

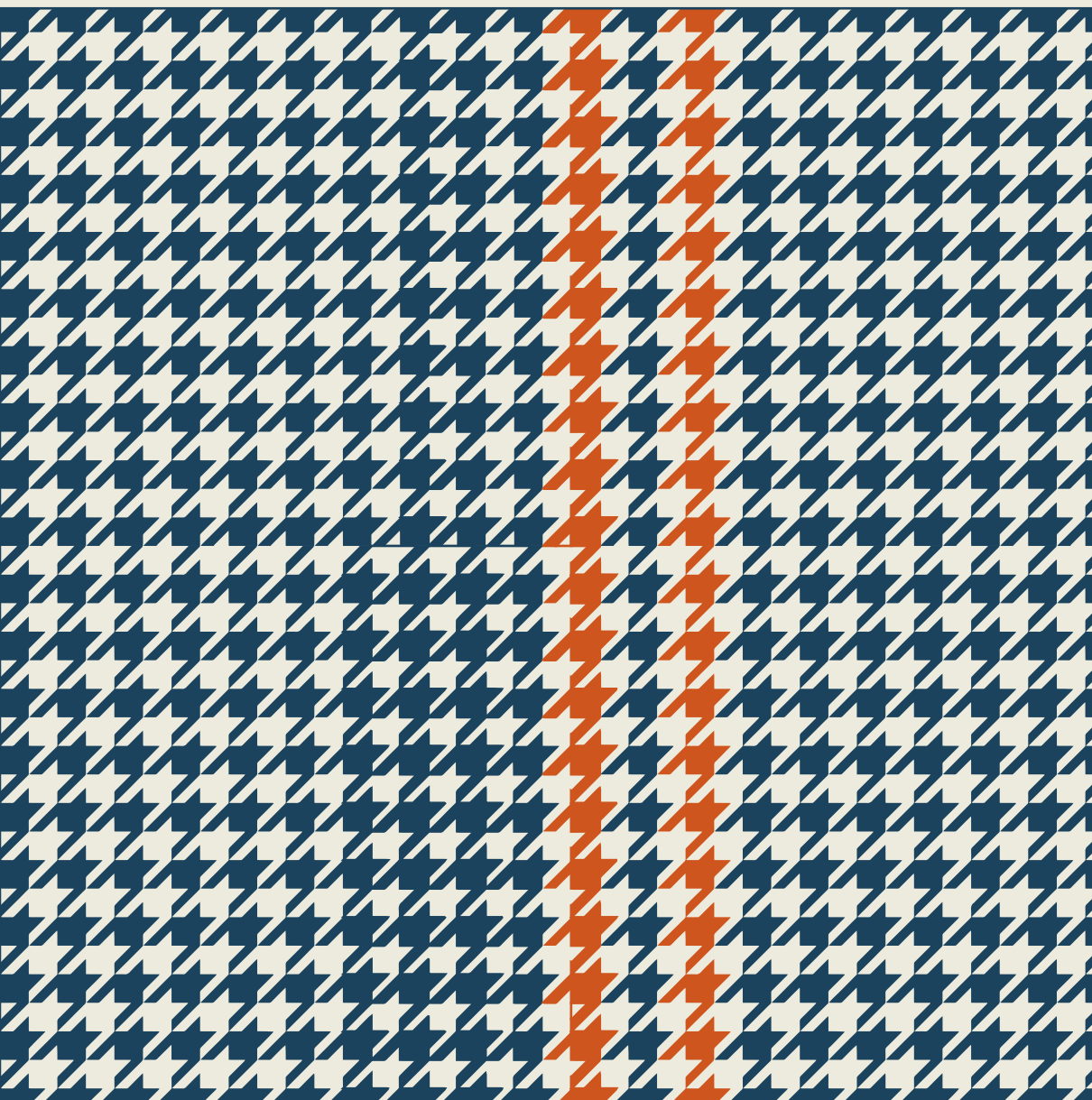
# English Literature

[online] ISSN 2420-823X  
[print] ISSN 2385-1635



**Edizioni**  
Ca' Foscari

Vol. 3 – December 2016



# English Literature

[online] ISSN 2420-823X  
[print] ISSN 1594-1930

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Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing  
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia  
Dorsoduro 3246  
30123 Venezia  
<http://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni/riviste/english-literature/>

# English Literature

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## Table of Contents

### ITALY THROUGH POSTCOLONIAL EYES

#### **Introduction**

Roberta Cimarosti and Flavio Gregori 7

#### **The Poetry of Belonging**

##### **Episodic Memory and Italian and South African Shades**

Chris Mann 21

#### **Modern and Post-Modern Rome in Irish Travel Writing**

##### **An Overview**

Donatella Badin 55

#### **Derek Mahon's Take on Italy**

Irene De Angelis 69

#### **Italy, World War II and South African Poetry**

Marco Fazzini 89

#### **Peter Blum's 'Kaapse Sonette' and**

##### **Giochino Belli's *Sonetti Romaneschi***

##### **From Trastevere to Table Mountain**

Tony Voss 105

#### **Italy in Postcolonial Discourse**

##### **Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje, Nuruddin Farah**

Carmen Concilio 113

<b>From Galileo to Aldo Moro</b> <b>Italian Imagery in Contemporary New Zealand Literature</b> Paola Della Valle	127
<b>Does Italy Need Postcolonial Theory?</b> <b>Intersections in Italian Postcolonial Studies</b> Sandra Ponzanesi, Goffredo Polizzi	145
<b>Post-Colonial Memories</b> Paola Pastacaldi	163

# **Italy Through Postcolonial Eyes**

Edited by  
Roberta Cimarosti



## Introduction

Roberta Cimarosti and Flavio Gregori  
(Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia)

The articles gathered in this issue of *English Literature* originate from a project on the representation of Italy and its culture in the literature, cinema and theatre of the former British colonies and settler colonies (“La rappresentazione dell’Italia e della sua cultura nel cinema e nel teatro delle ex-colonie britanniche, le *settler colonies*, e in opere letterarie di scrittori post-coloniali anglofoni”), funded by the Italian National Research Projects Programme (‘Progetti di Ricerca di Interesse Nazionale’) and carried out in the University of Turin and at Ca’ Foscari University, Venice. In particular, they are the results of the project’s final conference that was held in Venice in October 2013. The conference, entitled *Italy through Postcolonial Eyes*, saw the presence of several scholars in English, Italian and Postcolonial studies, of writers and journalists, including Maaza Mengiste, Igiaba Sciego and Paola Pastacaldi.<sup>1</sup> The articles submitted to this journal went through peer reviewing, in accordance with the journal’s policy, except for the opening chapter by the poet and scholar Chris Zithulele Mann, which was the conference keynote lecture and was revised by the present editors, in collaboration with Mr Mann himself, and the final article by Paola Pastacaldi, which comprises the author’s personal reflections on the Italian colonial enterprise in Africa with regard to her own two novels, *Khadija* and *L’Africa non è nera* (Africa is not Black).

The two main points at issue in the conference were the ways in which Italy has been interpreted through the eyes of contemporary postcolonial literature in English, and Italy’s present postcolonial moment. The former has a well-established tradition in Italy, mainly thanks to the pioneering work done by university research groups that have contributed to interpret and spread both Anglophone postcolonial literature and its sophisticated, revolutionary theoretical thought from the late 80s to our days. The latter point at issue, Italy’s present postcolonial moment, has been brought into focus in more recent times, thanks to the convergence of three main efforts: the work done by scholars of Italian literature and culture based

<sup>1</sup> See the following video interviews: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CM2zgS32pgs>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ke31U3pQxLE>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrfTN1Ag61U> (2017/05/08).



outside of Italy; the new trans-disciplinary research, carried out in Italy and including sociology, anthropology, history, cultural history and literary criticism, which looks at today's Italy through the lenses of established postcolonial theory and discovering a whole latent 'Italian postcolonial paradigm' in the works of Italian philosophers, writers and literary critics; and a new postcolonial literature produced in Italy today by both writers who have a biographical colonial legacy and by writers interested in drawing Italy's postcolonial life. For the first time in Italy, those two points at issue have brought to the foreground the crucial question of how these two traditions may or should dovetail to help us see the wider than national terrain of postcolonial Italy.

Peoples and cultures are the body and soul of a nation, and thrive beyond all the ideologies of nationhood that establish the idea of the nation-state. Not only are a nation's people and culture always manifold and plural, but they spontaneously cross paths, interweave with external cultures and people that impact upon them in chaotic ways, sometimes, if not often, in violent circumstances, after which they coalesce in a normal condition of value-sharing, and of composite continuities. As a result, a nation-state enlarges its boundaries by embracing a wider cultural space that may talk in multifarious languages. It is a space of double translation, because it is made up by the ways foreign visitors have come to understand themselves on a foreign soil by reading it through their own eyes and by articulating it in their own mother tongue; and because, on the other hand, through their language the visitors enlarge the local insight upon 'one's country'. For Italy, they constitute the deeper and truer sense of what Italians are and, finally, of what it means to be one entity, as one and plural.

This issue of *English Literature*, thus, contains precious insights that open up the scenario of a trans-cultural Italy that has been living and thriving over the centuries and needs now to be fully acknowledged. With a slight twist on the adjective, which will be explained below, it can be defined as a 'postcolonial Italy'. Yet, this does not depend so much on the fact that the paradigms of postcolonial theory, as developed in Anglophone studies in relation to Britain's ex-colonial world from the late Eighties (and ideologically rooted in French philosophical thought), have finally landed upon the Italian soil in order to be applied to Italian literature and culture. Rather, the label 'postcolonial Italy' indicates that Italians can now look at their own country with the awareness that its cultural complexity has always exceeded national boundaries for the following basic reasons:

- a. it includes moments in history that are not properly 'Italian' because they long precede national unification (typically the 'Italy' of the ancient Romans, or the 'Italy' of Dante and of the Renaissance);
- b. it includes countries of migration that extended the ideas of Italy and its very territory in the very years of the unification of the

- country: e.g. the floods of migrants, about twenty-seven thousand, that left Italy soon after it became a nation, taking with them the cultures of the regions where they had lived and that would be cultivated overseas; or, in the early decades of the Twentieth Century, the many colonial migrants who settled in the Italian colonies in the horn of Africa;
- c. it includes forms of exile, physical and intellectual, that shaped Italian identity, when it was still in embryo and in its infancy: e.g. Garibaldi's South American exiles and returns to 'Italy' to help unify the country and emblematically settling down in the isle of Caprera; the writers of the Resistance period who, as a way to reject the Fascist regime and its German affiliation, embraced Anglophone literatures and even thought of writing in English, like Beppe Fenoglio or Luigi Meneghello, who moved to Britain, founded an important department of Italian Studies at the University of Reading and continued writing about Italy from a distance, a condition that he defined with the neologism *dispatrio*, which brings with itself the idea of a 'dispersed' homeland;
  - d. it includes that space of 'translation' described before, which has been created by writers who have lived, or still live, in Italy at special moments in the history of our country and of their own homeland, and who have articulated their feelings in relation to both countries, thus engendering a form of belonging that includes Italy, and whose terrain is solidly shaped in their writings.

It is worth saying that one relevant aspect of this 'translational space' includes the writings by representative Italian literati like Giuseppe Ungaretti, who played a prominent role in defining Italian literary identity and whose multiple belonging is seldom considered. In this particular instance, we hardly know that Ungaretti only came to Italy as a 24-year-old man to fight in the trenches of World War I with the declared purpose that his participation in the war would make him become fully Italian and so re-join the motherland that his parents had left when they migrated to Egypt, where his father would work in the construction of the Suez Canal.

This wide geographical, memorial and literary space that has long formed a 'postcolonial Italy' we have yet until today failed to acknowledge. As the last two essays contained in this issue clearly claim, the full recognition and the collective knowledge of this too fragmentarily known postcolonial Italy is the *sine qua non* to understand today's migration. Italians still largely ignore, for instance, that the Africans who so dramatically come to our shores may be escaping from Italy's ex-colonial territories, or that African countries were artificially created by European decisions causing ethnic conflicts and civil wars, and that dictators in Africa were often set in place to serve European countries' interests. On a more general basis,

what we still fail to acknowledge is that Italy is geographically close to Africa and the respective peoples interwove and mixed up during colonial times even against Fascist racial laws, for the simple reason that a likeness appeared to be evident when they started to live together.

Therefore, the articles composing this issue are of two different types. Some delineate the principles that constitute postcolonial Italy (Mann, Ponzanesi-Polizzi, Pastacaldi); the others analyse the ways Italy has been seen through the eyes of Anglophone postcolonial writers (Badin, De Angelis, Fazzini, Voss, Concilio, Della Valle) and, therefore, the very special form of hybridisation that takes place through the encounter of these 'postcolonial Italies' and their readings.

Chris Zithulele Mann's opening article, "The Poetry of Belonging: Episodic Memory and Italian and South African Shades", presents the way in which South African and Italian cultures join and come together by forming a deep relationship, a terrain made of cultural interconnections and individual memories, itself becoming a hybrid place of belonging. This complex space that Mann lays before us is grounded on three main layers of experience and is composed of different temporalities. First, Mann retrieves and thoroughly examines five main aspects of the Italian tradition – language, accounting, religion, war and poetry – which deeply impact upon Zulu culture and daily life in South Africa, determining social development policies and their application. Then, he narrates autobiographical episodes in which he directly experienced each one of the above-mentioned aspects both in South Africa and in Italy. Finally, he turns each one of those episodes into a poem that recapitulates the overall experience. 'Language' is the first aspect of Italian culture that Mann describes as having a crucial impact on South African life. The focus of his attention is the Greek-Latin component of the English language, whose command allows people to efficiently write a formal report, therefore to account for the allocation and management of economics. Having access to the abstract and scientific lexicon and to the syntax forms stemming from Latin and Greek entitles one to master a complex situation, as well as to direct it to pragmatic goals. Italian, having this Greek-Latin structures and mechanisms at core, partakes in the dynamics of large scale societies ruling today's globalised world, in contrast with small scale societies – mostly those of ex-colonised countries – which only can plod slowly after them, also due to the fact that they cannot use the speedy means of a global lingua franca. An episode Mann uses to exemplify this linguistic aspect of the Italian-South African interaction is a meeting of the Valley Trust board to make the point on a water pipe supply project, whose funds had been allocated by an international Christian organisation, after two years of severe drought afflicting the local population, until then using the labour of women carriers to bring water from the spring to the villages. One lesson that Mann wants to bring to our attention is that writers must always be aware of their function in

cultivating the crucial linguistic terrain joining the local and the global together, by grounding the use of a large-scale-society language to local usage, yet remaining rooted in one's country's life and vernacular sources. The English language, just as the pipe water supply in the aforementioned episode, may then be turned to collective use when its local rootedness is made accessible to everyone as a 'lingua franca' through which life is made easier and fully satisfying one's practical needs. This seems to be the very conclusion drawn in Mann's poem, "Taps", which closes this section and stages an exchange between a shopkeeper selling a 'tap' and his customer: "You want a tap? | *Plonk* - that's it, friend".

'Accounting' is the second aspect tackled by Mann's essay. It concerns the invention of the double entry bookkeeping in early Renaissance Italy to serve the needs of large scale trading, particularly in Genoa and Venice, where the first book on this subject was published by Luca Pacioli in 1494. The invention proved to be "a cognitively powerful instrument" that prompted the diffusion of a financial lingua franca through which all commercial enterprises were conceived and accounted for. It brought about a knowledge that proved to be the key for the development of commerce in the Mediterranean trading area and then on a global scale, and that penalised the societies that did not know or did not use it but relied on a barter-based mentality and exchanges, with the consequence that the new system overwhelmed and absorbed them, for the simple reason that all forms of the economy started to be understood and translated into the terms of the new knowledge in which the previous values did not count anymore. The episode Mann uses to describe the impact of such an economic knowledge upon the South African community of the Valley is a road construction project in which the Valley board, including Mann himself, had to write an executive project complete with its estimated costs. Two projects were prepared, one in which machines were used to do the physical work and one in which man labour would be used, the former proving more convenient but the latter more valuable in terms of social employment and monetary distribution. The former, however, was approved and budgeted according to the economic 'ratio' responding to "global accounting standards" which all the funding and institutional authorities in charge relied on. The poem closing this section beautifully shows the irrational result of such rationalisation of costs. It is the common people that pay for it, who cannot afford owning or using vehicles that would run on the finally built road: "And rain has scalloped its ruts and corrugations in the gravels, | [...] but trucks and taxis | are grinding slowly up the curves crowded with people and heaped | with sacks of mealie-meal, bags of oranges, door-frames, | paraffin tins and mattresses".

The third aspect is the religious notion of the 'fellowship of the saints', the *communio sanctorum* established by the Catholic Church which become a syncretic religious practice in South Africa, where it is joined to

Xhosa and Zulu beliefs. It is a community composed of all the believers in hope and love, including the three categories of faithful people, of repenting souls and of saints living in a blessed realm of the spirit. The exemplifying episode that Mann describes is a funeral ceremony for the father of a local school teacher, whose grandfather had implanted the Catholic religion in that region, mingling it with Xhosa and the local beliefs. The episode makes the reader enter a place where, in spite of the fact that the absurdly inhuman laws of Apartheid outrageously divide people, people can meet on a common ground of deeply shared values that consist in a collective belief in a spiritual life joining the dead and the living. This is a rarefied terrain inhabited by “shades”, signposted by traces and fragmentary memories, and whose understanding is tentative and relying on the faith of finding a meaning for them, “a clustering of hints, a presence of clues”, mapped out by the poem concluding this section.

The fourth aspect is ‘war’ and, more extensively, violence as the disruptive consequence of the negative emotions that colonise our inner life, the *terra incognita* that is at the centre of this section, its dynamics involving our emotional and psychic life that is found out to be as cruel and as devastating in both South African and Italian history and societies. The episode exemplifying this aspect is the writer’s visit to the Italian family living in the countryside of Cavarzere, in the Veneto region, who saved his father’s life at the end of World War II. Here, by the Adige river, “signora Angelina” narrates two parallel episodes that opened and closed that war in opposite yet identical ways, in which members of the same community killed each other in the name of the ideals they were fighting for. The Fascists shot some Partisans and threw their bodies into the river; Partisans did the same as a revenge when the war ended. The story reminds Mann of Canto 12 of Dante’s *Inferno* describing the souls of the violent that are punished in a river of boiling blood, the Phlegethon, which Dante and Virgil compare to similarly ragged and slippery banks of the Adige river. It is a turning-point moment, in which Mann absorbs World War II and his father’s experience in his own inner life, as if the vividness of the connection made through Dante had made it substantial, concretely visible and understandable also in terms of the widespread violence of abuse experienced in his South Africa – as if violence could now be seen as something that sadly unifies the two countries. The concluding poem, “In a Field in Italy”, crystallises this moment of high awareness and the fact that it materialises into a piece of common ground where the writer now stands, feeling at home: “The trees are as in his diary. [...] | I’m standing in a field in Italy | trying to grasp what’s happening. The heat off the soil [...] | beats into my face as at home”.

The fifth and last aspect pertains ‘literature’ as a means of retrieving memory, or as bridge-building construction that joins present and past, events and their recollection, the living and the dead, in a meaningful and

self-evident continuum. This is a literary material that is made up of the South African poetic tradition, both oral and written, and of Italian poetry that acknowledges the active presence of the “shades”, i.e. the channels connecting the living with the dead, and as memory’s very means, the pillars of poetic tradition. There are two types of memory, in this respect, Mann explains. One is called ‘semantic’ and the other ‘episodic’. The former consists in the pragmatic knowledge of how things need to be done, including language and numeracy, as simple and complex skills; the latter consists in one’s ability to feel that an experienced situation contains facts that have already happened in one’s lifetime. Our individual memory, therefore, is many-layered and syncretic, and constitutes the material by which we may develop a complex, many-cultured identity.

Donatella Abate Badin’s essay, “Modern and Postmodern Rome in Irish Travel Writing: An Overview”, illustrates the two traditional ways in which Irish writers and intellectuals have looked at Italy over the centuries, from colonial times to the present days, and how four contemporary writers have attempted, and failed, to view Italy from a new perspective, free from past associations. The Irish Catholics have always seen Italy as a refuge, as an idealised homeland where to shelter themselves from the chaotic and tragic conflicts with the Protestants. Rome and the Pope have been ‘their own’ Italy. On the other hand, to Irish Protestants Italy has meant ancient Rome and Neoclassic grandeur, with a wink at their association with the British Empire. A third viewpoint was typical of writers such as Lady Morgan and James Joyce, who developed a critical eye on both things Catholic and (neo)classic, reminding them of the schizophrenic division between the two masters, Church and Empire, in the Irish mentality. This third viewpoint, further developed to fit the contemporary globalised scope, is the one assumed by the four writers Badin focuses on, none of whom, she concludes, manages to produce a convincing new insight on Rome. The writings of Sean O’Faoláin, Elizabeth Bowen, Julia O’Faoláin and Colm Toibin describe a chaotic Rome, where one can hardly find one’s way around, or is caught in its nightmarish traffic, while architectural beauties are lost in the smog. Rome turns out to be the mirror to a contemporary Irish identity that is deeply shaped by globalisation and by a willingness to abandon the trends of its traditional culture as envisioned by the previous Catholic-Protestant divide.

Irene De Angelis’s “Derek Mahon’s Take on Italy” makes us see how Mahon has positioned himself within ‘Irish Italy’ and produced his own ‘film’ about it. De Angelis selects crucial sequences from Mahon’s Italian pieces, the poems written after his four-month stay in Rome, contained in his *Collected Poems* (1999), as well as from Mahon’s versions of Italian and Latin classics contained in his *Adaptations* (2006), ranging from major Latin works to Michelangelo’s *Sonnets*, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, and well-known poems by Saba, Montale and Luzi. The long poem “Roman



Scripts”, from the *Collected Poems*, is the most representative of Mahon’s cinematographic technique and of his view of Italy, and is therefore the object of De Angelis’s scrutiny. Her reading lingers on the central role of Pasolini’s political and aesthetic positions looming large in Mahon’s view. De Angelis explains how “Roman Scripts”, itself being constructed through a specific filmic technique overlapping times and places that move fast and fragmentarily from one to another, is overtly related to Pasolini’s *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (Gramsci’s Ashes), as made evident by a quote from Pasolini’s poem that also opens and closes Mahon’s: “in the refuse of the world a new world is born”. Mahon’s Rome is a non-Catholic city, projecting Pasolini’s locales and people with casual or no attention to the its architecture and glorious past. Classic Rome enters Mahon’s vision only in his *Adaptations*, where excerpts from Ovid, Juvenal, Propertius and Horace are used to translate significant moments of the poet’s life and feelings.

Marco Fazzini’s “Italy, World War II and South African Poetry” focuses on the work of two South African poets, Guy Butler and Chris Mann, and their memories of World War II, experienced directly by Butler and, through his father’s diary, by Mann. In Butler’s case, we read of his ‘pacifist’ attitude during the war (his refusal to take part in any action and his choice of teaching South African poets instead) and of his reasons for joining the British army, i.e. not out of implicit approval of the English Empire to which his country was still affiliated, but out of the will to defeat Nazi-Fascism and racist ideology. Butler had known racism first hand in South Africa where, after World War II he would see it institutionalised with the rise of the Apartheid regime. Back in South Africa where hope had turned into disillusionment, Butler worked for many years reviewing the two poems that he had written while in Italy during the war, *On First Seeing Florence* (1966) and *Elegy for a South African Tank Commander in Action in Italy* (1986), hence working hard on the very terrain of his juvenile ideals and their tragic aftermath. Chris Mann’s view of World War II is analysed through his father’s diary, written in Italian while hiding from the Germans in the Veneto countryside, as we have seen. The diary is representative of the way memories may work indirectly, constructing a vivid sense of past events and shaping one’s life from a distance. Such a remembrance may be appropriated and given a solid substance. This is the fragile ground that emerge in Mann’s poem, *In a Field in Italy*, telling the encounter with the woman who saved his father’s life: “My Italian is rough a slow, | her dialect rapid, | our talk lead to guesses. | Confusion. Laughter | Scraps of knowing. Then gaps...”.

Tony Voss’s compact essay, “From Trastevere to Table Mountain: Peter Blum’s ‘Kaapse Sonette’ and Gioacchino Belli’s *Sonetti Romaneschi*”, presents the way Afrikaans stateless poet Peter Blum wrote nine sonnets in two books of poetry, both published in the 1950s, inspired by Gioacchino Belli’s *Sonetti Romaneschi*. The resulting contrasts between authenticity

and most bleak exploitation, as addressed by both poets, provide Blum with an effective realistic setting to stage the inequalities of the South African state abusing and rejecting its own people. Blum's Roman sonnets are distant 'translations' of the originals and build a discourse about a South African nation, where he had long tried to obtain citizenship until he gave up and settled down in Britain, never becoming a full citizen in either of the countries he lived in.

In Carmen Concilio's essay "Italy in Postcolonial Discourse: Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje, Nuruddin Farah", Italy is presented through the eyes of three major postcolonial novelists, each one opening up the view of important spaces inside our nation through very different experiences of migration. Jhumpa Lahiri's Italy turns out to be a dwelling-place constructed by characters whose diasporic life reflects that of Lahiri herself, triangulating India, the US and Italy. Rome, in particular, becomes the link through which the two previous spaces of belonging can be joined becoming a composite dwelling-place of the mind. In Lahiri's fiction, Rome becomes a city of love in which also the experience of loss is elaborated through the visit to the Etruscan museums in Rome and Volterra, where the funeral monuments of two married couples (one young and happy, the other old and unhappy) give shape to a symbolic turning-point in the construction of the new home. This new home seems to be built on the conviction - inherited, perhaps, from the writer's biographical motherland, India - that one learns to love with time, by facing a sense of 'deadliness' in the first place, because the commingling of life and death, as well as of joy and sadness, is what constitutes home. The elaboration of this mental and emotional condition seems to provide a solution to the disturbing questions that may arise in the life of migrant people. Such questions we hear Lahiri's two protagonists ask and answer after their visit to the Etruscan museum containing the married couple's funerary monument: "They have lived here, in each other's company all their lives. They will die here. I envy them that'. Hema said. 'Do you?' 'I've never belonged to any place that way'. Kaushik laughed. 'You're complaining to the wrong person'". For immigrants, living in a new mother country implies an overlapping of love and death, and requires the acquisition of a new mother tongue that, also, implies a form of death. In her latest fiction in Italian, *In altre parole* (*In Other Words*, 2014), Lahiri describes the way her writing in Italian has been a continuous coming to terms with failures that feel like a kind of death. Writing in Italian is described as walking up and down the bridges of Venice as well as a continuous passage across life and death. In Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Concilio detects an unexplored perspective by following one Indian character's night walk through a part of the countryside at Gabicce Mare, where after the War a cemetery would be erected, one of the several Commonwealth Army's graveyards that exist in Italy, where the soldiers of the Allied Force Army are buried. These



soldiers were implicitly considered to be less important than the soldiers coming from the Commonwealth 'settler colonies' and fighting in the white battalions of British descent; thus, as Concilio makes us notice, even in its Italian World War II graveyards, the Anglophone colonial world reproduced its hierarchies. The Indian soldier in Ondaatje's novel attends a nocturnal procession, during which he understands the true reason why he finds himself fighting in Italy: the hope that India will become independent after the war. Ironically, the reader knows well that what is actually waiting for him back home is the partition of India from Pakistan and the ensuing civil war. Examining Nuruddin Farah's work, Concilio finds that Italy is described mainly in his novel *Gifts* (1993) and in a book of interviews, *Yesterday, Tomorrow. Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000). In the latter, Farah interviews Somali people, momentarily living in Italy to provide themselves financial and educational resources. Two of the interviewed people may have been the inspirational source for the novel's two protagonists, Dunya, a nurse working in a hospital in Mogadishu, and Bosaso, her boyfriend. Thanks to this Somalia-Italy-Somalia trajectory, Farah provides a transitional space that maps out the protagonists' life stories. This space is particularly evident in the life of Dunya's brother Abshir, who still lives in Italy and sends commodities and money back home, thus representing, as Concilio indicates, the contrary movement of goods and people across today's globalised world that move, respectively, from north to south and from south to north. Farah's Italy is made of material things but, as such, it has been known by Somali people since colonial times, when commodities and goods acted as a divide between dominators and subjects: "We weren't allowed to go anywhere near Croce del Sud in the fifties, when the Italians were the master race here. Nor were the waiters allowed to wear shoes". The truth being, however, that the Italians who lived in the African colonies had more similarities with the indigenous population than differences and that artificial lines were needed to mark out differences.

In Paola Della Valle's "From Galileo to Aldo Moro. Italian Imagery in Contemporary New Zealand Literature", two very different ideas of Italy are orchestrated through the readings of works by New Zealand's writers belonging to each one of the traditional sides that have divided the country since colonial times: the indigenous Māori and the Pākehā of British origins. On the one side, Della Valle provides a reading of Witi Ihimaera's Italy, through an excursus into his 'Italian novels', *The Matriarch* (1986) and its sequel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997), and mainly through the opera libretto *Galileo* (1998); on the other side, she also reads Italy-inspired poems in the Pākehā poet Allen Curnow's collection, *An Incurable Music* (1979). They both stage two very different Italies, which are linked (and divided) by a short interlude that discusses World War II Italy as portrayed in the memorial novel *Tu* (2004) by Māori novelist Patricia Grace. As a lead-in to her central reading of the libretto *Galileo*, Della Valle summarises some

conclusions that she drew in previous publications, based on in-depth readings of the above-mentioned novels by Ihimaera and their employment of the Italian opera of the Risorgimento. In the libretto, Galileo's story works as an empowering metaphor of the need to consider Maori knowledge and beliefs as central to New Zealand culture as its Pākehā counterpart is. In the two novels the emotional power of Italian opera that decisively contributed to the success of the Risorgimento is an allegory to talk about the dynamics of nation building in New Zealand. Likewise, the *Galileo* libretto represents the Māori Renaissance fights for civil rights in the 50s and 60s. Della Valle's innovative reading of Ihimaera's *Galileo* shows that its main theme is that of the individual facing society's hegemonic forces by running against the current yet, unlike the Italian Galileo, also by reaching a point where he can offer a compromise: the coexistence of both positions that do not need to be mutually exclusive of one another. Galileo's drama stands for a call to legitimise the Māori culture, although in inverted terms, because, as Della Valle explains, it is their animistic beliefs that ask to be admitted by a society with a scientific and deterministic approach to reality. The next work analysed by Della Valle, Patricia Grace's novel *Tu*, was inspired by her father's war diary that he wrote while in Italy during World War II, when he served in the Māori Battalion, exclusively formed by Māori soldiers, in the New Zealand Division of the British Army. The Māori fought in World War II both to demonstrate their value to their countries and the world, and to see their civil rights recognised once back home from war. Sadly, as Della Valle points out, the very high number of casualties among the Māori soldiers happened because they "took part in the most stupid and meaningless sectors of the whole business". They were relegated to the marginal space they occupied at home also during the war in Italy. This consideration finally introduces to the reading of Curnow's *An Incurable Music*, specifically the Italian poems and their vision of the world as centred on violence. Violence is presented as taking place on three orders of our existence: the natural, the human and the divine. Violence is perpetrated to feed primary, political and religious needs in all times and places. Interestingly, Curnow's collection gives us both the point of view of the murderer and of the victim, as in the case of the poem that closes the collection, inspired by Aldo Moro's assassination, which Curnow happened to follow when he was in Italy during the days of his imprisonment by the Red Brigades. The very concept of 'sacrificial victim', present in human societies from immemorial times, is here being questioned by the victim himself who can only explain his role as the evidence of the limit-edness and lack of humanity of his own 'friends', the people with whom he shared an ideal vision and who gave up on him, "how incredible it is, this punishment". This bitter coda shows how Italy is a central instrument in the depiction of worldwide violence. As Della Valle observes, Italy also provides Curnow with Gothic atmospheres, in his poems that describe

famous murders in Medieval and Renaissance times. Dante's Phlegethon appears here too, as in Mann's essay, to unfold one of the most effective images of brutal violence of all times.

Sandra Ponzanesi and Goffredo Polizzi's contribution, "Does Italy Need Postcolonial Theory? Intersections in Italian Postcolonial Studies", provides the theoretical core of this issue and a positive answer to the question it raises. Italy does need postcolonial theory if it is understood as a means by which Italians come to see the specific features that have composed the country's postcolonial identity, over the centuries and especially around the years of national unification. Ponzanesi and Polizzi urge us to reflect that it is in the nature of postcolonial theory to work by ways of 'returns' to the country where some of its nuclear ideas had originated, to act on them anew, in more effective ways and through additional insights acquired abroad. Postcolonial theory's concepts are rooted and generated in many countries and at very different moments in history. In their multifarious combinations its concepts travel and change forms, acquiring wider meanings than they had been intended to have when firstly conceived and articulated. In this uncannily old and new form, postcolonial principles 'return' and enable to better focus on Italy's prismatic and hybridised identity. By contrast, when intellectuals fail to see that these 'returns' had always been in Italy, yet not quite, and that this latter side of the issue makes all the difference, then self-assertive and obtusely nationalistic conclusions come about to dismiss the need of a postcolonial critique, similar to that provided by Bayard's famous essay, which Ponzanesi and Polizzi confute in order to pinpoint the danger of taking a similar position in Italy. Just as French intellectuals, as Bayard's claims, developed philosophical concepts of postcolonial critique, so did the Italians, who could even boast having contributed seminal principles to the postcolonial critical domain. However, it is by applying these principles in their 'return journey' back to Italy and in their interplay with the wider postcolonial paradigm that their application may work as a mirror up to what Italians are. That being the case, what is it that constitutes the Italian 'mirror'? Ponzanesi and Polizzi give us an answer in five points. First, it is thinkers as different and distant in times as Giambattista Vico, Antonio Gramsci and Primo Levi, whose thought may be defined as 'postcolonial' for the reason that it has helped form the postcolonial paradigm abroad. Second, it is the historical presence of social and ethnic divisions that have created chronic north-south divide that has long split up the nation but that has recently been the object of theoretical reformulations in the so-called *Pensiero Meridiano*, and is at the core of Mediterranean Studies that relate the south to the 'postcolonial Mediterranean space' rather than to Europe. Third, it is the diasporic nature of Italy that became mostly manifest in the years of the Risorgimento when, just as the nation was unified, it was also taken apart by massive migration to the horn of Africa and to the Americas, by which

very different Italian regional realities were exported and maintained elsewhere, so that very different ideas around what it means to be Italian were elaborated from a distance. The removal of these Italian diasporas is one of the main causes for the present inability, in Italy, to cope with migration from Africa, because such a cancellation is the missing link that impedes us to see the logic by which today's facts connect with the past, with the result that "recognition, hospitality, and integration" become even cognitively unthinkable. Ponzanesi and Polizzi maintain that this is not simply a form of "amnesia", the ignorance of historical facts, but a form of collective "aphasia", i.e. a lack of knowledge that causes difficulties both to match 'things' with the words and notions that define them, as well as to concretely understand what one is being told. The fourth point Ponzanesi and Polizzi examine is the history of Italian racialism that produced specific subjects of discrimination, such as the southerner and the colonial other (around the unification period), the Jew (during the later fascist years), and the southern migrant (after World War II). The histories of those figures fracture the Italian national space and its narration to these very days. Finally, the fifth point is constituted by today's Italian intellectuals who are taking upon themselves the task of articulating these conceptual returns.

The volume significantly concludes with the novelist and journalist Paola Pastacaldi's reflections "Post-colonial Memories", which focuses on her two post-colonial novels, *Khadija* (2005) and *L'Africa non è nera* (*Africa is not Black*, 2014), set in colonial Ethiopia and Eritrea where the two main branches of Pastacaldi's family (her two grandfathers) lived. Crucially, the main focus of her reflections is the process of memory retrieval and of historical remembrance through research in both institutional and private archives, in quest of a colonial knowledge that is still elusive and, thus, hard to grasp and to articulate. As Pastacaldi writes, when her first novel came out, despite the fact that it was very well received, "the essence of the subject [she] dealt with was not fully recognized". The encounter of Italians, Eritreans and Ethiopians, as well as what it meant to her family, to herself and to Italy, were not understood by the Italian readership. In this respect, Pastacaldi points at the "hiatus" that impedes present understanding of the direct link between Italian colonialism and African dictatorships, as well as the comprehension of the reasons why African escape from their countries. Her novels break new ground or, better, break old ground anew, partaking in the formation of a new Italian genre in fiction, the 'colonial memoirs' that certainly can be one starting point from which to reconstruct one missing part of our complex identity. *Khadija*, her first novel of this kind, tells us the story of her Ethiopian grandmother. She married her grandfather who had escaped from Livorno where he had killed a man in a duel. The story portrays this Ethiopian-Italian woman who also looms large in some of the pages of Pastacaldi's second African novel, *L'Africa non è nera*. Its provocative title foregrounds the disastrous

and ridiculous ambitions of Fascist Italy that dreamt of extending its territory in Africa, but also of hard-working average people who migrated to Eritrea believing it could become their own new land. In Asmara, we meet Pastacaldi's grandfather, a road-constructor who migrated from Treviso, but also her mulatto father, the younger son of Khadija (who moved from Ethiopia to Eritrea when her Italian husband died) who got married, though unhappily, to Pastacaldi's mother, when she was in Asmara to visit her father. The story ends with the young couple splitting up: she returns to Italy while he stays on in free Asmara, nourishing growing resentments against the Italian invaders and confessing to have always loved only one woman, his mother Khadija. However, it is by reading these family stories with their psychological and emotional situations that we start filling up our memory gaps. Finally, what Pastacaldi's novels reveal is that, besides postcolonial critique, Italy needs its own postcolonial literature, written in a new Italian language, with its own views and scenarios and new ways to look at who Italians are and where they live: indeed a country 'seen through postcolonial eyes'.

