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 **No Nostalgia: Early Poetry of Pasquale Verdicchio**

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The scene is a predominantly Italian resort south of Cancun, Mexico, in January. Italian voices and Italian music sing out over the white coral sand and the palm trees. I begin to write my essay on the poetry of Pasquale Verdicchio. The setting is appropriate in this land of the lost Mayan civilization and of European colonization. Now we have the descendants of the Mayans and the Aztec learning Italian in order to be tour guides to Italian tourists who come by the thousands to visit the ruins of Mayan cities. Much like American tourists have visited Roman and Greek ruins in ancient sites around the Mediterranean, now Europeans learn that other civilizations have flourished far away in other continents. Will this change Eurocentic attitudes? Maybe the very fact that these Italians have flown 11 hours to get away from the overcrowded peninsula is a sign of changes in attitudes? Verdicchio’s poems resonate in this postcolonial environment.

From his first published poems Pasquale Verdicchio has questioned the assumptions behind the immigrant narrative. He has rejected the thematics “rooted in a misguided nostalgia” (1998, 45). Coming from Naples, the capital of sentimental songs of nostalgia, he had to consciously separate himself from this tradition of heavy “malinconia.” For Verdicchio the immigrant’s links with the old country are to be based on a critical view of history, a history which must also include the displaced. In many poems Verdicchio questions the role of memory and the meaning of language. In these early poems Verdicchio intentionally chose a style which sets him apart from other Italian-Canadian poets. We will discuss this style later in the essay.

I open Verdicchio’s first book of poems, *Moving Landscape,*(1985) and note with irony that the fifth poem is entitled, “Mexico,” (15) and it ends with the image of a Mayan pyramid. This is a book that deals with the narratives of history, often the lost narratives and the silences of stone, but not the loss of meaning. Rather it is a search for new meaning. The first poem, “Red-Winged Blackbird” questions the meaning of sounds and words. What do we hear, what do we understand and what do we misunderstand? What meaning do we bring to the sound and to the words? What kind of reality does the immigrant construct from half-learned new languages and half-forgotten old ones? (11)

The next poem, “Letter,” is an elegy to the dead immigrants scattered and lost. It begins with the image of the blue envelope, that is, the letter written by the far-away immigrant and captures the impulse to tell the life story, to share a life experience with family, to link ones travels with the larger village narrative. The image of the soiled immigrant hands writing the letter epitomizes the sacrifices and suffering, the need to tell and retell the story, the lost history. The subtext in this poem is that in the official history of Italy the immigrant does not exist. For the scattered immigrants it is not only a lost history but an excluded one as well.

In addition to history there is also geography, new territories and strange place names

on a page, “letters broken to mean a thousand words.” Will the many travels of the immigrants add new meaning to their lives, or will their tracks all be washed away by the rains of time. The poems ends with the images of sun-bleached letters and the immigrant’s sun-bleached bones turning to dust. The poet declares

 these I will use

 to make more names of places

 which may not even be. (12)

It is up to the writer to give meaning to the lives and old bones of these lost and scattered immigrants. Is there an Italian diaspora? This poem gives us an image of one through scattered bones. The images of place names capture the recurrent motif in Verdicchio’s verse: travel and nomadism. In the essays of this period he was exploring this problem in terms of motion and plurality. “The kinetic aspect of a work comes from writing in the present, writing as *difference*: from the origin, from itself, of its multiples, of language, announcing and losing itself.” (“The Intellectual Ghetto,” 53).

In other poems there is more travel across seas, over desert sands, through crowded cities and busy harbours. In “Barcelona” the aged immigrant returns to Europe as a tourist only to find that it has become culturally Americanized. We see the old culture of Europe in decay. The Spain of the conquistadors who pillaged Mexico is long gone. Even a history of great heroes cannot save a nation from its inevitable fate. It ends with an image of the famous statue of Columbus, a first immigrant, turning around in surprise at all the changes. What is the meaning of Columbus today? Is he an Italian genius, a Spanish navigator or an American icon? (23)

We turn to Verdicchio’s poem, “Ancestors,” and it begins to resonate with the echoes of a lost history. In many of Verdicchio’s poems the author’s attention to the lost meaning of words seems to subvert the narrative of Italian history, especially the lost history of immigration. In “Ancestors” he focuses on this lost history as in a dream, lost. The poet identifies the painful paradox of the Italian immigrant who must carry the burden of a great Italian culture with all its expectations, at the same time knowing that this culture has historically excluded him and continues to do so.

