reassesses his relationship to his Italian origins, imprinting his contradictory attitude towards Valle del Sole onto the story of his younger self. Villa del Sole’s natural beauty—“the world seemed encased in glass, trees and rocks and circling sparrows cut against a background of sky and slope like essences of themselves” (32)—often is overtaken by an undertone of malevolence, as in his depiction of Cristina: “my mother’s quiet sobbing mingling with the sigh of the wind like something inhuman, as if the air could no longer carry any human sounds, all of them smothered into the earth by the silence” (77).

Long Sentences

Flooded with intense images of the past, the narrator presents his story in long, elaborate sentences. He piles up physical details, as is exemplified in the opening description of Valle del Sole, and he itemizes the subtleties of a particular action: for example, Vitto’s fight with Vincenzo Maiale. He also describes states of mind: as in the scene of Vitto’s delirium, found near the end of the novel. Images of peasant life crowd the mind, but they quickly evaporate at the moment of apprehension: “The world, for all its seeming stability, was actually spinning around at a tremendous speed” (76).
The complexities of lived experience and the tentativeness of the social order prevent the narrator from having a unified and solid picture of the past. Vittorio cannot sort out from a surfeit of information what is important and what is incidental. The sensory and intellectual overload underlines the various and conflicting perspectives of the narrator and those of the other characters. Often a specific event elicits differing responses, such as the light and sound show during the village festival that produces shock, pleasure, and indignation. The presence of others induces contradictory and fluctuating perceptions. Vittorio sees his teacher as friend, tormenter, victim, and stranger. The presentation of competing impulses, of a multiplicity of reasons for particular actions, and of a variety of responses to a given situation, implies the absence of a singular purpose and an underlying open-endedness.

The constant barrage of information disorients the reader and makes the familiar appear to be alien and inaccessible, and, as such, magnifies the text’s depiction of the discontinuities that characterize both Vittorio’s personal life and his relation to external reality.

The recurrence of lengthy sentences transmits the image of a self-conscious narrator-character who examines in painstaking detail the factors which constituted a specific experience. For example, Vittorio Innocente reconstructs in several winding sentences an incident in which his father throws an object at his mother. Searching for a motivation behind this violent act, he describes from the point of view of his younger self his father’s physical characteristics, the location and particular social context of the event, and his mother’s physical and emotional response to the attack. After he vividly recreates this memory of his father, he immediately questions its veracity: “The memory was so dim and insubstantial that I could not say if it had actually happened” (37). The “tiny scar” (37) which he observes on his mother’s cheek provides the proof that he needs to verify his memory.

Similarly, the narrator thickens his descriptions of the physical and natural environment of Valle del Sole and of the appearance and behaviour of its inhabitants. These vivid passages, which are composed of extended sentences, are at odds with Vittorio’s revelation that he lives in a world in which people and things are at times indecipherable: “some secret village seemed to be lurking there in the darkness, one that could not be seen in the light of day” (113). This form of observation and ostensibly analysis raises more questions than it answers, also constantly fails to arrive at a final meaning. The formal trait in the novel shows a lack of certainty in the way one distinguishes the concrete from the imagined, and tends to subvert the depiction of reality. All of this underscores the provisional subjectivity of the narrator-character.

Thick Description

The abundance of details forges a heightened picture of the past in which the old world is shrouded in mythic qualities. We are given a vivid description of the disparateness and harshness of agrarian life: “why the lot of the contadini now was such a hard one, their plots of land scattered piecemeal across the countryside, often miles from the village; why the soil offered up yearly only the same closed fist, though the farmers cursed and cajoled it in the way they did a stubborn male” (52). Against this tableau, the narrator juxtaposes allusions to resplendent, fecund, and legendary time: “Once, my grandfather had told me, long before the time of Christ, the land around Valle del Sole had all been flat, unpeopled jungle, rich and fertile, the trees a mile high and the river a mile wide” (52). In this background is set the splendour of an ancient and indigenous civilization: “The Samnites, a fierce mountain people, had been first to settle the region...Their imposing cities, carved it was said right out of the bare rock of the mountains, had been levelled by Romans, only a few odd ruins remaining now—roadside markers of forgotten import, the mossy foundations of a temple or shrine, the curved stone seats of an amphitheatre” (59-60).

Whether in decline or in a state of prosperity, the old world of myth and history is presented as a consistent force in the novel; yet it is continually steeped in ambiguity. The stirring power of memory delivers a world awash in nostalgia. This acute rendering of the past injects historical events with an aura of the fantastic or the unreal, and makes the customs and behaviour of the villagers extraordinary, not part of conventional society.

Storytelling

Storytelling is itself a way out of instability since, from the tumultuous vortex of past events, it locates the critical moment which sets into motion an inexorable movement towards tragedy. The recovery of a particular instant—“that beginning occurred on a hot July day in the year 1960, in the village of Valle del Sole, when my mother was bitten by a snake” (7)—echoes the fall from Eden, but does not arrest time and revive one’s innocence. Instead, it makes plain one’s deep and inexpressible disillusionment with the original culture. Sifting through the detritus of lost innocence, the narrator-character tries to recompose his peasant heritage. His yearning for a coherent self finds its expression in young Vittio’s vision of Santa Cristina’s spiritual ascension: “At last [the archangel] reached out his hand to her and he led her up into the heavens, while on the earth a great storm was finally unleashed, and the Roman ship and all aboard it were swallowed into the sea” (136).

The text’s invocation of hagiography signifies Vittorio’s desire to relieve Cristina’s suffering and to reassume a tranquil and pure state of being. It is highly ironic since it foreshadows the mother’s death at sea, which is a tragic inversion of the myth of Santa Cristina. The structural irony entrenches the text’s assertion that what has been lost cannot ever fully be recuperated.
This view is connected to the narrator’s mourning for a time before family problems destroyed his idyllic childhood. Elegy, however, is undermined by an awareness on the narrator’s part that the peasantry has always been disunified and disenfranchised because of a hierarchical social structure and debilitating socio-economic conditions.

The Ambiguous Representation of the Old World

Juxtaposition constructs a picture of the old world in which abundance is contrasted to deprivation. Idyllic images of Valle del Sole emanate from several sources: references to the natural environment and festive occasions, as well as allusions to hagiography, folk tales, and local mythology. The surrounding landscape frequently is adorned with sunlight, inferring a kind of spiritual ascendency: “the sun was shining and the whole world seemed wrapped in a warm, yellow dream...The sun was rising over Colle di Papa, round and scarlet, sucking in dawn’s darkness like God’s forgiveness” (9, 58). Land is represented as being fertile and bountiful: “The wheat in our region ripened in a slow wave which started in the valleys and gradually worked its way up the slopes through summer...the greening of the slopes in the spring” (58, 88). Nature’s powerful presence is endowed with a luminous quality: “[the wheat was] like sunlight emerging behind a cloud” (58).

The use of light imagery is evident in the description of the Feast of the Madonna, especially in the reference made to the stage show in which the ordinary fuses with the spiritual: “It seemed as if we had been transported into one of la maestra’s stories of the saints, the world suddenly filled with light, and all possibilities open again” (99). Light recurs in the allusions made to the purity of the saints: “A golden halo hovered above [San Francesco’s] head...Santa Cristina, dressed in flowing white...a soft shaft of light trained on [her]” (133, 136). Images of fecundity are pervasive in the genesis myth. The villagers grow out of a giant’s body parts: “In the spring, a strange thing happened—the fingers on Gambelunghe’s severed hands began to grow, those on the left growing into five women, those on the right to five men, one couple for each field” (53).

