

Italian-Canadian Female Voices: Nostalgia and Split Identity

Carla Comellini

Associate Professor

English Literature, Director of the Canadian Centre

"Alfredo Rizzardi" University of Bologna

Via Cartoleria 5, Bologna

Notwithstanding the linguistic and cultural differences between the English and French areas, Canadian Literature can be defined as a whole. This shared umbrella, called Canada, creates an image of mutual correspondence that can be metaphorically expressed in culinary terms if one likes to use the definition ironically adopted by J.K. Keefer: “the roast beef of old England and the champagne of la *douce Franc*,” (“The East is Read”, p.141) This Canadian umbrella is also made up of other linguistic and cultural varieties: from those of the First Nation People to those imported by the immigrants. It is because of the mutual correspondence that Canadian literature is imbued with the constant metaphorical interplay between ‘nature’ and the ‘story teller’, between the individual story and the collective history, between the personal memory and the collective one.

Among the immigrants, there are some Italian poets and writers who had immigrated to Canada becoming naturalized Canadians. Without mentioning all the immigrants/writers, it is worth remembering Michael Ondaatje, who was born in Sri Lanka. It is not so out of place that Ondaatje uses an Italian immigrant, David Caravaggio, as a character for both novels: *In the Skin of a Lion* (1988) and *The English Patient* (1992). David Caravaggio represents the image of the split personality of any immigrant as his name brilliantly explains: Ondaatje’s Italian Canadian character is no more Davide (the Italian Christian Name) because it had been anglicized in David. Moreover, Ondaatje seems to point out that the immigrants have contributed to build the Canadian nation: *In the Skin of a Lion*, where the Italian language is also used to deal with food, the Italian Canadian David Caravaggio is one of the workers, one of the Italian *bitumatori* (*In the Skin of a Lion*, p.27), who had built the bridge of Toronto in 1918.

In *The English Patient*, David Caravaggio is used as a spy by the Allies just because he can speak Italian. Notwithstanding the story is set in the fictional Italian Villa S. Girolamo, near Florence, and notwithstanding the numerous descriptions of the Italian landscapes and works of art (*The English Patient*, pp.71-81), in the novel there are only few Italian words, such as *gelato* (ice-cream) in the sentence: “I need gelato.” (*The English Patient*, p.29) Then, if one considers that *gelato* is one of the most typical Italian delicatessen, known all over the world, it is clear that, in the novel, *gelato* becomes the symbol of the Italian identity (“Imagery of Italy”, pp. 93-106.): that identity which Italian immigrants try to keep even when they use a poor Italian language (“Explorations of Identity, pp.71-80), or even when they are hyphenated as Italian-Canadians. By the way, as food is one of the main connections for Italian immigrants with their homeland: a link as strong as to become a stereotype of the Italian Community: *mangiare*, *pasta* and *sole mio* are words usually connected to Italian immigrants.

Even the Italian immigrant Penny Petrone says in her autobiography *Embracing Serafina* (2000): “For Italians, food is the symbol of life.” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.12) Penny Petrone, “the daughter of Italian immigrants” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.7), as she defines herself, expresses her displacement, her feeling of inferiority in her autobiography where she reveals:

I was still at the stage in my life when I considered Calabrese customs inferior, when

I was rebelling against my parents’ culture. And when I was obsessed with keeping my figure svelte like the Hollywood sex sirens who were my role models. (Embracing Serafina, p.56)

In her desperate desire of belonging to the “xenophobic and WASP” group (*Embracing Serafina*, p.7), she had tried to reject her roots by substituting her Italian Christian name, Serafina, with the anglophone name Penny. Nevertheless, her split identity leads her back to her Italian roots, becoming “both Penny and Serafina” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.9), as she reveals in her autobiography, when she tells the story of her quest for her “true identity” or as she says: “To embrace my Italianess.” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.9) The “Italianess” is a conceit which will be re-proposed with the word “Italianita” by Caterina Edwards in her story, entitled “Assimilation,” where she writes: “Her posture, her creamy silk blouse, her high heeled shoes, her throaty voice, all proclaims her Italianita.” (“Assimilation”, p.56)