# The Poetry of Belonging Episodic Memory and Italian and South African Shades

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**Abstract** The essay develops a postcolonial perspective on Italy and South Africa based on the writer's experience of rural developmental work among predominantly Zulu-speaking people and on five main points of connection between that specific locale and the Italian cultural horizon, from Roman times to World War II: Language, Accounting, Spirituality, War and Literature. Central to this cross-cultural encounter is the writer's direct and intimate involvement in both cultural spheres and the way this is representative of the working of 'episodic memory', i.e. the psychic mechanism by which moments and people of the past are made to live again in one's inner world in the guise of 'shades' and crucially contribute to shape one's sense of belonging. This is a phenomenon that literature has always known, and which this essay exemplifies also by means of original poems that complement the theoretical insights exposed on pre- and post-colonial Italy and its connection with contemporary South Africa.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Language and the Construction of a Piped-Water Supply. – 3 Accounting, Money and the Construction of a Road. – 4 *Communio sanctorum* and the Ancestral Shades of Southern Africa. – 5 War in Italy, Dante and a Tree by the Adige River. – 6 Literature and Italian and South African Shades. – 6.1 Episodic Memory and the Shades. – 6.2 A Definition of Episodic Memory. – 6.3 A Definition of the Shades Based on Neural Science. – 6.4 A Post-Colonial View of the Shades in Dante. – 7 Conclusion.

**Keywords** Zulu. South Africa. Dante. World War II. Memory. Shades.

## 1 Introduction

In this essay I would like to take a post-colonial perspective, based primarily on my experience of rural developmental work in Southern Africa, and on five aspects of Italy, namely language, accounting, spirituality, war and literature. My approach will be that of a writer whose vocation is poetry. I will thus ground my insights on significant experiences and include a poem in each section. The experiences are drawn from work on poverty alleviation and development projects among predominantly Zulu-speaking people in rural and peri-urban Southern Africa, which took place over fifteen years. They are also based on encounters with the family who hid

my father in Italy during the war and on my current work as founder and convenor of Wordfest, a national multilingual festival of South African literature with a developmental emphasis.

## 2 Language and the Construction of a Piped-Water Supply

In all its diversity, the Italian language is inextricably bound up with the Greek and Latin of the Roman Empire. In this first recall of a significant experience, I would like to narrate an incident that reveals the role of Graeco-Latin in development.

Imagine, if you will, a meeting in a small hall on a Friday evening on the edge of the Valley of a Thousand Hills on the peri-urban fringe of the city of Durban in 1986. The valley is home to about 120,000 primarily Zulu speaking people and immigrants from other areas who are constrained to live there because of the apartheid legislation currently in force. Since the valley is deemed to be a part of KwaZulu, it falls under a so-called homeland government. The local authority is based on customary law and a hereditary *inkosi* (clan leader or chief). Despite the growing population, there is a lack of basic services such as water and sanitation, health, water and education in sharp contrast to the nearby suburbs and industrial areas where many of the people are employed as factory workers and domestic servants. Such is the disparity of income and service levels and the valley makes one think of Lazarus lying at Dives' gate. The meeting is taking place next to the clinic in the grounds of The Valley Trust, a socio-medical community and research-based organisation founded in 1948 by a visionary doctor. The trust's original focus on primary health care, nutrition education and small-scale vegetable production projects has expanded in terms of its holistic philosophy to include the training of community health workers, school-building and preschool projects, the development of democratic local government structures, labour-intensive infrastructure projects, sanitation and spring protection, and the training of community health-workers. Those who attend the meeting are Valley Trust employees and members of the Qadi-Nyuswa Development and Services Board. They include a shopkeeper, a catechist, a school principal, a clan *induna* (headman), and similar prominent local people elected at a community meeting the year before. They are all males, volunteers and church-goers.

A severe drought had afflicted the valley in 1984. Local people used to rely on springs in the hillsides where women and girls would collect water in buckets and carry it home on their heads, often walking long distances. The portage of water and firewood within that culture is one of the major physical restrictions on women's development. Queues for water at such springs began well before dawn. Such water was contaminated with high levels of *ecoli*. The *per capita* water consumption was significantly below



the World Health Organisation's minimum requirement for health. Time and again local people had asked the Trust to make piped water available in the valley (Mann 1985). The drought enabled Valley Trust officials to persuade the local regional water board to break with apartheid and supply bulk water to the valley on humanitarian grounds. The board would not fund the cost of the infrastructure. The Valley Trust raised the funds for the infrastructure from World Vision, an international Christian organisation. There were no evangelical conditions to the grant. The project involved digging the pipeline by hand to provide temporary employment to several hundred people, and the employment of some twenty standpipe attendants.

The report-back meeting was conducted in Zulu, followed a standard agenda and began with the usual extended and fervent prayer. In South Africa 'isiZulu' or 'isiXhosa' would be used to denote the language but 'Zulu' and 'Xhosa' will be used in context here. After 'Matters arising' had been dealt with, the manager of the pipeline began his report. Distribution was based on metered stand-pipes located along the sprawl of roads into the valley where the stand-pipe attendants issued water in exchange for tokens purchased at local stores. The manager's report comprised a series of anecdotes in which he described what had happened at each of the stand-pipes during the week. Members of the board asked him to speed up his report, to no avail. Stand-pipe by stand-pipe, incident by incident, in down-to-earth Zulu and in painstaking detail he told the Board about cash-boxes, floats, tokens, meter-readings and the illness or no-show of different attendants. Members of the board slumped on their chairs as the night wore on. Then, what struck me that evening, more forcibly and clearly than previously, was the fact that the manager lacked – owing to a number of factors, including the discriminatory and reductive educational policies of the apartheid regime and the mode of Zulu he used – a language in which the particular could be quickly made more general, and in which a specific event could be linked to similar specific events in a way that revealed a pattern of behaviour among individuals, i.e. a pattern that would induce meaning and corrective action in terms of the aims of the project.

The one closest at hand was English, the language of the colonial power that had conquered the Zulu kingdom in the previous century and whose economic dominance continued. As secretary of the meeting, I listened to the discussion in Zulu and took the minutes. Since I was not sufficiently competent in Zulu to do otherwise, I wrote in English, inevitably missing much of the details and nuances of the board members. Thus, I transposed the language of the indigene into that of the coloniser. Later, I wrote a portion of an imagined set of minutes to act as an illustrative metonymy of what regularly occurred. The committee agreed that the manager and the attendants required experience in administering the project. Secondly, the terms and conditions of their employment and the regulations governing the distribution of water required a revision. The edited document would



be prepared by the development agency, approved and amended where necessary by the development and services board and communicated to the stand-pipe attendants in detail at an in-service training course. The treasurer and financial manager then confirmed that they would prepare an income and expenditure account, a balance sheet as well as a summary of the capital expenditure and would submit this to the office of the South African Receiver of Revenue. Where is Italy in all this, you may well ask. Speakers of Italian may not be familiar with the history of the English language. This history is inextricably influenced by the Roman conquest and colonial occupation of Britain (45 BCE to 410 CE) and, linguistically more significant, the Norman invasion and occupation (1066-1154). In both cases, the language of conquest and administration included a vast array of abstract nouns and verbs. In the first instance, these were Latin, in the second the Latin was absorbed into early French. Both of these languages also carried forward the originating Greek terms that Latin had absorbed. As a matter of fact, the minutes I took in English during that meeting were dominated by words absorbed from Latin, as is the Italian of today:

La commissione ha concluso che il dirigente e gli assistenti non avevano l'esperienza necessaria per amministrare il progetto.

In secondo luogo, le condizioni e i termini del loro impiego e le norme che governavano la distribuzione dell'acqua dovevano essere riviste.

Il documento revisionato sarebbe stato preparato dall'agenzia per lo sviluppo, approvato e modificato ove necessario dalla commissione per lo sviluppo e i servizi, e comunicato dettagliatamente agli assistenti del serbatoio durante un corso di aggiornamento sul lavoro.

Il tesoriere e il direttore finanziario hanno poi confermato che avrebbero preparato un resoconto delle entrate e delle uscite, un foglio di bilancio così come un riassunto delle spese del capitale e avrebbero consegnato tutto ciò all'Ufficio delle Entrate sudafricano.

Here now is the English version, with the words of a Graeco-Latin origin underlined:

The committee agreed that the manager and the attendants required experience in administering the project.

Secondly, the terms and conditions of their employment and the regulations governing the distribution of water required revision.

The edited document would be prepared by the development agency, approved and amended where necessary by the development and services board and communicated to the stand-pipe attendants in detail at an in-service training course.

The treasurer and financial manager then confirmed that they would prepare an income and expenditure account, a balance sheet as well as

a summary of capital expenditure and would submit this to the office of the South African Receiver of Revenue.

It is significant that almost the only substantive word that is not written in the imported language of administration is 'water'. Most of the members of the Board were, as a matter of fact, competent in the use of English and the minutes I wrote in English were welcomed by them and crucial to the management of the improved though imperfect water supply to the people in the valley. In contexts outside the meeting, the language of the people on the board oscillated, in fact, from the *lingua franca* of administration to the language of the indigenes, which is a widespread practice observable in post-liberation South Africa, and expressed in the frequent use of mid-sentence code switching from one language to another.

How is this to be interpreted? One useful model of understanding that is still of value is provided by Monica Wilson, a prominent social anthropologist whose fieldwork was based in Southern and Central Africa. She argued that a necessary, though not complete, understanding of post-colonial societies requires an analysis of their change of scale. The change, in her terms, is from small-scale, village societies to larger scale societies. The latter societies are characterised by extensive systems of literacy and numeracy, a wider range of impersonal relationships than those found in clans and chieftainships as well as less local and more universal institutions of law, governance, money, trade and religion. This model of change complements and does not replace existing models of understanding, namely the discourses of politics and economics, gender and race (Wilson 1945; 1971). In some but not all ways, Wilson's model makes good what I call the *lingua franca lacunae* of post-colonial discourse. By this I mean the omissions in understanding what occurs when post-colonial scholars attempt to make sense of cultures other than their own using the language of the coloniser with scant or no reference to the culture-embedded language of the transitional society being researched. A shallow and romantic view of small-scale village societies can be the result. From a post-colonial perspective, then, based on the self-limited purview of the above experience, contemporary Italian is seen as a language of a large-scale society. Many of its Graeco-Latinate abstractions were absorbed into English following the Roman and Norman conquests of small-scale British clans. The British Empire in turn used those characteristics in the administration and development of the institutions of smaller scale societies it conquered and colonised. Such a *lingua franca* may provide access to power and social mobility to individuals in small scale societies. It enables them to enter the multiple dimensions of what I would call a larger scale linguisphere. It may also serve to alienate such individuals from their cultural heritage and to set up a lifelong inner tension between small-scale and large-scale values. For users of Italian in general, the perspective clarifies the extent

to which a large-scale society language is part of everyday Italian. For writers, as distinct from administrators, it emphasises how important it is to continue to keep texts grounded in the nouns and verbs and idiomatic metaphors of interpersonal colloquial usage.

Taps

What a piece of handiwork's a tap!

You ask for one inside a hardware shop,  
it's plonked on the counter.

*Plonk.*

'Will that be cash, friend, or on account?'

That's it - no mention of its origins,  
not a single thought about the webbed complexities  
of miners, crusher plants, furnaces and hazardous dumps,  
of labs and factories,  
of credit schemes, companies, trucks and roads  
that bring it spigot and all to that counter in the hills.

You want a tap?

*Plonk* - that's it, friend.

Consider too what pushes up and out of taps,  
which shoots and glitters forth  
and overflows a cup, a pot,  
a pair of cupped and dusty hands.

No need to heave across hot hills for that,  
no queuing till midnight with buckets round a toxic ooze,  
no sloshing into shackland rivers with a rusty tin.

So bless the manufacturers of taps I say,  
the water-board officials and the engineers,  
the clouds that rain into the reservoirs,  
and the men and women sweating in a trench with picks  
so pipe after light-blue polyvinyl chloride pipe  
laid end to end, for miles and miles  
will bring a tap to every house across a thousand hills.

Taps!

Would that a cool and glittering strand of water  
gushing from a sturdy brass domestic figurine  
could overflow each pair  
of cupped and dusty hands on earth.  
(Mann 2010, 110-1)

### 3 Accounting, Money and the Construction of a Road

The second significant experience links the financing of a road building project in the Valley of a Thousand Hills down the convoluted corridors of history to cognitive increases in scale in medieval Venice and Florence. The holistic model of development implemented by The Valley Trust during my tenure as Operations Director was based on a version of Maslow's well-known pyramid of human needs. Rather than impose projects, the Trust would, where practicable, respond to needs expressed by people in the valley for health care, education, water, sanitation, food and employment. This stretched our organisation immensely.

In 1986, a group of people from an inaccessible part of the valley approached The Valley Trust asking for a road to be built. The need was expressed in a memorable sentence along the lines of *Kunzima ukuham-bisa ugogo ngebhala e-clinic uma egula* (when Grandma's ill, it's hard to push her to the clinic in a wheelbarrow). This prompted discussions with Robert McCutcheon, a civil engineer who had gained extensive experience in labour-based road construction funded by the International Labour Organisation in Kenya and Botswana. With the assistance of another civil engineer, Robert Little, I cost out two models of construction, one that relied on machines and the other on manual labour. I was then able to complete two sets of accounts that set out the anticipated income and expenditure of the project using standard accounting categories. The labour-based model was 10 to 15% more expensive than the one that used machines. I can remember sitting in my office late one afternoon looking at the numbers in dismay. Material poverty was rife in the valley, and hundreds, if not thousands, of people were desperate for paid employment. There was no way in which the quantum of the value of the work to the prospective individual employees could be brought to account.

I then prepared a cost-benefit analysis. Although this was more inclusive of non-material and second level values such as access to the clinic, social cohesion and the payment of school fees for children of employees, it relied upon subjective assessment. I was cognitively at a dead end. It was obvious that the labour-based model had more worth and would generate more value from the investment, at least within the human parameters of

people in the valley, but I was unable to bring that to account within the conventional format of number-based accounting.

Given our limited managerial resources, we eventually settled on an income-enhancement project that would offer part-time piece-work to about 250 people over a period of three to four months. Costs were met by a grant from an unemployment relief fund administered by the Department of Manpower. Lingering idealistic doubts about the value of the project to the employees were removed by post-construction evaluations that were uniformly positive (Mann, Myeni 1990).

'The Thokoza (*Be Joyful*) Road project' was one of the several pilot projects that led, together with the change of government in 1994, to an expanded public works programme. These were funded by international aid organisations such as the ODA (Britain) and local development foundations such as the Donaldson Trust. This approach to employment provision, well documented by World Bank studies in other parts of the developing world, was heralded by political leaders in South Africa as a major contribution to the reduction of the unemployment crisis in the country as a whole. Government then set up a programme to provide jobs to a million people. It cost over R40 billion (about 3 billion euros). There were decidedly mixed results, which led to widespread and realistic scepticism about the capacity of the new government to manage a scheme of this magnitude. The worth of such an approach was lost in the maladministration, corruption and political rhetoric that followed (McCutcheon et al. 2012).

Accounting assigns numbers to economic goods and activities in terms of values generated within specific socio-historical contexts. It orders and presents the numbers in complex arithmetical systems governed by rules issued by regulatory authorities.

This format is standardised by an organisation based in London known as the International Financial Standards Board. In many ways its work is an astonishingly successful intellectual triumph since it provides a generally accepted financial *lingua franca* for widely different economies and cultures around the world. The format is not completely fixed, but subject to continual adjustment and reform by the representatives of participating countries. The founding definitions of the regulations that govern the International Reporting Financial Standards distinguish between assets and liabilities. Prominent among the latter are employees. People, in other words, are from the start defined as a cost to business. The current format, furthermore, omits any reference to the impact of the economic activity on the environment. This has serious ecological consequences. The time frames for financial reporting (typically quarterly and annual sets of accounts), within an investment culture hungry for short-term profit, also by definition exclude the worth of ecologically sustainable commercial and industrial enterprises that earn a lower return for investors. As a matter of fact, with the revolution in digital technology and the Internet,

accounting can now provide a continuous flow of data. A multinational retailer, for example, is now able to view a daily balance. This is a narrow and misleadingly precise construction of value, given the long time-spans of evolution, the escalating growth in the population of our species, and its increasingly destructive impact on the biosphere.

Where is Italy in all this, you may well ask. Accounting evolves out of pre-literate, small scale barter economies with the cognitive development of a number of systems of symbolical thinking, ranging from writing and numbering to the coins of money. More than seven thousand years ago, for example, comprehensive accounts were kept by the Sumerians. The Code of Hammurabi of Babylon (2285-2242 BCE) set out the legal requirements for reporting. The accounts of the Chao Dynasty in China (1122-256 BCE) were a comprehensive and systematic ordering of economic activities that include allocating income and expenditure to a number of different monetary funds, periodic reporting and auditing. A similar exact control of resources is observable in the accounts kept by Zenon (c. 256 BCE), an administrator who managed the agricultural estate of Apollonius, in effect the finance minister of the Greek colony of Egypt. Zenon's accounting officers recorded even the cost of used nails. Roman households were required to keep accounts that were used for the assessment of taxes. Augustus Caesar implemented an annual budget, but the accounting records of the Roman Empire have not survived as they were inscribed on wax-covered wooden tablets. In general, accounting in such societies amounts to the assemblage of inventories of economic transactions. These enable proprietors, be they individuals or institutions, to assert control over people and other material economic goods, and in the case of government, to extract and distribute tax in a systematic way.

Why then is the development of double-entry book-keeping such a formative change in economic activity, and why did it happen in northern Italy? The implications of the change cannot be underestimated. Luca Pacioli (1445-1517) summarised the characteristics and application of double-entry book-keeping in a book published in Venice in 1494 entitled *Summa de Arithmetica, Geometria, Proportioni et Proportionalita*. Chatfield in his authoritative *A History of Accounting Thought* states that "accounting history divides into two distinct parts, one comprising the 5000 years before the appearance of double entry and the other the 500 years since then" (Chatfield 1977, 4; see also Davies 2002, 1-65).

It does scant justice to the sophistication of the medieval mind to summarise the changes here but let me outline the differences using a small-scale society perspective. An economic transaction in a small scale barter economy could be characterised as leading to an oral agreement between two people. Such transactions, rendered to writing, evolve into inventory accounting. This acts as an *aide mémoire* so that a number of different transactions that occur over time can be recalled without dispute by both

parties to the transaction. What might have been a couple of spoken sentences and a handshake in an oral economy is transcribed, in greater and greater complexity as transactions increase in number and size, onto tablets of clay, scrolls of papyrus, a waxed tablet, sheets of paper in books or the molecules of silicon chips.

An innovation is required when individuals initiate a greater number of transactions with a larger number of other people over longer periods of time - when, for example, a trader does not merely exchange a basket of apples for a pouch of salt but a shipload of olives, cloth, wine, jewellery and dried figs for silks, spices, emoluments and wheat in different ports in transactions handled by different agents using different currencies. In this case, inventories by themselves are not sufficient to understand and control the number and complexity of the transactions. The innovation, in the case of double entry book-keeping, is induced by complexity and is a consequential increase in cognitive scale.

The transactions require, first of all, a reduction to a monetary value expressed in numerical symbolism and capable of computation by means of arithmetic. The duality, and not just the singularity, of each transaction needs to be perceived, analysed and recorded in monetary terms. The singular events - recorded in what is known today as the journal in accounting parlance - require interpretation and transposition into a nominal account known as the ledger. Then, these are entered into two different vertical columns headed 'Debits' and 'Credits'. These numbers, when brought to a trial balance on a separate sheet of paper as recommended by Paciola, allow the proprietor to see at a glance where the quantum of transactions is heading. What socio-economic events induced this cognitive breakthrough? The precipitating event was the capture of Jerusalem by the Turks in 1075. Over the next three hundred years, the Crusades that followed brought in their wake an unprecedented expansion in economic activity in the Mediterranean as the trade between Europe and the Middle East increased (Littleton 1981, 17). The Italian cities of Venice and Genoa, which acted as intermediaries, soon achieved dominance in the fields of trading and banking.

No longer could the existing record keeping of a company keep track of the implications of the sum of all transactions, which might have been possible in the past when the proprietor considered these prior to making a business decision. Not only had the range of goods increased, but proprietors also employed agents in foreign ports and entered into complex partnerships with other traders as well as bankers, venture capitalists and ship owners. In addition to double-entry book-keeping, other innovations in the instruments of trade included draft bills of exchange, marine insurance codes, mercantile law and innovative methods of credit formation. Other factors were the growth of literacy and numeracy among the merchants themselves, the invention of adjustable type and the rapid adaption of Ara-



bic numerals. The Greek and Roman symbolical representations of number were clumsy in comparison to the Arabic system. Within one generation of its exposition by Leonardo of Pisa in 1202, Arabic numerals were widely used by merchants in Italy (Chatfield 1977, 33). The earliest records of medieval accounting are patchy. There is evidence of rudimentary double entry book-keeping in the ledger of the Farolfi company in Florence in 1299. The oldest surviving evidence of such book-keeping by a city are the Massari accounts kept by the city of Genoa from 1340. The first recorded evidence of double entry book-keeping in Venice can be found in the accounts of Donaldo Soranzo and Brothers in 1410 (Chatfield 1977, 35).

In the absence of similar evidence from elsewhere in Europe or the Mediterranean region, it is a defensible surmise that double entry book-keeping developed by fits and starts in a number of companies and cities from the thirteenth century onwards in northern Italy. Pacioli's work summarised and ordered most, but not all, existing practices, was translated within a few years into five European languages and had a widespread influence. It is remarkable how little the principles of book-keeping laid down by him have changed in the five hundred years since the publication of the book (Chatfield 1977, 49).

From a post-colonial perspective, it is apparent that this form of accounting is a cognitively powerful instrument. As more and more economic activities, goods and services are commodified and allocated a monetary value, and as ownership is depersonalised through the issues of shares, so do firms grow beyond the limited human capabilities of the individual proprietor. Barter economies had little defence against the behemoth of manufactured and agricultural goods, the capital, technology and accounting brought into productive and extractive array by the companies of the nineteenth century. These contributed significantly to the mercantile expansion and the dominance of Europe in other continents. Given its origins in the commercial boom in the Mediterranean regions in the Middle Ages, could this be otherwise? Initiatives have intensified over the last few decades to make accounting more comprehensive and less simplistic, by, for example, providing triple-bottom line annual accounts. These offer investors a summary of the financial, ecological and human value of a company's activities over the accounting period. Such modifications offer a more human and ecologically sustainable 'number-fication' and 'money-fication' of values than the present format provides. At present, however, such innovations are only weakly and intermittently successful, given the global dominance of financial and material values.

From a post-colonial perspective, then, Italy's innovations in financial accounting standards and banking in medieval times significantly contributed to the development of the global accounting standards now in use around the world. The impact of the rigorous materialism of such accounting systems on the people of small-scale post-colonial societies continues



to be devastating. Reform is urgently needed. Without it the employment of machines and not people in places of poverty and unemployment will, according to the format of contemporary accounting, remain an irrational choice, whether in Africa or Italy.

### Thokoza Road

Rain on a road up a rural hillside,  
I'm walking there slowly with friends,  
walking its memory as I dream,  
tasting once again the sweat,  
the dust, the pride of its making,  
its light brown, sinuous corners  
rising through gullies of thorn,  
green thickets of bush, a sprinkle  
of salt-white goats, to mist  
along a ridge of dolomite rock,  
that hunger, that urge of our youth  
to be up and always doing,  
quiescent, becoming instead  
a mild, unspoken exhilaration.

And here's that culvert's arch,  
its masonry now tufted with grass,  
that stream still chewing its base,  
whose levels we struggled to find,  
and here is one of the pegs,  
that rusty remnant in a donga,  
hammered in to set the camber,  
and there, scored in a cutting  
the myriad marks of the picks,  
the whole wall of the cutting  
a frieze, a testimony in stone  
to those who'd laboured here,  
day after day, in dust and heat,  
so many summer-times ago.

And rain has scalloped its ruts  
and corrugations in the gravel,  
that tricky cross-fall is still  
too steep, but trucks and taxis  
are grinding slowly up the curves  
crowded with people and heaped  
with sacks of mealie-meal,

bags of oranges, door-frames,  
paraffin tins and mattresses.

While we, like shades come back  
to visit their places of toil,  
are walking Thokoza Road,  
our voices, that hunger stilled,  
content enough to remark,  
'This road was needed, was built  
by hand, in summer's heat.  
You who travel its surface  
be glad to find its artistry here.'  
(Mann 2010, 112-3)

#### 4 *Communio sanctorum* and the Ancestral Shades of Southern Africa

The significant experience on which I am going to base the observations of this section was prompted by a ritual ceremony. Over the years, I had got to know a local primary school headmaster known in the valley as 'Thisha Ngcobo'. He and his family lived in a modest house in the Qadi Tribal Authority area on a jutting spur of land that had a spectacular view of the valley down to the UmNgeni River far below. His grandfather had been a catechist who had established the Catholic church near his home. He was married to a Xhosa-speaking nurse who worked at the Valley Trust clinic.

Thisha Ngcobo invited me and my wife, the artist Julia Skeen, to a widely practised ritual ceremony known as *ukwambula itshe* (unveiling the stone, i.e. the tombstone of a relative, in this case his father). We took the invitation to be an honour, given the continuing repression, the tension and violence of the 1980s in South Africa as the struggle against apartheid intensified. It was also significant because we would be attending a public manifestation of what we had read about and often discussed with people in the valley, namely the importance ascribed to the continuing influence of the *amadlozi* (ancestral shades) in the day-to-day lives of ordinary people. I can remember very little of the physical details of the event. I can see the new fence erected around the family graveyard, the house of the teacher and the nearby church built by his father, the parked cars, the large number of people attending the ceremony, and the exuberant singing and *ingoma* dancing after the meal. The rest is infill, realistic suppositions drawn from vivid experiences elsewhere, from details found in the poem I wrote shortly after the event and from aspects of the painting by my wife. I am being deliberately laconic and inconsequential to realistically convey

how little I remember now. The painting shows the grave with the grey headstone still wrapped in a white sheet, the son of the deceased standing nearby in a suit and tie, choir-boys in red cassocks and white surplices, one holding a crucifix, and a priest in a white cassock swinging a censer as he blesses the headstone. In the background are people of all ages, pressing against the fence. I cannot remember what the priest said but I do remember something of his voice. Zulu is a tonal language, with few gutturals. The priest was Irish. He spoke a beautifully modulated bi-tonal tongue. What was happening below the surface appearances of this event? The priest had worked for years among Zulu-speaking congregations, and it would be safe to assume that he knew the significance of the ancestral shades to them. In this case both the deceased had been significant members of the Catholic Church, and therefore it was doctrinally possible for him to perceive them as members of the *communio sanctorum* that the Catholic Encyclopedia defines as follows:

The communion of saints is the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the same mystical body under Christ its head, and in a constant interchange of supernatural offices. The participants in that solidarity are called saints by reason of their destination and of their partaking of the fruits of the Redemption (1 Corinthians 1:2 Greek Text). The damned are thus excluded from the communion of saints. The living, even if they do not belong to the body of the true Church, share in it according to the measure of their union with Christ and with the soul of the Church. (*Encyclopedia catholica*, 3205)

My memory of the details of the ritual ceremony may have faded, but what I carry forward now is an understanding of how significant the event was. Two ancient and great traditions of spirituality, one European and the other African, were brought into concord during the ceremony as those attending watched, sang and prayed. I remained troubled, however, by the phrase “the communion of the saints”. This was not remedied by the generous definition in the Encyclopaedia. The contemporary understanding of the term ‘saint’ overwhelmingly attributes exceptional spiritual gifts to saints and seemed inflated when applied to the *amadlozi* (shades) of ordinary Christian people. This disquiet prompted me to look at the originating Latin more carefully. The phrase is attributed to St Nicetas (ca. 335-414), the Bishop of Remesiana, present-day Bela Palanka in the Pirot District of modern Serbia, but which was then in the Roman province of Dacia Mediterranea. Lengthy excerpts survive of his principal doctrinal work, *Instructions for Candidates for Baptism*. They contain the expression ‘communion of saints’, in other words, ‘*communo sanctorum*’, in reference to the belief in a mystical bond uniting both the living and the dead in a

confirmed hope and love. No evidence survives of a previous use of this expression, which has since played a central role in formulations of the Apostle's creed (*Encyclopedia catholica*, 463 and 8445).

There are various theories to explain why the phrase was added to what is known as the Apostle's Creed. Some hold the addition to be a protest against Vigilantius, who condemned the veneration of the saints; and he connects that protest with Faustus in Southern Gaul and probably also with Nicetas in Pannonia, who was influenced by the 'Catecheses' of St. Cyril of Jerusalem. Others see in it at first a reaction against the separatism of the Donatists, then an African and Augustinian conception bearing only on church membership, the higher meaning of fellowship with the departed saints having been introduced later by Faustus (*Encyclopedia catholica*, 3205). The reference to St Augustine of Hippo reminds us that the great theologian wrote in Latin and was a post-colonial African. His egalitarian interpretation of *communo sanctorum* could be rendered in English as 'the fellowship of the faithful'. This is in fact how the phrase is translated into Zulu (and Xhosa), namely *ubudlelwane babangcwele*, or, more poetically in the words of the phrase by Thomas Cranmer, "the company of all faithful people". This phrase evokes the continuity of the living and dead, which is central to indigenous concepts of the ancestral spirits in Southern Africa. We need no recourse to gene theory to demonstrate the reality of this. It is as straightforward and empirically verifiable as noting that our conscious minds are populated by the memories of other people.

A post-colonial perspective on the doctrine of the *communo sanctorum* in Italy, then, derived from the vigorous and animating belief in the shades found in South Africa, suggests that it is a humanising doctrine more worthy of renewal and application than appears at first glance. The recent findings of neural science demonstrate its potential value to urban dwellers, as will be seen in the final section of this paper.

### Unveiling a KwaNamatha Shade

The scene registers: a hilltop plot of grass,  
cleared and fenced, choirboys in cassocks,  
a priest with glasses, then Thisha Ngcobo  
standing at a tombstone veiled with a sheet.

That much the painting before me evokes.  
A stippling of ink's the flint in the grave.  
Pale floatings of colour, textures of light  
become fawn grass, a blue KwaZulu sky.

It looks so real. Thorn-trees and rondavels,

the tense, sombre look on the teacher's face  
cross over a *then* to *now*, a *there* to a *here*,  
with traces of clouds and barbs on the wire.

The art is in the omissions. The goats I saw  
straying into a neighbour's maize are gone.  
So have the friends that crowded the fence,  
a bus with balloons, thumping to a wedding.

Under the level flint, the confined residue  
of Ngcobo's father lies. The grieving over,  
the money saved up to purchase the tomb,  
he's being returned, back home as a shade.

Dogs barking nearby, the ads from radios,  
the prayers and hymns have leached away.  
He like the painting has now turned into  
a clustering of hints, a presence of clues.  
(Mann 2002, 26)

## 5 War in Italy, Dante and a Tree by the Adige River

The significant experience that generates this section of the paper took place beside the Adige River in a farm land a few kilometres downstream of the small town of Cavarzere in the province of Veneto. Angela Ferro (1920-2013), a small compact widow in her sixties with a rounded face and black hair, was standing on the bank pointing at the trunk of a tree. It was a windless sunny afternoon in the summer of 1973. The broad calm river, edged by poplars, flowed its unostentatious grandeur below the grassy bank where we stood. "*Sai Chris*", Mama Angelina said to me, "at the start of the war, men were shot here in front of this tree. Then they were thrown into the river with pieces of cardboard tied around their necks on which was written, *Così muoiono i partigiani*. At the end of the war, the same thing happened. Men were again shot against the trees and thrown into the river. This time the cardboard around their necks said, *Così muoiono i fascisti*. People who knew each other", she said, "relatives". I will never forget that story, or the quietly melancholy way in which Mama Angelina spoke. Up till then, World War II had been an imagined entity to me, experienced at a distance that was both geographical and existential. The distance was also shaped by my attitudes towards Europe. Surely wars in Europe were more civilised than the messy, confusing violence in Africa?

Mama Angelina's story altered my perceptions of Italy, as did the other stories she told during the different times I stayed with her in the nearby

village of Rosolina. She was, in effect, passing on to me some of her episodic memories of the war. I wanted to hear them because she was the last remaining member of the family who had hidden my father in the farm where they worked and lived.

Norman Bertram Fleetwood Mann (1920-1952) was a South African soldier who had been captured in North Africa by German troops and then imprisoned in the Po Valley with numerous other South African prisoners-of-war. He had escaped and had been hidden and fed for two years in the farm by a family who risked their lives to do so. For nine months they hid him behind a partition in their pigsty. At night time he would collect a bowl of food concealed nearby, in a haystack or hidden in the grass. The food, mainly beans and polenta, was provided by a tenant family who lived in a tumbledown outhouse and, like so many others in that region at that time of the war, were often close to starvation.

My father returned to South Africa after the war and died when I was four. He was an absent presence in the life of me and my family. Every memory of him that Mama Angelina recounted was a discovery to cherish. Story by story, I built up an outline of him and the war in that part of Italy. In fact he had provided much of the outline already, in a diary he had written in Italian in soft-cover school exercise books and hidden in a hole he had dug far out in the middle of one of the maize fields beside the river. Story by story, I began to sense how comprehensive and brutal the war had been in that part of Italy; and then, following further reading at home, how often sustained violent conflict had taken place in that part of Europe over the centuries and further, how often it was linked to belief systems of one sort or another, both ancient and modern. Cracks in my idealistic student adherence to the ideals of the Enlightenment began to open.

Dante's poetic truth-telling was closer to that moment beside the Adige River than I realised. On a Saturday afternoon, the 17th of July 2012, I was at home in Grahamstown, South Africa, when I received a phone call from a mobile in a café in Rosolina. Mama Angelina, as we called her, had married and moved there after the war. From time to time, after having learnt the rudiments of Italian at university in South Africa, I had stayed with her and her husband and, in due course, had introduced her to my wife and, then, our children. The phone call greatly disturbed me. Mama Angelina had died earlier in the week and had been buried earlier in the day. I spoke with members of her family and those of mine who lived in Britain, and had flown to Rosolina for the funeral. It was a blazing hot summer day in Grahamstown. I wandered round the house feeling listless and desolate. I had been reading Dante intermittently during the previous month or so. Later on that day, I picked up the copy of the *Commedia* on my desk and began to read here and there without registering what I was reading. I started to read Canto 12 of the *Inferno* for the first time and was startled to come across his reference to the Adige River. Dante

and his guide Virgil are scrambling down a rocky slope towards the river that runs around the seventh circle of hell. The rugged and broken terrain reminds Dante of the banks of the Adige near Verona. Then Virgil directs his gaze downwards towards the imagined river in hell, a river patrolled by symbols of vengeful anger and bestiality in which the shades of violent leaders are punished for all eternity by being made to stand up to their necks in hot blood. My memory of the Adige River was suddenly given a new dimension of significance as I dwelt on the following excerpts.

Era lo loco ov'a scender la riva  
venimmo, alpestro e, per quel che v'er'anco,  
tal, ch'ogne vista ne sarebbe schiva.

Qual è quella ruina che nel fianco  
di qua da Trento l'Adice percosse,  
o per tremoto o per sostegno manco,

che da cima del monte, onde si mosse,  
al piano è sì la roccia discoscisa,  
ch'alcuna via darebbe a chi sù fosse:

cotal di quel burrato era la scesa;  
e 'n su la punta de la rotta lacca  
l'infamia di Creti era distesa

[...]

Ma ficca li occhi a valle, ché s'approccia  
la riviera del sangue in la qual bolle  
qual che per violenza in altrui nocchia.