Countervailing images, however, contest such lyricism and sentimentalism. The fertility of the natural environment is undermined by allusions to its meagre resources and the arduousness of agrarian life. Light imagery is continually offset by images of darkness. Ubiquitous rainstorms and invariable clouds blot out the sun. An impenetrable shadowy world is often associated with the depths of night. Images of growth are embodied by Cristina who “stood out like a flower in a bleak landscape” (31) and Aunt Marta, “in whom knowledge seemed to be...bursting...like a plant in rocky soil” (130). In contrast, we are given static and concrete images, in which the villagers are indistinguishable from the mountainscape: “[they] stood still like stone, seemed to have merged with the rock of the houses and pavement, become finally themselves simply crags and swells in the hard mountain face of the village” (184). Social decay and dire poverty abound: the deserted Giardini estate in Rocca Secca, once emblematic of prosperity and cultural sophistication, is as much a ruin as the ramshackle, crumbling houses in Valle del Sole.

Although the Feast of La Madonna provides temporary respite from daily hardship, it cannot ultimately lift the villagers out of their despair. Their celebrations reveal “a kind of joyless intensity that bordered on violence” (102). Such emotional deprivation substantiates earlier descriptions of callous and belligerent village women and school children who cruelly chastise Cristina and Vitto for Cristina’s infidelity and illicit pregnancy. The allusions to tortured saints, the ever-present evil eye, and the decapitated chicken dramatize the bleakness and severity of parochialism: “the...air of desolation [of] the village square” (144). In contrast to Cristina’s nudity in the cave, invoking a kind of purity, Vitto’s erotic and disorienting vision of la maestra’s heavy-set body inspires mixed feelings of “excitement and horror” (42). This fantasy is a product of a confused state of mind. The ambivalent image of the teacher mirrors the ambiguity of the cave scene, which not only marks Vitto’s idealization of Cristina, but also implies his sexual attraction towards her. There is an almost incestuous quality to both scenes. These two instances allude to the repressiveness of peasant society, in which sexual desire is perceived as sinful.

The retelling of the creation myth focuses on the inbred malevolence of the villagers whose antediluvian ancestors are presented as being avaricious, jealous, and deserving of God’s pitiless retribution. We are told that “he caused mountains and rocks to grow out of the ground, and made the soil tired and weak” (53).

The Contradictory Depiction of Cristina Innocente

The ambivalence of the old world is recapitulated through Cristina’s contradictoryness. She signifies the nurturing side of the feminine principle in both the Great Goddess mythology and Catholicism. The caves of Valle del Sole, where she bathes in the hot spring and meets her lover, provide a womb-like environment in which she enacts her fertility rite and releases her sexual energy. This erotic image of Cristina is contrasted to descriptions of the flaccid, distorted, and unattractive bodies of the village women. Cristina’s creativity is also shown as she works in the garden and becomes part of its lush growth. The snake symbolizes the locus of her powers, for it not only moves through the ripening garden, but is present when she makes love in the stable. Vitto’s mother is delineated as having a snake-like appearance: “[she is]...standing above me for a moment utterly naked, smooth and slick as she had just peeled back an old layer of skin” (33). The snake stands as an icon of fertility and sexuality.
Cristina’s life-giving attributes resemble those of the Madonna, who appears to be an imperious goddess figure, “seated atop her litter like an ancient queen” (82-83). She is associated with fecundity when she receives such offerings as “fruits and eggs” or “garlands” (84). The Madonna’s connection to spring, Easter, rebirth and resurrection underlines a Catholic view of womanhood. The Virgin Mary is an embodiment of both ancient and Christian feminine values. In *Lives of the Saints*, Cristina is closely linked to the Madonna. Yet the use of Catholic and pagan mythology intones Cristina’s dark side. This is conveyed in the scene of the Madonna being removed from the church and taken to the chapel cemetery in winter time, as well as in the allusions to the snake’s stealthy movements and venomous bite. The snake is given Christian meaning; the snake meanders through the garden and descends into the ravine, where the lower elevation, darkness and wild growth are opposed to the serenity, orderliness, and copiousness of the garden. This juxtaposition of conflicting images of Eden and the fallen world is present in Vitto’s mind. This is why Cristina appears both as a nurturing and protective figure and as a reckless, self-absorbed, and neglectful parent.

The binary of negative and positive femininity is countered by Cristina’s victimization. The prohibition against sexual freedom is mirrored in the fact that Cristina almost dies from the snake’s bite. The cave imagery highlights Cristina’s imprisonment. In sharp contrast to the caves, which allowed Cristina to revel in her physicality, her family home is a stony cage. It is at home where she leads a silent and shadowy existence. Her cabin in the bowels of the ship is claustrophobic. Again “home” is the place of birth, physical suffering, and eventual death. Unlike the water imagery symbolizing fertility and life, the sea is the site of her burial.

Often Cristina is part of the narrator-character’s sexual objectification of women. The scene in the cave foregrounds Cristina’s sensuality and sexuality, and intimates Vitto’s sexual urges towards his mother. The sight of Cristina’s sinuous body leads to a graphic detailing of Vitto’s erotic fantasy of his teacher. Vitto’s awareness of Cristina’s sexuality is stressed by references to his mother’s breasts, hidden under her dress but which constantly hover over him. Vitto is jealous of the attention other men give his mother: Vitto refuses to eat his meal at the restaurant after his mother has had an intimate conversation with Luciano.

Ricci’s uncertain depiction of Valle del Sole grows directly from Cristina. Here is a peasant woman who has modern ideas about a woman’s role, but who is imprisoned in a peasant community which promotes social conformity. Cristina’s striving for independence is contrasted to patriarchal coercion: her father’s autocracy and her husband’s violence towards her. The latter’s abusiveness is a repetition of his own father’s mistreatment of his wife. Patriarchy is legitimized by the other women’s support of male authority. The women attempt to force Cristina to confess her transgressions before the village congregation. This ideological-gender conflict is depicted through a set of opposing images. While Cristina’s pregnancy instills in her a sense of mission, expressed by her defiant demeanour, her father undergoes a process of slow disintegration: “[his] face had grown pale and gaunt...loose skin draped over sharp, thin bones” (174). Cristina’s vitality is transmitted by scenes which highlight the attractiveness of her sleek, smooth body and upright posture. She stands out in the village where women lead a deadened existence. The deformed bodies of the other village women are marked by “rudy, swollen hands...round bellies...slow elephantine gait” (48-49). The portrait of Cristina opposes the stereotypical depiction of the other peasant women. Her childhood friends accept stoically patriarchy: “both had married local farmers and borne several children, had long ago completed the rite of passage from the small freedoms of adolescence to the daily toils of peasant motherhood” (49).

