L’immagine dell’Italia nelle letterature angloamericane e postcoloniali

a cura di Paolo Bertinetti


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In copertina: Il golfo di Napoli in un acquarello dallo Sketchbook di Lady Augusta Gregory (1900

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I went to Italy as a student…I went to Italy really for the sheer desire to go to Italy, to know myself, to know where I came from.” This statement made in a 1993 interview by Helen Barolini (von Huene: 106) – her 1979 novel Umbertina is now considered a classic in migrant writings and her 1985 anthology The Dream Book. An Anthology of Writings by Italian-American Women opened the path to the recognition of a silenced tradition – summarizes the multiple meanings of the Italian journey for contemporary Italian American women writers. It is a complex project, and their writings often reveal a sort of descent into Hades undertaken following the archetype of Persephone, as shown by Alison Goeller. Their poems, fiction and essays show the effort of reconnecting with ancestral heritage, discover a new identity and recover what was lost in the acculturation process (Goeller 75). Italian society, the land, the people, resonate in their writings with multiple meanings, mapping interior and external topographies. The multi-generation novel Umbertina, with its rich tapestry of emigrant life spanning from small town Calabria in 1860 to New York, New York State and then back to Italy in the 1970s, notably portrays third and fourth generation women trying to understand their Italian side in their nomadic lives, living and travelling in Italy. As she was inviting contributions for The Dream Book, Barolini received some poems from famous feminist critic Sandra M. Gilbert explaining: “I am really Sandra Mortola Gilbert, and my mother’s name was Caruso” (Dream Book 24).

Sandra M. Gilbert is internationally famous for her groundbreaking feminist work on women writers together with Susan Gubar The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), Shakespeare’s Sisters (1979) and No Man’s Land (1988-1994) among others, her essays recently collected in On Burning Ground: Thirty Years of Thinking about Poetry and Rereading Women:
Thirty Years of Exploring Our Literary Traditions (2009). She considers herself primarily a poet, has published nine books of poems and has been awarded many prizes for her poetry, among which the 1980 Poetry prize, the International Poetry Foundation 1990 prize, the Patterson Prize for Ghost Volcano (1995), the American Book Award for her Kissing the Bread: New and Selected Poems, 1969-1999 and the John Ciardi Award for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry. Her writings have also appeared in collections of Italian American essays and creative work (Barolini, Ciongoli and Parini, Tamburri, Giordano, Gardaphé) and the 2001 Lerici Pea Prize has given her Italian heritage due recognition and acknowledged her as one of the “Liguri nel mondo”; but Sandra Gilbert keeps her maiden name of Mortola shortened in a “M.” and has written of her Italianness as “mystery”.

Born in New York (1936) of Italian, French and Russian ancestry, she has lived the frequent second generation immigrant experience of an extended family sharing Italian regional traditional food, and at the same time erasing their Italian past and family history. Sandra is the only child of Aléxis Mortola, born in Nice of a Ligurian family which had originally emigrated from the area of Ruta di Camogli, and became a civil engineer in New York. His father Amedée Mortola, dreaming of becoming a painter in New York, had emigrated from Paris with his Russian wife in the early 1900s and eventually opened an American (not French nor Italian, Gilbert remarks in “Mysteries of the Hyphen”) restaurant in New York. He is lovingly remembered in the poem “Grandpa” (1984) as “painter of frescoes, master of promised spices”, a kind man who made spinach ravioli and stuffed mushrooms, sharing memories of the Mediterranean, and whose Queens kitchen smelled of “garlic and cigars.” Her mother, Angela Caruso, came to New York at the age of seven in 1910 from Sambuca Zabut (AG), with her midwife mother, her Socialist


2 See the classic (and now discussed) 1938 study by Marcus Hansen, The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant in Werner Sollors.