Oh cieca cupidigia e ira folle,  
che sì ci sproni ne la vita corta,  
e ne l'eterna poi sì mal c'immolle!  
(Dante, *Inferno*, 12, 1-12, 46-50)

The place that we had reached for our descent  
along the bank was alpine; what reclined  
upon that bank would, too, repel all eyes.

Just like the toppled mass of rock that struck -  
because of earthquake or eroded props -  
the Adige on its flank, this side of Trent,

where from the mountain top from which it thrust  
down to the plain, the rock is shattered so  
that it permits a path for those above:

such was the passage down to that ravine.  
And at the edge above the cracked abyss,  
there lay outstretched the infamy of Crete.

[...]

But fix your eyes below, upon the valley,  
for now we near the stream of blood, where those  
who injure others violently, boil.

O blind cupidity and insane anger,  
which goad us on so much in our short life,  
then steep us in such grief eternally!  
(Sinclair 1939, 154-7)

Dante places a variety of violent leaders in the river: an emperor (Alexander), a regional tyrant (Dionysus of Syracuse), the leader of a tribe of belligerent pastoral warriors (Attila the Hun) and, at a more local level, of social organisation, a Guelph and Ghibellene notorious for violent behaviour.

Bringing a post-colonial perception to bear on war in Italy and hence Europe, I had been shocked to discover an increase in scale far beyond my previous perceptions of how violent our species was. The emotion deepened when I later discovered that war bonds, the financial instrument that makes large-scale warfare possible, were an innovation that took place in Florence in Dante's time (Ferguson 2009, 66-119). Bringing Dante's poetic vision to bear on sustained conflict in twentieth-century northern Italy deepened that perception. Not only in this canto, but in other parts of the *Commedia* too, Dante relentlessly attacks the abuse of power by the leaders of social organisations, both clerical and secular. His vision forcibly reminded me that violence is nothing new in human history, and that a significant cause of its manifestation is to be found in the colonial and sustained conquest of the virtues of our psyche, our own inner *terrae incognitae*, by emotions as tyrannical as cupidity and anger. Where I had sought idealistic solutions primarily in exterior socio-political institutions of governance, I was prompted by Dante to look also inward at the causes of social violence that lay in the individual human psyche. His poetry also prompted me to acknowledge and praise the mercy and heroism of the family that hid my father.



A field in Italy

I'm standing in a field in Italy.  
A hot summer's day.  
Crows. Tractors.  
Poplars lining a river.  
Clods and stubble at my feet.

The trees are as in his diary.  
The gravel farm road.  
The narrow canals.  
The soft quick plop of frogs  
arrowing into a ditch.

I'm standing near Venice  
with people in a field.  
The sky is cloudless,  
as blue as Giotto's  
frescoed inside a dome.

A painter's skies.  
Spacious. Visionary.  
A Field in Italy  
Opening above the plains,  
the mountains of a Europe  
for once at peace.  
I'm standing in a field in Italy  
trying to grasp what's happening.  
The heat off the soil  
beats into my face as at home.  
A taxi is parked in the trees.

I'm trying to understand  
the people talking around me.  
I've come from South Africa  
with wife and children  
as pilgrims to this field.

We're here to give thanks.  
Thanks to a family  
who sheltered my father  
for two years of war,  
risking a bullet in the head.  
(Excerpts from Mann 2010, 66-7)

## 6 Literature and Italian and South African Shades

Imagine for a moment a rural retreat centre north of the city of Durban in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The coastal bush is thronged with people dressed in long white robes. There is the sound of unaccompanied choral singing somewhere, the scent of wood smoke. There are *amadlangala* everywhere, small rounded shelters made of saplings bent over and secured in the sandy soil. Elderly men, bearded, barefoot, some wearing necklaces and amulets, are shepherding new arrivals as they arrive in minibuses and cars. I am a visitor, accompanying a scholar of African oral literature equipped with a microphone and a tape recorder. In Zulu she asks the man beside our car to recite the *izibongo*, the praise-poem of Isaiah Shembe, the founder of the settlement. Azariah Mthiyane, the *imbongi* (praise-poet), gets on his knees and quietly and fluently recites an extended poem that sounds like this:

Uyasabeka!

UMhawu 'phalala usinde abasengozini  
 UMagqalabanzi kadinwa ukuthwala izono zethu  
 UMthombo' osela abalungileyo  
 UZandla zinemisebe njengelanga  
 INgqungqulu eshay' amaphiko  
 phezu komuzi wakithi Eluphakemeni

You are awesome!

Overflowing with compassion you rescue those in danger.

Your broad shoulders never tire of carrying our sins,

you're a spring that the virtuous drink.

Your hands have rays of light like the sun,

You're the eagle that beats its wings

high above our home on the Exalted Mountain.

(From Gunner and Gwala 1991, 67-9, with amendments to their translation by the Author)

Azariah Mthiyane's poem, built up of a number of epithets, was addressed to the shade of Isaiah Shembe (1870-1935), the founder of the *AmaNazartha* church in KwaZulu-Natal. At present, the church has an estimated four million members (2012). One of its best known rituals takes place each year when thousands of his followers, singing the hymns he composed, make their way up the holy mountain *Ekuphakameni* (The Exalted Place), north of Durban.

Shembe (1867-1935), the son of a farm labourer, worked initially as a dock worker in Durban. He never went to school and his belief system - like

that of Ntsikana, the nineteenth-century Xhosa religious leader and hymn-writer – developed irrespective of missionary influence. He responded to the alienating cultural fragmentation of urban life by creating a socio-cultural movement based largely on the Bible, which functioned in the minds of his adherents like a “theatre of memory” (Gunner, Gwala 1994; Gunner 2004).

Belief in the shades is an integral part of the indigenous religious system in South Africa. Any attempt to summarise its characteristics must emphasise that it is a belief system in flux, that it varies from individual to individual and group to group and has no formalised creed or doctrine. The outline here is based for ease of reference on a comprehensive account of such an indigenous belief system, namely *Zulu Thought Patterns and Symbolism*, by Axel-Ivar Berglund (Berglund 1976). This has a ring of authenticity since it is a sprawling array of quotations, a compilation of how individual practitioners view their beliefs rather than a summarised and analytic study by an anthropologist.

Lingering post-colonial parlance obscures the complex varieties of shade beliefs in Southern Africa as well as their interaction with Christian and other patterns of religious thought. One might hear, for example, a sentence along the lines of ‘local blacks worship ancestral spirits with the help of witch-doctors’. Berglund avoids the word ‘ancestor’ since this suggests predecessors who are dead and separate from the living. He states that the Zulu concept assumes “a very close and intimate relationship within the lineage between the departed and their survivors” (Berglund 1976, 29). He quotes one informant as saying that “it is impossible to *khonza* a shade”, in other words to worship a shade, and goes on to say that the correct usage is “*ukuthetha idlozi*”. This means to communicate with a shade, in particular during a rite which propitiates what an *isangoma* or diviner perceives as the discomfort or anger of a shade in the family lineage due to errant behaviour among the living (Berglund 1976, 43; Doke et al. 1972, 792).

The shades are venerated, however, in that they are perceived as channels of communication with *Unkulunkulu* (God). Classical *izibongo*, at least the residuum of texts still extant from the Zulu and Xhosa traditions of the last three centuries, in general address clan and household heads that are male. They are exhortatory, and while ironic criticism is present in some of the epithets, they typically extol the clan head’s aggression and courage. There is an epic quality to the recitations that is reminiscent of Homer. Such *izibongo*, recited with memorable passion and physicality by the *imbongi* during one ritual ceremony, stir listeners out of the possible apathy and disunity of ordinary discourse into a greater sense of belonging to the lineage or the clan of the person praised.

In recent times, the genre has, however, shown signs of increasing diversity. Contemporary *izibongo* include poems addressed to political and

trade union leaders as well as to women and religious leaders such as Shembe (Oosthuizen 1967; Gunner, Gwala 1991).

The shades are also present in the written tradition of poetry. A wide variety of South African poets and writers make reference to the shades in significant ways: Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi (1875-1945), Thomas Mokopu Mofolo (1876-1948), Nonstizi Mqgwetho (c. late nineteenth and early twentieth century), Henry Isaac Ernest Dhlomo (1903-1956), Archibald Campbell Mzolisa Jordan (1906-1968), David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi (1926- 1999), Guy Butler (1918-2001) and Mazisi Kunene (1930-2006).

Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947), for example, a significant poet, novelist and scholar in the history of literature in South Africa, makes numerous references to the *amadlozi* (shades) in his poetry. Born and brought up in a rural area near KwaDukuza (Stanger) in the first decades of the twentieth century, in 1936, when he was thirty, Vilakazi moved to the mining town of Johannesburg to take up a lecturing post at the University of the Witwatersrand. He wrote novels and poems, and with CM Doke prepared a monumental dictionary of Zulu that is still widely used. Such as Seferis, Vilakazi depicts himself as an exile from the landscape and culture that nurtured him, referring with affection to the lagoons, animals, trees and birds of his upbringing as well as to the shades of significant figures from Zulu history.

KwaDedangendlale, known colloquially in South African English as the Valley of the Thousand Hills, is one of the enduring loci of his yearning for unspoilt nature, tranquillity and a restoration of his originating Zulu culture. A significant number of his poems can be interpreted as acts of retrieval of childhood experiences, those crucial components of episodic and autobiographical memory that, in his case, renew a sense of belonging. Such retrievals are expressed through the use of semantic memory, which encodes the retrieved sensory experience in the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of language:

Ngikhumbule kud' ekhaya  
 Laph' ilanga liphumela  
 Phezu kwezintab' ezinde  
 Lishone libomv' enzansi  
 Kuze kusondel' ukuhlwa  
 Nokuthul' okucwebile,  
 Laph' uphuma phandl' unuke,  
 Uhogele ngamakhala,  
 Uzigqum' umzimba wonke  
 Ngomoya wolwandl' omanzi.

I remember far away at home.  
 There where the sun comes up  
 Above the tall hills  
 And goes down shining red below  
 Until dusk comes  
 With its pure silence.  
 There where you go outside and breathe in,  
 breathe in deeply with full nostrils  
 And feel your whole body affected by  
 the moist air of the sea.

(Vilakazi, translated by Adrian Koopman. See Koopman 2005, 66)

Koopman also quotes and translates other excerpts from *Amal'ezulu (Zulu Horizons)*, Vilakazi's second volume, which illustrate his perception of the agency of the shades. The first excerpt is addressed to 'Mamina', a female muse and interlocutor, and results in successful however temporary closure:

Yebo Mamina, sengiyavuma.  
 Amathong' angethwes' umthwalo,  
 Ngiwuzwa ngiphapheme nakwabuthongo.  
 Ngithi ngizumekile ngixoxiswe ngawe,  
 Ngivuke ngokhel' ubhaqa ngiqoshame,  
 Ngiphenduke ngelul' isandla,  
 Ngikulolong' emagxalabeni.  
 Ngizw' ikhambi lingen' ekhanda,  
 Lingiphethul' ingqondo ngibamb' usiba,  
 Kanti sekuyilapho ngihay' inkondlo.

Yes, Mamina, indeed I do agree.  
 The spirits have laid this burden on me,  
 I feel it even when asleep at night.  
 I mean even when fast asleep  
 I am made to talk by you,  
 I wake, light the lamp and squat down,  
 Turn and stretch out my hand,  
 And mould you between the shoulder blades.  
 I feel the inspiration enter my head,  
 It arouses my mind and I reach for a pen,  
 And it is then that I sing my song.

(Vilakazi, translated by Adrian Koopman. See Koopman, 2005, 71)

Vilakazi ascribes the spiritual restlessness he experiences before writing a poem to the activity of *amathongo*, the shades. This is akin to what

might be called the creative anxiety disorder experienced by an *isangoma* (diviner). This can be understood as the brooding (*ukufukamela*) of the shades (Berglund 1976, 127-50). Vilakazi, addressing *mathongo' ohlanga*, (literally 'the shades of the reed' or, metaphorically, 'the shades of the origin of human life') has no illusions about their turbulent power and persistence in his inner life:

Nezint' engazibhala ebusuku,  
 Ngingazange ngizisukele ngibhale,  
 Ngibeleselwe yinina mathong' ohlanga,  
 Ningixabanis' ingqondo ebusuku.  
 Kuleyonkathi ngiyobe sengafa.

And the things I have written at night  
 I have never simply of my own accord started to write,  
 I have always been pestered by you, the spirits of the reed,  
 You set my mind in turmoil at night.  
 And so it will always be with me until my death.  
 (Vilakazi, translated by Adrian Koopman. Koopman 2005, 72)

This leads to a striking evocation of his deeply felt yearning for perpetual peace, not, in the end, alienated from his surroundings, but in intimate contact with his forebears, the shades who are taken to reside in the earth:

... kengilal' ubuthongo,  
 Ubuthongo bokucimez' amehlo,  
 Ngingacabangi ngelakusasa nokusa.  
 Ngish' ubuthongo bokulala ngivuke kude,  
 Kud' ezweni lamathongo nokozela;  
 Ubuthongo bokulala ngingavuki  
 Ngisingethwe yizingalo zawokoko.

... let me lie in sleep,  
 The sleep that closes the eyes,  
 Not thinking of tomorrow and the next day.  
 I mean the sleep of going to sleep and waking up far away,  
 Far away in the country of the ancestors and drowsiness,  
 The sleep of going to sleep and never waking up.  
 Enfolded in the arms of the ancestors.  
 (Vilakazi, translated by Adrian Koopman. Koopman 2005, 74-5)

How do contemporary literary scholars schooled in secular humanism respond to metaphors such as these, which in their cultural context are poetically numinous and part of a spirituality of dissent at odds with the

scientific world-view and the monetarist values of economic globalisation at the start of the twenty-first century? Some ten years ago the revised edition of the influential book *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* ([1995] 2006) expanded the subject matter of post-colonial studies to include the sacred. The editors drew attention to the gap “between the theoretical agenda of the Western academy and the interests of post-colonial societies themselves”, and stated that

on one hand indigenous concepts of the sacred have been able to interpolate dominant conceptions of cultural identity; and on the other Western forms of the sacred have often been appropriated and transformed as a means of local empowerment. (Ashcroft et al. 2006, 7-8)

Chakrabarty, author of *Provincializing Europe*, is more forthright. He argues that the contemporary Western academy privileges the secular and relegates the sacred to primitive societies (Chakrabarty 2000). Indigenous concepts of the sacred in South Africa, based on the shades, have played a crucial role in resisting the impact of colonial conquest and dispossession over the last two and a half centuries. *Izangoma* (diviners or oracles) and *izinyanga* (healers) nurtured local concepts of personal identity and an indigenous world-view. *Amatola* (war-doctors) strengthened the resolve of armed resistance to colonial troops during the nineteenth century in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. This tradition extends to the use of medicines to strengthen participants in the Bambatha rebellion in the twentieth century, and to striking miners in the twenty-first. Commenting on the massacre of platinum miners that took place in 2012, the then Deputy President of South Africa, Kgalema Motlanthe, a former general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, said that the miners at Marikana had been in a muti-induced trance in which they would either kill or be killed (Motlanthe 2012). Flint and Parle identify four significant uprisings inspired by spiritual leaders drawing on the authority of the shades in the Eastern Cape, and also describe systematic attempts by colonial rulers to render such leaders powerless (Flint, Parle 2008, 312-21; see also Peires 1981, 1989).

### 6.1 Episodic Memory and the Shades

A recent development in the scholarly understanding of memory strengthens the need to reappraise indigenous concepts of the sacred, in particular those regarding the shades. Endel Tulving’s empirical research, followed by the advent of cognitive neuroscience and improvements in the technologies that image the activities of the brain, enabled neuropsychologists to extend the original insights of William James and to estab-

lish the science of memory. We are by now familiar with the concepts of working, short-term and long-term memory as well as mental processes such as encoding and retrieval generated by different neural networks. Tulving frequently reiterates that the discipline is new, and that the findings are rudimentary and likely to change. His major contribution to date has been to distinguish between episodic and semantic memory, and to show how these are crucial components of human consciousness and identity. Such mental activities may be fleeting and extraordinarily complex. There is, however, nothing insubstantial about them. They are real events in time (Tulving 1983; Baddeley et al. 2002). Episodic memory as distinct from the semantic one is part of a neurocognitive system evolved by *homo sapiens* that

involves remembering by re-experiencing and mentally travelling back in time. Its essence lies in the subjective feeling that, in the present experience, one is re-experiencing something that has happened before in one's life. It is rooted in auto-noetic awareness and in the belief that the self doing the experiencing now is the same self that did it originally. (Wheeler 1997, 349)

Examples of semantic memory are language, numeracy and simple and complex skills. These are memories of 'knowing what' or 'knowing how', whereas episodic memories are inseparable from subjective feeling and travelling back and forth in mind-brain time. Episodic memories unfold an individual's autobiographical memory and are, thus, the source of personal and socio-cultural identity. The expression and analysis of a patient's episodic memories is an approach used extensively in contemporary psychotherapy (Solms, Turnbull 2002). This approach is likely to reveal a variety of presences in a patient's psyche. Not all of them are likely to be beneficent. Some, in fact, may be destructively malevolent.

## 6.2 A Definition of Episodic Memory

Over the last few decades, with the assistance of sophisticated scanning technologies, neuroscientists have begun to disaggregate the vast number of activities working at lightning speed and in unimaginably complex congeries of networks in the mind-brain. Billions and billions of neurons with multiple interconnections quiver small packages of chemically distinct molecules called neurotransmitters back and forth across the multiple tendrils of axons and dendrites. Out of this complexity, a thought, an image, a memory, a word emerges and fades in a seethe of mental activity that continues even during sleep and which is always beyond the full recall of consciousness (Solms, Turnbull 2002, 8-43; Damasio 2004, *passim*). An



episodic memory is thus an enduring illusion among the detritus of the forgotten. Unlike the spate, the rush of incoming, disaggregated then discarded sense data that passes through the mind-brain during, for example, a day-long trip through the countryside in a car, the components of the memory are engraved, as it were, into the molecules of the networks of neurons where long-term memories are stored. These traces are the material foundation of our sustained sense of belonging, both in the world and with other people. From the perspective of a literary aesthetic, the bonding of present consciousness and past event, the illusion of the poem as a whole and the shade depicted in its framework make up an extended synecdoche.

### 6.3 A Definition of the Shades Based on Neural Science

The shades, to apply a neurocognitive model of understanding, do not need to be restricted to the biological lineage of an individual, nor are they ghostly phantoms that have a separate, perceivable existence independent of an individual's mind-brain. The shades, by this definition, are episodic memories of other people that, inhabiting the interior life of an individual, contribute significantly to that individual's personal and socio-cultural identity and, hence, sense of belonging as distinct from alienation. Without discounting religious perceptions of understanding, this neurocognitive model sheds light on the continuing influence of the shade of Isaiah Shembe on the life of his numerous followers as well as that of Buddha, Mohammed and Christ. The number of followers of the latter three spiritual leaders, despite the disaffection with religion in some post-industrial countries, continues to increase at a rate faster than the growth of the world's escalating population, and now numbers over four billion people (Schwarz 2004, 297-8). The neurocognitive model also helps to illuminate the roles of the shades in the imagination of such well-known poets as Homer, Virgil and Dante, the *griots* who transmit the Sundiata epic in Mali as well as T.S. Eliot and Seamus Heaney. Their appearance in literature in different guises and for different purposes is complex and variegated. Ted Hughes, for example, in *Birthday Letters*, explores and expands episodic memory after memory of his deceased former wife, the poet Sylvia Plath (Hughes 1998). Thomas Hardy provides comprehensive references in his poetry to every manner of shades, which he variously calls 'presences', 'spectres' and 'phantasms'. These are not the looming presences of epic heroes or mythical demigods. They are the shades of ordinary, mostly rural people. Hardy, in effect, demystifies and broadens the concept as a more egalitarian and democratic culture emerges in Britain.

#### 6.4 A Post-Colonial View of the Shades in Dante

We are now in a position to view the shades in Dante through a post-colonial perspective based in South Africa in which the shades are part of the life of ordinary people. It would be illuminating to examine the evolution of the concept of heroes and souls in Homer to the shades discoverable in Virgil and, in particular, what effect the transition from an oral to a written rendition of the shades has had on the perception of an audience or a reader. Unfortunately a lack of space constrains me to look at Dante's use of the shades in the *Divina Commedia*, a task in itself so large that it constrains me further to examine only a few salient points. The turbulence and violence found in contemporary post-liberation South Africa shares some important aspects with the period of violent socio-political transition in which Dante lived. Prominent among these aspects are the declining power of feudal rural institutions, the *amakhosi* or hereditary leaders in South Africa, the migration from the countryside to the town, an increasing 'moneyfication' of numerous aspects of culture, and the incessant conflict of values and sectarian factions as kinships make way for new social alliances. This takes place as the lingering mores of small-scale village societies are drawn into the large-scale society of a constitutional democracy and nation state. What is different, of course, is the absence of the temporal authority of a papacy in South Africa, and the jagged and deep divisions between the different colour groups. It is, in all probability, the social turbulence of his era, the shifting ambiguity of values and his exile from power, that prompts Dante to set out the moral universe of the *Commedia*. He does this not in the abstract but by making moral judgements, which assign the shades of different people to different circles in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. It is, I think, a similar longing for a just and ordered society that inspires Azariah Mthiyane to compose and evoke the shade of the messianic religious leader, Isaiah Shembe. It also induces Vilakazi to seek the consolation of his ancestors as he turns on his bed, unable to sleep in the mining-town of Johannesburg. Having said that, other differences are stark and numerous. Prominent among these is the role that Dante ascribes himself as a poet. He is no deferential *imbongi*. What South African praise-poet would dare recite a poem that consigns the *amakhosi* (hereditary leaders) of a clan to hell for their lack of morality? Dante places the shades of a vast array of leaders and ordinary people, as well as three popes, firmly in hell, which is an act of outrageous defiance hard to match even in countries where freedom of expression has long been protected by law.

Dante as well as an *imbongi* assume that the shades they address are not just creatures of the mind but have a corporeal identity and existence independent of others (Berglund 1976, *passim*). Dante, in fact, attempts in a cryptic and not particularly convincing interchange with Statius in

Canto 25 of the *Purgatorio* to remedy a defect in Catholic theology by presenting the metaphysics of how the shades of individuals come into being in their afterlife. The tonal range of an *imbongi's* attitude towards the lineage of shades is restricted to exhortations, celebration, occasional irony and panegyric passion. Dante's tones of voice are more extensive, ranging from admiration and astonishment and plain description to sarcasm, fury, despair, adoration and different manifestations of love. The range of shades evoked in the *Commedia*, furthermore, is not limited to a small-scale society's male leaders, but include the male and female shades of people he knew as well as the shades of historical, biblical and mythical people. From the perspective of a post-colonial society, in which the shades are part of the psychic inner world of millions of ordinary people, the wide range of shades in Dante's *Commedia* are those of a large scale society, written large in a gigantic frieze and harshly lit by the floodlight of the poet's stern morality.

## 7 Conclusion

By viewing aspects of Italy such as language, accounting, spirituality, war and Dante from a post-colonial perspective, I hope to have revealed some of their significance in a new way. Paradoxically, the exercise has also helped me to understand my own transitional society better. In this way, when brought together by post-colonial studies, Europe and Africa can be seen to continue to find each other out. This is notably evident in the development of a cross-cultural understanding of the existence of the shades based, at least in the case of this author, on a neural science model of episodic memory.

### In Praise of the Shades

Hitching across a dusty plain one June,  
 down one of those dead-straight backveld roads,  
 I met a man with rolled-up khaki sleeves  
 who told me his faults and then his beliefs.  
 It's amazing, some people discuss more  
 with hitch-hikers than even their friends.

His bakkie rattled a lot on the ruts  
 so I'm not exactly sure what he said.  
 Anyway, when he'd talked about his church  
 and when the world had changed from mealie-stalks  
 to sunflowers, which still looked green and firm,  
 he lowered his voice, and spoke about his shades.

This meant respect I think, not secrecy.  
He said he'd always asked them to guide him,  
and that, even in the city, they did.  
He seemed to me a gentle, balanced man,  
and I was sorry to stick my kit-bag  
onto the road again and say goodbye.

When you are alone and brooding deeply,  
do all your teachers and loved ones desert you?  
Stand on a road when the fence is whistling.  
You say, *It's the wind*, and if the dust swirls,  
*Wind again*, although you never see it.  
The shades work like the wind, invisibly.

And they have always been our companions,  
dressed in the flesh of the children they reared,  
gossiping away from the books they wrote,  
a throng who even in the strongest light  
are whispering, *You are not what you are*,  
*remember us, then try to understand*.

They come like pilgrims from the hazy seas  
that shimmer at the borders of a dream,  
not such spirits that they can't be scolded,  
not such mortals that they can be profaned,  
for scolding them, we honour each other,  
and honouring them, we perceive ourselves.

When all I seem to hear about these days  
is violence, injustice and despair,  
or humourless theories, from cynical hearts,  
to rescue us all from our human plight,  
those moments in a bakkie on a plain  
make sunflowers from a waterless world.

*bakkie* - pick-up truck.  
(Mann 2010, 128-9)

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# Modern and Post-Modern Rome in Irish Travel Writing An Overview

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**Abstract** Rome, after being an inescapable stopover on the European Grand Tour for centuries, has changed its iconic physiognomy attracting a different public and awakening different emotions. Irish travellers of the past had visited Rome mostly because of its classical associations and religious significance. The palimpsest of antiquity and modernity that Rome is nowadays, instead, offers a glittering surface of globalisation reminiscent of the Celtic Tiger to modern Irish visitors such as Elizabeth Bowen, Colm Tóibín, Sean and Julia O’Faolain. Yet, all four writers in their search for a fixed point that might allow them to grasp the contemporary essence of the city also preserve some remnants of an earlier, colonial approach.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords** Irish Literature. Rome. Bowen. Tóibín. O’Faolain.

Much has been written about the presence of Italy in English and American literatures. The Renaissance gave birth to generations of Machiavellian villains; the Gothic novel thrived on representations of a sublime and immoral country; Grand Tour travellers left countless reports about the classical grandeur, the architectural elegance, the natural beauties but also the shortcomings of the peninsula. Much work remains, however, to be done regarding a postcolonial vision of Italy as opposed to a Eurocentric or, at best, a Western view that has favoured the classical, artistic and religious features of the country seen as part of a common cultural legacy. The interest of postcolonial writers, instead, tends to focus on modern Italy. A borderline case is that of Ireland, which was incontrovertibly England’s first colony and was long treated as such but which also transgresses in many ways the different colonial models drawn up by scholars.

The vision of Italy entertained by Irish travellers of the past, who participated in such a Western and colonial practice as that of the Grand Tour (in its many variations), was “overdetermined by the country’s dependent position”, a characteristic that, as Joe Cleary argues, makes Ireland differ

1 An Italian version of parts of this article has been published with the title of “La Roma post-classica e post-moderna nell’immaginario irlandese” (Kanceff 2015, 95-109).



from other countries in Europe (Cleary 2003, 24). Even in the present, remnants of the old sensibility persist. This is particularly true in the case of Rome, which has always held a particular significance for Irish people. The changes that have taken place in Irish society, the processes of independence, modernisation and globalisation weigh upon the perception of the new faces of modern Italy and, more specifically, of its capital, Rome, the city that best exemplifies the persistence of the past in the present and the difficulty of shaking off the weight of tradition. Rome is no longer what it was one hundred and fifty years ago: it is neither the *caput mundi* of the ancient world nor of Christianity but the capital of a young modern state bearing some similarities to Ireland especially in the consciousness of having just overcome a long servitude.

It is the purpose of this article to examine the attitudes of modern Irish visitors toward the eternal city as exemplified by the works about Italy of some writers who all published after Ireland had emancipated itself from the British rule. Sean O'Faolain, who had taken part in the Irish Civil War and was very critical towards the new Ireland, visited Italy immediately after the end of World War II (his first visit goes back to 1948), leaving two accounts of his travels, *Summer in Italy* (1949) and *South to Sicily* (1953) and several articles published in glossy magazines such as *Holiday*. Elizabeth Bowen – who was O'Faolain's lover and went to Italy several times with him or on her own – belongs to the same generation. *A Time in Rome* (1959) is a love declaration to the eternal city in which the author tries to capture the atmosphere and complexity of the capital and to reconstruct what life was like in classical days.

Sean's daughter, Julia O'Faolain, studied in Rome at the University of La Sapienza,<sup>2</sup> which she evoked in a rather disparaging way in her autobiography, *Trespassers. A Memoir* (2013). Italy also largely looms in her narrative production, as the setting of *The Irish Signorina* (1984), *The Judas Cloth* (1992), and of a novel dealing with an episode of the life of the Communist leader, Palmiro Togliatti, *Ercoli e il guardiano notturno* (1999).<sup>3</sup> In these texts as in *The Sign of the Cross. Travels in Catholic Europe* (1996), the travel account of the novelist Colm Tóibín, the youngest of this group of writers, the image of Rome appears to be suspended between a romantic notion of the eternal city – the city of the Caesars and the Popes – and the representations of a decentralised and fluid urban space in which alternative forces coexist, which make it “anti-universal and anti-eternal” to use Dom Holdaway's and Filippo Trentin's expression to define post-modern

2 Julia O'Faolain's academic year in Rome, 1952-3, was funded by an Italian government scholarship. She spent it studying at the University of La Sapienza and preparing for a two-year National University of Ireland travelling studentship.

3 The novel was originally written in English but was published in Italy by Editori Riuniti in the Italian translation of Pittoni. So far, the English text has not been published.

Rome.<sup>4</sup> All of them, however, tried to free themselves from the colonial heritage that determined their forebears' response to Rome. In the end, however, the colonial taint remained.

The diverse facets of Rome that appear in the writings of these four authors reflect, in fact, not only the new realities of the capital but also the changes that affected their own country. Over the period that goes from the Easter Rising (1916) to our days with its recent economic crisis, Ireland has freed itself from its colonial destiny becoming eventually an independent republic, has been split in two by the partition and the ensuing Civil War and, in the last decades of the past century, by the Troubles, and more recently has experienced a period of rapid and prodigious economic expansion known as the phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger during which era, from being the poorest country of Europe, it became one of the richest. All of the above led the Irish (including our four writers) to elaborate new definitions of national and religious identity and new space/time relations with the rest of the world. The historical events of the past century have, as a consequence, also changed their perception of the eternal city, the objects of their interest in it and the instruments through which they interrogate the reality of the capital.

For centuries, Rome had been a mecca for Irish travellers not only as a must of the Grand Tour but also as the destination of pilgrimages and, especially, as a refuge for persecuted Catholics. During the period of the Penal Laws, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, hundreds of Catholics studied in the Irish Colleges of Rome, immersed in a sophisticated and stimulating atmosphere which they knew how to appreciate, as we elicit from their letters and writings, even as they prepared for clandestine activities on their return to Ireland, which at times lead to martyrdom. The fact that Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, after his long battle for Catholic Emancipation should ask that his heart be buried in the chapel of the Irish college proves how the Irish identified with Rome. Besides the image of the baroque splendour of ecclesiastical Rome transmitted by the Catholic exiles, however, the Irish also cherished another image, that of a city of splendid ruins that opened up the magnificence of imperial Rome to the imagination. The myth of the eternity of the Rome of the Caesars and its role in shaping a European identity was celebrated especially in the age of the Grand Tour and is still at the centre of the tourism industry. It had inspired international visitors from Gibbon to Winckelman and Goethe and was also appropriated by the Irish travellers who followed the itinerary of the Grand Tour and who, mostly, belonged to the Protestant Ascendancy or

4 In the "Introduction" to a collection of essays on post-modern Rome (*Rome, Postmodern Narratives of a Cityscape*, 2013), the editors, Dom Holdaway and Filippo Trentin, argue that in order to "marginalize our European gaze" that has always emphasised a vision of Rome as the universal and eternal city, it is necessary to focus on the post-modernity of the city (2013, 7).

to the wealthy upper classes, which led them to share British values. Their negative attitude towards 'papism' influenced their perception of the city, its contemporary architecture and its recent history leading to scorn for the opulence of religious buildings and Church ceremonies. Conversely, they extolled the civilisation represented by the remains of ancient Rome, a nobler city, they thought, than the present one.

Not all Irish travellers, however, felt admiration for classical Rome. The more radical and nationalist saw in the ancient civilisation the model for the British imperial power that had first been imposed on Ireland before affecting other continents. The awareness of Irish identity led the Protestant but nationalist author, Lady Morgan, to consider both the remains of imperial rule and the baroque splendour of Catholic Rome with equal execration. Far from evoking ideal perfection, the ruins irked the democratic author by their undemocratic story of "power, privilege and knowledge for the few - slavery the most abject for the many" (Morgan 2010, 175). The Irish author is annoyed by the view of "triumphal arches and laudatory columns" that recall "the triumphs of Imperial ambition" (185-6) and evoke actual crimes against humanity. Indeed, for her, most great monuments in Rome were erected "to commemorate the faults or follies of men, their wars and their errors" (187). These in the main, with obviously many exceptions, were the positions of the Irish who visited Rome between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Stephen Dedalus's complaint in the first chapter of *Ulysses*: "I am the servant of two masters, [...], an English and an Italian, the Imperial British state and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church" (Joyce 1998, 20) anticipates the rejection of the two "masters" that was to take place later in the twentieth century in Irish approaches to Rome. Not only did the appeal of the "catholic and apostolic Rome" slowly begin to wane owing also to Sean O'Faolain's journalistic efforts, for one, but political rebellion against the Imperial British state implied also discontent with its Augustan models in Rome, as was already foreshadowed in the nineteenth century by Lady Morgan. In Stephen's *non serviam* we can recognise many modern Irish travellers' attitudes toward Rome. Joyce's own stay in Rome in 1906-07 was actually motivated, wrote Melchiori, by his desire "to acquire first-hand knowledge of those institutions that originated the paralysis [of contemporary Dublin]" by infiltrating the "palace" of the Italian master (Melchiori 1984, 10).

Having first obtained their independence in blood, the new Irish travellers, too, now refused allegiance to the old myths of the Roman Church and the Roman Empire and sought fresh objects of interest more consonant with what Ireland was or was beginning to be. They bade farewell (or tried to) to the cult of classicism inherited from the British and veined with imperial longings but also stayed clear of too much involvement with the Church, recognising that the all-out defence of the Church or the virulent

attacks against it were both attitudes dictated by the lacerations of the past. Although they could not ignore either the importance of the classical past or the religious centrality of Rome, they tried to see the Italian capital with postcolonial eyes refusing the legacy of ancient servitude with the result that they often conveyed the image of a bewildering city that defeated their attempts to understand it. Echoing Yeats' prophetic exclamation that "the centre cannot hold", all of them, in writing about Rome, seem to be in search of a fixed point that might allow them to grasp the contemporary essence of the city notwithstanding its fragmented essence and their awareness that its classical and Christian identity cannot be circumvented. In that, as De Petris writes about O' Faolain, their representations of Rome are "tinted with modernity" (De Petris 2001, 189). Similarly, they perceive Ireland as finally free from the obsession of its Gaelic past and of the colonial condition, and in the case of the younger authors, as a modern country that is globalised and cosmopolitan as Rome is. In their eyes, they both represent a new reality incorporating various identities and stratifications, looking towards the future and trying to shake off the fetters of the past.

The senior O'Faolain's complaint that there is "Much too Much Past" (as one of the chapters of *Summer in Italy* is entitled) and his desire to be "finished once for all with the shadowy and shining past" (S. O'Faolain 1949, 156) are fully shared by the travellers of the second generation, Tóibín and his daughter, Julia O'Faolain. As for Bowen, in an imaginary dialogue with herself, she wonders what her attitude to classical Rome is: "Then I did not care for antiquity? - Not in the abstract. - What did I see in Rome, then? - Beginning of today" (Bowen 2003, 71).

In spite of the commendable intention of remaining rooted in the present, this in practice results in ambiguities and wavering for, what would Rome be for an Irish person without Catholicism or without its imperial past? The attitude of the Irish travellers in search of a picture of Rome corresponding to their status of citizens of a new country is in fact characterised by many contradictions on these issues. They might all agree with Sean O'Faolain that "no man can ever wholly leave ancient or sacred Rome behind him completely or for long" (S. O'Faolain 1949, 156). Rome's past is as essential a part of it as is its present.