The registering of ideological-gender conflict is problematized by an implied set of ironies. Cristina’s father has cooperated with the powers that be, the Fascist regime and the postwar governments, in order to defend his fellow villagers and maintain his socio-political status. He is himself overtaken by circumstances which appear to be beyond his control. The impoverishment of Valle del Sole and the pressures of modernization have compelled a sizeable segment of the village population to emigrate abroad. The community is not stable or unified. Rather, it is one that is assailed by a series of internal and external difficulties. When Cristina’s extra-marital affair besmirches her father’s reputation and forces him to resign as mayor, the villagers not only abandon him but gloat over his misfortune. As Cristina and her son prepare to leave the village, he voices his profound disillusionment at the old world: “this country...is a place of Judases and cowards” (175). The grandfather personifies the problem of peasant life: its maltreatment of women, class antagonisms, and economic deprivations. He is destroyed by modernity, embodied in the form of his daughter, which he has tried to forestall and which has inspired his son-in-law to emigrate to Canada in search of economic betterment for himself and his family. Yet, the old man is as much a victim as he is a victimizer: “he had always seemed a man who loomed large, who commanded respect; but now suddenly he seemed shrunken and small, as if some aura around him had faded or died” (74).

While the village women denounce Cristina’s infidelity because it threatens the fabric of traditional family life and reminds them of their own failure in throwing off the fetters of patriarchy, they feel exploited by the village’s patriarchal structure. Cristina’s attitude towards other women hurt by patriarchy seems to be inconsistent. Not only is Cristina indifferent to their plight, she also is repelled by their acceptance and promotion of traditional womanhood. At one point in the novel, she expresses her sympathy for the Captain’s wife, whose husband has taken on a mistress. Nevertheless, as the text implies, the Captain’s wife’s social and economic state is markedly less restrictive than that of the village women. Cristina’s relatively privileged position as the daughter of a village patriarch, which is also the focus of the peasant women’s resentment, has allowed her more freedom and to some extent has facilitated her subversion of patriarchy. In her inability to transcend her own self-interest and objectively acknowledge the misery of the village women, Cristina remains tied to patriarchy. The account of
Cristina’s contradictory behaviour, which is part of a story about intergenerational and communal strife, indicates the narrator’s [Vittorio Innocente] ambivalence towards his ethnic origins.

**Opposed Perspectives**

In emphasizing the difference between the peasants’ and young Vitto’s perception of Valle del Sole, the text further develops the conflicting character of the old country. In the villagers’ world view, the everyday world co-exists with the supernatural: “goats were common animals and yet the locus of strange spirits...la strega of Belmonte was both a decrepit old woman and a witch, a sorceress” (162). The severity of a parochial, agrarian life has bred a sense of fatalism among the peasants. They believe that “beneath every simple event there lurked some dark scandal” (21). Fatalism infuses all aspects of experience with a deep meaning. As Luciano tells Cristina, “for peasants like that everything is a sign” (66-67).

Several sections in the novel exemplify this particular interpretation of reality. We are given an explanation of the reasons for the villagers’ indigence, which reads like a morality play organized around the theme of invidia. In reconstructing this tale of woe, the narrator interweaves realism with mythology. He begins the tale with an overview of the villagers’ current privation and then shifts into mythological time. The narrator presents both a pre-Christian genesis and a Christian vision of retribution, in which God punishes the villagers for their jealousy and greed. The mixing together of the two modes of representation recurs later in the narrative. There, a historical synopsis of the progressive subdivision and over-cultivation of the village’s land merges with an invocation of the supernatural, of the evil eye. We are told of attempts to ward off the evil eye’s harmful effects: Dagnello sprinkles his fields with a potion from “la strega di Belmonte” (54) and the villagers avoid Fiorina Girasole’s doorway after the death of her twin boy babies. The narrator concludes with a ruined town, named Belmonte, devastated by war and which now is filled “with moss and weeds and wildflowers and overrun with lizards” (55). The town’s sole inhabitant is la strega, “an ancient woman with tough, darkened skin and long grey hair” (55). This passage alludes to the savage militarism of modernity: “Belmonte...had been destroyed by the Germans in the second war, and out of superstition the residents refused to rebuild there” (54). The peasants’ belief that the present is merely a repetition of the failures of a mythical past indicates the harshness of their living conditions.

The disparity of peasant life is perfectly embodied in the villagers’ duplicitous perception of snakes. Snakes represent fertility—“to improve their harvest, they would buy a powder made of ground snake skins” (11)—good fortune and, at the same time, ill-will since they are “agents of the evil eye” (11). Snakes are commonly associated with pride: “where pride is the snake goes” (11). In Catholic hagiography, monstrous “venomous” (135) serpents engage in deadly combat with saints. The defeat of the forces of good emphasizes the peasants’ inability to overcome adversity. The villagers invest every action or event with prophetic meaning: “people saw now an oracle, the prediction of their town’s declining fortunes” (61). Cristina’s snake bite symbolizes her threat to the equilibrium of the village. The downfall of the Giardini estate signifies a kind of collective degeneration.

Immersed in a primitive ethos, the contadini believe the world is governed by a malevolence, in the form of the evil eye, which “stood outside the normal categories of good and evil, subsumed them, striking both the righteous and the depraved” (54). Peasant culture is contradictory since the prescribed Christian order is at odds with ancient ways of seeing the world: “the eye was the locus of all the powers which could not be explained under the usual religion, the religion of the churches” (54). According to Nino Ricci, “The everyday world [of the peasant] verged on the miraculous and on the underworld of spirituality which the religion itself didn’t give people directly. It imposed laws and codes of behaviour but tended not to incorporate this more magical, imaginative level which had been a way of organizing the world before Christianity was imposed.”

Through Vitto’s unstable perspective, the text repeats and contests the peasants’ world view. The narrator shows that his younger self is at once part of and distanced from his cultural environment. Vitto endows his mother with mythic qualities, apparent in her snake-like form while she is in the cave and in the link made between her “invisibility...to the villagers...as you might see walking down the streets of the village” (81). In describing his elderly aunt Marta, Vitto not only notes her agelessness but also refers to the villagers’ belief that she is at once “simple and yet possessed of mystical powers, a witch” (47).

The joining of polarities attains its apotheosis in a brightly lit stage show in which modern technology is used to facilitate a religious ritual during the village festa. Vitto sees the workaday world as a facade. This is hinted at in the references made to Di Lucci’s mask-like face and the “surface smiles” (62) of the Rocca Seccans. Underneath such posturing is a sinister and inscrutable reality, proffered in images of “some secret village [which] seemed to be lurking in the darkness” (113), and of its inhabitants, “the crowd...was suddenly disembodied... voices around us only so many ghosts” (103), as well as Cristina herself, who is shrouded in “a shadowy silence” (74). Yet the nether side of experience is often as ephemeral as the textures of daily life.

Vittorio Innocente’s narrative of his youth exposes the fissures in peasant culture. The primary signifier of this disunity is Cristina’s revolt against the village patriarchy. Such incoherence is epitomized by Vitto’s splintered perception of la maestra: “[she] seemed a stranger to me, as if she had split before my eyes into two separate people: one who had babies that died, the
other who appeared as if from nowhere every morning in our classroom, and who faded into some shadowy limbo when school was over” (172). Details of everyday life are situated next to a bodiless world, usually called forth through ghostly figures who loom menacingly from out of thick shadows. These images in turn are supported by a veil which prevents contact between the inner and outer realms of experience. Accompanying this imagery are recurrent references to depredation: deteriorating ancient monuments and structures, and an unremittingly barren landscape.

The Defamiliarization of Reality

The tentativeness of the protagonist’s perceptions is conjoined to the evanescence of daily life. Often the external world either is imbued with a hallucinatory quality—“a stole of white shimmering so richly around his neck and down the front of his vestments it seemed on the verge of bursting into colour” (79)—or defamiliarized: “the world had abruptly changed into its opposite, been completely overturned” (121).