 Because we were the dreams

 which ancestors carved in stone

 and described in jewels

 we are now lost and confused (25)

The first stanza gives us the text for this situational contradiction. We have been taught about the great men of Italian history. It is a culture which promised greatness, but gave millions of us exile instead. The Italian immigrant is confused because even a life in exile is not his own, instead he seems trapped in this dream of greatness. The image has echoes of the Renaissance but also of the Fascist episode and the illusions it fostered about creating a new Roman Empire. Both periods linked to great stone carvings.

The second stanza continues to critique the “incomplete mosaic” of Italian culture and

ends with the note of betrayal as we see the false future painted for us. The third stanza

refers to the lost culture of the Etruscans, our lost ancestors. They yet remain a mystery.

They probably disappeared because they we peaceful people and not warriors like the

Romans. The image is of “Arms with bracelets of gold” rather than weapons of war. In

the image of the arms we are reminded that both the creative artists and the destructive

warriors are our ancestors.

In the fourth stanza we read that the imagination of our Italian ancestors promised much that was never fulfilled. The promise was forgotten and the dream lost. The art of the past is all that we have left: Italy as a great museum, with no room for surplus population.

This poem is one of the first which articulates the love-hate relationship of the immigrant with Italy. It rejects nostalgia and the blind filiopietism so common among Italian immigrants. The critique is all the more powerful because it is soft-spoken and un-rhetorical. It is in keeping with Verdicchio’s style of using language in an unemotional manner. If we look closely we detect the anger just below the surface.

The title poem in this first collection is “Moving Landscape,” an image which epitomizes the dislocation of the immigrant. Uprooted from his home village and peasant farm the immigrant will never be at ease in the new environment. In North America the landscape is unstable, always changing. Some of the changes are wrought by the immigrants themselves who are brought to cities to rebuild and transform them. The Italians built Toronto we are told. The landscape changes back in Italy as well. First there are the abandoned villages and farms in rural areas and then the sprawl of cities and super highways. Where is the immigrant’s place in this moving landscape?

 I am the only man missing

 from the landscape

 of a ready-made history. (41)

When reading these opening lines what “ready-made history” comes to mind? We may think that it is the majority history of North America, a narrative dominated by the English and the French with a few token Indigenous chiefs and Spanish generals. The Italian immigrant is certainly absent from this official history. But the “ready-made history” is also that of Italy, a history of great artists and heroes. A master narrative which has not included the millions of departing emigrants. By definition they “subtract everything/ nothing must be left over.” The emigrant is missing from the Italian landscape and is only evident if you recognize his or her absence.

The culture of the immigrant is that of absences. The immigrants “function as an absence” in both the home landscape and the new one. The second stanza begins with the image of a “city built of many departures.” This city could be any city like Naples or it could be Italy itself. The immigrants who left contributed to the future possibilities of Italy as much as those who remained behind. There is an old Italian saying which is the reverse of this idea, “Parte anche qui resta.” It literally means that those who remain also leave, and refers to the lasting effects of family break-up, the loss of a father, a son or a brother. (Pitto) The rapid departure of hundreds of thousands of emigrants in the decades after WWII changed the face of Italy and the dynamics in rural farms, villages and city businesses. The immediate benefits were that there were less demands on the limited social resources and on the impoverished economy. This contributed directly to Italy’s economy recovery in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the third stanza there is the metamorphosis enacted on the immigrant body by others.

Displacement results in physical change, but it also causes a change in identity over which the immigrant has no control. He finds himself separated from the past with words. The words are English and do in deed put distance between the speaker and his Italian origins. The transformation is enacted from the outside and makes him a different person on the inside. Is this new language a mask you wear? The deeper reality, the Italian one, is now hiding. The speaker observes that,

 There is no language without deceipt.

 A Grammar of bodies and images

 grown out of false form. (42)

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

He asks if there is any thing that remains of him in the old land, a lost sound perhaps. He can only imagine a return to the old shore. Is it an illusion, or only a dream?