Only for Julia O'Faolain who wrote her Memoir, *Trespassers*, in 2013 and knew Italy better than the others for having lived there, the question of the past does not arise. The real Rome is not the historical and glorious city sought by tourists but the ordinary, almost provincial city in which she was a student in the fifties. "When I knew it first, Rome's *centro storico* had traces of a rural languor which might almost have dated back to the era before 1870 when the pope was king" (J. O'Faolain 2013, 125-6.). As for the monuments of its grandeur, they are just a theatrical scenario for her scooter rides with a boyfriend: "I enjoyed whizzing around Rome on the pillion of

his Lambretta or Vespa [...] and the pleasure of moving from one theatrical setting to another: the Forum, the Colosseum, piazza del Popolo, piazza Navona, via Veneto, the hills" (142). The streets connected with shopping and the *dolce vita* were much more important than the monuments: "just as pleasurable was strolling alone along smart streets such as the via Condotti, then up to the Spanish steps to the via Sistina which to my mind had the best window-shopping in the city" (142) while other streets tempted her with their elegant restaurants such as "via Margutta or the next-door via del Babuino, two bohemian streets celebrated in a song of the day in which a foreign girl remembers her Roman lover" (131). In conclusion, "everything about the city was thrilling: the shop windows, the shapely women wearing tight emerald green silk when it was warm and Donegal tweed when cold [...], their buttocks oscillat[ing] like pendulums" (143). In the young student's impressions of Rome, one can already foresee the materialistic and consumerist culture of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

While in *Trespassers* the ancient pomp and splendour of the historical city are totally ignored except as a backdrop, the other authors seem to be less comfortable with turning their backs on the past although they, too, try to stick to the present. In the portrait of Rome that the novelist Colm Tóibín proposes in *The Sign of the Cross*, Catholicism and empire are emptied of meaning as in a television reality show. The city, visited in the days of Berlusconi's 1994 electoral victory, appears to be suspended "between the traditional and the venal" (Tóibín 1995, 284). This is clearly represented by the Easter Mass in St Peter's in the presence of the Pope, which acquires a new meaning in the glare of "hard television light and the clicking of cameras" (280). The Holy Week ceremonies in the Vatican, a favourite *topos* with writers in search of local colour, are nothing but a vulgar and showy spectacle:

I realised that I was watching a pageant from Berlusconi's Italy, Catholic and conservative, but deeply materialistic too, excited by the possibilities of glitter and wealth which Berlusconi and his empire offered, but holding on to traditions and processions on feast days, taking part in the great balancing act between the traditional and the venal which Berlusconi had organised. (284)

The pomp of the solemn ceremony barely hides a loss of faith similar to the author's while the city is fascinated by the "glittering" promises of prosperity offered by the rising new empire and has fallen prey to the same kind of schizophrenia that was also to grip the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger and to which this author is particularly sensitive.

Among the four writers, Bowen is the one who has the most ecumenical views, accepting the ancient and the contemporary, the splendid and the ugly. She realises that Rome is a city capable of swallowing and me-

tabolising every change (“Rome ingorges whatever is added to it”, Bowen 2003, 18) – from the ruins, aqueducts, fountains, cupolas to the icons of modernity:

Gasworks, slaughter-houses, rubbish dumps, cattle markets, [...] schools, asylums and hospitals, squatter’s villages, and other relics of pleasure or signs of progress crop up according to where one goes. Each demands to be taken into the picture. (21)

Indeed, to Bowen, Rome “is full of spaces, but all are Rome” (27). The sprawl of suburban neighbourhoods superimposed on historic images of the capital creates, however, unexpected and disorienting contrasts, as she notices. Rome “seems larger than it probably is. Hills contain it no longer; it overflows, darting all ways like quicksilver” (18). The city is disseminated with “*modernissimo* apartment blocks, like photographs, pasted on to a Victorian sepia wash-drawing” (18) creating interesting contrasts. She diligently exposes the characteristics of modern neighbourhoods such as Parioli, Prati, EUR underlining, however, that they are overlaid on a diagram of arteries and gates whose names (Appia, Flaminia, porta Metronia) evoke ancient times: “the present day shape of Rome has as a framework the ancient roads of the Republic” (21) she points out.

That palimpsest of ancient and modern that has always intrigued and fascinated visitors is, however, in spite of the travellers’ good will, experienced as confusing especially by the older travellers, Bowen and O’Faolain, who repeatedly try to qualify the “bizarre and irreconcilable juxtapositions” (S. O’Faolain 1949, 135) as “a maze”, a “terrible jumble”, “a babel”, “a tangle”, “shifting sand”. It is all summarised by Sean O’Faolain who, after a vain attempt at finding some order, writes:

It was the old jumble all over again; here the catacombs; there the Ardeatine Caves, where hundreds of Italians were murdered by the Germans; beyond, a night club; here, a modern villa; there Cardinal Wiseman’s little church looming against the sky, while the ancient cypresses whispered and a prowling police car hummed out under the arch where one of Mussolini’s aces had lived. (157)

In spite of the confusion, both O’Faolain and Bowen are determined to resist the temptation to see the city through the prism of the past: “it takes one’s entire capacity” – writes Bowen – “to live one moment – the present, the moment one ‘is’ living” (Bowen 2010, 11), even if it implies a fragmented and destabilising view (one only gets “splinters” of reality). No sooner does one swerve from the beaten touristic track, one feels “extraneous, dubious, an alien” as is experienced by Bowen walking along the dreary Via Nomentana that belies its time-honoured name (20).

The two lovers share with many other modern visitors a sense of “irreality”, as Sean O’Faolain writes (S. O’Faolain 1949, 134) regarding the Rome they are actually visiting or the one they are trying to recreate through fantasy or the reading of books. Describing the Rome of the past is for Bowen an act of imagination bordering on the unreal but at the same time a challenge: “[s]eeing the greater part of the time, had to be an act of the mind’s eye (or better that of directed imagination). To recreate, even for an instant, what is laid low, dishevelled, or altogether gone into thin air is exciting” (Bowen 2010, 64). However, the Rome of the present, the real city where real people live and work is equally ungraspable. Sean O’Faolain expresses his frustration thus: “there is, in fact, no way past the mirages of romantic Rome towards the refreshing oasis of the ‘real’” (S. O’Faolain 1949, 135). In spite of his desire to “restore some sense of common earth and of a more familiar Rome” (127), he ends up poking fun at himself and at all those who preach “that the search for the ‘real’ Rome [...] should be directed at red, raw [...] bleeding life; it should be conducted among the cafés of the Via Nazionale” (134).

The only Rome that is real, whether modern or ancient or a combination of the two, is the textual Rome, forged by the words of English-speaking or Latin poets, novelists and travel-writers: “you cannot read Rome without footnotes” comments Sean O’Faolain (126), since it is a city made up of words and of literary memories: “we come to Rome less to see a city than to verify an ideal one. We have all been here before, many times since childhood” (125-6). Indeed, as Carla De Petris remarks, “O’Faolain comes to Rome as a literary pilgrim following the footsteps of many English-speaking writers” whose books “have been carefully packed in his case” (De Petris 2001, 186). With a post-modern sensibility, these Irish writers are painfully conscious of the textual nature of the place and resent both the artificiality of the experience and the weight of this textual legacy, especially since it is part of the culture of their masters. The filter of language remains all important even to interpret the Rome of the present (“The reading of books about Rome in Rome is a pleasant sentimental occupation” S. O’Faolain 1949, 124-5), but it does not lead to an understanding of the actual city. Bowen, too, knows that books frustrate her need to understand Rome rather than help: “what I was looking for was so elementary, so much (I suppose) a matter of common knowledge, that no one had considered it worth recording” (Bowen 2010, 9). Travellers are on their own if they want to discover a common-place, non-literary Rome.

In Rome I wondered how to break down the barrier between myself and happenings outside my memory. I was looking for splinters of actuality in a shifting mass of experience other than my own. (11)



There is only one solution if travellers want to emancipate themselves from books and other people's experiences and see Rome with their own eyes and as a real city: a "pedestrian" solution as Bowen writes. That is, conquering the city by walking all over it: "my approach was pedestrian twice over. [...] My object was to walk it into my head" (15). Any other approach is simply useless: "[i]nside Rome [...] to be anything but walking is estrangement. Trams, buses, tempting on a return journey, take routes which obliterate one's tracks" (35). The central figure of her and Sean O'Faolain's narration is that of a Walter Benjaminian *flâneur* who explores the urban space without a clear goal, gathering glimpses of the modern but never bringing back a complete image as he is continuously reverting to the past and his memories of it.<sup>5</sup>

The other figure looming in their text as a model, or rather a counter-model, is Leopold Bloom, the deliberateness of whose walks over Dublin is quite in contrast with the modern travellers' vague *flânerie*, as Sean O'Faolain points out in the parodic passage where he envies the concrete aims of Joyce's hero taking an imaginary walk in ancient Rome: "[Leopoldus Romanus] strolling up Holy Street (the *Sacra Via*) looking at the jewellers' booths (the *tabernae argentariae*) for a cheap gew-gaw for his moll" (S. O'Faolain 1949, 143). Another wanderer evoked by these texts is the Odysseus of Adorno's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. Like him, O'Faolain and Bowen must resist the allurements of the plurality and 'multitudinousness' of Rome, their Sirens' song. Tied to the mast of common sense, clinging to the glimpses of modern Rome they have conquered, they strive not to be sucked back by the dreams of the past.

The desire to have precise reference points and to recognise a design in the city exceeds the pleasures of aimless walking and losing oneself in the crowd. For travellers such as the Irish whose social, national and religious identity was in a process of transformation after the loss of political and religious standing points, the difficulty of understanding the physical aspects of Rome corresponds to the difficulty of discovering what they look for in Rome. Modernity or antiquity? The real Rome or the ideal one? Christian Rome? Roman Rome? Or a totally new city ready to be discovered and enjoyed abandoning oneself to its *dolce vita*? The problems they meet trying to find their way in the city, reflected in the recurrent device of the construction and deconstruction of maps in which to find order and understanding, symbolise their basic uncertainty. Both Sean O'Faolain and Elizabeth Bowen write hilarious pages on their failed attempts to read or draw maps, underlining the difference between the clear abstract diagram

5 In *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism* (1935) and in the unfinished *Arcade Project*, Walter Benjamin elaborated his seminal notion of the *flâneur*, the aimless stroller in the urban space of the nineteenth century indulging in detached observations of the city, who has become an icon of modernism and of the condition of the bourgeoisie.



and the shapeless identity, the fragmented post-modernity of the actual city. The failure of cartography is a *topos* of post-modern thought, but it also applies to the reality of modern Rome where it is impossible to draw precise boundaries between its various layers, where borders between one part of the city and the other, one historic era and another are porous and flexible. "Everywhere in Rome something has gone somewhere else", writes O'Faolain marvelling at the use of ancient stones in more recent buildings (S. O'Faolain 1949, 134). Rome has no boundaries nor shape; it is protean, as his daughter writes, and "fathomless" (142). With a graphic metaphor he represents his glance as a ray of light trying to penetrate to the core of the city: "[Rome] is all depth and no surface, like a great bay at night, when each dim light is a downward finger" (133).

On the contrary, for Colm Tóibín and Julia O'Faolain the modern Rome is all surface and no depth. Tóibín underlines how the new Italy and the new Rome at the beginning of the Berlusconi era are dependent and shaped by the media, with the "mask" of Berlusconi dominating all six channels as he was "uttering political platitudes, vague statements about Italy and its future" (Tóibín 1995, 279). The political values of its leaders reverberate on the city itself: "it was like something out of science fiction, or a dream about television, or a new version of *Nineteen Eighty Four* [...] the brave new world of post-Christian Italy" (279). Religious ceremonies are "just another spectacle to be videoed, a mild distraction rather than a thing of mystery or primitive wonder" (284).

Although Julia O'Faolain finds Rome, together with Paris, "enlivening and protean" (J. O'Faolain 2013, 181), she draws a scathing portrait of the city and its denizens marked by superficiality and bad faith. The Italian *fidanzati* are "dodgy" philanderers (142). The Jesuit preacher's sermons are marked by violence and worldliness as he attacks the Left to the applause of the congregation (152). Left-wing intellectuals wore "white shirts and perfectly ironed summer suits" and were very proper and priggish (199). The world-respected writer, Ignazio Silone turned out to have been an informer for the fascist police (134-ff.).

University professors, such as the eminent scholar Mario Praz, are accused of being absentees, drawing salaries in Rome while teaching in the United States (136). Students are commuting and rarely attend classes. Nothing is as it seems, nobody as it should be. It is a sham world in which only "show mattered" (143).

As the physical city escapes travellers either for its depth, its fluidity or its superficiality, so does the history of Rome, which is perceived as a heap of fragments and dreams (De Petris 2001, 189), of factual data mixed with imagination. This is testified by a cursory research conducted by Sean O'Faolain about St Peter's burial place. The various versions presented to him all contradict the official one, so fundamental for Christians, that St Peter is buried under the main altar: "is it so? Or do we all depend on a

fiction of our imagination?" (S. O'Faolain 1949, 142).

Irish travellers may, however, benefit from their national experience to face the difficulties presented by Rome. Julia O'Faolain reveals to the reader why the continuous reference to the past experienced in Rome is particularly meaningful for the Irish. Meditating on her personal "geography of romance", she finds that "countries known for their ruined grandeur offer a paradoxical thrill", the thrill of sharing a longing for their past (J. O'Faolain 2013, 216). Rome with its remnants of older times is a mirror reflecting an Ireland still bewailing its noble past as is exemplified by the Irish passion for *fotrach*, the Gaelic term for ruins. Irish history too, as Fritz Senn writes, "is a checkered stratification of successive invasions, a city like Dublin consists of superimpositions and changes of names" (Senn 1984, 206). Tóibín too finds in his home experience a way of making sense of Rome. Like Sean O'Faolain, a Catholic who had lost his faith, and Bowen, a Protestant Irish who had lost her status with the fall of the British Empire, the agnostic Tóibín looks at Rome in search for something that can give sense to his experience, a sort of illumination he cannot find at home, as Gino Scatasta points out.<sup>6</sup> And like the other two he finds it in the old sources of certainty, the Church in his and O'Faolain's case, imperial institutions for Bowen. The Midnight Mass at St Peter's in Rome offers Tóibín an actual revelation: "it was only when the choir and the congregation began to sing 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' that I realised that if I closed my eyes I could be right back in Enniscorthy Cathedral in the early 1960s" (Tóibín 1995, 286).

With some disappointment, Tóibín has to recognise that, in spite of his efforts, the traditional and very Irish views of a Catholic Rome have prevailed:

This was not what I had wanted or expected. [...] Maybe I had been waiting for some image, some moment, which would illuminate the changes which were happening in Italian politics and the Church. Maybe I had even seen it and failed to recognize it. Maybe it was the strange ordinariness of the ceremonies, how much they belonged to my experience and background. Maybe that was important and instructive. I did not know. (289)

The new image of Italy that should emerge from these distinctive approaches ends up being another mirror image, a construction biased by the author's national identity. In the end, it is the old certainties and the similarities that play the major role in Tóibín's construction of Italy, those an Irishman can best appreciate and in which the author can recognise himself.

6 "Qualcosa in grado di dare un senso alla propria esperienza, una sorta di illuminazione che non può trovare in patria" (Scatasta 2008).

For Sean O'Faolain too, who was a life-long anticlerical and had been excommunicated, the culminating moment of his stay in Rome was his return (although short-lived) in the womb of the Church. Accepting, when he decided to go to confession, the complexities of Catholic Rome – believing and sceptical, mystical and materialist – allows him to discover a kind of permissive and ecumenical religion he can live with. And Bowen with all her desire to remain in the present ends up delving in the history of the Roman Empire to find an archetype of her own predicament. In the decline of the Roman *domus* and of the figure of the *pater familias* she sees the decline of the big houses of the Ascendancy, of which she had been personally a victim. These are but a few of the examples of how Rome continues to bear an important significance for some categories of Irish people.

In conclusion, in these texts we witness the failure of a search for different approaches to Rome than its classical past and its religion, which had been central elements in the representations of Irish travellers of the past. The two key elements continue to be valuable and important for the new visitors although the authors try to take their distances from them. The opulence, chaos and the glittering surface of a globalised Rome and its post-modern city-scape are like a fun-house mirror reflecting the face of the Celtic Tiger and, as the latter, bound to melt into thin air. What remains is what has always mattered for the Irish.

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## Derek Mahon's Take on Italy

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**Abstract** Derek Mahon's writings inspired by Italy date back to the Autumn of 1998, when he spent four months in Rome, which was his base for visits to Naples, Pompei and Sorrento. The *Collected Poems* (1999) include "Roman Script" and other poems connected to Italian culture, such as "High Water" about Venice, as well as a series of translations and adaptations drawn from sources ranging as widely as Michelangelo's sonnets and Ariosto, to Umberto Saba and Pier Paolo Pasolini. This essay explores the background of these poems, including references to his relatively unknown *Adaptations* (2006). I intend to show that Mahon's view of Italy is also shaped by his deep knowledge of the great Latin classics, from Ovid and Juvenal, to Propertius and Horace, and that his wide-ranging cosmopolitan insights enrich his and his reader's ways of looking at the world at large.

**Keywords** Derek Mahon. Italy. Rome. Pasolini. *Adaptations*.

Derek Mahon spent four months in Rome in the autumn of 1998 when he was in his late fifties. He also visited Venice and made an excursion from Rome to Pompei. We have evidence of this in his important poem "Roman Script" and two shorter ones, "High Tide" (about Venice) and "Ghosts" (sparked off in Sorrento, on the return journey from Pompei). Cerveteri and Fiesole both appear in "Quaderno" (2008, 20). His previous travels had included Dublin, where he took his degree at the Trinity College (an Anglican foundation), Paris, the U.S. (twice, for about two and five years) and England (in both London and the provinces).

Mahon was born in Belfast, where both his father and grandfather were skilled workers in the shipyards. The family was Protestant. So he did not go to Rome as a devout Catholic pilgrim or a devotee of Winkelmann, such as so many English intellectuals. He went there as a well-established poet, translator and literary critic, with a good knowledge of Rome from music (Cecilia, patroness of music is the only saint mentioned in "Roman Script", without her 'title'), art, literature and the cinema. "Roman Script" begins and ends with the same line from Pasolini's long poem "Gramsci's Ashes" – in Italian in the epigraph, in Mahon's English translation in the last line of the last stanza (11) of the main poem (stanza 12 is the epilogue). That line runs: "in the refuse of the world a new world is born" (2011, 239).

"Gramsci's Ashes" is set in the Protestant Cemetery of Rome, where the urn containing Gramsci's ashes was placed, near the grave of John Keats and the flat marble slab that covers the ashes of Shelley, author of

"Adonais", the elegy he wrote after Keats's death. Keats's "waking dream" (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 851), from the closing paragraph of his "Ode to a Nightingale", appears in Mahon's lines on Cinecittà, the cinema city (stanza 7), separated only by a semi-colon from the scene of the prisoners in Regina Coeli (Queen of Heaven!), instructed to entertain visitors during the mid-morning break when they are allowed outside their cells 'for air'. Mahon calls them the "wretched of the earth", using the same words as the American translation of *The International (Anthem)*: "Stand up, you wretched of the earth" (2011, 238).

There is a second reference to Keats in the previous stanza (7), where the insatiable Tourist is seen snapping up the huge accumulation of art forms in Rome and even violating 'Endymion's' grave (Keats's name transferred to the title name of one of his most famous poems) with the flash-photography of the Nikon camera. In the epilogue of "Roman Script" (stanza 12, not included in the 2011 *New Collected Poems*) we find a portrait of Keats tucked into what Mahon calls a Metastasio rewrite, showing him as an inventor of romances (read: "Lamia", "Isabella", "The Eve of St Agnes") who lived in a fever of creation (added to that caused by his illness); imagination filled the whole course of his life, making his days a dream. Mahon's own heartfelt prayer "when we wake from history | May we find peace in the substance of the true" (1999, 273) is like a modern version of the concluding lines of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 851).

Even the common reader has little difficulty in seeing the destructive tendencies in tourists' amateur flash photography (back to stanza 7). The connection between Cinecittà and the inmates of Regina Coeli is harder to grasp. Yet, if we remember the use of 'feelies' (films working on the emotions) in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the connection is clearer. *Brave New World* was published in 1932, the year before Hitler came to power. Could Huxley have anticipated even then that the atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps would be glossed over by a deceitful documentary film complete with roses, theatre and regular concerts, made at Theresienstadt? At the time "Roman Script" was written it was a known fact.

A flight to Venice in search of 'pedestrian silence' produced a thumbnail sketch of the city where "we" (Mahon and his travelling companion) stand on the Gesuati steps watching the city sink in the high water, while the "perpetual high tide" of "Year round tourism" gives it no respite. The brighter side of Venice appears in the room on the Janiculum in "Roman Script" with gondolas and imagined scenes of Byron's philandering and Goldoni's hilarity.

Not only Keats but Shelley too is mightily present behind the lines of "Roman Script". As Mahon laments the loss of Pasolini's "true direction" (stanza

11) and speaks of the “bright garbage on the incoming wave” produced by the “genocidal corporate imperative” of the modern industrial world, we know that the final chorus of Shelley’s “Hellas” (1822) could not have been far from his mind. It says:

The world’s great age begins anew  
 The golden years return  
 The earth doth like a snake renew  
 Her winter weeds outworn:  
 Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam  
 Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.  
 (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 771).

“Roman Script” also contains the essential message of Shelley’s “Adonais” – the luminous worth of poets (stanza 48) seen as “the kings of thought | Who waged contention with their time’s decay” contrasted with the “ages, empires and religions [that] | Lie buried in the ravage they have wrought” and “borrow not | Glory from those who made the world their prey” (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 784).

Mahon’s version of this message is most obvious in stanza 6 of “Roman Script”, which ranges from Nero and the “shrewd popes” (2011, 237) who frequent “the venial gym” in search of boy-victims, to Mozart’s Don Giovanni where his licentious life ends in a precipitous fall to Hell. It is also very present in stanza 9, which speaks of the ‘others’, the anti-fascist prisoners who were *here* in Regina Coeli, brutally tortured for their aspirations to “a society based on hope and truth” (2011, 238). They are and are not represented by Pavese, the “poet of internment” (the most lenient form of imprisonment under the Fascist régime). For Pavese, befriended by his old anti-fascist schoolmates more out of kindness than of trust, was never more than a timid anti-fascist.

Fatherless, with only a mother who died in 1930 when he was 22, and a sister to support him if he got into trouble with the régime, his slight offence was punished by a three-year sentence, of which he only served one. Certainly he suffered bitterly from solitude in an era in which (for example) women were treated like clothes hangers to hang attractive commodities on (“a hat, a pair of shoes, a blouse, a glove”, 2011, 238). A world that Moravia caught so well in *Gli indifferenti* (1929). It was this cynical, empty world that drove him to suicide. For years, like Keats, he had been “half in love with easeful death” (“Nightingale”, *The Norton Anthology*, 2: 851, stanza 6). He titled the traditionally sentimental poems he wrote for Constance Dowling *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi*. They were published posthumously in 1951. Mahon changed this title into “to him death came with [...] a glib post-war cynicism” (2011, 238). In the light of Pavese’s short stories *Prima che il gallo canti* (1949), it is clear that his self-esteem



suffered badly from the political compromise he took refuge in both before and after the war. The title itself, drawn from the Gospel story of how Peter “went out and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26.75) is sufficient evidence of this.

As regards the structure of “Roman Script”, it is based on the frequent changes of angle on space and time typical of the film script.<sup>1</sup> As the poem opens the brightly coloured flowers on the Janiculum, refreshed by night rain and Respighi’s (unmentioned) *Fountains of Rome*, seem to light up the whole city centre. Then in a flash, inside Mahon’s room, we are in Venice.

From Venice we are rushed to the land of conspiring Irish exiles destined to die in Rome. From the smart order “out you go” (2011, 237), down to Trastevere, comes what at first looks like a kind of tourist itinerary. But once across the bridge (Ponte Sisto) and round the Circo Massimo ‘race track’ we are catapulted to the floodlit “naiad and triton” (2011, 237) of the Fontana di Trevi and Via Veneto (Harry’s Bar) haunted by a jet-set not unlike that portrayed in the American Fitzgerald’s “beautiful and the damned” (2011, 237), and film actors like those in Fellini’s *La dolce vita*. Nero and popes switch us back to the Forum and basilica area, near Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. But to see the “soft marble thighs of Persephone” (2011, 238), by that other great baroque sculptor Bernini, we have to leap back across the Tiber and up to the Galleria Borghese, before being brought back by tourist photographs to the tomb of St Cecilia and Keats’s grave in the Protestant Cemetery, out in the Testaccio district. Again, the Regina Coeli prison in central Rome (Trastevere) is placed side by side with Cinecittà, outside the city altogether. The theme of decay and destruction takes us from Pasolini’s “peripheral rubbish dumps” (2011, 239), to the moral decay of Nero, the popes, Mozart’s Don Giovanni and the material decay of the large homes of the rich upper-middle class on the Janiculum, with their pretentious façades of (porous) “ochreous travertine” (2011, 237) that soak up not only the evening shadows of the poplars but huge quantities of smog as well.

Mahon’s treatment of time in “Roman Script” also shares this flexibility of the cinema camera. The first stanza starts from the present, goes back to the Respighi *Fountains* (1916), perhaps to the 1952 American musical *Singing in the Rain*, but since the fiddles “provoke” line dancing, “rain” could refer to the provoking chorus-girls of the Moulin Rouge or even to the use of music and dance in rites to propitiate rainfall. That would mean a time-span from the present to the very distant past. There follows a milder gap between Byron and Goldoni or the glamorous nun in Fellini’s film on Casanova, quite a big jump. When he comes to “our own princes” (2011, 236), the Irish exiles who sought refuge in Rome after they were defeated

1 For Mahon’s first-hand knowledge of film making (as a script writer) see his “Bowen on the Box” (*Selected Prose* 87 and following). See also “The Poetry Nonsense” (24).

at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601, Mahon specifically comments that their world seems more distant now than in the days before Pompeii was buried under the ashes of Vesuvius (79 AD).

This brings him to the stabilising present of his routine of work on his poems, soon followed by the link between today's Fiat and Maserati 'contests' round the capital and the imagined chariot races of ancient Rome. From Nero to Don Giovanni is just one stride, while from the ruins of the Roman Forum to the 'ruins' (Mahon's word) below the tower blocks in the new industrial suburbs is a rocketing flight somehow less significant than the chaos created by global economy and global warming in the twenty-odd years between 1998 and the seventies, when together with Giorgio Bassani of *Italia Nostra* and many others, Pasolini was making strenuous efforts to stem the tide of global pollution ("His is the true direction we have lost", 239). Sestet 6 of the *Quaderno*, titled "Pasolini", presents a less idealised portrait of the poet-film producer, an uncensored list of things he did before he was murdered "amid the trash", but still seen shining like "a bronze bird-shape" (2008, 20).

We now need to look at the scrupulous scholarly work that goes into the making of at least some of Mahon's poems. While I was preparing the chapter on him for my *The Japanese Effect in Contemporary Irish Poetry*, I came across some sheets of the Derek Mahon Papers housed at Emory University. They formed the groundwork for that perfect little poem "The Snow Party" (1975). I was amazed to find that it started off as an idea for a poem about Hiroshima. After reading John Hersey's report very carefully and identifying the most striking and distressing images, Mahon drew up a sheet of 'brainstorming'. Then, not wishing to intrude, as an outsider, on the sufferings of the Japanese people, he superimposed other images taken from Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, which had been published as a Penguin in the early 1970s. The 'elsewheres' that contrast with the quietly tinkling china of the party Basho is invited to are transferred to the savagery of seventeenth-century Europe (and America?), the burning of witches and heretics and the "thousands have died since dawn | in the service of barbarous kings" (2011, 62) bent on conquest and oppression. The result is, in its way, equally horrifying, and the century-old message of human cruelty is there, but the poem gains a unity that the brainstorming did not have.

Sheets of the Emory Papers are evidence that "Ghosts", the second short poem that grew out of Mahon's 1998 visit to Italy, was part of a much more ambitious project on the exceedingly lascivious frescoes in Pompeii. These frescoes, a highlight for tourists greedy for sensations, have been completely cut out of "Ghosts". But as we know that Ibsen wrote his play of that name in the hotel in Sorrento that Mahon stayed at on his way back to Rome from Pompeii, our minds swiftly connect the dissolute way of life of Captain Alving in the play to the Pompeian frescoes.

I feel certain that stanza 8 of “Roman Script” is based on a similar technique. The immense hiatus between the Regina Coeli and Cinecittà scenes cannot just represent an empty space. The reader inevitably fills it in with the torture of anti-fascist prisoners we know to have been constant during the régime. I have no documentary proof that Mahon knew about the Nazi’s documentary film on Theresienstadt that I mentioned above. That he knew the camp existed is obvious from his article “War and Peace”, on the work of his old friend Michael Longley (2012, 224-8). There he speaks of Longley’s Holocaust poems like *Terezin* (the Czech spelling of Theresienstadt). He thinks it was his friend’s “Jewish granny, on the maternal side” who gave them their “peculiar poignancy” (2012, 227).

Mahon’s method in constructing “Roman Script” might be compared to the way Michelangelo took great blocks of marble and then cut away the superfluous parts to get to his *Prigioni* figures. That seems like a contradiction of Mahon’s definition of the frescoes of the Creation in the Sistine Chapel. He calls them a “violent comic-strip” (2011, 238), which is shocking to people brought up to think of Michelangelo as a great Renaissance painter. The violence of the *Creation* is indisputable; all the art critics call it Michelangelo’s *terribilità*. And it is a fact that today people think of the great cycles of Renaissance frescoes as the equivalent of our comic strips, just the non-Reformed Church’s alternative to the printing press. Yet the impression remains that, while both artists are baroque, Mahon had little liking for Michelangelo’s frescoes, but was delighted in Bernini’s *Persephone*, which embodies the idea of life renewed; in her “a new world is born” (2011, 239) from the underworld.

For further light on Mahon’s attitude to the Sistine Chapel we need to go to the “Quaderno” (2008, 19-21), a sort of travel journal, which conceals some very weighty matter beneath quite a casual tone. “I Penserosi” (sestet 7), for example, tells us that “We too spent time in the high, lonely tower [...] with other lamps aglow in Fiesole” (20). The clue to our desperate questions: “Who else is implied in that ‘too’? Which ‘lonely tower’? And whose are the ‘other lamps’?” is in the title. In the singular it is *Il Penseroso*, an early poem by John Milton, the grave pendant to his “L’Allegro”. He wrote them while he was living in Oxfordshire, after leaving (Cambridge) university and before coming to Italy. In *Il Penseroso* Milton says:

Let my lamp at midnight hour  
 Be seen in some *high lonely tower*  
 Where I may... Unsphere  
 The spirit of Plato  
 (*The Norton Anthology*, 1: 1448) [Emphasis added]

Of course there is no mention of Fiesole in the Oxfordshire poem. For that we have to go to *Paradise Lost*, book 1, lines 283-91, where we discover that

The superior fiend's [Satan's] [...] shield  
 [...] Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb  
 Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views  
 At evening, from the top of Fesolè,  
 [...] to descry new lands,  
 Rivers, or mountains in her spotty globe.  
 (*The Norton Anthology*, 1: 1483)

And who can the "Tuscan artist" be other than Galileo? David Masson tells us in his introduction to *Paradise Lost* (1961, 27) that Milton conversed with him near Florence in 1638. Speaking of this meeting, Milton described Galileo as "a prisoner to the Inquisition for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought" (2011, 112-3). The monstrous injustice suffered by Galileo and the humiliation of being forced to lie about his deepest convictions ("*Eppur si muove!*") to save his life if not his freedom, inspired Brecht to write a whole play, *Galileo*. Might they have prompted Mahon to insert an extra meaning in the first and last lines of his "Roman Script"? In their separate contexts, the words "cock-row" in the first and "substance of the true" (1999, 273) in the last line have no connection, while "cock-row and engine hum" (2011, 236) create a kind of merging of rural and urban that the Latin poet Horace so delightfully described at plant level.

But what if, to an ex-choir boy, commanding a clear view of St Peter's from some point on the Janiculum, "cock-row" (unlikely but literal, not an idiomatic alternative to "at first light", used in the following line) is associated with the Gospel of St Matthew, quoted above (26.75), which describes how Peter (later Saint) "went out and wept bitterly" when he remembered that Jesus had foreseen that he would deny him three times "before the cock crow"? In fact, Peter assured the soldiers at Jesus' trial, three times, that he was not one of his followers. Set against this untruth, what is the value of the expression "the substance of the true" (1999, 273)? Does it simply mean essential truth, the stuff of truth, or might that 'substance' conjure up centuries of dispute over the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation?

Since Mahon is known to revise his poems frequently, the removal of stanza 12 of "Roman Script" (the Metastasio epilogue) does not come as a surprise. The term "Rewrite" places it naturally among the *Adaptations* and without it the structure of "Roman Script" is tighter, more focused on the Pasolini section. Yet in the light of sestet 7 of the "Quaderno", which I have examined above, might not the decision to omit it in the *New Collected Poems* also mean that Mahon felt it was pointless to add to what the author of *Paradise Lost* had already said? The Catholic Church takes decisions in its own time. It was only in 1215 that the Fourth Lateran

Council fully adopted the doctrine of transubstantiation, which was reworded during the years of the Council of Trent (1545-63), at the time of the Reformation. As happened with the ‘rehabilitation’ of Galileo, no doubt also this issue will eventually be examined once again.

So much for Catholic Rome. What of Ancient Rome? Mahon pays it very little attention, jumbling “basilica, forum, fountain and frieze” (2011, 238) in one great anonymous heap. Once more, an explanation for this can be found in the “Quaderno”. Here “Geronimo”,<sup>2</sup> the fifth sestet, picks out “an Etruscan | ... at Cerveteri” (2008, 20), the site of the tombs described so tenderly by D.H. Lawrence in his *Etruscan Places* (first Penguin edition 1966). ‘Gudrun’, in “Beyond the Alps” (sestet 2, 19), one of two sisters in Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, defined by her unusual name as well as the unhappy end of her lover, confirms the link with Lawrence in this fifth sestet. In his slim volume Lawrence compares the soft, living qualities of the Etruscans with the hard, destructive Roman armies that exterminated them, leaving no doubt where his sympathies lay. Which partly explains why Mahon’s “Etruscan” “carried himself like a spry veteran | of tribal conflict, disinherited yet | blithe, and took off in an ancient Fiat” (2008, 20). And why Mahon’s take on Italy in “Roman Script” practically ignores Ancient Rome.

The picture changes completely when it comes to literature, where Mahon reveals a more than passing acquaintance with Latin and Italian writers and poets and chooses those he deals with in greater or lesser detail with great discrimination. His contributions to *The Listener* between 1970-1975 include a review of Goldoni’s *The Venetian Twins* given at the Aldwych Theatre, one of Pirandello’s *Il gioco delle parti* (*The Rules of the Game*, at the Queen’s Theatre) on 24th June 1971, another of Eduardo De Filippo’s *Napoli Milionaria* (again at the Aldwych), 8th May 1972. In July 1970 he had also reviewed Montale’s *Farfalla di Dinard* (*The Butterfly of Dinard*), an unfinished work on a novel about provincial life (in Liguria), rather reminiscent of Proust. And in June 1973 he chose to review William Weaver’s translation of Giorgio Bassani’s *Dietro la porta* (*Behind the Door*). He no doubt knew and approved of *Italia Nostra*, the association Bassani founded to defend the neglected landscapes and monuments of Italy. Incidentally he also travelled to Rome briefly for *Vogue* Magazine in the spring of 1975, the year of Pasolini’s death, to interview Anthony Burgess on “Rome and Music”.

In 1980 Mahon ‘graduated’ from BBC Radio to BBC TV, and later the ITN, Granada. Challenging and fascinating as his new work as a script-writer was, he must have realised this was taking a great risk as far as his

2 The title is taken from the name of the noble American Indian, defender of his people’s rights against the savage destruction they were subjected to by the white invaders.

creative writing was concerned. He had written, in the article “MacNeice, ‘the War’ and the BBC” that “during the 1950s, when he was busiest at Features [the BBC Features Department], there was a certain falling off in [MacNeice’s] poetry itself, though this was rectified towards the end”(2012, 132). This would be even more applicable to the very different work-rhythms involved in script writing. Besides, there was the fact that, in his case, he was beginning rather late, at thirty-nine. His doubts are obvious when he calls Harold Pinter ‘a real screenwriter’ (“Bowen on the Box”, 2012, 91).

These worries coincided with early warnings of the break-up of Mahon’s marriage, which ended in 1985. So it is not surprising to find that his original poem “Ovid in Tomis”, published in *Stand* magazine as early as the winter of 1983-1984, describes three kinds of exile, from the homeland or familiar social background, from home and family and from poetry. It is also an extraordinary study of perspectives; from present to past and on to ancient times; from past to present; from minute detail to infinity. Even more impressive is the way the voices of the ancient and the modern poets are brought so close that they are often almost indistinguishable, then really merge in the final lament for ‘our’ exile.