The defamiliarization of external reality is strengthened by the superimposition of exotic or fantastic images onto descriptions of ruin and decay, evident in the eerie and exaggerated representation of the Gardini estate. This disorientation is induced by the use of jarring analogies, such as Cristina’s father’s withdrawal from village life: “Over [his] face a film had formed, tangible as stone, which he retreated behind like a snail into its shell” (57). There is an instability to existence which makes any form of human endeavour appear superficial and inconsequential: “you had only to turn your back and the glitter would fade” (62). Reality can be apprehended only as flux, as impermanence: “the market in Rocca Secca seemed real, at least honest in its transience” (62). The ephemeral nature of the market place stands as a metaphor for the construction of social reality: “[the market] had been carted in...and by afternoon it would be faded and finished...the stalls boarded up until the following day” (62). This view is revisited later in the novel when Vitto becomes startled by the incongruity between technology and medievalism: “the—equipment... looked strange and unreal, like something that had no connection to the square or the people gathered there, that might have descended suddenly from the sky to impose itself among us”(93). In juxtaposing images of modernization to those of preindustrial society, the text suggests the constant reframing of reality. The act of electrical wizardry temporarily transforms Villa del Sole’s story and ancient square “into a pocket of rich modernity” (99).

The slipperiness of Vitto’s apprehension of reality—experience is fleeting and rarefied—communicates the inconstancies of peasant culture and, thus, the impossibility of reconstituting an essential Italianness. The intangibility of human action is recapitulated in the villagers’ subjective interpretation of Cristina’s social defiance: “It was as if my mother had simply written a character in the air, a cipher, and those who looked on it were happy enough to give it the meaning that suited them” (142). As Innocente reinhabits his other self, his mind fills with contorted images of peasant life: “the world looked oddly warped and unstable, like something seen through a piece of curved glass...all the events of the afternoon beginning to distort and skew like objects in a curved mirror” (47, 127). These glass and mirror images not only express Vitto’s confusion and displacement but also, and more importantly, evoke a fragmented Italian identity. Like aunt Marta, who wavers “between non sense and lucidity”—(131), Innocente reconfigures from out of the disparate materials of memory a sometimes revelatory but relentlessly unsteady picture of the immigrant past.

In joining dream to lived experience, the text deepens its study of the uncertainties of the Italian Canadian subject. Not only do dreams reenact actual moments in time—“strange images troubled me...Father Nick standing solemnly before a coffin in the church, reciting a mass for Mr. Mario Cullino” (116)—but so does reality manifest itself through reverie: “remembering that I was in my bare feet and undershirt I felt suddenly ashamed, like in dreams I had where I found myself inexplicably naked in school or in church” (22). There appears to be no firm ground that forms reality. Daily activity is repeatedly indistinguishable from Vitto’s unconscious. The fusion of dream and reality mirrors the peasants’ sense of the world and reveals Vitto’s troubled relations with his fellow villagers and family, as well as his subsequent trauma of immigration. Disturbing images of past events infiltrate Vitto’s unconscious. The bloody corpse of a chicken implies an incapacity to protect his mother from the malice of the village. Vitto’s terror over Cristina’s pregnancy arises from his fear that she will give birth to a snake-headed child, “some new demon took possession of her” (110), and from a haunting dream of her hatching a “large blue egg” (119).

Vitto’s journey is presented as a kind of mirage, signifying the marvelous and strangeness of immigration. Features of his trip—the shoreline, “a dusty sun-drenched town of white adobe” (202), the sea, which stretched “away in every direction, it seemed, to the very ends of the earth” (204), and the bowels of the ship, where “everything seemed larger than life, as if made by giants” (203)—are suffused with an intensity and vivacity which dramatize Vitto’s whimsical and child-like view of the world. The journey itself proves to be a nightmarish. Vitto’s frightening encounter with the sea is framed in fantastical terms: “for a moment it seemed the world had obeyed me. [and had] give[n] me time to crawl into the sea’s belly and find whatever spoils of storms and tempests lay half-digested there” (219). The force of the waves knocks him against a stairwell, rendering him unconscious: “Then as if in a dream the wave finally closed over me, and the world went black” (219). The brutality of the storm foreshadows Vitto’s tragic and final break from Valle del Sole. Relieved by the birth of his baby sister, whose human shape erases his dread of the evil eye, Vitto sees a wondrous world, disclosed in the image of the evening sky: “a thousand stars glinting overhead” (22). Yet his victory over the powers of darkness (embodied by the storm) is shortlived. Vitto moves between wakefulness and dream as his mother bleeds profusely. The eeriness of the scene invokes Vitto’s incredulity and terror.
Cristina’s death throws him into a state of delirium. Confusion, incoherence, and hallucination mark his psychological separation from the old world (represented by the ship) and the new (signalled by the presence of his father). Vitto’s delirium symbolically calls attention to the provisionality of Italian Canadian identity. It is made obvious by the sense of dreadfulness that pervades the depictions of both the old and new world. Images of Canada’s forbidding natural environment reproduce the narrator’s rendering of the rocky and arid landscape of Valle del Sole.

The overlaying of the real on the numinous and irrational, and the affiliation of dream with reality sabotage any notion that there exists a solid referential universe outside human consciousness. Vittorio Innocente’s contradictory reexploration of his Italian childhood destabilizes “the fixity of origins.”Italian Canadian writers, such as Ricci, Paci and Minni, deconstruct “images of fixity” by continually focusing on the discontinuities within and between two separate and often adverse cultural perspectives. Lives of the Saints, Black Madonna, and Other Selves invoke the conflictedness of the culture of origin and present a precarious reading of ethnicity. This instability is evident in the way the three texts describe the protagonists’ ambivalent view of (and their difficult experiences in) Canadian industrial-urban society.

Immigration and the Ambivalent Portrayal of the New World

In Lives of the Saints, the new world imparts a sense of disjunction: “America. How many dreams and fears and contradictions were tied up in that single word...some said [Canada] was a vast cold place with rickety wooden houses and great expanses of bush and snow, others a land of flat green fields that stretched for miles and of lakes as wide as the sea, an unfallen world without mountains or rocky earth” (160, 162). This passage seethes with irony, for while it harks back to the privations in the old country, its countervailing images of fertility and bountyfulness betray the immigrant’s attempt to regain a lost paradise which “shimmered just beneath the surface of the seen” (162).

Immigration to North America is perceived to be a way out of the ferment and incoherence of southern Italy. The act of mythification, in which “America... [was] more a state of mind than a place” (162), is quickly undermined by allusions to unrelenting hardship: “sooty factories and back-breaking work and poor wages and tiny bug-infested shacks” (162). The wasteland imagery of industrial society evokes the dark side of the Sun Parlour, a shadowy world not unlike that of Valle del Sole. The interchangeability of the two places is ironically underlined by the similarity of their names. The new world perpetuates the injustices and miseries of the old: “America continued merely the mundane life which the peasants accepted as their lot, their fate, the daily grind of toil without respite” (162).