4 The Italian Collection, p.7. All page numbers for poems in this essay are from this collection, even if originally published elsewhere.
father – the Caruso had emigrated to the US due to a dangerous public speech – her sister and seven brothers. Gilbert remembers Angela strongly resenting the Sicilian habit of not giving a College education to daughters, growing up as an American flapper, eager to forget all about their Sicilian past “She really felt she had to get away from the whole immigrant experience” (Brogan 2009: 415). She became the school-teacher who encouraged her daughter’s interest in writing poetry as a child. At the center of the family’s origin myth – whenever that surfaced fragmentarily in a family that wanted to be only American – loomed the figure of her Sicilian maternal grandmother whom Sandra never knew. Her poems try to shape in words the figure of a black-haired, black-eyed strong, bright, skilled midwife, mother of nine; in “The Grandmother’s Dream” (1968) her polished midwife tools appear in the dream as “knobs of an invisible door” leading to the mysteries of identity. Aléxis Mortola spoke French and English, so English was the language spoken in the family. Her poems image her extended Caruso family of “socialisti” chemist uncles, aunts and cousins gathering in her zia Petrina’s cool basement “Summer Kitchen” for Sicilian meals, or in her tiny garden perfumed with basil and roses for heated political discussions in incomprehensible Sicilian (“The Summer Kitchen”). Her 1991 essay “Piacere conoscerla” speaks of a fascination with the sound of Italian and of wonder at fragments of family history surfacing even recently during family reunions. Growing up in multi ethnic New York City made her aware of the otherness of her ethnic background “I didn’t have a single grandparent without an accent. I believed “real” Americans weren’t immigrants like my family” she remembers (Brogan Interview 415). Furious at being identified with movie mafia stereotypes (her poem “Mafioso” speaks back on this subject) or with Mussolini, and during WWII with an enemy country, she eagerly adopted her husband’s name when she married Elliott Lewis Gilbert in 1957 – the conformist “tranquillized Fifites” – as she recalls in her essays. Her poem “The Leeks” (1982) gives voice to her teenage unease and fantasies of wanting “a name that ends in a Protestant consonant/instead of a Catholic vowel”, of becoming “a red-haired freckled//Presbyterian girl” living in a Vermont farmhouse who “never tasted olive oil” nor drank red wine. Her poems and essays voice her complex experience of living on the hyphen which links her European heritage and her Americanness, “I eat
hyphenated food, sleep and dream among hyphens, and in a sense am a walking, talking hyphen.” (Mysteries of the Hyphen 52).

Gilbert visited Italy for the first time with her husband in 1958, while Elliott was in the American Army in Nuremberg, and they were in Venice, Liguria and Rome. More visits followed to Portofino, Bergamo and Northern Italy, but she didn’t get to Sicily until 1985. Significantly, at that time she was unable to find the family town of Sambuca Zabut (AG) because she had the wrong information of it being in the proximity of Palermo, eventually spending a day in Sambuca and visiting Agrigento and the Valley of the Temples years later with her daughters. Gilbert’s visits to Italy have been frequent; besides her holidays she has been resident fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation in Bellagio in 1982 and in 1991, fellow at the American Academy in Rome (2001), resident fellow at the Bogliasco Foundation the same year and again in 2013. These latter residencies have given her the possibility of repeated visits to Ligurian places whose name she shares, Cape Mortola with the Hanbury Gardens and the via Mortola in Ruta di Camogli.

Gilbert has explored Italian culture as a literary critic and cultural historian through the writers she has worked on, besides her journeys to Italy. Her Acts of Attention. The Poems of D.H. Lawrence (1972, 1990) speaks of his “Italy with its primal seas and raging flowers” (Acts of Attention 121), and Lawrence’s ecstasy at the Mediterranean light and sun certainly resonated with her own lure of Italy long before her first visit to Sicily. Emily Dickinson’s image of Italy across the Alps in her poem “Our lives are Swiss” is significantly used as motto for her essay “Mysteries of the Hyphen. Poetry, Pasta and Identity Politics”. Another instance of the mediations which have guided her experience of Italy is her enquiry into the process of construction of Italy as a “woman country” in the works of Madame De Staël, and of women writers in Italy who were involved in the Risorgimento, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Margaret Fuller (“From Patria to Matria”).