The first four triplets come as a shock. What can this trash of gear-box and Coca-Cola (even though “unsinkable”, hence in a sense timeless) have to do with the ancient Latin poet whose work has survived twenty centuries? Does “They stare *me* out” (emphasis added) mean they force him (Ovid), or only the modern poet, to lower his eyes? “My transformation into a stone” can only refer to the author of the *Metamorphoses*, so there can be no doubt whose name “was mud [...] | A dirty word in Rome” (2011, 140); nor that it is the modern poet who gives the reader an idea of what Ovid’s banishment on the Black Sea was like, by talk of Byron in Botany Bay or Wilde in Dawson City (US). Memories of his former success, when he “strode | Head-high in the forum” (2011, 141) make Ovid rebel, understandably, against his exile by Augustus, prolonged by his successor Tiberius. The idea of the muddle of mud huts where he is living becoming “A handsome city, | [...] port, | [...] resort” (2011, 141) (with an oil pipeline!) is feasible; whereas the dignified statue of Ovid, seen as if he was some person outside himself, can only have been thought up by the modern poet.

Then, in a phase of resignation after six years, Ovid draws a sense of purpose from observing strange sea creatures like the spiny bat-fish and pleasure from “listening hard | to the uninhibited || Virtuosity of the lark” (2011, 142). More than pertinent for anyone in the modern world, fearing his creative writing may be inhibited. This is not a Latin poet, dreaming of an impossible simple life, mixing up games of ducks and drakes (played with stones) with the latest craze for deck quoits, played with rubber or metal rings. Even when he talks about Syrinx’s metamorphosis into a tall reed, she is *keening* (an Irish word for lament) because in the modern



world reeds will be pulped to make cording for motorcar tires. And the “Pan is dead” (2011, 144) is suspiciously near the Nietzschean “God is dead” of student protest in the sixties and seventies, while at the same time making the passage from blind religious belief to serious, systematic examination of the universe as it is and as Lucretius saw it (“I | have exchanged belief | for documentation”, 2011, 144).

Fear of being abandoned by “the Muse” (the power of artistic creation) and the possible emptiness of the universe beyond our immediate world dissolve, because of the reverence that writers feel before the infinite promise of the unblemished page. The poet has achieved the “uninhibited virtuosity” of the lark in a limpid flow of thought sustained for fifty-two delightful triplets. That he feels an immense debt to Ovid goes without saying.

Mahon turned to Ovid once more in an original poem in the early nineties, when his son visited him in New York (*New York Time* 2011, 175). This visit must have brought back painful memories of the ‘bad times’ that led to the family being split up. Through Ovid’s Philomela’s *Metamorphosis* he achieved a release, a second transformation into a children’s bedtime story, no more upsetting than *Jack and the Beanstalk*, that “no malicious hands can twist or tear” (“The Old Snaps”, 2011, 103). “[S]ome silence in the street | till released children dash to bus and swing” (“Ovid on West 4th”, 2011, 173) establishes this from the start. King Tereus’ repeated bullying “send young Itys here to me” (2011, 173) only makes him look foolish. When he realises the atrocious trick the women have played on him (making him eat his own son) he “nearly had a seizure” (2011, 173). He howls an order to the furies of Styx, then makes a contemporary correction, overturns the dinner table and calls the furies from “the hobs of hell” (2011, 173). After which he brandishes his sword, ineffectively, since the two sisters (his wife and lover) merely fly off as a swallow and a nightingale; while he, transformed into a hoopoe, in the old story-telling formula “is furious still” (2011, 174).

The underlying grief seems summed up most effectively in the substitution of the routine “fires of hell” by the ‘hobs’ of hell. This absurd little device, attached to a bar of the raised Victorian grate in fireplaces to keep hot water constantly ready for making tea or grog and so on, symbolised the essence of lower-middle and working-class family comfort when things went right. Thus, so much the more hellish when they went wrong.

The other thing that strikes the reader most is the omission of the tapestry Philomela wove and sent to her sister to tell her of Tereus’ cruel way of preventing her (so he thought) from telling her sister how he raped her, by cutting out her tongue. I strongly suspect that in this version it is the poem that is the tapestry and tells a tale in which the poet, not “Philomela”, is silenced by unanswerable reproach, when actually an “impractical daughter” has had her share of responsibility in marrying someone too like her

father, a navy captain who apparently “lost [his] balance” and died like the Chinese poet Li Po; the real culprit being the distillery by the river at Portballintrae (“A Curious Ghost”, 2011, 61).

Mahon has gained his knowledge of Italian literature largely through his work on the versions and adaptations, which have now been collected in two small volumes, *Adaptations* (2006) and *Echo's Grove* (2013). It should be emphasised that they are part of a work in progress, which is gradually moving towards a collection of world poetry, universal, at times even cosmic, so that the Italian and Latin contributions only represent a small part of the whole. Starting, as he tells us in the foreword to *Adaptations*, as something “poets use [...] to keep the engine ticking over” (2006, 11), they eventually contributed to earning him the Scott-Moncrieff award for translation, which must be the most prestigious prize in this category. Mahon insists that they are not in the tradition of literal translation and makes no secret of the fact that he often relies on recognised scholarly works as a point of departure. What he fears most is the uniformity suggested by Robert Lowell in the introduction to his *Imitations* (1961). He tells us that what dictate (his) choice of poems in the first place are “affinities of idea, shape and atmosphere”, as well as, in the case of Ovid for example, “an imagined kinship” (2013, 18).

Mahon is very economical with dates. Even his date of birth is given only as 1941, while Haughton adds that it was “after the Blitz of spring 1941”. The earliest of Mahon’s versions or adaptations of poems in Italian seems to be *Gramsci's Ashes* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, first published in *The Irish Times* on 25 October 1986. This might mean he wrote it during or just after the years he spent as a scriptwriter for the BBC and Granada. It only includes the first section of Pasolini’s long poem, written in 1954, over twenty years before his death in 1975. At that time, obviously, Mahon was over thirty and would have had an opportunity to see Pasolini’s films in London. From them he would have understood how intelligent and creative Pasolini’s mind was and the memories of the films must often have returned to him during his script-writing experience.

The manner of Pasolini’s death offended everyone but neo-fascists and neo-nazis. I have already shown when I was looking at “Roman Script” that Mahon saw him as a martyr; the more so because his atrocious death, perpetrated by suburban louts, was almost certainly ordered by sinister puppet-masters behind the scenes. Hence the adaptation of “Gramsci’s Ashes” presents a sort of dual martyrdom, since the “brother” who drew “the ideal society” also suffered (slow) death at the hands of the fascist régime. Paradoxically, he also suffered the injustice of being buried, or re-buried in Rome’s non-Catholic cemetery, among English and other aristocrats; he, who had given his entire life to the cause of the working man. Probably, when he made this comment, Pasolini did not know that the reburial took place in 1938, the year the Racial Laws came into force, render-



ing all minorities more vulnerable. No doubt Gramsci's sister-in-law made this decision because fascist fanatics might have desecrated his grave, if it had been left in the Verano cemetery. The surrounding Testaccio district is more in sympathy with Gramsci's ideas, with its anonymous, barrack-like blocks of flats where the workers live on the dirty-yellow top-floors by the mud of the Tiber, and (though this is not a new suburb) the accompanying trash which Pasolini had joined with Giorgio Bassani to combat. Another reason, as I have already pointed out, why Mahon felt akin to him.

*Adaptations* includes just one short poem by Umberto Saba (1883-1957). Mahon has placed it between Rilke and Pasternak, making him more Mittel-European than Italian. Saba was born in Trieste, of a non-Jewish father but Jewish mother and later joined the Jewish community of Trieste. Consequently, though he was not deported, he had a very hard time from 1938 until the war ended. He survived with the help of various friends, one of them Montale, who put him up for a time. A good literary reason for choosing "A Siren", the poem in question, is that Saba championed the cause of 'honest' poetry. "A Siren" is honest but not ingenuous. It skilfully portrays a beautiful young swimming champion who has charmed an older man, superimposing her image on the healthy mother figure encouraged to practice sport (but not mental activity) so that she will be able to produce a large healthy family to colonise a fascist empire.

Mario Luzi's "Trout in the Water" (2013, 152) is a superb poem. It sings like Schubert but with even more power and variety of rhythm. Behind the lines, but never expressed in obvious religious terminology, an enquiring mind is asking fundamental philosophical and religious questions. The water is the trout's true element and it is true to it; in its turn the water protects the trout and enhances its vision. The poet thinks that both the trout and the river may have some idea of their own identity because they belong to the 'greater wisdom' beyond themselves. This is all the more important because we human beings probably spin (invent) heavens (paradise) in our dreams as a defence against suffering. We cannot forget, either, that early Christians drew a fish to represent Christ and the Scriptures were seen as the water Christianity was sustained in.

Mahon's *Adaptations* also includes "A Rewrite - *from the Italian of Pietro Metastasio, 1698-1782*" (2006, 46). Owing to the vagaries of history, after Austria replaced Spain as the dominant power in Italy, Metastasio was installed in comfortable exile as a court poet in Vienna from 1830 until his death in 1882. There he produced the librettos for many brilliant operas. As a poet he was very pre-Romantic. Mahon's 'remake', originally placed at the end of "Roman Script", might among other things have been a comment on the predominance of opera/melodrama in the Italian musical world, certainly until the 1970s. Traditionally, orchestral music had been largely neglected; even the famous Accademia di Santa Cecilia was always very traditional. On the strictly literary level "when we wake from history"

(l. 13) is a variation on Stephen Dedalus' response to his chauvinist headmaster's provocation (in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, episode 2): "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake".

The adaptation "A Dirge" is not based on John Webster's play *The Duchess of Malfi*, which Mahon knew and had seen performed, but on the life of the original Duchess, Giovanna d'Aragona (1490-1520). While he was in Rome in 1998, Mahon had several conversations with Barbara Amendola, who was carrying out research on Giovanna and may also have suggested that poems by the great Vittoria Colonna and Gaspara Stampa would provide examples of the kind of language Giovanna would have used. Mahon chose the form of the dramatic monologue developed by Robert Browning for the first part of "A Dirge" (1999, 268). The dialogue conveys Giovanna's courage in claiming her right to a life of pleasure with "the one I venerate and deify" and contrasts it with her punishment, alone, desperate and desolate, abandoned even by this chosen companion. What Mahon is most interested in is why present-day audiences, in a society of wealth and bright lights, are still charmed and dazzled by the cruelty, corruption and violence of this now extinct provincial court.

The answer is that the harshness of our own violent time is global, cosmic. Even present-day theatre is sententious but encourages those who indulge in luxury at the expense of the public purse and are also responsible for the proliferation of warplanes and 'dumb' bombs. The "cricket [...] racket" couplet is particularly revealing, because the game of cricket, played throughout the British Empire, gave rise to the expression 'it's not cricket', meaning 'it's not fair play', a criterion seldom respected by the present ruling classes, who are associated with the grating "high-pitched chatter" of their ladies and the "racket" (also dishonest trading) or loud noise of cheering at cricket matches. In contrast, the Duchess Giovanna deserves homage for her courageous defence of her own and other women's rights.

No collection of World Poetry would be complete without some connection with the old legends about heroic knights. Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532) takes up the theme of the medieval French *Chanson de Roland*. Typically, in the adaptation "Night and Day", Mahon chooses lines not about Orlando's success as a warrior, but the gentler side of the work, as in the episode of Angelica and the young Moor whom she finds by chance as she escapes from Orlando. She looks after, then marries him and they spend their honeymoon happily in the woods.

"Night and Day" (2006, 40) has something of Browning's "Meeting at Night", in the furtive approach of the lover (not in the country here but down a city colonnade). The "faint squeak" of the opening door recalls

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
And the blue spurt of a lighted match

And a voice less loud  
 [...]
   
 Than the two hearts beating each to each!  
 (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 1362)

Which leaves the erotic details of “Night and Day” (“exploding like the sulphurous candlelight”, 2006, 40) to the imagination. The Victorian poet’s “Parting at Morning”, when “the sun looked down over the mountain’s rim” (*The Norton Anthology*, 2: 1362), is business-like and clean cut. The “Night and Day” adaptation ends with regret at ‘banishment’ when day breaks and the plea “can we not live in a world of love forever?” (2006, 40) rings like a distant echo of the student movement slogan ‘make love not war’, which I shall be looking at when I come to the Latin poetry in the adaptations.

Having worked on Vittoria Colonna’s poems as he prepared Giovanna d’Aragona’s monologue, Mahon could not fail to go on to Michelangelo’s impressive sonnets, modestly called *Rime*. Whatever doubts he may have had about the gigantic Sistine frescoes, the weighty, finely chiselled lines of these *Rime* prompted him to adapt two of them. He probably chose the one about art vanquishing death, partly because the theme would be familiar to his English-speaking readership from Shakespeare’s famous sonnets. With the exception of the technical chemical term *calcium carbonate* and the over-chummy “the pair of us” (2006, 41) addressed to Vittoria Colonna, whom Michelangelo always treated with great deference, Mahon has not yielded to the temptation of peppering this adaptation up with colloquial and contemporary expressions. The sonnet devoted towards the subject of death also throws light on Michelangelo’s attitude to the Church. In the sestet, which points out that God’s promise to mankind has not yet been fulfilled, Mahon renders “per chi ti crede” with “your saints expect”, probably referring to the circle of deeply religious people gathered round Vittoria Colonna and inspired by Juan de Valdès (1500-1541), who hoped for a spiritual reformation of the church. Of course, as a young man in Florence, Michelangelo had been impressed by Savonarola’s sermons, not yet fanatical as they later became (Careri 2013, 271).

In November 2009, the year Seamus Heaney turned seventy, Derek Mahon made *The Poetry Nonsense* with Heaney, his other old friends Michael and Edna Longley and some younger ones. In 2010, commenting on this ‘docudrama’, he wrote, “in my seventieth year I have finally put *The Poetry Nonsense* behind me, or very nearly. The task is done and now I can turn to prose with an easy mind” (2012, 24). That “or very nearly” must refer in part to his adaptations, the second volume of which, *Echo’s Grove*, came out in 2013. Not surprisingly, this includes two sonnets by Petrarch (1304-1374), who died at the age of seventy. They were both written after the death of Laura, which changed Petrarch’s life and way of life completely.

As he mourned for Laura, fearing the grief that overwhelmed him when he was alone in his little bed in his austere little room, he accepted the company of common people whom he had shunned before Laura died. Above all, he says, his vein of inspiration has dried up and he will write no more poetry. The last line of the second sonnet Mahon chose runs: “et la cetera mia rivolta in pianto” (and my lyre turns to weeping). As I have already pointed out, Mahon’s adaptations are, intentionally, never literal. But for that last line of Petrarch he gives us: “and the strings whimper in a minor key” (2013, 70), which seems to me to go far beyond adaptation. In “the strings” I hear the first words of the title of Louis MacNeice’s autobiography, taken from a scene in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (Act 4, scene 3, line 291) as Mahon explains in an old review (2012, 121). It is the night before Philippi and Brutus hears his boy Lucius talking in his sleep. He says: “The strings, my lord, are false”, meaning out of tune.

We associate “whimper” with the last lines of T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”: “This is the way the world ends | Not with a bang but a whimper” (*The Norton Anthology*, 22: 2386). Written in 1925, after *The Waste Land*, it sums up a period of decline after World War I. Finally, “in a minor key” refers, I think, to Mahon’s work on adaptations of poems in non-English languages. I simply do not believe that this line was written merely “to keep the engine ticking” (2006, 11). To me it is a very moving line of original contemporary poetry. I know a poet’s voice changes in his later years, when his main work has been completed. My impression is that, when Mahon wrote “the task is done”, he was thinking, with apprehension for his friend, of the ‘early warning’ Heaney had a few years before his final illness in 2013.

As regards Mahon’s adaptations of works by Latin poets, these include (not in a chronological order) Ovid, Juvenal, Propertius and Horace, concluding with the wonderful “Lucretius on Clouds”, drawn from the sixth book of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*. The short original poem “Tractatus” has a reference to Tacitus. From what I have said about Mahon’s original poems “Ovid in Tomis” and “Ovid on 4th West”, it should already be clear how he felt about the great love-poet’s work. The four adaptations of Ovid that he has published so far require little comment. There are two excerpts from the *Amores* (i.v and ii.x) in “Ovid in Love”, the lovely legends of Galatea (Pygmalion) and Echo (both from the *Metamorphoses*) and Ariadne’s complaint about Theseus’ ingratitude (*Heroides* 10) after she saved his life with her spool of thread. These adaptations seem more than usually respectful of the original texts. *Amores* I.V has a girl “capering in the nip” and her gown, torn from her, ‘squirming’ on the floor. The opening lines of “Galatea” (“Pygmalion lived... alone | without a wife to call his own”, 2013, 42) have a faint echo of an old drinking song, but the analogy stops short there. In the Echo story Jupiter’s nymphs, warned by Echo, “skedaddled” (ran off in a hurry) (2013, 45), to prevent Juno from

surprising him with them; again, an isolated touch. Ariadne's story is completely without colloquialisms.

There can be no doubt why there is one of Juvenal's brilliant satires among the adaptations, since it corresponds so nearly to twentieth/twenty-first century global society. Mugging at the bottom end, poisoning anyone inconvenient at the top, tax evasion even in the middle. Limitless self-indulgence in diet, drugs and sexual habits end in early physical and mental disintegration, including the familiar 'anecdotalage' (telling the same stories *ad nauseam* in old age); feminine attractions are flaunted in vain; for family affection read greed for inheritance.

Propertius's "Sextus and Cynthia" cycle is also outstanding for its 'present-day' features. I was rather surprised to find that, while Mahon defines it as an "exercise", all nine sections are included; rather out of proportion to the space allotted even to Ovid. The availability of a reliable translation by the 'real translator' Gilbert Highet (see Foreword to *Echo's Grove*) may have counted for something here. But I think the deciding factor was that this cycle lends itself to the introduction of very colloquial language, as happened with Molière's *L'école des maris* and *L'école des femmes* adaptations, which were very successful in the theatre in the 1980s.

Cynthia's ghost reminds the poet of their one-time "shenanigans" (this is now accepted English - originally it was almost certainly Irish), calls him a "lying sod", his women visitors "floozyies" (2013, 37); his new mistress is merely a "whore" (37). It is hard to place Cynthia socially. On the one hand, Sextus trusts her judgment of his writings, based on close attention ("how she listens when I read", in "Epic Love", 2013, 29). She is expert in the arts of lovemaking, conceding almost complete surrender; yet "she rules me with an iron fist" (2013, 31), and asserts her independence by occasionally going away to the country or the sea alone. If she unexpectedly returns while he is having a "Quiet Orgy", with "her dander up" (2013, 35), she punches him in the face with her fist like any plebeian; yet, she cannot be one of the plebs, because she had a faithful nurse who took good care of her while she was dying; she asks Sextus to look after her in her declining years. For his part, Sextus entirely adheres to the 'Make love not war' program - "wrestling with Cynthia is war enough" (2013, 30).

The poems of all the Latin authors Mahon has chosen contain considerations on philosophical and religious things that seem to reflect different phases in his own thinking on these matters. I have already mentioned the "Pan is dead [...] I | have exchanged belief | for documentation" (2013, 144) in "Ovid in Tomis". The Juvenal satire ends cryptically "and if | you want to worship mere materialism, | that modern god we ourselves have invented" (2013, 50) points out that this new 'religion', which seemed so honest and truthful, is open to the same objection such as the old world religions. It was born of the human need to combat the fear of the unknown future. Juvenal's solution is stoicism.

Horace's "How to Live" (*Odes*, 1, v. 2) also contains a touch of stoicism. But Horace had learned wisdom through living in very uncertain times and so emphasises the importance of enjoying life while we can without worrying about the future. "Decant your wine" (2013, 27) he adds, which is easier if you follow the example of his famous country mouse and opt to go back to the country. Propertius proposes to "spend my old age studying natural things, | [...] the spiritual economy of life on Earth" (2013, 30). This is getting very near to Lucretius.

Of all these Latin authors, Mahon seems to feel nearest to the poet-philosopher Lucretius, who adopted a flexible version of Epicurus' atomistic theory. Philosophy apart, they have their great love of clouds in common. Throughout Mahon's work, clouds are omnipresent, both physically and metaphorically. What is particularly striking in "Lucretius on Clouds" is the way the formations and transformations of clouds are shown to correspond to movements in the human organism, creating a deep sense both of the multiplicity and the one-ness of the universe. For Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* is not only a scientific examination of detail, it coheres in its powerful poetry.

The short, original poem "Tractatus" (2011, 111) is one of Mahon's upside-down, 'circular' creations. The Latin author here is Tacitus, close friend of Pliny the Younger and famous for his *Histories* and *Annals* based on contemporary letters and Senate documents but also largely too on the gossip of the exclusive social circles he moved in. This is no doubt why Mahon introduces his story of sailors *hearing* the sun sinking in the western sea. Which is followed by the extremely ironical question: "who would question that titanic roar, | The steam rising wherever the edge may be?" (2011, 111). Of course in those days the earth was still believed to be flat, so that you (or a ship) could fall off the edge if you came to it. So we are back at the beginning, with Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* (1921) and the striking 'first proposition': "The world is everything that is the case" (2011, 111). Everything from a very small creature to a wonderful creation of art: "The fly giving up in the coal-shed | To the Winged Victory of Samothrace" (111).

Mahon follows this up with a bitter answer to the question that haunts all believers – why, if God created the world and everything in it, did he allow evil and injustice to exist; why should even a small innocent creature such as a fly suffer for no reason? Or the passengers on a splendid liner like the Titanic die undeservedly, when it sank in 1912? Do even the wonders of great art compensate for such things? The non-believers' answer (lines 3-6) is that God did a bad job when he created our very imperfect, though in many ways wonderful world. Which is probably why he is represented in religious paintings as old and white-haired. Yet, behind "The fly that gives up in the cold-shed | To the Winged Victory of Samothrace" (111) there are echoes of one of the 'great' hymns Mahon used to sing as a choir-boy:



All things bright and beautiful  
*All creatures great and small*  
*All things wise and wonderful*  
 The Lord God made them all.  
 (*The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* 1964, 2) [Emphasis added]

Strictly speaking, most of “Tractatus” has nothing to do with Italy. It does, however, have a great deal to do with the kind of person and the kind of poet Derek Mahon is and, consequently, has determined what aspects of Italian history, thought, art and literature he is interested in.

This essay has endeavoured to show how widely Mahon’s knowledge of Italian culture ranges across time and space: his visit to Italy certainly constituted a sound basis for his deep understanding of our country, but it was particularly his encyclopedic erudition combined with a fervid curiosity and the gaze of a keen observer that shaped his imagination. As a cosmopolitan writer, he constantly seeks to expand and enrich his own and the reader’s way of looking at the world. In this sense, his poetry crosses all borders, and his view of Italian ‘otherness’ is ultimately a celebration of the power of poetry to bring us to ourselves.

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## Italy, World War II and South African Poetry

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**Abstract** The focus of this article is Guy Butler, Chris Mann and Memory. Details and texts of poetry, but also fragments of letters, drawings, notebooks, images, photos and a more general visual iconography pertaining to these two South African poets' life and work will be used to show the way in which Butler and Mann had something important in common: War and Italy. Guy Butler took part in World War II in Italy, whereas Chris Mann indirectly experienced World War II conflict in our country. Their experience has been indelibly recorded both in their personal memories and in their writings: poems, diaries and prose pieces.

**Keywords** Italy. South Africa. World War II. Poetry.

It would be impossible for me to describe all the possible routes and secondary paths this topic can lead to, because I would be forced to discuss at least four or five or, possibly, six different South African poets who have had diverse links and influences through and from Italy. I could, for instance, easily refer to F.T. Prince, Guy Butler, Patrick Cullinan, Stephen Watson, Douglas Livingstone and Chris Mann. For example: I recently read Douglas Livingstone's private diary, which he kept during his 1992 trip to Italy to launch a book of his poems translated into Italian, *Il sonno dei miei leoni*. The diary is full of dates, impressions, drafts, poems, descriptions of places and people, and would be a rich source of discussion. But I am not going to talk about it, though I'm sure it would be as interesting as, say, Richard Rive's trip to Italy or Guy Butler's autobiographies. There might be similar pages in the diary and notebooks that Stephen Watson produced during his stay in Bellagio. Equally, I shall ignore all the work Patrick Cullinan (the eminent poet and translator) did on Montale – the essay on him and the translations of his work. Then, there are F.T. Prince's writings, amongst which you will find more than one page or thought on places in Italy, especially Venice, Florence and Vicenza; but they, too, must remain beyond the scope of this essay.

Italian literature and culture have had a notable presence in South African contemporary poetry in the last seventy years but I must limit myself here to one or two cases that can illustrate the topic.

The focus of this article will be Guy Butler, Chris Mann and Memory. I will use not only details and texts of poetry, but also fragments of letters,

drawings, notebooks, images, photos and a more general visual iconography that I have collected during my research in private houses and libraries such as the National English Literary Museum (NELM) in Grahamstown. I will present images of some of the key books and documents that I refer to, so as to enable you to imagine the larger contexts and bibliographies such a topic might lead to in the future.<sup>1</sup>

The reason why I have chosen the above-mentioned poets is simple: in South Africa Guy Butler has been one of the most famous and most influential poets since the 1930s. Chris Mann, thirty years younger than his master, started publishing in the 1970s and is now Professor of Poetry in the same university where Guy Butler was active as a writer and professor. Apart from sharing some personal and professional interests, Butler and Mann also had something else in common: war. Obviously, since their lives are a part of different generations, when I say they shared the experience of war it does not mean that they both fought in our country. Guy Butler took part in World War II in Italy, whereas Chris Mann indirectly experienced the conflict in our country.

When World War II broke out, South African politicians were divided over what decisions to take. "Six ministers, including the Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog, argued for remaining neutral and for upholding National sovereignty, apart from discharging the legal requirement to protect Britain's Simonstown facility" (Nasson 2012, 55).

Seven other Cabinet members, with Jan Christaan Smuts, the Deputy Prime Minister, prominent among them, pushed for joining the war against Germany as a matter of duty, national interest and security. On the one hand, Hertzog thought that only through neutrality could South Africa preserve its full national independence and the freedom to chart its own destiny; on the other, Smuts was afraid that Germany would demand the return of what was then known as South West Africa (the actual Namibia), so as to open a kind of door into the Union. "By cutting loose from its British Commonwealth friends and allies", Bill Nasson writes, "it would find itself adrift and alone in an increasingly perilous world" (56). Let's have a look at one of Bob Connolly's cartoons of the period.

Here he celebrates the liberation of Italy as a joint South African-United States enterprise. The Italian Campaign, where South Africans fought as part of the American Fifth Army, cost something like 9,000 casualties out of the more than 200,000 troops involved. Most of these troops were white, but black and coloured soldiers fought (and died) in auxiliary war service (Vale 2011, 20). The image can be comic, and it is certainly an ironic one; yet, as Desmond Tutu observes in his introduction to Peter

1 The printing of the following images was accorded to me by Chris Mann himself, who holds the rights as their owner.

311 AMERICANS AMONG THE 1,400 PASSENGERS

**SURVIVORS PICKED UP BY SHIPS IN NEIGHBOURHOOD**

— BY A PRESS ASSOCIATION REUTER.

LONDON, Monday.

The Ministry of Information states that the Donaldson liner, *Athenia*, of 12,445 tons, with 1,400 passengers aboard has been torpedoed and sunk 200 miles west of the Hebrides. Among those on board were 311 United States passengers.

The master of the *Athenia* has called the owners that all the passengers and the crew, with the exception of those killed by the explosion, took to the lifeboats and were picked up by various ships. The number of killed is not yet known.

The liner had lifeboats to carry 1,550 passengers.

The *Athenia* left Glasgow on Friday, Liverpool on Saturday afternoon, and Belfast yesterday. She was bound for Montreal with a cargo of 1,000 tons.

The liner first dashed the message, "Torpedoed," and all possible assistance was dispatched to the scene.

The sinking rapidly message was received as far as is known, the last to be received.

The Ministry of Information bulletin states that the *Athenia* was torpedoed without warning. Such action, says the bulletin, is in direct contravention of the rules regarding submarine warfare, by which German submarines were to be warned before they attacked.

The crew of the *Athenia* numbered 230. No official news has yet been received as to how many people were saved.

**MANY WOMEN AND CHILDREN**

Many women and children were on the liner.

The Americans on board, including the number of girl tourists, were those



Image 1. *The Star* (Johannesburg, Transvaal). Monday, September 4th 1939, 11

Image 2. Bob Connolly, cartoon dated 19th April 1945. *Victory Cartoon. Selection of R.D.M. Cartoons* (Central News Agency)

Vale's book, you can laugh at the cartoons, but "remember, please, that international relations are no laughing matters" (Tutu, in Vale 2011, ix). Both the horrors of war and the pleasures of peace are the main topic here, one which allows us not only to re-live the tragedy of violence but also the ever-present opportunity to show that a longing for life, generosity and humanity can emerge even in difficult times. And this is particularly moving when history, memory and personal experiences are being transformed into literary texts, poems in this case. Let us read what Sampie De Wet (1906-1984) writes about our country. She lived in Pretoria, writing stories and children's books. In 1956 she published *Nine Stories*, which deals with the themes of death, pain, fear and madness. She served with the South African Women's Auxiliary Services in World War II, and wrote a book about her stay in Italy. This is just one of the many examples we could supply in order to give a stranger's view on Italy during the war:

When new acquaintances used to ask me how I liked Italy, I always answered that what I was seeing was not Italy, but a country in the grip of war, and that is a vastly different matter. I should imagine that Italy, at present, is more like England than either is like its peace-time self. Italy is dirty, walls unwhitewashed and shutters unpainted, the roads bad, and everywhere debris which has not been removed, and damage

which has not yet been repaired [...]. It has been a dreadful winter, both for our troops and for civilians, but fortunately the winter is over. When I left at the end of March it was already much warmer, and light till after seven in the evenings, and food was becoming less scarce. Many traces of the war had been removed. (De Wet 1945, 27)

Guy Butler attended Rhodes University during the 1930s, graduating MA in 1938, and left South Africa to fight in World War II. After the war, he read English Literature at Oxford University, graduating in 1947. He returned to South Africa, where he took up a post lecturing in English at the University of Witwatersrand. In 1951 he left Wits to take up a post as Senior Lecturer at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. A year later, he was made Professor and Head of English at Rhodes, where he remained until his retirement in 1987. Throughout his career, Butler promoted the culture of English-speaking South Africans, which led to the charge of separatism from some critics, although he argued for integration rather than exclusivity. He was influential in achieving the recognition of South African English Literature as a distinct body of work. In his poetry, he strove for the synthesis of European and African elements into a single voice. In his late *Collected Poems* volume, published in 1999, he dedicates a full section to our country calling it "Italy 1944-1945". It contains famous poems such as "Pietà", "Giotto's Campanile", "December 1944", "Letter from Monte Stanco", "Before a Dawn Attack", "From a War Diary: Beyond Verona". Let's read how De Wet's prose description of a destroyed country resonates in Butler's first stanza of "Pietà":

Tremendous, marching through smashed buildings, trees,  
 a stream of bawdy bubbles from our lips.  
 Dog-eyed he stares from the ruin's lower steps,  
 then frightened fingers flutter out to seize  
 his mother's dusty skirts. She lifts her eyes,  
 straightens, flashes back at bay, and almost trips;  
 then turns, goes out to him, him only, grips  
 his fear-blind head against her bending knees [...]  
 (Butler 1999, 37)

But it is in "Giotto's Campanile" and "December 1944" that Butler anticipates what will later become his 'Italian' voice, that particular way of experimenting with the *terza rima* in which he would produce, in a few years, two of his major long poems: "On First Seeing Florence" and "Elegy for a South African Tank Commander killed in action in Italy, October 1944".

The first one, as Butler himself says, was "an attempt to do justice to one such renovating spot of time". It grew from an early-morning view of Florence when units of the 6th South African Armoured Division had

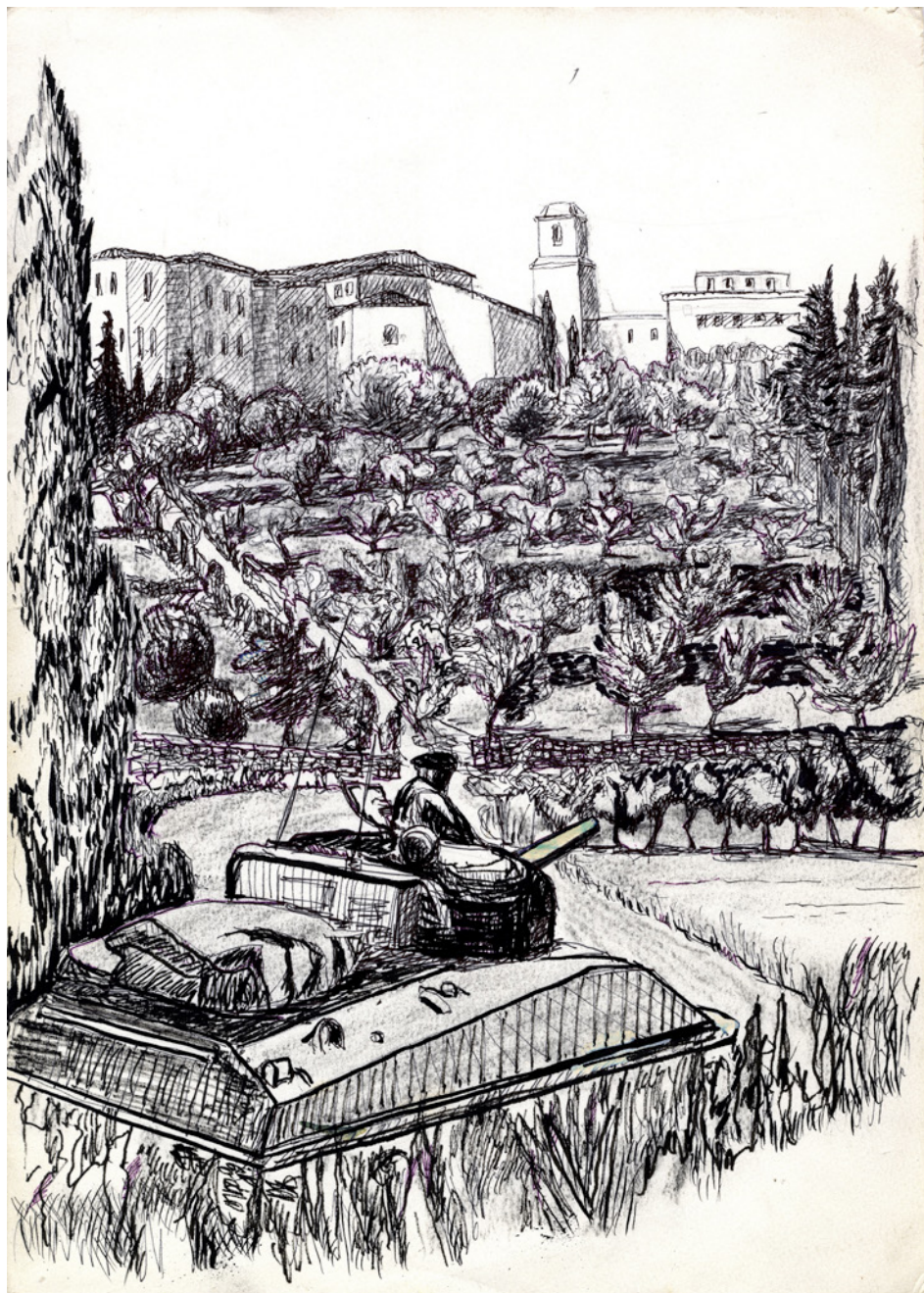


Image 3. Drawing by Guy Butler, *Guy Butler, A Local Habitation. An Autobiography 1945-90*. New Africa Books, 1991



advanced to the southern bank of the Arno, on the 4th August 1944. The poem went through a series of visions and revisions, until it was finally published in 1968, after the Arno floods of November 1966 and a chance reading of Iris Origo's *War in the Val d'Orcia*.

In the other long poem called *Elegy*, Butler had to go through an even more complicated period of writing and revision. Of the many war casualties that made an impact on him, there were three that, more than others, impressed him: David Pitman, Willoughby Jackson and (Janson) Breda van Breda, a young relative of his wife. The tank commander killed in his long poem "is an embodiment of many idealistic young South Africans at that time, whose awareness of their African origins and complex heritage were awakened first by the strange world of Egypt and then by Italy".