The fragmented story of Vitto’s father restates the contradictions of both Canada and rural Italy. References to his indecipherable letters and mysterious life in the new world elicit a disembodied figure, whom Vitto “sometimes imagined had no face at all, merely a shadowy blank that hid him from the world like a veil” (36). Mario Innocente personifies the inadequacies of a male-centred peasant society. He is depicted as a tyrannical and violent man who physically abused his wife, Cristina, and who still controls the lives of his family from afar. He tells his wife that she and her son should no longer sleep in the same bed. The indictment of the father is mitigated by the sending of a part of his earnings to Cristina so that she and Vitto can be economically stable. The text’s account of Innocente’s immigration to Canada, nevertheless, is highly ambivalent. After being laid off from his factory job, Innocente is compelled to do menial work on a farm in order to make ends meet. He lives in a refurbished room next to the barn, which Cristina sarcastically refers to as “a chicken coop” (94). Although Mario Innocente can always find some form of employment in Canada, the working conditions there are as burdensome as those in Valle del Sole.

There is an ambiguity to the narrator-character’s representation of Canadian and Italian society. The trauma of emigration, in which “it seemed [mother and son] were being ripped untimely from [their] womb” (164), is as hurtful as Vitto’s social ostracism in the village. The reference to the womb is doubly ironic since it recalls Vitto’s moment of joy and unity with his mother in the cave. Immigration, then, signifies not only that the new world is fundamentally undefined terrain—“a kind of limitless space” (165). The old country remains ingrained in the consciousness of immigrant. According to the narrator, Vitto was on “a journey...that took direction not from its destination but from its point of departure, Valle del Sole, which somehow could not help but remain always visible on the receding shore” (165).

The conclusion of the novel centres on Cristina’s death. Here is invoked the demise of the old way of life: “The words of a song were floating into my head, surfacing like sunken relics from a place that was no longer visible on the horizon, that had been swallowed into the sea” (237). Such nullification is in marked contrast to earlier images of the liberating journey. The narrative is drenched in allusions to the natural elements: “the air and sun seemed to bring back to my mother a warm radiance, as if the crisp blue of the sky and sea had seeped inside of her...around us the sea lay bright blue and placid” (202, 204). Instead of symbolically acting as a bridge to the new land, the ocean metaphorically entombs the old culture as Cristina is buried at sea. As Ricci has observed, “while immigration is providing this escape, it is also destroying a certain way of life.” When Vitto finally arrives in Canada, he finds an inhospitable place—“we rolled across a desolate landscape, bleak and snow-covered” (234)—totally at odds with the mythic America promised by the peasants. The old world lingers on. It persists as ethnic identity in the new. But it soon becomes Vitto’s final, dark view of Valle del Sole: “the villagers—some of them had begun to move now, drifting like wraiths towards the edge of town” (184). This picture of ruin will finally reinforce Vitto’s avowed desire to break from his Italian culture. His relationship with a fellow village boy, Fabrizio, now is transmitted through
images of entrapment and self-mutilation: "I hated him...as if he were something shackled to me that I must cut away at all costs, the way animals gnawed off their own limbs when caught in a hunter's trap" (127). Fabrizio is socially and economically marginalized and he reminds Vitto of the imperfections of the old world.

The Ironic Treatment of the Story of Santa Cristina

The interweaving of the stories of Cristina and Santa Cristina discloses the ironies and contradictions of village life in Abruzzi. Cristina's opposition to a conformist and patriarchal social system is linked to her saintly counterpart's scorching of the materialism and idolatry of Roman civilization. (In both stories, the paternal figure is characterized as oppressive and spiritually sterile.) As a result of their iconoclasm, the two women are made to undergo "a long series of chastisements" (135), typified by brutal torture or social ostracism.

The interrelation between the mythic and the "real" further manifests itself through references to physical endurance. The menacing presence of a snake/serpent and the light imagery respectively suggest purity, salvation, and blessedness. The text's reworking of hagiography—of the veneration of the Roman Cristina—privileges an emancipated womanhood. The sheer force of Santa Cristina's presence evokes a selfless but powerful femininity. This evocation reinforces the image of Cristina as a sexually and emotionally liberated woman who defies the dictates of patriarchy. The use of the story of Santa Cristina underlines the gap between myth and reality. Despite the extremity of her predicament and the wickedness of Roman civilization, Santa Cristina achieves spiritual transcendence and immortality. In contrast, Cristina's life appears to be empty of such redemption, for even the birth of a daughter, which signifies feminine continuity, does not alleviate the tragedy of her death.

For Cristina, America connotes a place where individuality takes precedence over collective duty and she appears to act out the villagers' hidden desires. On the eve of her departure for Canada, Cristina berates her fellow villagers for their lack of independence: "not one of you knows what it means to be free and make a choice" (184). Vitto innocently accepts his mother's criticism of Valle del Sole and sees the journey to the new world as an act of liberation: "all that could ever cause pain and harm was being left behind on the receding shore, and my mother and I would melt now into an endless freedom as broad and as blue as the sea" (201). This statement is ironic, for Cristina's decision to emigrate is based on the belief that the new world will provide a better nurturing environment for her son and soon-to-be-born child.

Immigration reasserts the importance of family in Cristina's life. However, as her death attests, the immigrant is not immune to the damaging effects of the ancestral culture, organized around an inflexible patriarchal social order. Ultimately, the story of Santa Cristina's altruism and salvation is out of step with Vitto's experiences in the Apennines and his traumatic immigration to Canada. Cristina's tragic death at sea functions as an ironic inversion of Santa Cristina's ascension. Cristina, not her tormentors, gets swallowed up by the sea. Santa Cristina's self-abnegation allows her entry into paradise, yet Cristina Innocente is punished for affirming her individuality. Unlike the angels in the Christian fable, Darcangelo, the captain's assistant, who attends to Cristina's needs on the ship, does not rescue her from impending doom.

Lack of Narrative Closure

The conclusion of Lives of the Saints confirms the ironic and ambivalent character of Vittorio Innocente's narrative. As Vitto's lucky lira slips out of his hand and tumbles into the sea, the text repeats the opening image in the novel in which the re-enactment of the past is presented in metaphorical terms, through the evocation of water imagery: "If this story has a beginning, a moment at which a single gesture broke the surface of events like a stone thrown into the sea..." (7). The use of the qualifier "If" indicates that the narrator implicitly questions his attempt to reduce the details of personal history to a specific incident. In doing so, he emphasizes not just the arbitrariness of his tale but an inability to fashion from the dynamic of lived experience a whole picture of the past. He perceives personal history to be essentially unclosed, without final resolution or resting point: "the ripples cresting endlessly" (7).

The lira sinks into the swirling vortex of the sea as a stone puncturing the water's surface and symbolically brings the ending and the beginning of the story together. This intimating of a circular movement highlights the narrator's act of remembering. The two images respectively initiate and conclude his storytelling. The text problematizes such closure by constructing an ambiguous and, ultimately, grim picture of immigration. The lira (a talisman of the old world) is unable to protect Vitto from misfortune and cannot provide him with any sign which will redeem his tragic journey to Canada. While he looks intently at the rolling coin, searching for "some final secret message, some magic consolation" (238), it "tilt[s] fatally towards the rails...tumbling out to the sea" (238). The image both symbolically re-dramatizes Cristina's burial and reiterates the passage of the old way of life.