Always interested in Italy and in her Italian background, Gilbert has made what research has now shown to be a common ambivalent experience with Italian-Americans and with ethnic return migration in

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5 Gilbert recognizes the poetry of D. H. Lawrence as a significant influence (Brogan 423)
general – of returning to a foreign country from which her ancestors came, and where she is identified as American and finally feeling an American (Mysteries of the Hyphen). She has “reinterpreted” her Italian heritage\(^6\) in her poetry, showing a complex experience of Italy in which the poet is engaged in a process of recovering a lost heritage and a sense of belonging, and at the same time explores the Italian landscape and Italian art and culture as texts which invite engagement and decodification.

*The Italian Collection. Poems of Heritage* published in 2003 and dedicated to the memory of her mother (the corona of poems “Belongings” published in 2005\(^7\) pays her a loving tribute) gathers 25 previously published poems written since 1961 – a sign that her Italian American position is not a recent fashionable ‘coming out’ in postethnic America. They sound a little known ancestry of grandparents and mysterious “blacksheep” uncles, sketch houses, capture the warmth of family reunions presided by matronly aunts in which the preparation of food takes on fairytale dimensions (“The Summer Kitchen”), investigate family customs (“Kissing the Bread”), and give voice to her multi-layered experience of Italy. Her sketches of Italian arts, of cities and landscapes, and her rewritings of Italian stories and poems, trace an inner topography, offering the multiple dimension of remembering, imagining from other people’s memories and imaging from direct experience of place. Italian words are inserted as fragments of the past or voices of the present.

As a literary critic Sandra Gilbert has herself offered a very clear insight into her position as Italian American in the two essays mentioned earlier, “Piacere conoscerla” (1991) and “Mysteries of the Hyphen…” (1997) from which I quote an abridged version published in the introductory Note to the Reader in *The Italian Collection*:

> It begins to seem to me that Italy has had at least four or five kinds of meaning in my life. Even while for obvious reasons I have associated the country of my forebears with family secrets, and more generally with the

\( ^6\) See Michael Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Postmodern Art of Memory” in Clifford and Marcus

\( ^7\) The poem speaks of her mother’s last days and of a catholic burial “far from the simmering fields of Sicily”, that she would have opposed fiercely with a “Tuono di Dio”, *Belongings* Norton 2006. Also available on the Poetry website http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/182437
mystery of origins, I’ve been infuriated by some of the painful stereotypes with which my heritage links me. At the same time, I’ve idealized Italy as a lost Eden or dreamed of this simultaneously foreign and ancestral land as a glamorous center of otherness, a place where I might find what William Butler Yeats would have called an “anti-self”. Maybe finally, therefore, Italy has become for me, as it has for many artists (including a number who were not fortunate enough to have Italian roots) a symbol of something eternally desired but therefore perpetually remote, even in its essence inaccessible. (ix-x)

I shall concentrate here in reading those poems in the collection which give voice to the direct experience of travelling to Italy, which in a technique sometimes imagistic, sometimes impressionistic, try to penetrate the essence of Italian landscapes.

Of all the cities Gilbert has visited, Rome is the only one which has inspired a poem “Old Color Slides: Rome, 1958” written in 1962. Faded memories of her first trip to the eternal city, “the broken inner city of the European dream” open the poem with expectable images of chaos “weather hot, the traffic impossible”, mazes of streets, the Trevi fountain impossible to find, “miraculous Italian light”, a juxtaposition of Bernini’s works, graffiti, coffee houses (Caffè Greco and Babington’s Tea room first come to mind) renowned as meeting places for writers and artists. At this point family memories intrude as she thinks also of “my Sicilian uncles” sitting in coffee houses. This sudden recollection sets the climax for the second part of the poem as the poet herself is drawn from spectatorship to a dynamics of identification – a group of Sicilian pilgrims waiting for the “Pape” are acknowledged as “my paesani” - and at the same time of otherness, “although they didn’t know me, foreign as Keats”, to whose grave in the Protestant cemetery the poet Sandra and her husband duly “made the pilgrimage” (19). No other personal connections can be made in or with Rome, not even with a relative: “As for the uncle who still lives in Rome, I never called.” The poet remembers seeing him “dark and strange” when she was four years old and ends “what could I have said to him in Rome?” (20)