I will not go through the long line of drafts and revisions he described in his article on "Elegy"; suffice it to say that there are now four versions of the poem:

1. The so-called 'Third Draft', which is for record purposes only.
2. The version published in the journal *Standpunte* in 1955 (vol. 10, no. 1, August/September 1955).
3. The "Elegy" (reconstructed and shortened in *Stranger to Europe with Additional Poems*) which dates back to 1959.
4. The so-called post-Peter Sacks Version, which Butler wrote in March/April 1986 after reading Peter Sacks' book, *The English Elegy* (Butler 1945-1985).

Here is the beginning of the long poem:

Briefly released from autumn's battle line,  
 relaxed as antique shepherds on the sward,  
 or lounging like young lords, we'd savour wine,  
 we'd say the pen is mightier than the sword;  
 we'd nag at ironies: of how we'd come -  
 white Africans who artlessly abhorred  
 raw voices screaming from Berlin to Rome -  
 only to learn the bitter paradox  
 of trouble brewing, terribly, back home:  
 to help bring Freedom through the storms and shocks  
 to harbour in calm waters, victory won -  
 and then to run upon the selfsame rocks.  
 (Butler 1999, 76)

It is worth noting here that, despite his refusal to take part in any operational and fighting actions in war - by which reason he was appointed as a teacher to the troops - Butler was strongly convinced that he, like

many South Africans, “did not go off to fight *for* an Empire, but against Nazism – *against* a political creed based on a biological belief in a master race”. “We believed”, he writes, “in democracy, and we thought the Commonwealth a good thing” (Butler 1994, 164). Yet, soon after the war, as he tells us in the final volume of his autobiography, *Local Habitation* (1991), apart from the death-camp tragedies and the use of the atomic bombs, he would suffer further difficulties: in 1947, after his graduation in Oxford, he was back in a country where, in 1948, the National Party won at the polls and began the period of apartheid. In his words, we can perceive the final disillusion with humankind and his particular sense of private and public disintegration:

It is very difficult to communicate, at this distance in time, the body blows, and the protracted nausea of disillusionment in the years that followed the 1948 election: the ineluctable implementation of apartheid; the removal of the ‘Coloured’ voters from the common roll; the banning of virtually all black writers; the withdrawal from the Commonwealth; the desperate, sometimes pathetic, sometimes dangerous reactions and conspiracies; Sharpeville, the station bomb [...] The result was that, within a decade, we felt like exiles in our own country. Many of us still do. (Butler 1999, 165)

In 1986, when Butler decided to publish the latest and revised version of *Elegy*, the State of Emergency had just been lifted, but it was re-imposed in June of the same year and continued to be enforced until 2nd February 1990. The unstable political situation had led to a deep economic crisis in the country. The banning and detention of political leaders left a vacuum in black public life, only filled by church leaders such as Desmond Tutu, Frank Chikane, and others. Nearly 35,000 people were detained during 1986-87. Reports published in the *Weekly Mail* during the period June 1985 to December 1986 reveal that 813 books, objects, and publications were banned, 371 for political reasons. Butler’s lines seem to have been particularly suitable for the war years in Italy, but also for other possible violent contexts and situations, such as South Africa under the State of Emergency in the 1980s. The following lines were ignored by the state police when they were revised and published in South Africa in 1986:

how can we love  
when every outward gesture, thought or word  
must see itself distorted, relative  
and mirrored in the infinite absurd?  
If speech is but a subtle sort of bark,  
and song the pretty twitter of a bird,  
why should it hurt to hear a falling lark



stutter so sweetly? Why do I choke and turn  
to mutter half-meant longings to the dark?  
(Butler 1999, 94)

Yet, as Stephen Watson has clearly observed, Guy Butler's life, which had its beginnings in what is to us an "almost unprecedented degree of rootedness in landscapes natural, cultural, spiritual, was precipitated into that condition of uprootedness which has grown to the dimensions of a universal condition in the twentieth century" (Watson in "Introduction" to Guy Butler's *Essays & Lectures* 1994, 4) In more than one critical essay, Butler stressed that traditions must be adapted to new environments, revealing him to be an innovator as well as a conservative, "both radical and traditionalist" (4).

While Guy Butler was teaching South African officers in Italy during the war, and also travelling to Rome, Cassino, Florence and other cities, another South African was in our country, following a different route, mainly made up of prison camps and physical difficulties. Cricketer Norman Tufty Mann joined the 2nd Anti-Tank Regiment during the war, passed through Cairo, Alexandria, and El Alamein, and was captured at the battle of Tobruk. He was deported to a prisoner-of-war camp near Chiavari, having passed through Benghazi, Tharuna, Sicily, and Naples. Finally, he was driven to Padua, soon after the Italian Armistice at Cassibile, passing through Genoa and La Spezia on the way. Here, rumours of an invasion of Italy were in the air, but Tufty Mann, together with other prisoners of war, was still in the middle of German soldiers and officers in a camp near Chioggia. Escaping all the checks, one day he visited Venice because, as he says in his diary, "rumours were falling thick and fast about our ears – that the British Navy was expected in Venice that morning! (Just to show how rumours became distorted!)". On the way back to Chioggia, he saw a violent raid against the town, so his plan to try to escape by boat to Ancona failed, and he had to go back to the port and the mainland, asking for help in a farm. In his diary Tufty Mann says:

We knocked up the family who had given us food previously when we worked on the farm. Having no male in the household it took them over ten minutes to pluck up courage to open the door. When they did so, this was the beginning of incredible kindness from people so poor, peasants who had so little but gave all. We were taken inside and within ten minutes were drinking very acceptable hot coffee and having a lightly boiled egg which had been cooked by being placed on the ashes of the fire. After a long complicated explanation of what had happened we were glad to doss down in the stable after such an exhausting day. This was Saturday, three days after the Armistice.



Image 4. The Ferro and Zagato families in Cavarzere, around 1940

So, this is the beginning of the story of Tufty Mann who, together with a Durban railwayman, spent 20 months evading the Germans in the north-east of Italy.

By day they lived in a pigsty, hiding behind a false wall; sometimes they hid in reeds, freezing. By night, he was taught Italian, living on polenta and beans. He wrote his diary in those slim notebooks used by Elementary School kids under the Mussolini regime.

Tufty Mann smoked homemade cigarettes, made of whatever he could scrounge from the countryside, and caught malaria near the Po River. He was eventually rescued by Popski's Army, an international band of Allied adventurers. After the war, he played 19 cricket tests for South Africa, touring England in 1947 and 1951. He could have played many more, but died in 1952, aged 32. In his will, Mann bequeathed £200 each to Angelina Armoroli and Cesare Zagato, the Italians who took him in when he was on the run.

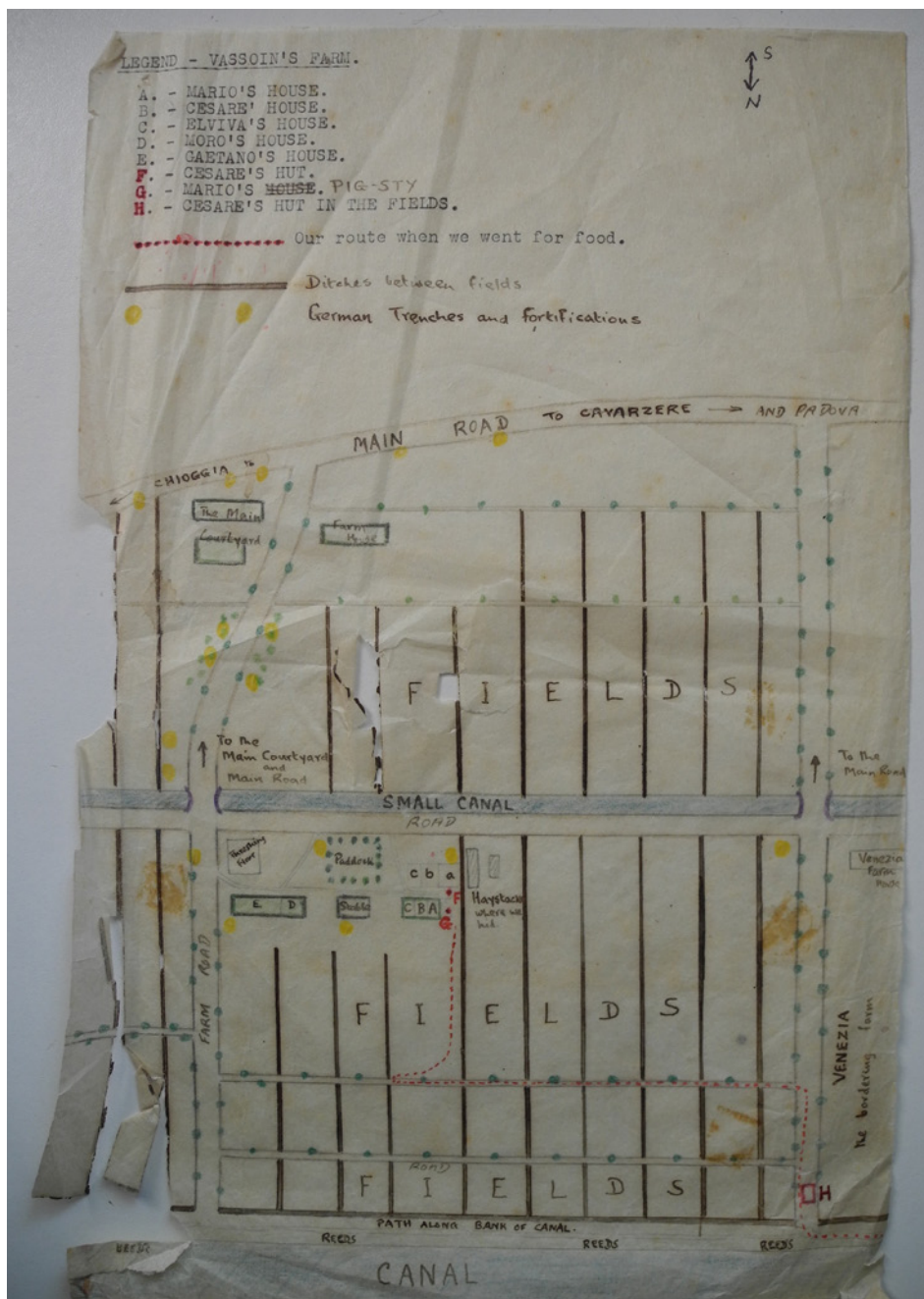


Image 5. Map of Barracks and Lodgings in a POW Camp in Chioggia, Italy



Images 6-8. Norman Tufty Mann's Italian Notebooks





Image 9. Norman Tufty Mann in Cavarzere during World War II

Angelina named her daughter Normanna, after Norman. Normanna's son, Alberto, is a friend of Chris and Julia's son, Luke. Both Alberto and Luke live in London and are college friends.

Mann's story is interesting from a number of different angles, with various layers of possible literary text involved: a diary, an unpublished autobiographical novel and, finally, a published poem written by his son, Chris Mann, after his visit to the actual spot of his father's hiding place. The poem, published in his book *Heartlands* (2002), is called "A Field in Italy" and concerns both Mann's actual visit, with the whole family, to Cavarzere and a particular interpretation of memory through the invocation of shadows (or shades) in a landscape. I would like to remember here, as a kind of final observation, the thoughts of Walter Benjamin when he talks about digging and remembering. He says that whoever tries to get closer to his or her hidden past must dig according to a plan. And, in digging, he or she must not be mistaken in thinking that the most important thing is to produce a precise list of found objects. He or she must also remember the exact place where antiquities were lodged. So, memories do not have to be founded on references but they have to point exactly in the place where the researcher has found them.

Borrowing some details from Chris Mann's research, it will be enough here to say that the shades, to apply a neuro-cognitive model of understanding, do not need to be restricted to the biological lineage of an individual nor are they ghostly phantoms that have a separate, perceivable existence independent of an individual's mind-brain. The shades, by this definition, are "episodic memories of other people which, inhabiting the interior life of an individual, contribute to that individual's personal and



Image 10. Article on Norman Tufty Mann's Story

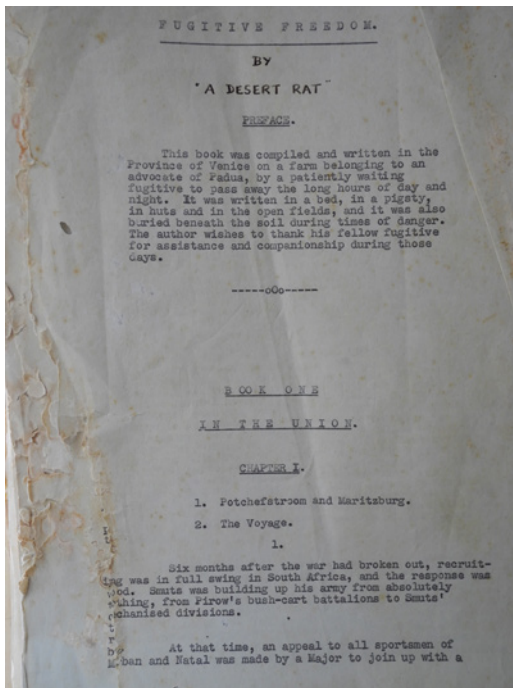


Image 11. Frontispice of the transcription of Norman Tufty Mann's Notebooks

socio-cultural identity". Recent discoveries show that our personal identity is closely linked to recurrent significant memories of other people. In short, we define who we are by our relationship to our shades. They are the kind of shades that you might find in the poetry of well-known poets such as Homer, Virgil and Dante. Possibly, they include a literary guide in the form of Virgil, or a spiritual guide in the shape of Beatrice, and all the possible presences coming both from the African concept of ancestral shades and the original Catholic doctrine when it brings together the whole company of believers, the living and the dead. This particular form of syncretism reconciles all the imagined and dreamed presences Mann talks about in his poem and helps him (and us) to fill in the gaps of history and the pain of individual and emotional lacunae for the re-construction of a distracted subconscious:

I'm standing in a field in Italy.  
 A hot summer's day.  
 Crows. Tractors.  
 Poplars lining in a river.  
 Clods and stubble at my feet.  
 The trees are as in his diary.  
 The gravel farm road.  
 The narrow canals.  
 The soft quick plop of frogs  
 Arrowing into a ditch.  
 I'm standing near Venice  
 With people in a field.  
 The sky is cloudless  
 As blue as Giotto's  
 Frescoes inside a dome...  
 'Ma tanti anni fa, sai'.  
*Signora Ferro's* beside me.  
 'The barn was here,' she says.  
 'Or maybe closer to the trees.  
 It's all so long ago'.  
 My Italian is rough and slow.  
 Her dialect's rapid.  
 Our talk leads to guesses.  
 Confusion. Laughter.  
 Scraps of knowing. Then gaps...  
 The memory shallows. Fades.  
 I hear *Signora Ferro* talking,  
 Far off, in swirls of words.  
 Stocky. Black-haired. Resolute.  
 A handbag over one arm...

People keep leaving each other,  
 The words in Zulu put it.  
 Humans keep missing others.  
 Dangling raw ends.  
 Loneliness. Suspicion. Gaps.

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## Peter Blum's 'Kaapse Sonette' and Giochino Belli's *Sonetti Romaneschi* From Trastevere to Table Mountain

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**Abstract** 'Kaapse Sonette' (Cape Sonnets) refers to the nine sonnets which Afrikaans poet Peter Blum (Trieste 1925-London 1990) published in two different books of poetry, *Steenbok tot Poolsee* (Capricorn to Polar Sea) in 1955 and *Enklaves van die Lig* (Enclaves of the Light) in 1958, using Giuseppe Gioachino Belli's *Sonetti Romaneschi* as inspirational source, in some cases faithfully translating from the Romanesque dialect of the original, in others 'only' transposing the social background of Belli's sonnets to depict the condition, as well as the language, of the black population in Apartheid South Africa. 'The Kaapse Sonette', like the *Romanesque Sonnets*, makes a strenuous attempt to address a monolithic, authoritarian state, a *regime de facto*, unable and unwilling to acknowledge the voices and identities of its own population.

**Keywords** Peter Blum. South Africa. Belli. Italy. Apartheid.

Blum published nine of these sonnets: six in his first volume *Steenbok tot Poolsee* (Capricorn to Polar Sea)<sup>1</sup> of 1955, and three in his second *Enklaves van die Lig* (Enclaves of the Light) of 1958. The South African poet's versions create an 'I' figure, a male, speaking the idiomatic Afrikaans of a Cape Coloured, and relocate the voice as clearly to Cape Town as Belli's protagonist is at home in Rome and Trastevere. (Blum's speaker is unusually anonymous, but seems to be identified in one case.) Some of the Cape Sonnets are faithful versions of originals in the *Sonetti Romaneschi*, but Blum took his admiration for Belli further. The South African poet issued a warning to his friend Barend Toerien:

Not ALL the Cape Sonnets are really translated from Belli. Beware of the double 'leg-pull!' Some (and I don't want to reveal WHICH) are pure Blum, although in Belli's style. (Blum 2008, 321)

Rightly or wrongly Blum argued that Romanesco was not an 'arcane' language and that, in fact, it differed very little from standard Italian.

1 All translations, unless otherwise specified, are my own.

He judged that the language of the Veneto was one of the “difficult dialects”. Perhaps there is an element of creative pride in Blum’s claim that the language of his sonnets was not completely the ‘Kaaps-Kleurlings’ (Cape Coloured) of the anthropological linguist, “but is ALSO just as much an art product as Burns or Theocritus” (Blum 2008, 321). This suggests something important about both Belli and Blum: that in their sonnets they are urban pastoralists. N.P. van Wyk Louw saw that Blum, like his inspiration, had achieved something universal in dialect poetry, in a language of the small, the intimate, the humble (Kannemeyer 1993, 74). The setting of a recognisable local dialect in the strict form of the sonnet with a surprising feeling of dramatic variety makes Blum an honourable companion to Belli.

Peter Blum was born in Europe and died in England, but became a South African, Afrikaans, poet, with, as many commentators noted, a European sensibility.<sup>2</sup> Where in Europe Blum was born is part of his mystery. Applying for South African citizenship in 1948, the poet identified himself as “Austrian (by birth & parentage), German by annexation” (Kannemeyer 1993, 147), and gave his birthplace as Vienna, but later claimed to have been born in Trieste. The Germano-Italian ambiguity is characteristic. His family was German-speaking, and the poet may have been schooled in Berlin, or elsewhere in Germany, and in Switzerland. In his youth he knew Split, the town of Diocletian, about whom he wrote in later life, and he had travelled in Croatia. His youth was multi-lingual: German, Slavic languages, Italian, and an early education in Latin. Later, he studied French and made distinguished translations of Baudelaire and Apollinaire into Afrikaans, the poetic medium he settled on, after having first written verse in English, and even having considered German. As a member of what was a Catholic family with Jewish roots, perhaps Peter Blum can also be thought of as a late citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Blum settled with his parents in South Africa in 1937, when he was twelve. Five years later he matriculated from an English-medium school in Durban (the town of the young Pessoa, Roy Campbell and Douglas Livingstone). He went to the University of Stellenbosch and worked as a librarian in Cape Town and the Free State. His poetry was received, not without controversy, but generally to great critical acclaim. Blum applied for South African citizenship twice, in 1948 and 1959. For complex and not generally satisfactory reasons, he was twice refused, and shortly after the second refusal, he left South Africa with his wife Hettie, never to return, and died in London in 1990. Kannemeyer said that “the departure of Blum from South Africa was more than the mere moving-on of a chance immigrant. It is to this day the greatest single loss suffered by Afrikaans literature” (6).

2 For Blum’s biography I rely on Kannemeyer (1993).

Blum's nine Cape Sonnets as a whole clearly transpose Belli's setting to the 1950s Cape Town of Coloured proletariat. Rome and Trastevere become Cape Town, the Papal state becomes the apartheid South Africa. The clerical/lay division is not simply translated into white/non-white. Blum's "all-encompassing scepticism" (Olivier 2012, 314) and "avowed cosmopolitanism" (Willemse 2012, 433) showed little sympathy with either of the major alternatives of South African identity politics: Black African and Afrikaner. The poet had spent seven years working as a librarian with Coloured readers in Cape Town and seems to have developed what might be called an a-political sympathy with what he saw as their cultural vitality and their humorous detachment from the opposing nationalisms of South Africa.

In Cape Sonnet no. 2 "Oor Monnemente Gepraat" ("Talking of Monuments" in Guy Butler's translation: Grové, Harvey 1962, 321), which may recall Belli's no. 1547 "Er masso di pietra", the speaker mocks, without naming it, the pretentiousness and solemnity of the Voortrekker Monument. The cornerstone of this forty-metre high Afrikaner shrine had been laid in 1938 and the monument itself inaugurated in 1949, shortly after the National Party general election victory of 1948. Blum's speaker, judging the monolith huge, ugly and over-solemn, asks who paid for it, and offers instead recognisable Cape Town public statues ("elkeen soos 'n mens", every one like a person) of figures (both English and Dutch) from the colonial past:

ou Afdum-Murray, Hofmeyr met sy pens;  
hier's Jan van Riebeeck, bakgat aangetrek  
in sy *plus-fours*; Cecil Rhodes wat jou wys  
wa' die reisesbaan lê; en vorie Paalmint-hys  
ou Mies Victôria met ha' klein spanspek.

old No-thumb Murray, Hofmeyr with his gut;  
here's Jan van Riebeeck, very smartly dressed  
in his *plus-fours*; Cecil Rhodes who's pointing  
to the race-course; and in front of Parliament  
old Mrs. Victoria with her little melon.

These statues are spread from the north (Rhodes in the Company Gardens, Queen Victoria at Parliament House), through the centre (Murray at the Groote Kerk<sup>3</sup> and Hofmeyr in Church Square) to the reclaimed foreshore (van Riebeeck), on the spot where the first Dutch settlers might have

<sup>3</sup> Murray's thumb has recently been restored by the sculptor Marieke Prinsloo-Rowe. See "Nuwe duim vir afduim-Murray" by Le Roux Schoeman. URL [vimeo.com/51922658/](http://vimeo.com/51922658/) (2014/03/02).

docked. “Your hinterland is there” is inscribed on the plinth of Rhodes’s statue and the figure points north into Africa: here he gestures in the same direction towards the Milnerton race course. Victoria’s royal orb becomes a musk melon. These recognitions require an intimacy with the locale and a perspective that acknowledges humanity rather than historical significance. Blum would have found both intimacy and the humane perspective in the *Sonetti Romaneschi*.

Blum’s Cape Town setting is also marked by reference to its harbour. No. 3 “Slaaikrappery” (hanky-panky, adultery, literally scratching in the lettuce) deals with one of Belli’s recurring themes: profane love and sex in the context of religion. The speaker denounces a woman he claims has been promiscuously unfaithful to him: she is “Satansgoed” (the Devil’s work), she will go with any sailor, and she does not love Jesus. A number of Belli’s sonnets are dramatic monologues or include dialogue, and in “Ou Groentesmous” (Old Vegetable Hawker, no. 4) Blum’s speaker, identified in the title of the poem, meditates on the passage of time and the aging and passing of his friends, as he addresses a customer. Only Table Mountain, it seems, is unchanging: “Hy’s ‘n goeie ou klippie” (He’s a good old pebble). No. 8 “Planne in die Maanskyn” (Plans in the Moonlight, or Moonshine), perhaps written after the launch of Sputnik on 4th October 1957, imagines human settlement on the moon, where white people will live in posh areas with the names of craters (names which the speaker transliterates so as to suggest the new suburbs of the urbanising Afrikaner middle class). Recalling the separate residential requirements of the Group Areas Act of 1950, the speaker wonders where the Coloured people will settle.

En vir ons?  
Vir ons die donker gatkant van die maan.

And for us?  
For us the dark arsehole of the moon.

Belli raises the possibility of human occupation of the moon in “Er Zignore e Ccaino” (1147, The Lord and Cain), when Cain is banished to “weep in the moon”. The bluestocking daughter-in-law of no. 1294, “La mi’ nora”, is quoted as saying “The moon is inhabited”.

In Blum’s sonnet no. 9 “Die Ou Beslommernis” (The Old Vexation) the speaker addresses a judge or magistrate, acknowledging that in South Africa as in Israel (he quotes a number of Biblical cases) “dassie seks wat iewag pla” (sex is always worrying):

Ingang tot die Hel –  
Ennie ienagste voo’smaak vannie Paradys.

The gateway to Hell  
And the only foretaste of Paradise.

Four of Blum's Cape Sonnets derive directly from particular originals among the *Sonetti Romaneschi*: Belli's sonnet 430 "La Cucina der Papa" is Blum's "Die Miljenêr se Kombuis" (The Millionaire's Kitchen); Belli's 906 "Er Monno muratore" echoes in "Opwekkingspreek" (Revival Sermon); Belli's 521 "La Morte co la Coda" in "Die Nasleep" (The Consequence); Belli's 1515 "Li Padroni de Roma" in "Plegtige Opening" (Ceremonial Opening).

Belli's Pope's kitchen becomes a millionaire's kitchen, as big as "porto di mare", which Blum renders as "die Duncan-dok" (the Duncan Dock), another post-World War II Cape Town building project. The cuisine, which shifts from Roman to Cape, is abundant, but the millionaire, like His Holiness, dines alone. The reference to "'n soort bok" (some kind of buck, or perhaps goat) among the carcasses on display is an urban approximation.

In "Opwekkingspreek" (Revival Sermon, no. 5) the building of the Tower of Babel is re-located to Cape Town's post-World War II building boom. This too has political implications: in Belli's sonnet the crisis comes when the builders of the tower reach the level of St Peter's cross: for Blum the mark is the roof of the tower of "die Ou Mutual" (the Old Mutual Building), for many years the city's tallest edifice. At that point "kon skielik niemand Afrikaans verstaan" (suddenly nobody could understand Afrikaans), where Belli has "Gnisuno ppiù ccapiva l'itajjano". This is a reminder that the Cape Coloureds, whose right to vote had been removed with the passing of the Separate Representation of Voters Act in 1956, are also Afrikaans speakers.

In "Die Nasleep" (The Consequence) Blum holds on to both the universality of Belli's theme and the particularity of his own historical moment. The *sonetto* opens with "Cquà nun ze n'esse" (We cannot escape this alternative), while Blum has "Dissie tweesprong" (It's the crossroads), which shifts the context slightly towards the historical. Blum called "tweesprong... 'n boekwoord", that is a 'bookish word' (Blum 2008, 321). For "ggiacubbini" (Jacobins) Blum has "Komminieste" (suggesting the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950), and for "o mminenti o ppaini" Blum has "Mosleem of Kriste" (Moslem or Christian): many Cape Coloureds are Moslem. The temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil are localised, for example, in "spôts" (sports, games, with a hint of mischief) and "boom" (marijuana). Blum seems to allude further to Cape Town's seaside status: he translates "ccredemo a la legge der Ziggignore" with a maritime metaphor:

ons neem wêk in die Jere se boot;  
Maar as ons volg en vaar - Mosleem of Kriste -  
Dan seil ons teen die groot skrik op - die Dood.

we take work in the Lord's boat;  
 but if we follow and persist - Moslem or Christian -  
 then we sail up against the great fright - Death.

The sea returns in the closing tercet: "drilvis" (jellyfish), "innie stookgat offie kebbin-klaas" (in steerage or in cabin-class), "daai haai bekse Ewagheid" (that shark-mouthed Eternity).

In "Plegtige Opening" (Ceremonial Opening) Blum shifts the general clerical/lay survey of "Li Padroni de Roma" (The Bosses of Rome) to the view of a street-side onlooker at the ceremonial opening of Parliament, an annual Cape Town spectacle. The speaker sees a procession of

die mense wat die wette  
 soos skoenveters lostorring en weer knop -  
 want op watter sole ook al hulle loop,  
 die toon is maar bestem vir ons bruin stête.

the people who untie the laws  
 like shoelaces and tie them up again -  
 because whatever soles they walk on,  
 the toes are intended for our black tails.

Blum captures the sound and sequence of the procession into the House all the way up to the Governor-General, the Senate and the Cabinet. (Blum may be alluding to the National Party's packing of the Senate, by act of Parliament in 1956 in order to achieve the two-thirds majority required to change the constitution, so as to remove the Coloured voters from the common roll.) The specifics of the procession highlight and mock the militarist oppression of the Apartheid state: soldiers, cadets and the police force are followed by "more uniforms and boots and funny hats". The speaker looks back to the Afrikaners' history of descent from the Dutch and ends, where Belli has "Le donne belle e li mariti loro", with "die nonnies met hul basies" (the young madams and their masters).

Blum's nine 'Kaapse Sonnette' are a minuscule proportion of Belli's 2,279 *Sonetti Romaneschi*. While they are not, as Belli's are, dated, day-by-day, over the thirty years of their composition, Blum's have an equally strong sense of historical, social and geographical location. Blum does not achieve Belli's metaphysical urgency, but his political imagination evokes both the class status of his speaker and the possibility of human community. Formally, the Afrikaans poet is faithful to the strict demands of sonnet prosody required to match Belli, so that his versions are the equal of Anthony Burgess's less localised translations and of Robert Garioch's Scots versions. Certainly Blum showed a justified artist's pride in his Cape Sonnets: his biographer suggests this was something that made



his twenty-five years in South Africa not a waste of time (Kannemeyer 1993, 146).

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## Italy in Postcolonial Discourse Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje, Nuruddin Farah

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**Abstract** In this essay, I would like to explore the representations of Italy through the eyes of three outstanding postcolonial writers: Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje and Nuruddin Farah. Even though Italy is an oasis of art and culture, Jhumpa Lahiri looks at it with a profound sense of both admiration and sadness in *Hema and Kaushik* (2008). Her scrutiny of the ancient, pre-imperial ruins of the Etruscan period leads her characters to question life, death and marital life. Similarly, Ondaatje opposes an Italian Renaissance villa to the debris left behind by war in his well-known *The English Patient* (1992). His Punjabi character Kirpal Singh mentions Gabicce Mare, a place that soon after World War II will become a memorial and cemetery for the Indian troops who fought and died for the liberation of Italy. This discourse is picked up by Helena Janaczeck, a Polish-Italian writer who combines a narrative on Polish migration in Italy with an elegiac narrative about the cemetery and memorial in Cassino, where a Maori goes to visit the tombs of his ancestor, who also participated with the Commonwealth troops in World War II. Nuruddin Farah too, who provides a reportage on Somali immigrants to Italy, seems to consider the country as a springboard either to other North European destinations or to a possible destiny back home. All three writers present Italy according to varied and unusual perspectives.

**Keywords** Lahiri. Ondaatje. Farah. Postcolonial Italy.

The aim of this essay is to examine how different the representations of Italy can be, if looked at through the eyes of three well-known Anglophone writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967), Michael Ondaatje (b. 1943) and Nuruddin Farah (b. 1945). They represent two generations and it is through this generation gap that Italy changes. This essay will highlight how these three authors transform Italy from a utopian paradise of art and culture (Lahiri and Ondaatje), into a space of ‘inbetweenness’, a “purgatory if not a real hell, for migrants” (Farah). All three writers, in spite of their cultural and linguistic differences and of their different geographical provenance, offer an original and personal perspective on Italy. Etruscan sarcophagi, remains of a pre-Imperial civilisation and history, accompany interrogations on ‘ways of dying’; war cemeteries and Commonwealth memorials remind the reader of Italy as the theatre of World War II. All these are not necessarily aspects of the country that we keep in our mind or remember.

To begin with, it is worth considering the unique authorial and personal experience of Jhumpa Lahiri, Pulitzer Prize winner in 2000 with her short

story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). It is well known that Lahiri chose Italy as her homeland for a while, after dedicating her life to the study of ancient and modern Italian art and culture and of the Italian language. Thus, the duality of motherland (West Bengal) and host land (the US) was somehow solved by means of a triadic structure that eventually included Italy as a third, alternative space (Dhingra, Cheung 2012). Jhumpa Lahiri, born in London, brought up in Massachusetts, lived in Rome for a few years with her husband and her children, who attended a local public school. She intently read and studied Italian literature. Lahiri now speaks and writes also in Italian. Moreover, she studied Latin and Renaissance Italian art, therefore by now she has a fairly vast and profound knowledge of this elective host country.

While presenting and discussing her latest novel (Lahiri 2013) in a public interview in Torino, Jhumpa Lahiri asserted that a triadic structure – in fact, the classical love triangle – had eventually helped her bring the plot to a solution. She was more evasive when answering a question about the geographical triad that is also present in the novel, which allows the female protagonist to travel from Calcutta to Rhode Island, and then to California, thus denying a possible circular journey, or odyssey, back home.

A similar pattern is to be found in her novella “Hema and Kaushik”. This three-chapter novella occupies the second part of her collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (Lahiri 2008, 221-333). “Hema and Kaushik” seems to follow a stereotyped pattern that definitely sets the story within the genre of ‘love among the ruins’. Lahiri seems to affiliate herself to a well-established British tradition that goes from Robert Browning’s poem (1855), which celebrates love among the poor remains of a powerful Empire, to Edward Burne-Jones’s well-known painting with the same title *Love Among the Ruins* (1894), to a whole series of short stories and novels pivoting round the Grand Tour cliché, taking place either in Italy or in Greece, by Victorian and Modernist English writers. In Lahiri’s novella, the passionate love story between the two young protagonists develops over just a few days, between Rome and Volterra, within a landscape of archaeological ruins.

Similarly to what happens in the plot of her well-known novel *The Namesake* (Lahiri 2007), the novella literalizes what was already announced there. That is, the necessity of or the search for a geo-physical third space: to Lahiri’s Bengali characters Italy is the second best choice after fleeing from the States. In an interview the author claims that the source of inspiration for this story was Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Marble Faun* (1860), whose setting is Rome and whose protagonists are four artists.

Thus, in the novella, the temporary migration of the Indian female protagonist, Hema, a would-be writer and academic, from the US East Coast to Rome, anticipates the same trajectory by Lahiri herself, who by now has a successful career. Right before her imminent arranged marriage

with Navin in Calcutta, and after the break up with Julian, a married man, Hema meets Kaushick in Rome, by chance. Now a war reporter, he is still the fascinating boy she used to know in her childhood days.

In a Rome that is an elusive rather than a real city, the two young protagonists immediately fall in love. Rome's climate feels 'languorous' and mild (Lahiri 2008, 295), where open-air restaurants are full still in November. The local food and wine are appreciated. But, most importantly, in the so-called 'eternal city', Hema is free to live only in the present: "Now she was free of both of them, free of her past and free of her future in a place where so many different times stood cheek by jowl like guests at a crowded party" (Lahiri 2008, 299).

Hema is well aware that to her Rome is not exactly a real city, but that she is just a tourist there and does not fully belong to it:

Certain elements of Rome reminded her of Calcutta: the grand weathered buildings, the palm trees, the impossibility of crossing the main streets. Like Calcutta, which she'd visited throughout childhood, Rome was a city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the other hand not at all – a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay. She knew the ancient language of Rome, its rulers and writers, its history from founding to collapse. But she was a tourist in everyday Italy, [...] she didn't have a single Roman friend. (Lahiri 2008, 299)

The assimilation of Rome to Calcutta is an objective reference to the real city, to its Mediterranean vegetation of impressive and pervasive palm trees, to its majestic yet decadent buildings, and to its chaotic streets. This image of Rome makes it resemble the big metropolis of the global South, and it is almost in tune with a vision of how Euro-America is evolving towards Africa, as Jean and John Comaroff would put it (J. Comaroff, L. Comaroff 2012). In an interview Lahiri claims that Rome and Calcutta are similar, as cousins might be.<sup>1</sup>

1 "Credo che Roma e Calcutta abbiano in comune una specie di energia e anche un modo di vivere. I loro abitanti sono passionali e orgogliosi della loro città. Entrambe le città, poi, hanno una reputazione speciale: sono luoghi intensi, travolgenti, forse indecifrabili. Ospitano quasi tutto il mondo e tutti vogliono andarci per trovare qualche cosa. Esteriormente ho l'impressione che Roma sia una versione di Calcutta, come se fossero cugine. Ogni settimana, mentre i miei figli sono a lezione di pianoforte, faccio una passeggiata a Trastevere, dalle parti di Via della luce e Via della Lungara, e ogni volta la passeggiata mi ricorda un aspetto di Calcutta. Per esempio, sebbene sia sempre circondata dal rumore e dal movimento, c'è anche molta tranquillità, perché sono circondata da vie strette e nascoste. Nell'atmosfera poi percepisco l'assenza di qualche cosa, come l'ombra di un altro tempo. sento lo stesso a Calcutta, lo stesso contrasto, come un dialogo fra il passato e il presente" (Antonelli 2015).

Somehow, the description of Rome we find in the novella seems to obliterate some people:

Saturday mornings, instead of working, she would go to the Campo de' Fiori, watching the stylish mothers in their high heels and jewels and quilted jackets pushing strollers and buying vegetables by the kilo. These women, with their rich, loose tangles of hair, their sunglasses concealing no wrinkles, were younger than Hema. (Lahiri 2008, 301)

Here Hema seems to direct her gaze towards what she already knows, that is, to a certain upper class lifestyle, thus obliterating other types of reality, never allowing her gaze to reach down the social ladder. The street market people become invisible, even if there must be women among them, too.