The text's ironic and elegiac representation of the old world is magnified by the terrible in-betweeness of Vitto's existence. In the final moments of the narrative, he remains suspended between two worlds, one that has disappeared from view but which still haunts his consciousness and another which, while it is near, is beyond his reach. Lives of the Saints portrays Vitto's cultural dislocation in the way that it moves from Cristina's burial to glimpses of his father and the Canadian landscape and back to the Saturnia where Vitto is recovering from his delirium.
This circular movement recapitulates the overall narrative thrust of the novel whose gaze is turned backward. In focusing on the act of crossing over, rather than on embarkation or settlement in the new world, the text calls attention to the transience and indeterminacy of the immigrant and, by implication, to cultural transformation. Unlike the ending of the story of Santa Cristina, which evokes victory over evil and human suffering, the conclusion of the novel is suffused with a sense of loss which preempts any form of redemption. It also ironically reminds us of the peasants’ amoral vision of life: evil strikes both the wicked and the righteous. This remembering of Vito’s Italian past is characterized by unrelenting ambiguity and irony. The text’s ironic use of point of view and mythology, whether pre-Christian or Catholic, breaks open the cultural-ideological contradictions of the old world and signals to us the disjunctions within the consciousness and narrative of Vittorio Innocente.


Notes
1. Nino Ricci, Lives of the Saints (Dunvegan, Ontario: Cormorant Books, 1990) 131. (Further references will be in the text.)
4. Loriggio, Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature 63, 60.
11. Slemon 16.

Aritha Van Herk, Kristjana Gunnars and Nino Ricci:
Observers and Subjects of the Ethnic Gaze
By Sonia Wilson

Aritha van Herk’s essay “The Ethnic Gasp/The Disenchanted Eye Unstoried” provides a commentary on the difficulty of defining or articulating ethnic experiences and a glimpse at some of the factors that lead one to be considered “other.” The reading of one of van Herk’s short essays, combined with works by Kristjana Gunnars and Nino Ricci allow for comparison and contrast of their described experiences and responses. Gunnars’ “The Prowler,” van Herk’s “Of Boers and Dykes and Drowning” and Ricci’s “Going to the Moon” utilize writing styles that facilitate examination of the author’s writing process, and highlight themes associated with their ethnic experiences in Canada. This paper explores how the self-reflexive styles of Gunnars and van Herk allow them to comment on their relationship to their writing, and how the styles of all three facilitate analysis of the ethnic subjects’ and their families’ histories. Their stories and personal essays promote the exploration of themes relating to class, displacement, disillusionment, and marginalization.

In “The Ethnic Gasp/The Disenchanted Eye Unstoried,” Aritha van Herk conveys the struggle involved in articulating ethnic experiences due to the many intersecting factors that contribute to these experiences. She offers a unique viewpoint on the moment an ethnic subject comes to define oneself, or is defined as “other” by referring to it as an ethnic “shock.” She writes: “My concern as a writer preoccupied with contemporary fiction that might be designated as ethnic had led me to examine the in-sight, the epiphanic seeing that like some version of thunderstorm clarifies the troubled and often uneasy space that the ethnic subject occupies” (van Herk, Ethnic Gasp, 75). Van Herk goes on to clarify her belief that there is “an epiphanic moment that enables the ethnic subject to begin the self-interrogation that must accompany the subject’s recognition of him or herself as, if not other, other than” (75). Self-interrogation is a key component of many recorded ethnic experiences. Ethnic writers are in a position to examine their differences to try to reconcile themselves to their imposed categorization as other.

Van Herk offers two different, but related ways of approaching the recognition of otherness. The first refers to the observation of the moment of recognition while the second refers more to the lead up to and the actual moment of the
recognition itself (the ethnic gasp). She explains the first experience as "a narrative afterword, a readerly recognition that of audience to ethnic, observers beyond claim yet claimants (those watching, defining, partial voyeurs, partial censors) to the act of the gaze" (75). This avenue for understanding ethnic experience can be understood in a number of ways. First, it refers to the writer, who is in a position to act as observer of the gaze, and identify the moments of becoming other. Digging deeper, in terms of literary style, the first interpretation can be extrapolated and applied to a self-reflexive style that allows the writer to comment on the act of the gaze by reflecting on his or her connections to the narrative. This interpretation may help us to understand the writing style utilized by van Herk in "Of Dykes and Boers and Drowning" and Gunnars in "The Prowler."

The second way of approaching the recognition of otherness, as van Herk describes it, is as this "dis-enchanted eye and its narrative moment of recognition fluency, a gesture towards articulation, of course, but also a fluency of sight that precedes the constructedness of articulation, the saying, speaking and writing (which often works towards closure) of the purely ethnic identification" (van Herk, Ethnic Gasp, 77-8). However, this fluency, this moment before full recognition, is difficult to put a finger on. Van Herk acknowledges that it may be "subsumed by the larger trajectories of event and speaking, of rising action and dénouement. But like every intensified space, it creates its own energy, asserts a field that outlasts the thematic or plot-driven mechanism of identity as a finding, a discovery, and an obligation" (79). The moments that precede knowing oneself as completely otherare of great concern to van Herk. In terms of the three stories examined in this paper, all attempt to articulate the experience of being identified other, and the moments and experiences that precede the "ethnic gasp."

Gunnars and van Herk employ a self-reflexive style that positions them as both author and observer of the ethnic gaze. Smaro Kamboureli provides a succinct description of Kristjana Gunnars’ writing as "loving literary theory while avoiding incorporating its 'dogmas'... [she] writes in a way that deliberately resists easy labels" (Kamboureli, 286). Particularly, in "The Prowler" she uses "a self-reflexive writing mode that goes beyond the conventional boundaries of literary forms. It is as much about its writing process as it is about the experiences of a young girl growing up in Iceland during the Second World War" (286). Gunnars herself comments on her own writing process, in the first few lines. "It is a relief not to be writing a story. Not to be imprisoned by character and setting. By plot, development, nineteenth century mannerisms. A relief not to be writing a poem, scanning lines, insisting on imagery, handicapped by tone. A relief just to be writing" (286). She, like the reader, is observing the story as it unfolds.

Further in the story, although not further in the plot because the story is not sequential, but more a collection of thoughts, commentaries and remembered experiences she comments on her role as writer. "The writer is a prowler in a given story. There are no protagonists in the given story. Any subject is a contrived subject. The point of view is uncertain. The writer is necessarily part of the story" (291). Gunnars continues her commentary throughout the story and also provides thoughts that may be related to the placement of ethnic subject outside the centre of power. "I imagine a book that pretends to tell an off-story. In the margins there is another story. It is incidental, it has little bearing on the official story, but that is where the real book is" (290). Gunnars’ self-reflexive style demonstrates her ability to observe, comment on and experience her story. As van Herk suggests, there are opportunities for "unblinded identification, providing an epiphanic seeing of...ethnic subject, both central and other" (van Herk, 76).