“Sculpture: Naiad Fountain” written in 1976, is a bravura piece about what could be any of the many Naiad fountains in Italy (Rome’s huge fountain decorated in 1901 with four Naiads by Antonio Rutelli in piazza della Repubblica comes first to mind). While Naiads are usually sculpted
or portrayed in groups, the poem focuses on one individual Naiad statue, opposing images of life, warmth, of the constant mobility of the mythological spirit of the waters, with the fixity of the statue. The Naiad seems now caged in stone, “stone-faced”, silenced, in contrast with the continuous splashing of waters artificially moved by an engine:

    Legless, rooted to that blind center
    where the water churn, murmurs, prepares
    its terrifying leap upward,

    she’s forgotten the warm stream where she swam
    that afternoon the sculptor captured her,
    forgotten nipples and milk, fingertips and leaves, (31)

Here, as in other poems, the specificity of place, city or square seems irrelevant and is left undefined. The poem concentrates on what is felt as the essence of sculpture, not a portrait in stone but the drama of a living being captured by the artist and imprisoned in stone, like a metamorphosis of ancient classical times. Art is seen in opposition to nature (one wonders if the poet wanted to echo the impression experienced by seeing Bernini’s Apollo and Daphne in the Borghese Museum in Rome). The Naiad seems to ask the onlooker for involvement in her drama, wants to be imagined, follows the poet in her dreams asking to be given back her voice. Gilbert’s critical work of the period – the poem was written in 1976 – giving voice to a silenced tradition of women writers, echoes in the closing lines:

    You wake and look: she’s still here,
    Fixed in the blank piazza, which has
    No words to ease the violence of her silence. (32)

There are few instances of attention to Italian arts in Gilbert’s Italian poetry, another being “Trionfo del (sic) morte” where the fresco in Pisa’s cemetery which gives the title to the poem resonates with the poet mourning her dead husband. The poem opens in the first person, as the

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8 Here as in other poems the Italian spelling is wrong. This is not unusual for Italian American writers and American writers in general, marking the distance with a language which is felt as other.
poet wakes up from a painful dream of trying uselessly to reach him and looks outside her hotel window at the flying “birds of Tuscany, voluble Italians”. The external landscape is rapidly sketched as “Baby poplars/ file in arrogant squares”, swallows, “Alberi” – a fragment of Italian inserted in the poem – and the voice of “the tremulous monk, last/guardian of San Vivaldo”. In Section 3 of the poem, “Museum”, we can see her Italian American family antichurch feeling as the poet sketches the fresco in contrast with the experience of a teenage would-be cook who “worships the photos of abbondanza”

so much deeper than those watery frescoes in Pisa
where industrious Franciscans defy the Trionfo del (sic) Morte

as if they could hoe and harvest and bake
eternal life into its proper place. (55)

and continues with impressions of gold and death everywhere in the museum:

dead in its triumph
tearing the tiny souls
out of the mouths of merchants (56).

The collection includes two experiments at rewriting Italian texts, a way of making them one’s own. “Pinocchio” (1981) is a poetic rewriting of the worldwide famous Tuscan story of the death and rebirth - of a pine nut, of the soul - which has attracted a large attention in writers and critics9. The poem concentrates and expand in a lively, sometimes playful note on the ‘treeness’ of Pinocchio: “When Pinocchio looks at the forest does he see/ the eyes of cousins, does he dream/ a tickle of moss/ on his painted scalp?” (26)

“Anna La Noia”, a poem written in 1982, is dedicated to Giuseppe Ungaretti’s “Alla noia” of which Gilbert experiments a rewriting. The poem has as a motto Ungaretti’s “la mano le luceva che mi porse” and like Ungaretti personifies the feeling as a young woman. The boredom and