It is curious to note that Petrone refuses her Italian name Serafina in favour of the Anglophone Penny and rejects the fresh figs offered to her in Calabria, during her first visit; but, as soon as she reconciles herself with her Italian heritage – as Petrone admits – she wishes to “embrace wholeheartedly the land of [her] parents” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.558) to “return to [her] ancestral homeland” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.551), to her Italian heritage, made of Catholic religion, Latin, the works of “Dante, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Caravaggio [...] Petrarch [...] Verdi and Palestrina” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.551), and to Italian food. Thus, it is not out of place that she ends up celebrating the conciliation between Penny and Serafina with food (“L’Italia nell’immaginario canadese”, pp.47-52), or as she says: “I licked my *gelato*.” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.552) Thus, as any other Italian-Canadian, Penny-Serafina becomes an example of a split identity, hyphenated forever. She also exemplifies the poor knowledge of the Italian language shared by all the Italian-Canadians, or as it is written in her autobiography: Penny-Serafina’s Italian is “fractured [with a] vocabulary meagre and limited.” (*Embracing Serafina*, p.552)

This sentence by Petrone seems to subtly refer to that *Italianese* spoken by the Italian-Canadians, as reported by Mary Melfi in her book, *Italy Revisited, Conversations with my Mother* (2009). In her book, Mary Melfi, who is another Italian-Canadian writer, explains that there are so many different dialects in Italy and that the Italian-Canadians know their own regional Italian dialects better than the Italian language, and this is the reason of their poor knowledge of Italian. An example can be offered by the word *La Merica* (*Ritorno in Italia*, p.267) that means *La America* (North America), in a sort of misspelled form, or in a grammatically incorrect Italian expression. In addition, she not only cites Italian food as *pasta e fagioli* (beans), *spaghetti e braciolo*, *salsicce* (*sausages*) e *prosciutto* but also describes recipes, such as that for *involtini*, in Italian. In her latest work, which is a comedy entitled *My Italian Wife* (2012), Mary Melfi deals with the themes characterizing the Italian-Canadians which are: first of all, Italian food: *pizza con ciccioli* and *panini*, or *prosciutto*, cited using Italian words. It is just that kind of Italian food which “Canada didn’t appreciate [...] in the 1950s” (*My Italian Wife* p.129), as she says. Then, Mary Melfi points out again the difficulty of learning “a new language” (*My Italian Wife*, p.130) and, consequently, of speaking good English. In addition, she insists on the fact that the goal of immigrating to Canada was connected to the idea of moving “to the promised land” (*My Italian Wife*, p.130) as Canada was considered at that time. In fact, the imagery of a Canadian Garden of Eden, metaphorically seen as a “promised land”,¹ is shared by English and French Canadians. Even in Atwood’s long poem – *The Journal of Susanna Moodie*, it is clear that the immigrants hope in a better future in that Canada seen as a new Garden of Eden.²

All these themes are re-elaborated also in Melfi’s poetry. In her poem “The Wanderer”, Mary Melfi deals with the strict connection between land and country, emotions and language. And as she says, it is language, used as a weapon, to allow Melfi both to express all her emotions and to describe reality:

¹ It is the pure wilderness to create the image of the Canadian Garden of Eden which is poetically elaborated by the Nineteenth century poet, Isabella Valancy Crawford in her long poem, *Malcolm’s Katie: A Love Story*. If Crawford’s poetical image of the Canadian ‘Garden’ contains also the germs of the future multiethnic reality with immigrants from all over the world identified either as the good pioneer, respectful of nature, or as the bad pioneer who wants simply to exploit the land. Moreover, the ‘other’ ethnic presence is also indirectly revealed both by the prints of the moccasins of the ancient inhabitants, the First Nation People and by their memory as the legend of the Indian Summer, retold by Crawford in her poetry. (*Isabella Valancy Crawford*)

² Without stressing too much that the idea of moving to the Canadian Garden of Eden was connected to the hope of a possible happiness, nevertheless it is worth remembering that even the British writer D.H. Lawrence ends some of his stories with this idea. In his novella “The Fox”, one of Lawrence’s characters says: “You’ll feel better when once we get over the seas to Canada, over there” (“The Fox”, p.479). In another short-story, Lawrence writes: “I was thinking of emigrating,” he said. ‘to Canada? Or where?’