In spite of that, Lahiri admits that her permanence in Rome has allowed her to meet the migrants, particularly Bangladeshi, to talk to them and share the news of Bangladeshi newspapers with them.<sup>2</sup>

The reason for the erasure mentioned above, however, is that Hema allows herself the status of a tourist, while conjuring images of her future self, her imminence of wifehood and motherhood, since she is about to get married. All that explains why she is attracted to a particular site, when visiting Villa Giulia:

Looking at the giant sarcophagus of the bride and groom enclosed in a box of glass, she found herself in tears. She couldn't help but think of Navin. Like the young smiling couple sitting affectionately on top of a shared casket, there was something dead about the marriage she was about to enter into. (Lahiri 2008, 301)

The sarcophagus clearly represents the possibility of eternal love as seen by Etruscan art. Yet, it also hints at love and death, at the temporariness, if not at the precariousness of life.

Hema and Kaushik spend the rest of their holidays in Rome together, visiting museums and archaeological sites. They decide to travel northwards, to Volterra, in Tuscany, an "austere, forbidding, solitary place" (Lahiri 2008, 318). Here they visit the Guarnacci Etruscan Museum, where

there was another sarcophagus of a husband and wife. But they were nothing like the languid, loving pair Hema had seen in Rome. Here they were older, cruder, still bristling after years of marriage, ill at ease (Lahiri 2008, 320).

2 "Vedo più immigrati, soprattutto dal Bangladesh. Sono molto interessata alla loro presenza qui a Roma perché, conoscendo il bengalese, posso parlare con loro e provare a capire come vivono, quale è la loro posizione in Italia" (Antonelli 2015).

The previous idealisation of married life leaves space for a different image, a kind of second thought, or a possible different version of the story Hema tells herself about her future husband, and about her own marriage: "And though she knew it had every chance, over the years, of coming to life, she was conscious only of its deadness" (Lahiri 2008, 301). Rather than an opposition between life and death, or love and death, even of love and its death, one should retrieve a certain pattern that was already present in the novel *The Namesake*, to which the novella is strongly indebted.

First of all, Hema expresses the same positive judgment on modern arranged marriages, which are a way or a chance to learn to love one's partner over the years as one of the 'practices of everyday life' (De Certeau 1984), for a modern woman with Indian origins. Second, Lahiri seems to worry about ways of dying, rather than ways of living. As if for a migrant, assimilation, adaptation and integration were less important than the manners of one's own death and burial. Already in *The Namesake*, the protagonist, Gogol, is often disturbed by the sight of cemeteries and burial grounds. To him, to be American, like his white fiancé Maxine, means knowing one's family's burial ground, one's final (pre)destination. To him, as a migrant, even a second generation Bengali-American, ways of dying and burial ceremonies remain obscure, unpredictable, uncertain and above all unlocalised. Similarly, Hema and Kaushik reflect on this same issue, while overlooking some employees during their lunch break:

- They have lived here, in each other's company, all their lives. They will die here.
  - I envy them that, Hema said.
  - Do you?
  - I've never belonged to any place that way.
- Kaushik laughed. - You're complaining to the wrong person.  
(Lahiri 2008, 321)

Actually, Kaushik will soon die in Thai because of a Tsunami, after leaving Rome, after leaving Hema to her destiny. Separation and death conclude the plot, thus precluding a happy ending, which is always avoided by Lahiri, even in her shorter fiction.

This utopian, idealised and elusive Rome becomes a third space, as Homi Bhabha has defined it (Bhabha 1994), or literally "a purgatory" as Lahiri admits, where dichotomies disappear, where India and the States recede into the background, and new mature identities take shape.

Now that Lahiri has tasted Roman citizenship, her autobiographical narrative *In altre parole* (Lahiri 2015) enriches her discourse on Italy. She had the opportunity to live in the country she loves and she knows both from her studies and from her previous visits. She has strenuously learned Italian both through formal lessons and through reading a vast canon of Italian



literature. Surprisingly and courageously, she has positioned herself in the humble place of an apprentice who struggles to master a foreign language.

The language sounds familiar to her, yet it resists her. It must be said that, having Bengali in her mind and therefore the Sanskrit roots of the language, Italian might sound familiar because of its syllabic morphology and because of its vowel sounds. Moreover, having studied Greek, Latin<sup>3</sup> and Italian architecture and art, Lahiri had already exposed herself to a conspicuous amount of lexicon borrowed from classical languages by the English language, and juxtaposed to the Anglo-Saxon lexicon. Finally, much architectural, artistic and musical lexis is Italian.

Lahiri explains how difficult it is for her to acquire literary self-confidence within this new language. While reading Moravia, Pavese, Vittorini, Carlotto and the poets Quasimodo and Saba,<sup>4</sup> among others, she obsessively and diligently gathers words upon words in her notebooks. She writes that living/writing in another language is like swimming for the first time across a lake, or it is like walking on bridges in Venice to avoid water or, even, it is like putting on someone else's pullover by mistake: just like yours, yet not quite.

The psycholinguistic aspect of Lahiri's life in Italy is quite interesting. She claims to write from the margins, using a metaphor that is well-known in postcolonial studies, as an existential condition that haunts her wherever she goes: "Scrivo ai margini, così come vivo da sempre ai margini dei Paesi, delle culture" (Lahiri 2015, 75). Even more poignantly, she admits, this condition of 'marginality' derives from her early and original uprooting from Bengal, first to reach the States, and later Italy. This on-going displacement causes her a sense of inadequacy and incompleteness.<sup>5</sup>

She then adds that, due to her appearance and her name, in America people assumed she could not master the language. Similarly, in Italy people addressed her more easily in English than in Italian and she sees

3 A commentator refers to her "latinate word choice" (Hadley 2016).

4 "Ho letto i romanzi di Alberto Moravia, Elsa Morante, Italo Calvino e Cesare Pavese, e anche qualcosa di Elena Ferrante e Alessandro Baricco. Ho un'antologia della poesia del ventesimo secolo, che contiene, tra gli altri, i versi di Eugenio Montale, Giuseppe Ungaretti e Umberto Saba. Di recente ho avuto il piacere di conoscere Patrizia Cavalli, quindi sto leggendo uno dei suoi libri. E mi fa sempre piacere leggere i libri dei miei amici italiani: *L'America non esiste*, di Antonio Monda, e *Casa Rossa* di Francesca Marciano" (Antonelli 2015).

5 "Per colpa della mia identità divisa, per colpa, forse, del mio carattere, mi considero una persona incompiuta, in qualche modo manchevole. Può darsi che ci sia una causa linguistica: la mancanza di una lingua con cui possa identificarmi. Da ragazzina, in America, provavo a parlare il Bengalese alla perfezione, senza alcun accento straniero, per accontentare i miei genitori, soprattutto per sentirmi completamente figlia loro. Ma non era possibile. D'altro canto volevo essere considerata un'americana, ma nonostante parlassi quella lingua perfettamente, non era possibile neanche quello. Ero sospesa anziché radicata. Avevo due lati, entrambi imprecise" (Lahiri 2015, 86).

that as a personal defeat. Lahiri is accustomed to analysing herself and reality without indulgence. Maybe, she does not take into account a certain narcissistic and histrionic attitude Italians manifest as soon as they detect a slightly foreign intonation.

Going back to her analytical attitude, she sees herself in terms of a metaphor that is very common in postcolonial theory, that is, being an exile, a nomad, without a motherland/mother tongue, exiled from exile itself.<sup>6</sup>

More poignantly, she has recourse to the figure of the triangle again, coming, so to speak, full circle back. The triangle, thus, becomes a figure of speech as well as a geometric/geographical representation of Homi Bhabha's third space. In her chapter entitled "The Triangle", Lahiri says that she was born in Bengali, but she grew up in an English language educational environment, from kindergarten onwards. In her words, Bengali receded, while English took power, when she started reading at the age of six or seven. Then she adopted Italian, in her maturity, in her twenties, as a way out, creating a triadic and triangular psycholinguistic space all of her own.<sup>7</sup> It is here necessary to admit that the third space in Homi Bhabha's theory is a space of hybridity. It acquires here a slightly different meaning, more literal: a third direction, a third way, a way out.

Now Lahiri is at home in the Italian language and her Italian work has been published, first as a series of short narratives in the weekly magazine *L'internazionale*, later as a book by the same publisher that has so far published her novels in translation: Guanda. It is also possible that she will become a translator of the Italian writers she appreciates the most. Her Italian work has been translated by the much acclaimed Ann Goldstein, editor of *The New Yorker*, who has been highly appreciated in Italy as well as internationally for her titanic and extremely accurate and sensitive English translation and editing of Primo Levi's complete works.

Lahiri is not only a writer, she is a researcher, a committed reader and a refined interpreter of Italian artistic, literary and cultural productions.

6 "Chi non appartiene a nessun posto specifico non può tornare, in realtà, da nessuna parte. I concetti di esilio e di ritorno implicano un punto di origine, una patria. Senza una patria e senza una vera lingua madre, io vago per il mondo, anche dalla mia scrivania. Alla fine mi accorgo che non è stato un vero esilio, tutt'altro. Sono esiliata perfino dalla definizione di esilio" (Lahiri 2015, 100).

7 "Il triangolo. [...] Il primo idioma della mia vita è stato il Bengalese, tramandato dai miei genitori a me. [...] Il mio primo incontro con l'inglese è stato duro, sgradevole: quando sono stata mandata all'asilo sono rimasta traumatizzata. [...] Qualche anno dopo, però, il Bengalese ha fatto un passo indietro, quando sono diventata una lettrice. Avevo sei o sette anni. Da allora la mia lingua madre non è stata più capace, da sola, di crescermi. In un certo senso è morta. È arrivato l'inglese, una matrigna. [...] La parte di me che parlava inglese, che andava a scuola, che leggeva e scriveva, era un'altra persona. [...] Ho dovuto giostrarmi tra queste due lingue finché, a circa venticinque anni, non ho scoperto l'italiano. [...] L'arrivo dell'italiano, il terzo punto sul mio percorso linguistico, crea un triangolo. Crea una forma anziché una linea retta" (Lahiri 2015, 113).

Her choice of living in the area of the Ghetto in Rome, her taste for ancient architecture and archaeology, her deep knowledge of the country, are much more than simple 'scaffolding', as she claims, no matter how many little mistakes she might make, or new words she might create, no matter whether her sentences are short and paratactic as in English. She has now successfully and convincingly 'metamorphosed' and 'translated' herself into an Italian author.

The second exemplary case study is Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1992), which gained him the Booker Prize, and which was adapted into an extremely successful film.<sup>8</sup> It also represents Italy as the utopian space where art and culture – books, paintings, frescoes, sculptures, Renaissance villas and small villages – can heal the wounds of a group of international soldiers and spies who have been affected and psychologically damaged by World War II.

Canadian Hana and Italian Caravaggio, Hungarian Almasy and Punjabi Kirpal Singh find themselves entrapped in a villa in Tuscany, where a library and a piano are signs of a life dedicated to culture, in a countryside rich in small villages with their little churches made precious by beautiful frescoes. This aspect of the novel – the praise of Italian Renaissance art – has been thoroughly examined by critics, and commented on by the author himself. In contrast, one aspect that is almost unnoticeable in the novel is the mentioning of Gabbice Mare by Kip, the Sikh character who witnessed there a silent and touching religious procession by night during the war, under the risk of German bombings. As Gabicce Mare is the site of one of the cemeteries of the Commonwealth Army in Italy, the fact that Kip comes all the way from India to visit the place that will become a site of commemoration for the international force that took part in the War with Britain and the US is highly symbolic. Lahore, Kip's hometown, is on the verge of becoming a Pakistani city, while Gabicce Mare becomes the burial ground for Indian soldiers. These two geographical locations are connected by a cause and effect chain, due to the participation of India in World War II. The no-longer-Indian and not-yet-Pakistani soldiers do not know that what they are dying for at the Italian front is not only independence and decolonisation, but tribal and communal riots, slaughtering and massacres, in one word: Partition.

Thus, the lyric description of Gabicce's religious rituals by Ondaatje endows the place of an almost sacred aura as a way of celebrating the deaths of the soldiers of the Commonwealth Army. More recently, the Polish-Italian writer Helena Janaczeck, born in Germany to a Jewish family and now living and working in Italy, tackles this same theme of com-

8 *The English Patient* (USA 1996). Director: Anthony Minghella; writers: Michael Ondaatje (novel), Anthony Minghella (screenplay); stars: Ralph Fiennes, Juliette Binoche, Willem Dafoe.

memoration. Her moving novel, memoir, reportage, historical chronicle, *Le rondini di Montecassino* (Janaczeck 2010), pivots around the War memorial and cemetery there. If Ondaatje has the merit of reminding us, Italians, of the Indian contingent fighting for our liberation, Janaczeck reminds us of the Polish, the Maori, the Nepali Gurkha, the Indian, the Moroccan, and the South African contingents: soldiers who were fighting in Italy, and then regained full citizenship – after years of colonisation – over their own ancestral lands once they went back home, thanks to decolonisation processes that started in various ex-colonial countries. Their sacrifice had also helped the survivors to rebuild Europe. Janaczeck manages to intertwine the chronicles of the Jewish persecution and diaspora from Russia to Germany to the Middle East all through the War years with the mobilisation and convergence of Commonwealth troops from far away towards Montecassino. This planetary movements of peoples and troops is encompassed in her passionate and moving novel. She does not forget the migrants, who more recently moved from Poland to Italy in search of better working opportunity, particularly young women allured by the world of cinema, television and the show business in general, soon to be disillusioned.

Janaczeck's work maps the cemetery of Montecassino for us. In spite of the fact that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists among its rules that all the tombs should be uniform and that there should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed, Janaczeck uses irony to claim that while British soldiers were allotted the central area of the Montecassino cemetery, the blacks, Indians, Maoris and others were put to the margins and their tombs are very difficult to locate. She speaks of ghettos for the dead that resemble the ghettos for the living, of the hierarchies of the cemetery. She claims, through the voice of a Maori visitor, that the Memorial is classist and racist but, above all, it is all wrong, for Hindu tombs are not easily visible, while there are hundreds of them. The cemetery seems to show that most of the dead were British, but a large number of Indians and Maori died at Montecassino, too.

The contrasting views of Italy present in this novel show it as an arena of sacrifice and racism, but also of liberation and hospitality. Even today, all these aspects place this country among the paradoxical and controversial Mediterranean frontiers. As a sad note to update this view, it must be said that Italy is becoming more and more a land of camps. Refugee camps are proliferating for all those migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, who are stopped at frontiers, rejected by bordering countries, not allowed to (re) join their families or acquaintances abroad.

This reality is closer to the view provided by the third author here examined: the Somali writer now exiled in South Africa, Nuruddin Farah, who has been awarded the Prize for Reportage in 2006. Farah's permanence in Italy was not an idyll or a real choice. Born in Baidoa, the Italian-adminis-

tered region of Southern Somalia, he had been blocked once in Rome on his way back to Mogadishu by his brother's phone call, announcing that the authorities saw him as an undesirable presence. Since he was an exile, Farah was constantly receiving visits by thugs or spies. Thus, he left Italy as soon as he could.

After that experience, he wrote the novel *Sardines* (1981) where the young protagonist is a swimmer in the Somali national league, training for the next international competition to be held in Rome. Actually, she is hiding the secret determination, once in Rome, to quit her national team and ask for asylum in Italy. In the years of the cold War, when abroad for international competitions, some athletes from the ex-Soviet Union and from ex-communist countries actually asked for asylum and for the status of refugees in western countries.

Farah explores a similar situation, having a young woman fleeing from a so-called Socialist country to reach Italy. In fact she is fleeing from the dictatorship of Siad Barre (1969-1991), which in the eyes of Italian intellectuals had created a model and 'an exemplary case' in Africa.

On the occasion of a second visit in the nineties, Farah managed to interview Somalis who were living in Italy (Farah 2000). Interestingly enough, Italy is only a sort of waiting room, a sort of third space, not so much a third space of hybridity, but a purgatory between the hell of the civil war and the heaven of a future elsewhere, mainly in North America and Canada. Italy is not a hospitable country, since it never allows full citizenship. It is not a place where to plan one's future.

Farah interviewed traffickers, who managed to bring Somalis from Nigeria to Rome, because - they claimed - Italy was a corrupt country and anyone was corruptible. Among the various people he met, two figures captured Farah's attention as a novelist. The first is a woman, Caaliya Muxummad, who has a strong and determined temperament. She had been the director of a high school back in Mogadishu, and now works as a governess with an Italian family and earns enough money to buy a passage for all her brothers and sisters first from Somalia to Italy and then from Italy to North America. She shares her small apartment with five young men who, in spite of their good health and young age, do not work: they are unskilled, uneducated and unemployed. She is their only support, and yet she is in command of her own life. For her and for many Somali women working as nurses or carers (*badanti*), Italy is a country that fosters women's emancipation, while men fall easily into inactivity and into depression.

This type of woman seems to be embodied by Dunya, the protagonist in the novel *Gifts* (Farah 1993), an independent nurse in Mogadishu and a widow, who works hard and manages to keep control over her family. The second figure that strikes Farah is a doctoral student in Medicine, Mohammed Abucar Gacal, who studies in Italy and dreams of going back

to Somalia one day to do something useful for his country. He is the only young man who appreciates Italy as a place where to improve one's professional skills and he might be the model for Bosaso in the same novel.

In *Gifts* Italy plays an important role and shows two faces: it is the land from which Dunya's brother sends money, remittances, together with the latest technological gadgets for her children, for instance a brand new Walkman and the video tape of the film *ET*, Levi jeans and denim shirts. Thus, Italy seems a sort of huge shopping mall. No longer the centre of elegance and fashion industry, which was represented by the *bella vita* hedonistic philosophy, it is more a commercial and globalised market. Italy is not necessarily the producer of technological goods, but it is a place where these global gadgets and transnational pieces of clothing can easily transit, or can be purchased and dispatched anywhere. This image of Italy confirms that the flows of goods normally travel from the North of the planet to the South, since consumerism creates new needs and desires in the countries of the South. On the contrary a flux of people travel from the South to the North, certainly in search of a better life, but also partly because of the mirage of a consumer society and of commodities at hand (Appadurai 1996).

Italy is one among many international agents promoting assistance to Somalia, of a very ambiguous type. For instance a piece of news pasted at the end of a chapter anonymously reports:

An Italian government Aid Protocol was signed the day before yesterday [...]. In this connection the Italian government has promised to increase the number of professors on secondment from Italian institutions of higher learning to the National University of Somalia. The Somali university is the only one outside Italy where all subjects are taught in Italian. As part of this programme, Italian scholars of Somali are helping their counterparts to complete an Italian-Somali dictionary. (Farah 1993, 100)

This piece of news that breaks through the narrative, with its neutral tone and its objectivity, is not accompanied by comments. Neither positive nor negative evaluation is passed on this protocol. However, if we read Farah's interviews to Somalis in Italy, we immediately perceive the hypocrisy behind projects of this type. Somalis are never allowed entrance into the country, in spite of those reciprocal cooperation projects.

Newspaper articles are quoted where Italy is associated with other western countries in the European Union or even the States. Italy is criticised and attacked for sending to Somalia items that are really superfluous in the hot climate of the region and do not respond to the real needs of the population. Italian philanthropic international policy seems completely hypocritical and misled.

These articles are signed by Taariq, Dunya's ex husband, now a journalist. He speaks in the first person ("If I could afford to be cynical [...] Am I stretching the point?", Farah 1993, 198), and more explicitly accuses western countries, among which Italy, of hiding vested interests behind their donations of food and medicines, which are given away only to produce dependence and enlarge a market of possible future buyers.

However, in the end, Bosaso and Abshir, respectively Dunya's new fiancé and brother, share their happy recollections of life in Rome: an international city, with people of various origins working at FAO. The only reproach to the Italian colonial policy is an ironic comment on the rules for waiters in whites-only clubs and restaurants:

We weren't allowed to go anywhere near Croce del Sud in the fifties, when the Italians were the master race here. Nor were the waiters allowed to wear shoes. "Why do Italians believe they are the ones who taught Somalis to wear shoes, as if the whole venture of their so-called higher civilization comprised a gimmicky habit of a pair of feet covering objects?" (Farah 1993, 235)

Quite meaningfully, Dunya and Bosaso build their new life in Mogadishu, and Bosaso is one among a few characters who have been abroad and have come back home to promote new models of life, more modern, maybe westernised, yet aimed at improving life, social and political conditions in Somalia, not in Italy.

To Lahiri it is pre-Roman Italy that provides a model for family life and the institution of marriage, but it also allows her meditations on death. To Lahiri Italy has an existential resonance and it is a place where a Cosmopolitan intellectual can easily find 'a room of one's own'. To Ondaatje Italy is the cradle of Renaissance and Humanistic culture and these values provide a potent counter discourse to War and its destructiveness. It is not surprising that to Farah Italy is a route from the countries of the South to an elsewhere that is difficult to reach. It is one among many capitalist western countries, participating in international aid projects, in a free market, sharing and dispatching technical and administrative skills, but it is not a place where to stay and establish roots for postcolonial migrants.



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## From Galileo to Aldo Moro Italian Imagery in Contemporary New Zealand Literature

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**Abstract** Italian images and symbols are numerous in contemporary New Zealand literature. A basic distinction must however be drawn between Pākehā writers, that is, New Zealanders of European origin, and writers belonging to the indigenous minority: the Māori. Italy has aroused a different emotional response and its imagery has served (or not) a political purpose according to the author's affiliation to the group of the colonizers or that of the colonised. In this article I will analyse how Italian images are employed by two living Māori writers, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace, and by a Pākehā poet, Allen Curnow, passed away in 2001. In particular, I will focus on whether these images pertain to a common system of values and on the extent to which they are functional to the dominant discourse or constitute a means of subversion of it.

**Keywords** Patricia Grace. Witi Ihimaera. Allen Curnow. Galileo. Aldo Moro.

Although there have never been historical reasons of close contacts between Italy and New Zealand or a substantial immigration flux from Italy comparable to that which took place in other parts of the New World such as Australia, Argentina or the USA, our country has aroused the interest of many New Zealand writers for its past history, its immense artistic patrimony and its being the cradle of Western culture and civilisation. Italy has always left a symbolic mark in the New Zealand authors who came, one way or another, in touch with it either physically (as visitors or soldiers during World War II) or through readings and pictures. However, a basic distinction must be made between writers belonging to the indigenous minority (the Māori) and Pākehā writers (that is, New Zealanders of European origin). Italy has drawn a different emotional response and its imagery has served (or not served) a political purpose according to the authors' affiliation to the group of the colonised or that of the colonizers.

In this essay I will analyse how Italian images are employed by two living Māori writers, Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace, and by a celebrated Pākehā poet, Allen Curnow, who died in 2001. Since I have already explored this theme in earlier publications on Ihimaera's and Grace's novels, I will just briefly outline some of the points previously treated and focus on

new works and images I still have not dealt with so far, namely Ihimaera's libretto *Galileo. A Millennium Opera* and Curnow's poem *An Incurable Music*.

As writing was not part of their cultural legacy, Māori were subject to Pākehā and European literary representations for more than one century, from the beginning of the British colonisation in early 1800 to the Māori Renaissance of the 1960s. In this period Māori started to publish their first works, expressing their own world-view, becoming agents of their literary representations and finally asserting their right to show "others who they were", in Grace's words (Grace 1975, 88).<sup>1</sup> This enacted a process of appropriation of the dominant language (English) and of the Western canon, and the abrogation of a monocentric view of human experience, leading to the production of syncretic and hybridised (or composite) works. Interestingly, Italian imagery has become the ridge-pole of two novels and an opera libretto by Ihimaera, respectively *The Matriarch*, *The Dream Swimmer* and *Galileo*, and of a novel by Grace: *Tu*. The process of appropriation has, therefore, gone beyond the boundaries of the imperial centre (namely Britain and the Pākehā view) to include another European culture that is not directly set in binary opposition to the Māori world but rather re-interpreted and used for the assertion of Māori identity and rights.

The Italian nationalist movement of the 19th century (the Risorgimento) and its invention of an 'Italian nation' prompted Ihimaera to trace an interesting parallel with the New Zealand Wars between British and Māori, which were occurring at about the same time and led to the invention of an alleged 'Māori nation' too. As Judith Dell Panny says, "[t]he references [to the Italian context] assist the European reader to proceed from the familiar to the unfamiliar, to see history in a wider context, and to see it from a Māori perspective" (Dell Panny 1998, 6). What is particularly striking is the fact that, in *The Matriarch* (1986) and its sequel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997), Ihimaera does not appropriate to his use the history of the Risorgimento itself but rather the artistic genre that was its most important source of ideological transmission: the *melodramma* (Della Valle 2011, 104). The spirit of the Italian nationalist struggle is fully evoked

1 This is what a Māori elder tells the protagonist of Grace's short story *Parade*, from the collection *Waiariki*. The narrating protagonist is a young Māori woman who returns from the city to her family in a rural area to participate in the celebrations for the carnival. During the parade, however, she feels uncomfortable in front of the Pākehā public clapping and cheering at them as if they were clowns in a circus and perceives the shallow friendliness of the authorities, who seem to remember and cooperate with the Māori community only once a year to put on the colourful spectacle for tourists. She is angry at the condescension of her relatives, but she finally discovers that the elders are as aware of the patronising attitude of the Pākehā as she is. Yet, they are proud of their traditions and believe it is the Māori duty "to show others who we are".

by Ihimaera's drawing on the emotional Manicheism and characterisation of Verdian operas and by blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, which characterised both the Risorgimento and its most remarkable artistic product. In this period, while Italian political events went on stage, allegorically entering the plots of operas, the aesthetics and ethics of *melodramma* reached out beyond the theatrical world to deeply influence language, fashion and behaviour of common people and politicians, as though the country had been transformed into one giant stage where patriotic actors performed their struggle for liberation. The interconnection between art and life was a defining characteristic of the Risorgimento: opera conveyed major historical issues and inflamed the patriotic spirit, while nationalists dramatised their political ideals according to the aesthetics and ethics of an artistic genre. Similarly, the characters of Ihimaera's novels wear clothes that resemble theatrical costumes and use melodrama's hypertrophic rhetoric and gestures. The plots reproduce the triangle formula ever present in melodrama (opposing the couple of soprano and tenor to an antagonist, a baritone or mezzosoprano). Moreover, Ihimaera inserts numerous operatic quotations functioning as comments on the actions or characters. In *The Dream Swimmer* all quotations are from *Aida*, while in *The Matriarch* he draws on a wide number of Verdian operas, such as *Aida*, *Otello*, *La forza del destino*, *Macbeth*, *Nabucco*, *Don Carlo*, and *Un ballo in maschera*. The subversive power of Ihimaera's novels lies in their evocation of Risorgimento's emotional spirit through its most forceful rhetorical weapon, which is applied to the Māori predicament and serves to legitimise their cause.<sup>2</sup>

Ihimaera's appropriation of Italian melodrama is learned and intellectually articulated, grounded on his musical studies and refined musical sensibility. He is also a well-known opera reviewer and wrote four libretti himself, among which *Galileo. A Millenium Opera*, based on the life of the 17th century Italian scientist.<sup>3</sup> This chamber opera in four acts, with music by John Rimmer, was completed in 1998. After a successful concert performance in the same year, it premiered at the Maidment theatre in Auckland with a four-night season in April 2002. The opera is designed for a Chamber Ensemble of eight players accompanying seven singers and a chorus, but the orchestration features taped electronic music as well. As Manai and Hanna explain, while the story belongs to the Renaissance, the music

2 For a thorough analysis of the use of melodrama in *The Matriarch* and *The Dream Swimmer* see Della Valle 2011.

3 The other libretti are: *Waituhi. The Life of the Village*, music by Ross Harris, performed at the State Opera House, Wellington, 1984; *Tanz der Schwane*, music by Ross Harris, performed at the Adam Concert Room, Victoria University of Wellington, 1993; *The Clio Legacy*, music by Dorothy Buchanan, performed at the Composing Women's Festival in Wellington Town Hall, 1993.

includes a variety of styles and forms in sharp contrast with each other. They range from traditional tunes, such as the fifth century hymn sung by Grand Duchess Christina (Galileo's protector), to sophisticated electronic sounds, like the leitmotif of the whole opera, the so-called "Music of the Heavens" (Manai, Hanna 2005, 264). Such mix seems to create a link between different epochs and underlines the authors' will to provide a new reading of Galileo's story applicable to their own time and context. This is further confirmed by the multimedia apparatus of the work. The scenery involves a giant screen curving around and partially above the audience, incorporating them as actors within the show. Video and slide projections integrate the story enlarging on the meaning of the facts narrated and connecting them to contemporary reality. The opera itself is framed within two references to recent historical events that received worldwide media coverage. At the beginning, the giant screen shows a rocket being launched, while a voice over of a TV newsreader informs the audience that, on 8th December 1992, the Galileo probe, launched by NASA three years before, passed by earth's moon on its way to Jupiter. The opera closes with a reference to Galileo's rehabilitation by Pope John Paul II in 1992. Within these two scenes, it follows Galileo's life in chronological order, charting his scientific achievements, pinpointing his increasing popularity among scholars, courtiers and common people, recording the Church's growing diffidence, and finally describing the trial and his famous recantation. After the Pope's condemnation of Galileo for heresy and before Galileo's submission, the stage directions suggest the screening of images of old and modern horrors: the inquisitorial burning of heretics, gas chambers at Belsen and Pol Pot atrocities.

Manai and Kirsten have explored two previous works centred on Galileo's story: Bertolt Brecht's play *Life of Galileo* and Italian director Liliانا Cavani's film *Galileo*. They contend that they both present a reading of the scientist's life that is deeply influenced by historical and personal events. Brecht wrote three different versions of his play. All of them are centred on the relationship between science, society and power, but the second and third versions differ considerably from the first one. If the first version, written in the late thirties when he was in exile in Denmark, seems to provide the typical picture of Galileo as a positive hero, trying to defend his experimental method of research and his discoveries from the interference of the powerful Catholic Church but finally having to succumb, in the later versions Brecht depicts an ambiguous character, who represents "the betrayal of scientists and their submission to power" (Manai, Hanna 2005, 268). Brecht wrote the second and third versions respectively in the USA in 1945-46 and in East Berlin between 1953 and 1955, that is, after the atomic explosions that had put an end to World War II. He clearly wants to emphasise scientists' ethical responsibility. He even makes Galileo utter a speech of self-condemnation at the end

of the play, where the scholar claims he had never been in real danger and had been as strong as the ecclesiastical authorities for many years. Therefore, he regrets his lack of steadfastness, which “might have had tremendous repercussions”:

If [he] had held out, scientists might have developed something like the physicians’ Hippocratic oath, the vow to use their knowledge only for the good of mankind. As things stand now, the best [they] can hope for is a generation of inventive dwarfs who can be hired for any purpose. (Manai, Hanna 2005, 268)

Liliana Cavani’s film (1968) reflects instead the radical atmosphere of the late sixties, the battles against any kind of authority, the fight of young people for a society liberated from the repressive power of outdated institutions and narrow-minded bourgeois morality. Cavani follows Galileo’s life step by step, emphasising that he had no choice but to act as he did. The alternative would have been martyrdom, as for Giordano Bruno, who was burnt at the stake because of his open attack on the Church. She stresses Galileo’s pragmatism and prudence that allowed him to survive and continue working in captivity.

As to the latest interpretation of Galileo by Ihimaera, Manai and Hanna maintain that he represents an allegory of humankind in the New Millennium: a new Prometheus, delving without restraint into nature’s deepest secrets, from biotechnological manipulation to the search of life on other planets. Like Prometheus, Galileo defies his superiors and shows *hubris* (arrogance, presumptuousness) but, unlike the Greek hero, he finally submits himself to the humiliation of the trial and the recantation, which makes him appear flawed and weaker, but also more human. Galileo becomes a symbol of diversity and of the “repression of difference in self-proclaimed democratic societies” (Manai, Hanna 2005, 263). In particular, his ordeal represents the silencing of the intellectuals in modern regimes like German Nazism, Italian Fascism, Stalin’s Soviet Union and post-colonial Algeria.

If these parallels can certainly prove the multifaceted nature of Galileo’s story, one more interpretation can be added, which also takes into account the indigenous origin of the script’s author. Ihimaera forcefully stresses the scientist’s tenacity in defending his autonomy of thought and, more generally, the existence of ‘other’ perspectives different from the widely accepted mainstream one. Actually, Galileo does not want to demolish the Holy Writ’s narrative but only trace the boundaries within which its perspective can act and find its deepest sense. Here is how he exposes his point of view to Gran Duchess Christina, who is warning him against the ecclesiastical disapproval of his theories:



## GALILEO

My Lady, who would set a limit to the mind of man?  
 Who dares assert we know all there is to be known?  
 The articles concerning salvation and the establishment of the Faith  
 are in no danger of valid contradiction – the Church is safe  
 But the world of Nature is not the same as the world of the Spirit  
 God has given his Holy Writ to understand the one –  
 And to man his aspiring intelligence and science  
 to understand the other –  
 (Ihimaera 1998, 3, 1)

In defending his discoveries and method, Galileo does not try to deny the existence of God. He is interested in analysing the functioning of the world, not in debating about the existence of a final cause or unmoved mover or *primum mobile*, which is conversely the Church's duty. While he respects the Church's role as arbiter of spiritual and metaphysical matters, the ecclesiastical authorities do not respect him as scholar. In Ihimaera's version, the despotic and absolute stance of the Church is emphasised, a position that does not admit 'other' views or possibilities. Here is how Galileo replies to Cardinal Bellarmino during the trial, a few lines before the Pope's final pronouncement.

## BELLARMINA [sic]

You question others more learned in God than you, Galileo?

## GALILEO RESPONDS WITH A FLASH OF COURAGE

## GALILEO

The Scripture is not only capable but necessarily in need of interpretations different from the apparent meaning of the words, and it seems to me that in disputes about natural phenomena the Scripture should be reserved to be the last place –  
 (STRONGLY) But what have I done to deserve this?  
*Two truths can never contradict each other –*  
 All I have done is look into the face of God and tell what I have seen  
 (Ihimaera 1998, 3, 2) [Emphasis added]

According to Galileo, both faith and science, the Bible and nature, come from God. The contrasts that may arise can be solved by determining the boundaries of each other's sphere of intervention. Today we see Galileo as the initiator of the experimental method and of a new school of thought. His approach to knowledge enabled the Western world to achieve extraordinary technological and scientific advances and to claim the right of reason to decipher and measure material reality, an attitude that had

considerable influence on the following trends of Western civilisation. It has also become the symbol of secular culture. Actually, Galileo's position has been later assumed by the Church too, who has acknowledged the validity of the scientific method in natural studies and agreed, at the same time, that the literal meaning of the Holy Scriptures should be re-interpreted (Abbagnano, Fornero 2007, 108). Galileo's assertion in the text that "two truths can never contradict each other" is ambiguous. It might mean that, if two assertions are true, they necessarily cannot contradict each other or that they can be two faces of the same and only truth. According to present studies, Galileo always rejected the idea of two separate truths, in favour of one single truth, from which faith and science derive (128). The second possible interpretation appears therefore more plausible.

In any case, Ihimaera seems to use Galileo's predicament as a metaphor of the challenge to conformity and absolutism: a symbol of the battle that the 'diverse' or the 'other' has to fight to be acknowledged. His 'other' cannot but be, first of all, the indigenous minority of New Zealand in relation to the overwhelming power of the European dominating majority. The ideological frame is however reversed in this context, as the authority is a highly technologized, capitalist and materialist coloniser, who has taken scientific progress to extremes almost as a new faith, while the 'other' is an indigenous population with a holistic spiritual approach to reality, pervading every aspect of their life. This necessarily entails another ontological system, involving different views of nature/mankind relationships, land and land ownership, family, history, identity and sense of belonging. Power relations in Western empires have always been based on a presumption of superiority of the colonizers, which led them to impose their vision and act on behalf of the colonised in political, economic and cultural matters. Ihimaera's Galileo can be rightfully seen as a role model for a hero defying absolute forms of authoritative knowledge, pre-established cultural paradigms and institutional power. According to this reading, his recantation could be interpreted as a strategy and highlights a pragmatic attitude pertaining to Māori people too, as shown by the numerous negotiations characterising New Zealand history and the dialectic evolution of race relations in this country. In fact, after his submission, Galileo addresses the audience and says: "It still moves; eppur si muove!" (Ihimaera 1998, 4, 2).<sup>4</sup>

Another major field of interest concerning Italy is the 28th Māori Battalion's participation in the Italian campaign of World War II. After the 1943 armistice with the Allied forces, the Anglo-American troops started the liberation of Italy from the (now enemy) German occupiers. The Māori

4 Galileo is referring to the Earth. His discoveries convinced him that the heliocentric Copernican view was right. The Church still believed that Earth was the immovable centre of the universe, as the Bible claimed.