The poem continues with images of his dying mother and lost memory. It is a very slow and painful death as we try to recover memory and construct poems. Besides the dead mother there is the dead language and dead words. The black of burning pages turning to night to produce more poems to welcome death. Does writing poetry keep death at bay?

The immigrant sees destiny in following the horizon, travelling under different skies.

He asks questions about destiny, “caught between ambiguity of surfaces.” (45). We are caught for a short time, our lives, between two identities and two languages. The memories of stone and fire end with the striking image of “tongue-tied ruins.”

“Moving Landscape” is Verdicchio’s major poem of this period and illustrates his main literary preoccupations: the rejection of nostalgia, the questioning of a national history which excludes a major part of the population and its exodus. We also note the absence of any personal references or any suggestion of a confessional mode. There is a feeling of alienation in these verses reflected in the suppression of the personal. Is this alienation also mirrored in the use of the fragmented language in parts of the poems?

The chapbook that follows, *Moving Landscape,* is called appropriately, *Ipsissima Verba*, (1986) and begins with images of the moving landscape, fragments of memory and lost voices. In the different poems Verdicchio examines the problems of language, and of home. In the poem, “This House, That House,” he examines the different types of home: the home of distance, the home of division, the home away from home, and the home constructed. Is the perpetual wanderer, the immigrant dreaming of home? The next book is called, *Nomadic Trajectory* (1990) and continues the pattern of moving across landscapes and across borders, forever. In another chapbook, *A Critical Geography,* (1989) this poet develops similar travels in space and time. Some Italian locations are suggested with references to fig tree, Ionian sea, olive tree, rosary and saints.

Style

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

 When the instinctual search takes place in the language

 of poetry it turns away from English or French to find

 emptiness. And though the mother-language makes itself

 felt, it is distant, out of reach. The need for its expression

 manifests itself through an act of will, the voluntary, though

 irrational, use of one Italian word or another. (119)

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

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

Where are the Italian aspects of Verdicchio’s poetry? These are not as obvious as in other Italian-Canadian writers. The subject of Italian immigration is the pervasive one in these early poems. “Moving Landscape” cannot be understood outside of this context of physical displacement and of deterritorialization of language. There is the repeated critique of Italian history and modern society. At times this critique is a subtext as in “Letter.” The abstract language and calm tone apparently hide the emotional force behind the poems, and the anger is there as well.

The poems do not indulge in any overt immigrant nostalgia because there is so much of it in Italian popular culture and music. His native Naples is famous for its sentimental songs such as, “O Sole Mio,” and “Te Vojo Bene Assai.” Verdicchio is consciously reacting to this and as such is also part of the historical discourse (Bakhtin). He focuses on the geographical displacement with is the major change in any immigration. Verdicchio’s treatment of the nomadic recurs in many poems and several of his collections. And we must recognize that this motif of travel reflects his one life migrations from Naples to Vancouver to Edmonton and then to San Diego, California, with many long stays back in Italy.

Verdicchio’s preoccupation with language and meaning is part of the subject of geographical displacement. Only someone who must deal with the reality of two or more languages, especially as an immigrant, would develop such a sense of the ambiguity of words and meanings. In many of these early poems a reader is struck by the sparse use of words. This minimalist style puts more weight and meaning on each word, but it also brings out the ambiguity of words. These word patterns can have several meanings, or can just be beautiful word patterns. Any reader cannot help but feel that the fragmentary style in several of these poems reflects the loss of meaning for words and for language.

We will have to explore the development of this process in Verdicchio’s latter poetry and essays and see if we must revise our impressions of these early poem,

Future work on Verdicchio will need to consider his work with Antonio D’Alfonso in *Duologue: On Culture and Identity*, a series of discourses on many of the topics raised in this short essay. It is sometimes described as a companion to Verdicchio’s *Devils in Paradise: Writing on Post-Emigrant Culture.* Guernica Editions, 1997. Some of the views expressed in the two volumes listed above are in contrast to the arguments presented in Pivato’s book, *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures.* Guernica Editions, 1994 and 2002. (This essay was revised in March, 2020)

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