‘I think to Canada.’ ‘Yes, that would be very good.’ (“Daughters of the Vicar”, p.161)

My country is my name.
My heart is my language and my weapon.
I borrow so many words, e.g., reality.
(N:B: I am without a country, speechless.) (“The Wanderer”, p.64)

Another Italian-Canadian poet, Mary di Michele seems to suffer from the same psychological difficulties of any emigrant, those felt by Italian immigrants concerning language and food in a nostalgic way, as revealed in her poem with an Italian title, “Casa Mia” (Home). In the poem, Italian food - spaghetti and meatballs - seems to refer to a reality imbued with the memory of the Italian life style; a memory permeated by a nostalgia created by that inheritance of belonging to a different culture and tradition;

[...] the daily
hydraheaded spaghetti,
the meatballs multiplying plump
like our heads and swelling buttocks,
As bread turned to stone on the table.
[...]
My inheritance be the prodigal
rebellion and drive into hell,
fast getaway from the green
fertility of that farm
where lived in a womb
as a womb
and knew no other,
like the peaches, apricots, and roses
swelling with hidden life. (“Casa Mia”, 57-58)

In her poem, again with an Italian title “Enigmatico”, Mary di Michele, succeeds in making us almost visualize the psychological difficulties created by living a life as individuals characterized by a split or hyphenated identity. The situation, “with a bare foot [,] in the Abruzzi “ and “the other [,] in Toronto”, reproduces the Colossus, like the one which used to be in Rhodes in archaic times, as the following lines brilliantly describe:

With one bare foot in a village in the Abruzzi,
The other busy with cramped English speaking toes in Toronto,
She strides the Atlantic legs spread
Like a Colossus. (“Enigmatico”, 62)

Another Italian-Canadian writer, Caterina Edwards, deals with the theme of Italian food and of the poor knowledge of the Italian language in her tale, entitled “Island of the Nightingales” (1984). Caterina Edwards re-evokes her childish experiences in the lands of her Italian ancestors - that Island of Lussino which had become Croatian territory after the II World War. In a subtle comparison between her Canadian life in Edmonton and her more and more feeble Italian roots, Caterina Edwards succeeds in remarking how the Italian roots are becoming weaker and weaker even in that “Island of the Nightingales”, that is the Island of Lussino, which is now part of Croatia. (“L’Italia nell’immaginario canadese, pp.47-52) Thus, her split Italian-Canadian identity is mirrored in the split identity of the Italians in the Island of Lussino, with young people speaking Croatian or the regional dialect, the old Venetian: this means that the young people of Italian origin in Lussino have to learn Italian at school as it happens in the Italian Communities in Canada, as Caterina Edwards brilliantly points out, with these words: “Since Gianni spoke no English and I no Croatian, our words were Italian. Not the casual dialect we learned from family, but the Italian of books and University courses.” (“Island of the Nightingales”, p.95)

In another story, entitled “Who Remembers?”, Caterina Edwards deals with the horrible fate of losing memories both of traditions and people and, consequently, of private and collective stories, or as she writes: “No pictures, no stories, no memories.”

(“Who Remembers?”, p.21) And she bitterly concludes the tale commenting that just because “there are no surviving pictures of Antonia” (“Who Remembers?”, p.21), consequently, there are “no stories, no memories” (“Who Remembers?”, p.22); thus, Antonia is destined to be forgotten, erased. Obliquely, Caterina Edwards suggests that it is because of her writing and her stories that her memories of Lussino will survive.

By the way, her description of an house in Lussingrande, as reported in her writings, will be fixed in the page forever and become unforgettable:

[...] a home with a bitter orange tree in the courtyard, a home with thick stone walls, a terracotta tile roofs, and spacious rooms A house built to last centuries [...] Dalmatian lace curtains on the windows, a Persian carpet in the parlour, the English china in the dining room, Italian silver on the sideboard. A Murano glass chandelier. (“Who Remembers?”, p.20)

Thanks to her descriptions, the reader can imagine, and somehow visualize the typical houses of Lusingrande in the Mediterranean style, houses “built to last centuries” (“Who Remembers?”, p.20); the reader can also recreate the inside of the house, characterized by a typical kind of furniture, enriched by the “Italian silver” and the “Murano glass chandelier.” (“Who Remembers?”, p.20)

Curiously, in the Island of Lussino, the Italian roots can be detected particularly in food as is brilliantly told in “Island of the Nightingales” with “the fresh caught scampi in tomato and onion sauce, the carafes of cold, dry white wine.” (“Island of the Nightingales”, p.94) Even in the story “Who Remembers?” Caterina Edwards not only deals with food such as gelato³ (The gelato is cold on her finger and her tongue” (“Who Remembers?”, p.19), but also with home-made food, “gnocchi con zuzini” (“Who Remembers?”, p.21). Moreover, she gives the receipt to her readers: “Mamma had made a special treat, gnocchi with zuzini, balls of potato dough that were boiled then rolled in melted butter, breadcrumbs and sugar.” (“Who Remembers?”, p.21)