9 Giorgio Manganelli’s Pinocchio parallelo and Elémire Zolla’s deep analysis of Pinocchio in his Uscite dal mondo first come to mind.
Gilbert’s imagistic technique is particularly evident in her landscape poems, two of which were inspired by her residencies at the Rockefeller Foundation in Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio. “The Lake” written in 1991, qualifies it as “the deepest in Europe” and locates it without ever mentioning Lake Como, by indirection, as if presenting a riddle, offering a brief impressionist sketch of Milan “Beyond Milan, the granite carbuncles// the vast stiff lace they call the Duomo” (44). Its depth and color are fused in one image “it goes greenly, blackly down” and it becomes the object of questions to which there is no answer but in more baffling lyrical images such as “the other side of the shriek of a bird.” The Alpine rocks surrounding it seem to offer an impression of solidity but are soon contrasted by the reality of a warning signboard “caduta massi” pointing to their inevitable decadence, an image continued unexpectedly in that of the ferries crossing the lake, which close the poem:

(...)

groaning ferries float
like tiny cakes of light
offering themselves to the dead. (45)

In the landscape of Lake Como an olive grove again catches Gilbert’s attention in “Autumn, Como” a long poem written in 1994, which gives voice to the experience of exploring the hills in autumn. It is divided in seven parts focused on seven images, olives, poets, bread, wind, castle, evening rain, morning rain:

Olives

They’ve cut the grass in the olive grove.
A floor of pallor, close and prickly,
Coats the slopes above the lake, (46)

(...)

The autumn wind incessantly blowing over the lake and the hills generates the unexpected synesthesia of olives like birds holding on to the tree branches:
(...)

Hard and green,

flocks of olives

clamp to their branches,

fat with the cold new life

they have to hold for three more months. (46)

Looking for words, the poet cannot forget being in the place where Shelley lived for a while. The autumn lake is almost absent, it is “the unchanging fact of the lake” (47), the grey sky almost indistinguishable from it. Exploring the area brings the interested discovery of local bakeries selling special cookies and sweet bread for All Saints’ day “fav a dei morti”, “pane dei morti” and prepares for the image of a museum relic of a long forgotten wreck and the sailors who died fighting in the shipwreck in the sixth section, “Castle”. More unexpected metaphors animate the poem, the incessant wind is “tatters of sky/claw at the shutters” (50), evening clouds are sorrowful old women:

A rainy twilight, clouds

close and tragic as old

women

plucking at passersby,

whispering their wrongs. (49)

The poem closes with the lake transformed into a “vast cold mass of gray” “patiently,/ waiting to be a lake again.” (51)

Sicily and Liguria expectedly offer landscapes resonating with family oral stories and memories, and as Diane Raptosh has said of Gilbert’s poems in general, one can see how her Italian poems in particular tap “topographical and ancestral roots.” (Raptosh 153) “Giardini La Mortola (Ventimiglia)” (1964) continues the idea of the poet looking at old color slides as seen earlier. An old picture of her first visit to the Hanbury Gardens invites comments and rereading of her past experience, which is compared to a new visit. At first she acknowledges her blindness and naivety as “awkward girl” in the land of her forefathers, her ignorance of family past:

I hardly know myself in those old photographs –
An awkward girl in the foreground,
whose dream villa sleeps behind….

(…)

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no landscape met that gaze
of arbitrary wonder. (21)

Part 2 of the poem brings back her father’s voice telling the story of his first trip from Paris to Liguria echoing words that he must have repeated many times “We’d journeyed all night from Paris, I was seventeen, it was my first return to my first home”, remembering his wonder at waking up in the morning and looking at the coast of “such a blue/ as in a sea of dreams” (22). Part 3 sees the poet visiting again the gardens after her father’s death, this time her eyes are wide open as she carefully observes the plants, noticing their roots that emblematically reach the sea water in the light that “prospers there”, and invokes the sea to open up her interior landscape, the mystery of her identity:

you tell me
that I sprang from such a soil too,
some centuries ago.
If I can pass
beyond the perilous passage through the cypress groves,
will I regain that place? (23)

“Mare Incognita” written in 1965, images an unidentified Italian marine landscape, as the title says. It is a poem which suggests impressionist painting with blotches of color and evokes silence with frequent use of ellipses, “a blue corrupt with light/ decadent orange of the hills…”, hints at “hill and town”, and ends with the image of a dying fish on the floor of a fishing boat and of the “sun-drugged sea.” (25)