Kamboureli also cites van Herk as a self-reflexive writer. Van Herk uses what she calls "ficto-criticism", writing as reading, as a self-reflexive act (Kamboureli, 421). Van Herk says that in all of her fiction she is "concerned with the unexplored geographies of landscape and person and with the recovery of mythical voice and identification in contemporary time and place" (421). In "Of Dykes and Boers and Drowning" van Herk reflects on her Dutch past and heritage, and stereotypical associations with both. She writes about "the one that everyone laughs at: Dutch, Dutch, Dutch, as ugly as its sound and the throaty gutturals of its pronunciation. Full of connotations of lowness, levelity; Netherlandish the bottom's Synonymous with all despicabilities" (van Herk, Of Dykes, 422). Like Gunnars, van Herk experiments with language and style to tell her personal story. She goes back and forth from English to Dutch and comments on the meanings to the reader as if having a conversation. She writes "neither boer nor boerin minds their cousin boerenbedrieger (yes, the one who takes the money and runs), trickster incarnate, pissing behind the bomen (yes, trees, ordinary trees), and even the trees have more culture and nature, more history than that ugly lot?" (van Herk, Of Dykes, 423). Van Herk also remarks on her reactions to these stereotypical attitudes in trying to separate herself from her heritage to pass as one of the majority:

Examining these connotative figurations now, under the glass of Inglish, I begin to see and to understand why, in the powerfully Anglo world that my parents (Dutch boers) chose to emigrate to, displacing themselves from the comfort and safety of their known context, Dutch as place and language, I have tried and succeeded in effacing as much as possible of both my Dutch and my boer. (425)

Van Herk’s self-reflexive style allows her to comment on her own past and her family history.

Nino Ricci writes in a style that could be termed realist, opposed to the self-reflexive style of Gunnars and van Herk. Ricci does not provide commentary throughout his story "Going to the Moon" on his role as ethnic writer, nor is he seen to be speaking to the reader. He is primarily concerned with developing the story and characters, but like Gunnars and van Herk he examines ethnic and immigrant experiences. He provides his thoughts on the role of the writer to Smaro Kamboureli: "[T]he artist," says Nino Ricci, "is someone who stands outside the community and therefore sees it in starker, perhaps more realistic terms than those who are inside it and don’t question its rules" (Kamboureli, 484). These comments position the writer as what
van Herk calls "observer of the act of the gaze" (van Herk, 75). Ricci examines the immigrant experience in the context of it being a "continuum with 'the whole history of Western mythology,' he is interested in exploring what constitutes what he calls the 'myth of the other place'" (Kamboureli, 484). As both part of the other, and an observer of it, Ricci is able to offer commentary for the benefit of both his own culture and the larger society.

Joseph Pivato explains that the realist quality of ethnic writing used to be pushed aside because it was viewed as too sociological. Novels of ethnic minorities were "criticized as poor realism or naturalism" reduced to the oral history of immigrants or to the sociology of new settlement in ethnic neighbourhoods" (Pivato, Representation, 158). He disagrees with this interpretation and criticism. Instead, he writes that "It is precisely because of this attention to the realistic representation of the immigrant story that...[ethnic works] are valuable both as literature and as story" (159). This common usage of realism by ethnic writers can also be seen as an attempt "to find or construct the minority subject for the first time" (159). Ricci employs this realism in his efforts to explain ethnic experiences. He describes a particular memory: "Uncle Bert had shown me a picture once of the tiny room at the back of his old shoe-repair shop on Erie Street where he'd lived alone for twenty years, a room as grey and bare and gloomy as a prison cell" (Ricci, 485). Ricci clearly explains and relates ethnic experiences using realism.

In van Herk's "The Ethnic Gasp" she describes the funeral of an "English-speaking Tamil with a German education, a Canadian Inuk, living and working in an Inuit world that enveloped him with gentle acceptance" (van Herk, Ethnic Gasp, 76). She goes on to say "In this narrative, there is a mixture of ethnicities, a collision of ethnicities, a collision of ethnicities that both refuses and embraces recognition, that acts out an ethnic epiphany without postulating as such" (77). She is explaining that this person did not have one single ethnic identity, and all ethnic subjects have more than one identity. This contributes to our understanding of the complexities in defining ethnic experiences. One of the pieces that contribute to definitions of ethnic identity is related to the integral role of family and its significant impact on how ethnic subjects define themselves. In terms of literary style, the first person point of view is used to show family connections and influences. Ricci, van Herk and Gunnars all use first person narrative in varying degrees in their stories. This first person narrative is common in ethnic writing. As Pivato writes, the attractiveness of writing in first person "is that it gives the illusion of power and control over one's life, a sense of self-determination that never existed in the real experience of dislocation" (Pivato, 159). By using this first-person narration, Ricci, van Herk and Gunnars are able to reflect on individual and family experiences with a sense of ownership.

Ricci writes about Uncle Bert's journey to and settlement in Windsor. "It seemed astonishing to me that he'd done that, that in all his years in Windsor he'd never so much as set foot in America... and astonishing that we all ended up in Windsor on account of him, family after family, aunts and uncles and cousins, stuck there in our narrow brown brick houses out of sheer inertia, like Dorothy falling asleep on the road to Emerald City" (Ricci, 485). Van Herk's essay contains many reflections on her family. In particular, van Herk refers to "the quick flash of pain in my father's eyes, he who has always been a boer, a genuine, quiet, and simple man who believed and still believes in working hard with his hands, who believes that raising food is a good thing to do for other people and although he is not a sophisticated thinker, he knows that boer is a word that degrades him" (van Herk, Of Dykes, 424). Gunnars' essay is also peppered with references to family connections. She writes "Who are the people looking over my shoulder, writing stories in my name? Is it my great-great-grandfather from the remote north of Thingeyjarsysla, who had so much to do with the liberation of my father's people from the clutches of my mother's people? Or is it my great-grandfather from the Danish island of Fyn, who gambled away his entire estate?" (Gunnars, 289). The self-reflexive styles of Gunnars and van Herk allow them to comment more directly on family influence, while Ricci makes similar statements through his protagonist. These styles and techniques also facilitate commentary on themes of class, disillusionment, displacement and marginalization.

The issue of class is a particularly poignant one for many ethnic writers. In "The Ethnic Gasp," van Herk describes that experiences of poverty contribute greatly to the debilitating effects of being considered other. She writes:

The worst shock of my ethnicity was a combination of religion, class and economy. Oh, there was no doubt that I was white, northern European, capable of assimilating without a hitch and without a shudder, despite being female, near-sighted and not particularly healthy. I was what my now-colleagues disparagingly refer to as "poor white," well not quite "trash," but certainly dirt-on-the-hands-working class. And the glance that still skips past that instant of ethnic crisis has been burn into the back of my neck, spiralled into a repudiated narrative that cannot be told without my becoming ludicrously sodden with its poverty and clumsiness, its disdain and its dismissals. (van Herk, The Ethnic Gasp, 79)

In "Of Dykes and Boers," van Herk further explores the themes of class and poverty. She analyzes the term boer and its association with boor and boorishness. "Boer. Another accent, classiness on top of Dutchness from boer to boor, an awkward and always ill-mannered person, a clownish rustic" (van Herk, Of Dykes, 422). She continues in this vein, describing this association with a Dutch peasant. "Carrying with him his own associations of servitude and boorishness, not to mention rascality and baseness, rusticity, uncouthness, and yes, certainly, simple-mindedness. Always, of course, from the Dutch boer" (422). Gunnars' story also contains many references to poverty and its memories and lingering effects. Early on, she explains that her country (Iceland) did not have vegetables. She writes "My sister was so thin her bones stuck out of her sweater. She had sores on her hands. It was some form of malnutrition. I thought the boats should bring more vegetables, surely" (Gunnars, 288). The poverty affected not only food supplies, but also clothing for the family. "We had very few clothes. I was always
cold, and when it rained, I was always wet. It was a thought so selfish I hardly dared think it: I need clothes. My body needs clothes” (288). Nino Ricci also provides images of this important theme. He writes: "when my parents told stories about Italy, they talked about misery, a word that meant ‘poverty’ but that conjured up in my anglicized mind images of vague tortures and chastisements, although according to my mother we were poor in Canada as well, owed thousands of dollars to the bank for our house” (Ricci, 485). He further alludes to the family’s poverty when he explains how the narrator’s coat zipper is broken, but the mother does not have money to fix it and instead sews buttons on. "I was certain that the kids at school, that Miss Johnson, would see in those makeshift repairs my mother’s swollen hands, our poverty, our strangeness; and the next morning I left the house in only my sweater, my parents already at work and Joe merely shaking his head at my stubbornness” (Ricci, 488-9). The repeated theme of class and poverty is conveyed in a reflective manner by all three authors as they and/or their characters look back childhood experiences.