Once more, in her story, entitled “Assimilation”, Caterina Edwards stresses the problems shared by any Italian imigrant. Both the difficulties of being “certified legal” and of understanding English are brilliantly remarked by Caterina Edwards when she writes: “He is cerified legal; he can work in this country” and “when people speak, he understands practically nothing” (“Assimilation”, p.50); then, the feeling of detachment, or as she writes: “From the moment he arrived in Canada, he has felt disconnected [...] unreal: a ghost, a projection.” (“Assimilation”, 57) It is worth remembering here Atwood’s long poem, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), where the heroine Susanna Moodie, who had moved to Canada in 1832, is an immigrant who feels “to be split”, to be as “a detached observer, a stranger”; or who feels to be “a word in a foreign Language.” (*The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, p.16)

In her story, “Assimilation”, Caterina Edwards insists on the theme of food, but from a different perspective: not good food, as he (the main character) was used to have in Italy, but local “Garbage: fried, greasy garbage.” (“Assimilation”, p.51).

In order to enrich this survey, it is worth mentioning Genny Gunn and her novel *Solitaria* (2010), set in Rome. In the novel, the story of a mystery contributes to discover the interior troubles and the split personalities of the characters who had immigrated to Canada. Again, the feeling of being split is suggested thanks to the comparison between the two different traditions and identities: the Old Italian and the new Canadian one. They are respectively symbolized by Rome, and her eternal walls and monuments, and by modern Vancouver, in perennial and constant change. And of course, the language also manifests the state of being split, as is brilliantly suggested by the Italian-Canadian character, who is a translator of librettos and of Italian Classical authors. He is also a ghost writer. Thus, Genny Gunn subtly refers to the feeling of “being disconnected [...] unreal: a ghost” (“Assimilation”, p.57), felt by any immigrant at his arrival in Canada and that Caterina Edwards has expressed in her story “Assimilation”. Thus, one could argue that in Gunn’s novel, no normal assimilation is taking place; only writing – either in *incognito* or as a ghost writer – and translation from your mother tongue can somehow reunite the two halves. Two halves which are made by the two tests – the Italian one and its English translation, made by the main character himself, the original script and that re-elaborated by the ghost writer. Consequently, these two halves are represented by the two languages, the two traditions, and the two literatures in which the main character is split. And those two halves share the same mind, the same body of the main character to whom they both belong.

³ Of course, one can easily link gelato to the Ondaatje’s reference in *The English Patient* and to the connected meaning referring to the Italian identity.

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CV:

Carla Comellini, Associate Professor of English Literature, is the Director of the Canadian Centre "Alfredo Rizzardi" and on the board of the Doctorate in European Literatures (Bologna University). Fulbright scholar (California University, USA, 1981-82), she got two grants by the Canadian Government (1988, 1993) and two by the Italian CNR (1991, 1996-97).

Her books are: *D.H. Lawrence, A Study on Mutual and Cross References and Interferences*, 2009 (1995); G. Greene: *The Tenth Man*, 2003; *Invito alla lettura di Greene*, 1996; I.V. Crawford, *UN Nuovo Eden*, 1990; G. Greene: *le forme Del narrare*, 1990. She also edited: *I tanti inglesi, studio sulle varianti della lingua inglese*, 2012; *Guide to G. Greene: The Tenth Man*, 2003; *Fra le culture: l'Italia e le letterature anglofone (Bologna, la cultura italiana e le letterature straniere moderne I b)*, 1992. Her essays and articles are on British writers (G. Greene, D.H. Lawrence, J.R. R. Tolkien, M. Lowry and L. Durrell), on Canadian authors (I.V. Crawford, M. Lawrence, E. Hay, I. Layton, J. Newlove, J. Rosenblatt, M. Atwood, T. Findley, E. Alford and M. Ondaatje), on South-African, Nigerian, Australian and North-American Native writers. She translated poems and *The Green Plain/La verde piana* (1990) by the Canadian J. Newlove. On the Board of Directors of *Englishes* since 2000, she is also on the Board of Reviewers of *Oltreoceano*, on the Advisory Board of *Interactions* since 2012, on the Scientific Board of *Fashion, Society and Contemporary Cultures* and in the Scientific Committee of the Canadian Association Cana Diana, since 2013.