“In the Golden Sala”, written in 1983, before she visited Sicily, goes back to the place her mother came from, imaging a palace in Sambuca Zabut (the name witness to the Arab dominion over Sicily), remembered in family stories. These told of the grand ballroom of a decayed prince’s palace where for some time her grandmother, her mother with her sister and some of her brothers lived, for reasons unknown to the poet. The poem opens and closes with images of fierce sunlight that evoke the Sicilian landscape, a light so strong that the sun god Apollo seems to be present in it10. From this imagined landscape the light is brought inside

10 See Gilbert comments on the poem in Italian Americana 2002
the old sala, transformed in the light of the gilding of ceiling, of the
golden threads in tattered curtains, of golden floor tiling that testify to
the past grandeur of the place:

Sun of Sicilian hillsides,
heat of poppies opening like fierce
bouquettes of Apollo,
light of Agrigento, fretting the sea and the seaside cliffs -
light of the golden sala, (3)

Her mother’s voice is brought in, telling the story of how the family
lived there, of the grandmother midwife whose skill was known to
women in villages all around and of the sala where she also practiced
helping women during deliveries. Then the poet’s voice continues the
story imagining the wonder of the nine black-eyed, “black-haired”
children witnessing the birth of a baby in the Sala, looking down at it as
if from a sea cliff

as if from a high cliff by the sea
hot and yellow with new poppies. (4)

Research has shown the ways in which Italian American identity is
linked to food (Cinotto), and certainly food plays an important role in
Gilbert’s mapping of her “ancestral topography”, connecting her family
in Brooklyn to Sambuca and Liguria. Besides her childhood memories of
her aunt’s “summer kitchen” where

(...), black-green poles of zucchini
fell into slices of yellow
like fairy tale money. (“The Summer Kitchen” 13)

Italian food is the subject of a personal, culinary and cultural
discourse in a number of her poems. “Kissing the bread”, “No thank
you, I don’t care for artichokes”, “Basil”, “Add Finocchio Seeds” link
family, memories, meals, tastes, smells and plants11. “Basil” written in
1995 is an instance of Gilbert’s skill in expanding an image playing with

11 As the present essay goes into print Norton has just released Gilbert’s new cultural
studies research on The Culinary Imagination. From Myth to Modernity.
associations and variations from an unspoken question, what is basil, which brings her from the Liguria of her father - “as in green blades of Liguria” - around the world to Thailand and back to Sicily hinting at Boccaccio’s sad story of Lisabetta da Messina who buried her lover’s head in a pot of basil:

\[ \textit{as in a pot of} \]
\[ \textit{where the lover’s head} \]
\[ \textit{explodes into new ideas. (52)} \]

and ends mixing recipes and poetic images (and echoing W.C. Williams’ plums poem “This is just to say”). “Add Finocchio Seeds in the Pasta Sauce for that Real Sicilian Flavor!” written in 2000, closes The Italian Collection showing how a family recipe makes the taste of fennel seeds resonate with stories, history and memories like Proust’s madeleine.

Gilbert has chosen as cover image of The Italian Collection the painting “Piazza d’Italia” by Giorgio De Chirico, one of her favorite Italian painters. The picture is one of a series with the same title and images the ancient statue of a reclining figure at the center of a stylized Italian square with arcades. His mysterious, metaphysical, dream Italian square (although based on Italian architecture, originally the squares surrounded by arcades in Turin mediated by the architecture of Brunelleschi) seems a fit parallelism of her sense of an ancestral geography wherein the mysteries of origins are “hopelessly embedded” (Mysteries 53).

Bibliography


\[ ^{12} \text{The painting is from the San Francisco Fine Arts Museum. Incidentally, Gilbert’s choice reminds us that De Chirico was also the son of emigrants. Born in Greece of Sicilian father and Ligurian mother, he came to Italy only as a young man. One can also add that Sylvia Plath’s poem inspired by his painting “The Disquieting Muses” is the subject of an essay by Gilbert in Shakespeare’s Sisters.} \]


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