Displacement and disillusionment are both prevalent themes in the works of all three authors. Feelings of displacement are often a result of immigrant experiences. Nino Ricci aptly describes this sentiment:

[...] that other world that appears to a lot of immigrants before they leave as "paradise" often becomes, upon arriving in that other place, "hell"... And over time the paradise they imagined they were coming to was replaced by the paradise they imagine they left behind (Kamboureli, 484).

In "Going to the Moon," the narrator’s parents imagine Canada to be the paradise, until they arrive and settle into the reality. The narrator then sees America as the new paradise and Canada as the hell that should be escaped. When his mother goes to a funeral in the United States, the narrator thinks that "this would change her in some way, or that she would return with some expected gift, something exciting and strange, that could not be found in the Woolco mall; but she came back a few days later empty-handed" (Ricci, 489). Feelings of displacement, or being out of place are also linked to marginalization, and ultimately these feelings turn into disillusionment. When the astronauts that the narrator’s class are studying are killed before the space launch, it symbolizes destruction of the narrator’s fragile hopes and dreams.

All my life, it seemed suddenly, was merely waiting for the fulfilment of that promise, for a redemption from the narrowness and meanness of the world I came from: but it seemed possible finally that nothing would change, that I was stranded in my own small world as on some barren planet, with no way to bridge the gap between the promise and the hundred small humiliations that kept me from it. (Ricci, 488)

Ricci’s writing reflects intensely on feelings of disillusionment with America, with dreams, and with experiences of immigration.

Van Herk’s disillusionment is perhaps best conveyed by her explanation of the drowning cell or water house. "Each time I hear the word boer I imagine myself in such a cell, vochtig (yes, damp) and tight" (van Herk, Of Dykes, 426). The drowning cell was a punishment for the idle in which they were forced to work a pump to empty the cell of water, or else drown. With this metaphor, van Herk explains her disillusionment with "multicultural platitudes” (van Herk, Ethnic Gasp, 78). "I am not sure if the pump is Dutch and the water is English; or if the water is Dutch and the pump is English. Or if the pump is what I pass for and the water is my inevitably lower class background. All I know is that I must work the handle (with my solidly Dutch peasant body), because the water is rising and I cannot swim." (van Herk, Of Dykes, 426). Gunnars also conveys disillusionment in "The Prowler." Particularly, through the mother’s story about picking strawberries to buy a much-wanted record. "Her family was not wealthy, and she wanted to have a record of some beloved music. It was strenuous work, bending down for many hours, day after day, filling baskets with red berries. In the end she bought her record. On the way home she fell and the record broke" (Gunnars, 291). These feelings of disillusionment take on the air of hopelessness as ethnic subjects endure many negative experiences straining to see glimmers of the positive.

Feelings of displacement and disillusionment are often linked to, and sometimes a result of, the marginalization felt by ethnic subjects. Marginalization is more often associated with visible minorities of colour, but as Enoch Padolsky writes "many European-Canadian ethnic minority writers still seem to be conscious of issues of dominance because the bi-national framework to the Canadian discourse still frames their Canadian minority ethnicity experiences of disempowerment continue to reverberate" (Padolsky, 26). Padolsky uses the example of Matt Cohen’s story "Racial Memories," that describes Jewish experiences of marginalization. “The story’s title, and its opening sentence describing the grandfather, both serve as reminders that in an earlier Canadian terminology ‘visible minority’ meant dress and appearance and not just pigmentation” (26). Feelings of marginalization reverberate with all three of Gunnars, van Herk and Ricci.

In "Ethnic Gasp," van Herk describes her marginalization. "I am that ethnic being talked about, that stupidly stubborn and Calvinistically motivated Dutch woman... I become so othered, the mote in the homogenous eye, the intake of breath before the subject asserts an ethnic identity (only too easy to disdain multicultural platitudes, and to assert the needfulness of diversity)” (van Herk, Ethnic Gasp, 78-9). Van Herk’s entire essay "Of Dykes and Boers" is a commentary on marginalization. She writes about the "permissions of paternalism, the generous condescension of those who know better, who can afford to practice the cultural superiority of imitation... those lucky folks who never have to endure the heft of the silver fish knife, the lozenge of neetjes voorgebeeld (yes, nicely turned out, polite)” (van Herk, Of Dykes, 424-5). This is compared to the Dutch boer, "dull,
beneath contempt. The knowledge of being and the essence of boer... stupid in manners, in habit and knowledge” (van Herk, Of Dykes, 424). Gunnars explains the marginalization associated with her difference. “In my father’s country I was known as the dog-day girl, a monarchist, a Dane. Other kids shouted after me: King-rag! Bean! In my mother’s country other kids circled me haughtily on their bicycles. They whispered among each other on the street corners that I was a white Inuit, a shark-eater. The Icelander” (Gunnars, 289-90). Ricci’s narrator is also marginalized by his ethnicity. He remarks that his brother was picked on at school, “some of the older English boys called him Mustachio because of the dark hairs that had begun to sprout on his upper lip. I had the sense that we were both of us merely interlopers at school, moving uncertainly through a world that refused to admit us, that we had to hide ourselves within like animals changing the colour of their fur to fit into a lands cape” (Ricci, 486). These powerful experiences have lasting effects on the ethnic subject.

Although one must be careful not to generalize the similarities between ethnic experiences, there are definite patterns that emerge from experiences of immigration and being known as other - poverty, displacement, disillusionment and marginalization. Pivato writes, in reference to Italian immigrant writing, but which seems applicable to many ethnic writers, that there are chronicles of suffering. “The memory of this suffering, like the literature that explores it, seems to have a healing effect” (Pivato, Famiglia, 150). Again, Pivato is talking primarily about separated Italian families, but it seems that many ethnic writers also write of suffering in the hopes of getting it out, and giving voice to the emotional pain. van Herk recognizes this healing effect. She indicates that the observer of the ethnic gase (the writer) is in a better position than the ethnic subject gasping for comprehension of their othered position. She describes that the “fluency of sight that precedes the constructedness of the powerful ethnic gaze.

Aritha Van Herk, Kristjana Gunnars and Nino Ricci use reflective styles in their short stories that illuminate key components of ethnic experiences...family influences, class, displacement, disillusionment and marginalization are all prominent. Gunnars and van Herk also experiment with language and style to engage the audience by commenting on their own relationship to the writing process, while all three writers use first person to empower their experiences. In "The Ethnic Gasp," van Herk provides a framework for understanding the moments that lead to one’s designation and recognition of being other. The observer of these moments, the ethnic writer, is in a pertinent position to self-heal and negotiate muddy waters as both othered subject and observer of the powerful ethnic gaze.


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