Battalion was a distinct infantry unit within the Second New Zealand Division and was exclusively formed by Māori soldiers coming from all over the country. Although conscription was applied to Pākehā only, over 17,000 Māori enlisted for combat and 11,500 took places in essential industries (King 2001, 89). As Michael King mentions, “the Maori Battalion covered itself in glory as a combat unit in North Africa and Italy” (90). The number of casualties was extremely high, since the Battalion fought in some of the most difficult and ill-conceived actions at Orsogna, Cassino and Rimini. In the disillusioned words of the protagonist of Grace’s novel *Tu*, they “took part in the most stupid and meaningless sector of the whole business” (Grace 2004, 277).

Patricia Grace’s father, Sergeant Edward Gunson (Grace 2004, 283)<sup>5</sup> went to war in 1944. His diary, read by the writer twenty years after his death in 1983, prompted her novel *Tu*. The main subject of the book is the reason for the massive voluntary enlistment of young Māori men in the Battalion. Not only did the government encourage their enrolment, but also the majority of Māori people were in favour, including Māori politicians and authorities, on the ground that it was a way to demonstrate their “pride of race” to the world (and their own country) and have their rights and full citizenship acknowledged at home. But the novel also provides an unprecedented view of Italy from a Māori perspective, invested with their animistic and spiritual philosophy. Besides, Italy does not appear at all as part of the imperial centre, nor is it set in binary opposition to Māori culture. On the contrary, the protagonist discovers a series of cultural affinities between Italians and Māori about which he had only read at school, that allow him to re-interpret and validate his own heritage: in particular, the sense of family, the central importance given to food, the enjoyment of music and singing as an emotional and communal experience, and their melodic language, whose flow is similar to that of Māori (see Della Valle 2010, 218-30). Like Ihimaera’s works, *Tu* implies an act of conscious appropriation of another culture, to the service of Māori. The result is the blurring of the centre-periphery dichotomy and a re-centring of the Māori position.

Italy is also found in Allen Curnow’s poetry, but from a completely different perspective. In February 1974, Curnow came to Europe on his last university leave, half of which was spent in Italy. This must certainly have inspired the second of a series of three poems that he first published in the literary journal *Islands* in 1978 and that will be the ridgepole of his collection *An Incurable Music* (1979): “Canst Thou Draw Out Leviathan with an Hook?”, “In the Duomo” (set in Renaissance Florence) and “Bring Your Own Victim”. The collection, which can be better defined as a sequence

5 The pages correspond to the “Author’s Notes”. See also the dedication of *Tu*.

of interconnecting poems on the same theme, also includes “Moro Assassinato”, a natural postscript to the whole work inspired by another trip to Italy he took in 1978, after his retirement. During this stay Curnow was able to follow the predicament of Aldo Moro,<sup>6</sup> kidnapped by members of the Red Brigades on 16th March 1978 and assassinated fifty-four days later. As Alex Calder states, the poet arrived in Italy “to find that the sacrificial themes and political violence he had been writing about were unfolding in a real-life drama involving one of Italy’s most senior politicians” (Calder 2011, 238). The ubiquity and persistence of violence throughout space and time, as an obscure and primordial force in human life, is in fact the collection’s subject matter explored by Curnow in the different settings of the poems, which move between worlds and different ages: from Karekare’s Cathedral Rock (a popular surf-casting spot in New Zealand) to 15th century Florence and the Pazzi conspiracy (*Congiura dei Pazzi*), up to Rome and the Moro affair.

The collection opens with a detailed description of an act of ordinary violence: the catching and killing of a big kahawai, a local fish, at Karekare’s Cathedral Rock. The event is anticipated by other images of natural violence, the sea waves breaking against the rocks:

The big kahawai had to swim close  
to the rocks which kicked at the waves [...].

The rocks kicked angrily, the rocks  
hurt only themselves, the seas without a scratch  
made out to be storming and shattering,  
but it was all an act that they ever broke  
into breakers or even secretively  
raged like the rocks, the wreckage of the land,  
the vertigo, the self-lacerating  
hurt of the land.

6 Aldo Moro (1916-1978), leader of the Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*), was one of Italy’s longest-serving post-war Prime Ministers, holding power for a combined total of more than six years. He was one of the most convinced supporters of an alliance of his party with the Italian Socialists in the 1960s, and with the Communist party (PCI) in the 1970s: the so-called ‘Historic Compromise’. Moro wanted to conciliate the Christian and popular mission of the DC with the rising laicist and liberal values of the Italian society, in order to integrate new important social groups (youth, women, workers) in the democratic system. He was a progressive politician and a tenacious mediator, particularly skilled in coordinating the varied trends of his party. His ‘Historic Compromise’ was strongly opposed by the conservative wing of the DC and the USA government. The USSR was not favourable either, as they considered potential participation by the PCI in a cabinet a form of emancipation from Moscow and rapprochement to the Americans.

Swimming closer  
 the kahawai drew down the steely cloud  
 and the lure, the line you cast  
 from cathedral rock, the thoughtful death  
 whispering to the thoughtless,

*Will you be caught?*  
 (Curnow 1979, 9-10)

The incident is described in detail, in all its brutality, as from the victim's point of view:

Fingers and gobstick fail,  
 the hook's fast in the gullet,  
 the barb's behind the root  
 of the tongue and the tight  
 fibre is tearing the mouth  
 and you are caught, mate, you're caught,  
 the harder you pull it  
 the worse it hurts, and it makes  
 no sense whatever in the air  
 or the seas or the rocks  
 how you kick or cry, or sleeplessly  
 dream as you drown.

*A big one! A big one!*  
 (11)

This is further followed by an act of gratuitous cruelty – the gills are lacerated with a twist to make blood pour out fast – pertaining to habit or ritual rather than to necessity or real effectiveness, and justified by the proverb-like formula “quick bleeding makes best eating” (Curnow 1979, 10). The fish dies in a rockpool full of its own blood as “in a red cloud of itself” (11).

The image of Karekare's Cathedral Rock, with its massive natural dome, dissolves into a man-built dome, that of Santa Maria del Fiore during the High Mass of 26th April 1478, place and time chosen by members of the Pazzi family to murder Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici and put an end to their rule in Florence. The conspiracy, backed by Pope Sixtus 6 and the Duke of Urbino, ended up with the death of Giuliano only and the unexpected retaliation of the whole city against the conspirators, who were all tortured and put to death in the most brutal ways. The artwork and decoration of the cathedral are described in natural terms: “It is all in the walls of one great shell incised” (14). At the altar, the priest is offering God

the body and blood of his “butchered son”. As Calder notices, the rite of transubstantiation is suggested by the word “homooosianus” (which means ‘of the same essence’) (241). A portion of the white Host, dropped into the chalice, floats in red wine and reminds us of the kahawai fish floating in a red cloud of its own blood. Moreover, the section’s last lines are gradually reminiscent of the natural world and Cathedral Rock:

[...] the blood is poured  
by experienced hands which do not shake

serving up to Messer Domeneddio god and lord  
the recycled eternity of his butchered son,  
this mouthful of himself alive and warm.

This is homooosianus, this is the cup  
to catch and keep him in, this is where he floats  
in a red cloud of himself, this is morning sun

blotting the columns, the ogives, the hollowed throne,  
smoking the kite-high concavity of the cliff.  
This is the question, *Caught any fish?*

Say, No.

(15)

The fish was a symbol of Jesus in early Christianity and has a lot of theological overtones in the Gospel.<sup>7</sup> Fish and Jesus seem to belong to the same sacrificial logic, inherent in both nature and religion. The beach is a place of transience and transubstantiation, like the altar during the mass at consecration. The image of a stream of blood is another recurring image in the poem, connecting natural and religious imagery. It is no coincidence that the next section opens with a quotation from Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and the description of the Phlegethon, a river of boiling blood in the Seventh Circle of *Hell*, in which the bodies of those who committed crimes of violence are immersed. Then we are introduced to Giovanni Battista da Montesecco, a professional soldier and leader of the papal mercenaries hired by the Pazzi family for the conspiracy, who explains the reason why he refused to perpetrate the crime at the last moment and had to be substituted by two clerks, spoiling the whole business: he did not want to

<sup>7</sup> The Greek word for fish is ‘ichthys’. As early as the first century, Christians made an acrostic from this word: Iesus Christos Theou Yios Soter, i.e. Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. Moreover, Christ fed 5,000 people with 2 fishes and 5 loaves and called his disciples “fishers of men”. Water baptism, practiced by immersion in the early church, created a parallel between fish and converts.

shed blood in the church and commit sacrilege. He believed, says Curnow, in the words of the “divinest poets” (16) and, despite his being a ruthless killer, he would not kill anybody in a church, as he explains to one of the Pazzi family members:

You keep your side of it, I'll keep mine,  
 I'll dagger you a dozen Medici at anybody's table  
 except Christ's. Two will be sufficient, Pazzi said.  
 Who's paying? And Montesecco, Who's going to burn?  
 (17)

When Giuliano is struck by the daggers, the images of the red cloud and of a body floating in its own blood are used again, as previously for the fish and the body of Jesus Christ incarnated in the white Host:

Giuliano de' Medici  
 bled where he had to bleed,  
 bedrock flat on the church floor  
 in the cloud he made  
 of the strong bestial smell  
 of dissolving clay,  
 their offering to the oldest god  
 that holiest day.  
 (20)

Calder suggests that the images of blood, death and sacrifice in the collection are distributed through the three orders of things, as in the Great Chain of Being (Calder 2011, 242): the natural order (the fish), the human order (Giuliano de' Medici) and the divine order (the rite of High Mass, celebrating God and his “butchered son”). The theme of violence goes hand in hand with that of sacrifice. The catching of a fish responds to a natural necessity. Giuliano's murder to a political logic. Christ's martyrdom and crucifixion to a religious vision. But the epilogue, the poem on the Moro affair, seems to underline how questionable the sacrificial logic is. Moro was given the role of assigned victim by both the Red Brigades and his own party, the Christian Democrats. The former wanted the liberation of some of their jailed fellows and hoped to radicalise the quiescent Communist Party. The latter were in power at that moment and did not want to come to terms with terrorists. Moro was however lucid and courageous in his determination not to accept this role. As Calder underlines: “Moro's letters affirmed he was a person, a member of a family, a friend appealing to friends not only in response to the impersonal violence of revolutionary fanatics but more particularly to the depersonalizing violence of the state” (249). Caught between two



opposing forces, he was inevitably squashed.

Like the previous sections, "Moro assassinato" is also haunted by the echo of earlier times and distant beaches. Words and images from different worlds and epochs overlap and are mixed in the text: New Zealand and Italy, present and past, Pacific Ocean and Adriatic Sea. The poem starts with Curnow sitting in a cafeteria at Zattere in Venice and reading about the Moro affair in the Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*:

All the seas are one sea,  
the blood one blood  
and the hands one hand.

Ever is always today.  
Time and again, the Tasman's  
wrestler's shoulders

throw me on Karekare  
beach, the obliterations  
are one obliteration

of last year's Adriatic,  
yesterday's Pacific,  
the eyes are all one eye.

Paratohi rock, the bell-tower  
of San Giorgio recompose  
the mixture's moment;

the tales are all one tale  
dead men tell, the minor  
characters the living.

Nice and all as it was  
And is, the dog-trotting sun  
Of early April nosing

The 'proud towers', to sit  
At Nico's tables  
On Zattere, [...].  
(34-5)

*An Incorrigible Music* is a study on the ordinariness of violence in human life, and especially in human relationships. In the poem "Moro Assassinato", this is shown by the insistence on the world "normality", when the

Italian politician recalls the moments of his kidnapping:

Normality was this car's  
warm vinyl under the buttocks [...]

Normality was the guns  
worn close to the body of each  
of the guards, god friends, composing  
my escort sitting behind me [...]

Normality was the moment's  
mixture, moment by moment  
improvising myself,  
ideas, sensations, among them [...]

Normality was no less  
what it had to be, the ambush,  
the crashed cars and the guards  
gunned down dead in the street;  
and the car that carried me next  
here, to the dark classroom  
of the Prison of the People.  
Normality is, do you follow?  
a condition very like mine.  
(38-9)

Curnow moves from the terrorists' point of view to Moro's. He represents the former as cold, disenchanted and matter-of-fact, directed by a sense of intrinsic necessity:

He wrote letters, we willingly accepted them  
for delivery, Fanfani, Zaccagnini, Andreotti,

Cossiga, Dell'Andro, Eleonora his wife.  
Did we seriously expect these would procure  
The political deal, the exchange for our comrades

gaoled by the State, their liberty for his life?  
'An episode in a war', terror for terror,  
An honourable swap. So his letter argued.

He knew us better than they, adduced Palestinian  
precedent, humane principle, the party interest,  
all that shit. What did he, or we, expect?

Jesus wrote no letters to Judas or Caiaphas.  
 It was he or Barabbas, and that was another Rome.  
 Not known at this address. Try Simon Peter.  
 (42)

On the other hand, Moro's excruciating letters forcefully affirm his refusal of the sacrificial role. He appeals to his fellow party-men, asking for possible negotiations with his jailers, confirming the authenticity of his handwriting and signature, asserting the sincerity and reasonableness of his requests. His last letter to his wife Eleonora (Noretta) sounds as an act of accusation to the Italian authorities, the State and his party, who have abandoned him:

My darling Noretta, After a little optimism,  
 fleeting and false, as it turns out, something  
 they said, I misunderstood, I see that the time  
 has come... No time to think  
 how incredible it is, this punishment  
 for my mildness and moderation... I have been wrong  
 all my life, meaning well, of course...  
 too late to change, nothing to do but admit  
 you were always right. What more can I say?  
 Only, could not some other way have been found to punish  
 us and our little ones?... I want one thing  
 to be clear, the entire responsibility  
 of the Demo-Christian Party by its absurd,  
 unbelievable conduct. Friends have done too little,  
 fearing for themselves perhaps...  
 (45)

Andrew Johnston has associated the phrase that gives this collection its title (*An Incurable Music*) with "our capacity for evil".<sup>8</sup> Calder prefers to recall the "still sad music of humanity" that Wordsworth wrote of in his poem *Tintern Abbey* (Calder 2011, 252). One way or another, Italian imagery is used in the collection to reinforce Allen Curnow's central idea. The insertion of the Pazzi conspiracy urges the uncomfortable question: 'How was it possible that so much art and so much violence could co-exist at a time and place reputed to be a pinnacle of Western civilisation?', a point reinforced by the development and conclusion of the Moro affair in the present. Although the use of rituals and the re-elaboration of language can create a security distance between humans and their actions, the in-

8 "Late, Late Curnow: A Mind of Winter" (quoted in Calder 2011, 252).

humanity of humans lies within the ordinariness and ubiquity of violence, as a constant of their nature, and in the unbridgeable gap between human and humane.

Unlike Māori writers who appropriate Italian images to assert and legitimise their own cultural and ethnic specificity – a politically connoted act –, in Curnow’s verses Italy becomes a symbol of a universal attribute of the human condition, which blurs national and ethnic differences. One of Curnow’s early poems *Landfall in Unknown Seas*, written in 1942 to commemorate the three-hundredth anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of New Zealand by the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman in 1642, derides fatuous celebrations of national identity, evoking the violence of that first encounter between Europeans and Māori forebears at Golden Bay and the memory of “[t]he stain of blood that writes an island story” (Curnow 1960, 208). On that occasion, four members of Tasman’s crew were killed. But everybody knows that, when James Cook landed in New Zealand about a century later, he got even with the Māori and “showed what the musket could do”, as remembered in another poem of Curnow’s, *The Unhistoric Story* (203).

To conclude, Italian imagery in Ihimaera, Grace and Curnow shows the great evocative valence of our landscape, culture and history for New Zealand writers. It also reflects existential conditions and power-relations in a post-colony. A disempowered minority in its own country applies strategies of survival, abrogates rules and canons, appropriates another culture and bends it to its needs. By contrast, the European invaders’ children look back to the Old World from the Antipodes to bridge distances, fill voids, find elements that allow them (for better or worse) to perceive the universal in mankind and be part of a larger community, although this might mean reflecting on a negative attribute of humanity. The utilization of external imagery is a projection of one’s needs and tells much more about the users than the used.

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# Does Italy Need Postcolonial Theory? Intersections in Italian Postcolonial Studies

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**Abstract** This article addresses the issue of Italian postcolonialism and its belated flourishing in comparison to other European countries. In particular, it focuses on the different genesis that this paradigm has undergone in terms of intellectual traditions and cultural output. Different cartographies have led to a specific brand of Italian postcolonialism that has emerged as a useful umbrella term to critically address questions of immigration, multiculturalism and citizenship within the Italian context. The term has now gained momentum bringing Italy into a transnational dialogue that questions the flows and nodes of Italian history, culture and politics creating new archives and cosmopolitan futures.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Does Italy Need Postcolonial Theory? – 2.1 The Italian Intellectual Legacy. – 2.2 The Southern Question in Italy. – 2.3 Race Theories and Eugenics. – 2.4 Italy's History of Double Colonisation. – 2.5 Contemporary Thinkers. – 3 Conclusions.

**Keywords** Italy. Postcolonialism. Europe. Race. Migration.

## 1 Introduction

Italy seems to have finally entered its postcolonial phase, to the relief and excitement of many scholars, writers and activists who have, for years, been promoting the need to revisit Italian history from new perspectives and subject positions. But if postcolonial theory has finally landed in Italy, is that a reason just for celebration or also for scepticism? Does Italy need postcolonial theory?

Some years back, the French African specialist Jean-François Bayart (director of research at CNRS) wrote a virulent article on postcolonial studies, summing up the field as a carnival and as a fashion that arrives far too late to make a difference. The article, which was originally written in French, has been translated by Andrew Brown and republished in *Public Culture* (Bayart 2011, 23) with the title "Postcolonial Studies. A Political Invention of Tradition?", stirring up fierce controversy among postcolonial theorists and French studies specialists.



Jean-Francois Bayart gives a searing critique of the field of postcolonial studies, pointing out what he calls methodological errors in postcolonial studies (namely a certain 'reification' of what it is to be defined as a proper 'colonial situation') and calls for greater contextualisation and historicisation in order to avoid some of the possible shortcomings. Although Bayart does not dismiss postcolonial studies entirely, he goes as far as affirming that

for all its usefulness, postcolonial studies is largely unnecessary. Most of the issues it has explored had been explored previously or were simultaneously being investigated by other theories, which often managed to avoid the pitfalls into which postcolonial studies fell.

[...]

Postcolonial studies is questionable; it leads the study of colonial or postcolonial situations to a dead end, with the risk of a real scholarly regression in relation to the achievements of the past thirty years. (Bayart 2011, 65)

Somewhat provocatively, Bayart raises an important question, one that we should ponder: if it is to avoid becoming a new normative and exclusive label that falls into the trap it wants to criticise, postcolonial studies needs to be made more 'local' and parochial. Postcolonial studies should also be able to account for the diversity of the contexts in which it is applied, while at the same time avoiding fostering somehow essentialist (or, in the worst-case scenario, even nationalist) ideas about coherent and self-sufficient identities. A certain productive tension between universality and particularity needs to be left unresolved.

The university prisons will soon be full, as postcolonial studies have now taken all situations of dominance through the ages as its province, without fear of anachronism or absurdity. (58)

Though invectives, denigrations and accusations of postcolonial studies is an intrinsic part of the field itself and a feature of its vitality and mutability, the specific *j'accuse* by Bayart needs further scrutiny – not to glorify his ideas and positions, but to articulate and analyse how such a view could, to a certain extent, also be applied to Italy and be reconfirmed or confuted. His anti-postcolonial manifesto was dutifully accompanied in the *Public Culture* special issue by equally powerful responses by critics of the calibre of Robert Young, Ranjana Khanna and Ann Laura Stoler, and including pro-postcolonialists (if we start thinking in compartments) such as Achille Mbembe and Marnia Lazreg. But let me first examine Bayart's most salient points.

Jean-François Bayart accuses the field of explaining current social divides (such as the 2005 banlieue riots in France) as the protracted effect of the past 'colonial divide', by postulating a continuity that underlies modes of representation and behaviour from the colonial era to the contemporary period (56). He complains, therefore, that the field is simply a catch-all term that is not only ambiguous and ambivalent but also fragmented. This is because postcolonial studies is a "river with many tributaries" (58), as there are many sources, and it is attached to different groups, categories and claims.

And yet neither postcolonial studies itself, not postcolonial critique of it have managed to erase an initial ambiguity. In the work of its theorists, the desire for universalism often turns into a discourse of identity, and the status (philosophical or scholarly) of its texts frequently remains uncertain, which makes them difficult to comment or to use. (58)

Bayart acknowledges, however, that postcolonial studies is now also flourishing in France. However, he rejects the virulent claim that the country has resisted or is resisting this paradigm out of provincialism, conservatism and, above all, the desire not to face its own colonial past.

The originality of postcolonial studies lies in the way the connection was made between the critique of colonialism and the critique of other forms of domination, especially with respect to the question of gender - borrowing heavily, yet again, from French writers such as Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault, who nevertheless had not really integrated the parameter of empire into their thinking, as Ann Laura Stoler has pointed out, and whose conception of the subject and of representation, allegedly disembodied and Western-centered, has not found favour with Spivak.<sup>1</sup> The link was not completely absent in the works of Fanon and Octave Mannoni, or even Sartre. Nonetheless, postcolonial studies benefited from the tremendous theoretical germination that took place in France in the 1960s and the way its seeds were then sown in America. Duly noted. (60-1)

Through a long argument in defence of France and against the postcolonial essentialisation of France, Bayart points out that postcolonial studies owes

<sup>1</sup> See Stoler 1995; Spivak 1988, 271-313. As Bayart continues on Spivak: "Spivak having rightfully cautioned against the limitation of the culturalist problematics of fight against social exclusion and inequality and advocated for deconstruction of Western conceptualisation of 'representation'. But paradoxically this author has contributed a fair bit to that very same culturalist slide!" (65). This section and other parts of this article are based on the MA thesis by Goffredo Polizzi, *Postcoloniality and the Italian South. Race, Gender, Sexuality, Literature*. Erasmus Mundus Master Degree in Women's and Gender Studies. Utrecht University, Faculty of Humanities, 2013.

much not only to French theory but also, and above all, to the intellectual, literary, artistic and political trends that focused on the colonial question in France during the 1950s. Therefore, in defence of France, Bayart concludes that “we’ve done our bit!” (59) with writers such as Aimée Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Octave Mannoni, who are seminal to the development of the field, and other French philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, who have inspired the critique of other forms of domination such as gender, sexuality and class, even though they do not directly address issues of empire. More recently, Édouard Glissant (1997) and Étienne Balibar (2003) have kept the critique of colonial formations in sharp focus.

To summarise: he accuses postcolonialism of operating in a homogenising fashion, of being promiscuous in its lack of disciplinary specificity and of being invested in an identitarian politics. For Bayart there are two main fallacies, or what he calls two methodological errors in postcolonial thinking:

1. Dehistoricising the colonial.
2. Concatenation between the colonial moment and the postcolonial moment.

Now, we could say that, if we formulate this differently, by saying for example that operations of oppression and resistance operate with similar patterns across time and that the legacies of the colonial schemata are still lingering in the present constitution of nation states, construction of identity and migration patterns, then yes, Bayart is right, yet with the opposite effect.

Bayart’s tirade against the accusation of French anti-postcolonialism is well taken, as it persuasively argues in considerable detail the way in which French culture has been inspirational, and even foundational, for postcolonial studies. However, it also reconfirms the blindness, or intellectual resistance, towards the transformation that these notions or this inspiration drawn from French theorists and intellectuals underwent when travelling elsewhere and returning in the form of postcolonial theory. The latter is rejected as imported and colonising, reaffirming a natural resistance towards theories travelling back to France from other contexts.

## 2 Does Italy Need Postcolonial Theory?

There is general agreement that the field of Italian studies has been behind the times, that there is a kind of amnesia or removal of the memory, effects and legacies of the Italian colonial past, but that contemporary patterns of immigration have suddenly prompted a new awakening and the elaboration of a new ‘postcolonial consciousness’ vis-à-vis new political, social,

cultural and humanitarian emergencies, as brought to light by the many recent Lampedusa disasters.

As mentioned above, we could read the genealogy of postcolonial studies (following Bayart's model, but not in a negative sense) within Italy itself, in an attempt to figure out whether Italy has been completely immune, resistant or antagonistic to the postcolonial development. Or perhaps a different genealogy needs to be traced, where terminology might be different but concerns similar, yet linked to the specific geopolitical situation of Italy in its transition between the colonial past and multicultural present. This should take into account Italy's strategic position or – to phrase it better – influential and influenced/contaminated position in the Mediterranean with a different connection/relation (both territorial and metaphorical) to Europe and the other Souths, i.e. around the Mediterranean basin.

There are several intersections that should be mentioned when the development, the flourishing or what is more often called 'the arrival' of postcolonial studies is celebrated:

1. The precedent in supposedly 'postcolonial thinkers' or those who have instigated and influenced the development of postcolonial theorising (Vico, Gramsci, Levi).
2. The internal subaltern question in Italy, namely the Southern Question and its relation to *Pensiero Meridiano*/Mediterranean studies.
3. Italy's history of double colonisation (paradigms of emigration as immigration or what is usually referred to as external and internal colonialism) with very specific consequences for the Italian notion of national identity but also geographical reach and scope.
4. Race theories and eugenics. How the discourse on race has followed a specific track in Italian studies and merges and diverges with studies on colonialism and postcolonialism (from Lombroso to Sergi to Burgio, Sorgoni, Barrera, Poidimani, Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop).
5. Contemporary thinkers are readdressing the operation of nation state, empire and globalisation vis-à-vis patterns of migration, capitalism and sovereignty (Negri, Agamben, Dainotto, Passerini, Verdichio, Mezzadra, Mellino, Passerini and so forth).

## 2.1 The Italian Intellectual Legacy

Let me start with Italian thinkers who have undisputedly contributed to the genesis if not to the development of postcolonial studies. Starting with Said, widely acknowledged as the founding father of the field, we

can easily confirm that his thinking was inspired by Vico for his notion of humanism, and by Gramsci for his notion of hegemony and the subaltern, along with Foucault and his notion of knowledge as power and of how discursive constructions of domination and resistance are articulated. It is universally acknowledged that Gramsci has been a key thinker for the development of postcolonial studies, though he himself did not devote much attention to the Italian colonial question in his *Prison Notebooks*. Hailed by cultural theorists as a wide-ranging thinker, going beyond the mere question of class and Marxism, as this has often been continued to be studied in the Italian context, Gramsci has become a bit of a cult figure thanks to his insights (that were far ahead of his time) concerning the notions of hegemony and consent, the subaltern, the role of the intellectual, the function of minority languages and the role of accents. Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya have devoted a very useful volume to the study of Gramsci as a postcolonial thinker, trying to connect his legacy to a much wider transnational scenario in which the appropriation, abrogation and derogation of this thinking has led to fruitful intersections and insights.

As Robert Young writes in the volume edited by Srivastava and Bhattacharya, it was actually Spivak who invented the subaltern and not Gramsci. The latter's definitions shifted and referred to the term in different ways, as the lower classes, classes struggling against the state, marginal classes and peripheral classes, though the most viable definition is the reference to the proletariat as a class without political consciousness: "groups who have not yet come to class consciousness (Quaderni 328-32/ *Prison Notebooks*, 2, 48-52)" (Srivastava, Bhattacharya 2012, 30). Obviously, Levi has also been very influential in postcolonial thinking and his name is closely linked to the work of Agamben and his definitions of camp, bio-life and the state of exception, which have been widely used and appropriated to analyse postcolonial conditions of abjection, as in the case of migration, refugees and asylum.

## 2.2 The Southern Question in Italy

As Bayart points out, postcolonial studies should seriously consider the fields of thought that have revolved around concerns and issues similar to its own, in the various contexts in which it tries to adapt itself. In the Italian and southern Italian context, this would certainly mean addressing the now centuries-old tradition of *Pensiero Meridiano* (Cassano 2007) and Mediterranean studies (Chambers 2008).

Linking to the famous 'Southern Question' initially explored by Gramsci himself, Paolo Verdicchio posited a while back that the condition of colonialism and postcolonialism is not just one of empires and their demise but also of internal colonisation within Italy itself, through the divide between

north and south and the hegemonic construction of authority and inferiority, modernity and backwardness, progress and a-temporality, which follows the classic Orientalist paradigm developed by Said, but which has barely been read and recognised as such for the historical, political and cultural relations between North and South.

The Italian-American scholar Pasquale Verdicchio has written of a “Preclusion of Postcolonial Discourse in Southern Italy”: postcolonial studies challenges historical fictions and yet it sometimes falls short in its representation of postcolonial groups, mostly due to a characterization of post-coloniality almost entirely in terms of problematic designations such as white versus non-white, or First versus Third World. As Verdicchio argues:

[i]f postcolonial discourse is to effectively unmask the workings of imperialism, it must be opened up to study colonial possibilities that exist(ed) in less clear cut situations. First and Third World are not always separable in geographic space and granted racism’s unambiguous influence and effects, race is an ambiguous category. The phenomena of emigration plays a key role in such cases where the historicization of emigration trends can only enlarge the scope of postcolonial studies. (Verdicchio 1997, 191)

Therefore, the category of race, as Verdicchio demonstrates using the case of Italian migrants in the United States, is much more ambiguous and dependent on a variety of contextual elements than the white/non-white binary would account for, and processes of racialisation are not always uniquely dependent on apparently self-evident (but in reality purportedly singled out) physical differences. Verdicchio defines southern Italians as “unrecognized postcolonials” (Verdicchio 1997, 191) and delineates a very useful framework for the consideration of southern Italy through a post-colonial lens.

Making a similar argument, the anthropologist Jane Schneider has considered the north-south dynamics in Italy as an instance of ‘neo-orientalism’. Schneider describes the past twenty years in the life of Italy as a period of rekindled regionalistic conflict fostered by the different and conflicting interests of diverse actors on the national stage (political parties, industrial lobbies and criminal organisations of various kinds) and finds it imperative to rethink the ‘Southern Question’, via Said and his notion of Orientalism, as having a strong but somehow unacknowledged racial element. Commenting on what has become an internalised sense of inferiority on the part of southern Italians, Schneider states that the task of the present is to understand “what alternative formulations might people create and live by if they were able to escape from the control of the ‘Question’ and to imagine the political, economic and cultural differences within Italy in some other way” (Schneider 1998, 16).

One attempt to combine the focus on southern Italy with a postcolonial line of thought has been that associated with the conceptualisation of the Mediterranean as a postcolonial space. According to Iain Chambers, for example, southern Italy should be interpreted and should interpret itself as being part of the larger postcolonial network of the Mediterranean Sea. Southern Italy should be looking south, instead of looking north to Europe, in order to gain a better understanding of its identity and networked relations through alternative geographies and histories. This theoretical move has to be understood against the backdrop of recent discourses on the 'Europeanness' of Italy and of the southern borders of Europe becoming ever more impervious, which has yielded the coining of the phrase 'Fortress Europe'. According to Chambers, the Italian south can be a place from where a critique of Western developmental teleologies can be sustained and from where alternative versions of modernity and global transformations can be envisioned and articulated. The southern point of view offers a critique of Western modernity from within, demonstrating modernity's incompleteness and interruptions. Thus, the discourse of the Mediterranean as a site of open-ended hybridisation exposes "the fundamentalism of Occidental humanism" (Chambers 2008, 31).

Chambers' theories can be seen as part of what Norma Bouchard calls a 'Mediterranean Neo-Humanism' (Bouchard 2008) or *Pensiero Meridiano*, as it is most often referred to in Italy. The sociologist Franco Cassano can be considered one of its major proponents. According to Lollini, Cassano and *Pensiero Meridiano* do not endorse a complete rejection of humanism; rather "[f]rom the framework of the global south(s) of postcolonial and subaltern theory, Cassano questions the universalizing assumptions of Eurocentric Occidentalism, while seeking to recover a subalternized archive of humanistic knowledge" (Lollini 2008, 20).

*Pensiero Meridiano* amounts then to a search for a different kind of humanism, one that is not coterminous with a Eurocentric point of view, and whose origins can be traced back to the Mediterranean. *Pensiero Meridiano* reopens the somewhat exhausted tradition of *Meridionalismo* through its engagement with postcolonial studies, opening up new trajectories that connect Italy's subaltern history to wider European comparative contexts.

### 2.3 Italy's History of Double Colonisation

Italy has been 'postcolonial' all along if we want to account for the massive history of migration that Italy suffered between 1800 and the present - almost 27 million Italians emigrated, often without returning. In the book *Italy's Many Diaspora* (2000), Donna Gabaccia examines the social, cultural and economic integration of Italian migrants. She explores their complex yet distinctive identity and their relationship with their homeland.



The plural in Gabaccia's title refers less to the multiple global destinations of Italians and more to two different considerations: that Italians left their country as Veneti, Siciliani and Neapolitans rather than as 'Italians'; and that a distinct feature was the varied character of their dispersion: trade diaspora, cultural diaspora, nationalist diaspora and mass diaspora. The formation of the modern Italian nation often seemed to take shape more easily outside Italy than within. Gabaccia argues: "For a country with a long history of sending emigrants abroad, Italy experienced considerable distress in welcoming migrants onto its national territory" (Gabaccia 2000, 170), and adds that "a nation accustomed to thinking of its migrants as subject to racist and capitalist oppression abroad suddenly looked into the mirror to see itself as the oppressor" (172). This might have to do with the fact that Italy, unlike the United Kingdom, France or Germany, has not developed a clear understanding of how its history of migration has defined its national identity.

So, Italy is not only engaged with the retrieval of its colonial past but also with coming to terms with its national dispersal, which can also be seen as an expansion, or elongation as Ato Quayson would call it, of the national space and consciousness (2012). Nonetheless, it requires a different paradigm to account for what history is and how 'postmemory', as coined by Marianne Hirsch,<sup>2</sup> works out, through which second- or third-generation Italian emigrants, despite not having been born in Italy or perhaps even speaking Italian, carry the weight, experience or sense of Italian identity, which also brings with it its many tainted legacies of anti-Semitism, colonialism and racial apartheid. That means a 'postmemory' that is not only about supporting Italy in the World Cup and seeing Balotelli as a possible new national 'postcolonial hero', but also a much more confused and diffused relation of belonging and contention.

This émigré mentality has a link, though it works differently, with the current patterns of immigration, which should remind Italians of their migratory pasts and which instead heightens the lack of memory of this loss, and does not enable to make a connection between national haemorrhage and migrant invasion, the one referring to loss and diaspora and the other to rejection and non-recognition of the other as human, let alone as 'potential co-citizen'. The many Lampedusa disasters are again a bitter reminder of the disconnection between race, identity and soil, all making

2 Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Focusing on the remembrance of the Holocaust, this essay elucidates the generation of postmemory and its reliance on photography as a primary medium of transgenerational transmission of trauma. Identifying tropes that most potently mobilise the work of postmemory, it examines the role of the family as a space of transmission and the function of gender as an idiom of remembrance. Cf. Hirsch 2008, 103-28.

problematic the operation of recognition, hospitality and integration. This rejection has often been analysed in postcolonial terms, as a reminder of the unprocessed, unelaborated Italian colonial past, silenced, suppressed and removed for decades, and now coming to haunt Italy's contemporary politics with a vengeance, literally through the dead bodies of the many immigrants who try to lay claim to Italy in particular and to Europe and the West more generally, on the basis of their links, historical ties and colonial bondage.

This is linked not to simple amnesia, but to what Ann Stoler has called 'aphasia'. The word is used not to appeal to an organic cognitive deficit but:

Rather, it is to emphasise both loss of access and active dissociation. In aphasia, an occlusion of knowledge is the issue. It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things. Aphasia in its many forms describes a difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most important, a difficulty comprehending what is spoken. (Stoler 2011, 125)

To conclude, there are several issues that are specific to the Italian postcolonial predicament and that should be taken into account: the internal Southern Question; internal and external colonialism, including the Jewish question, as the specific race discourses pertaining to the Italian case; and the influence of Italian colonial thinkers, which is also marked by the appropriation and cherishing of the postcolonial field outside Italy. This refers to the phenomenon of scholars who are often not part of the diaspora themselves, or in exile, but un-homely. This makes it possible for the postcolonial studies to be not simply a reflection on the Italian postcolonial condition and its relation to the colonial past, but also to engage with it with a double insight: embracing a discipline from a distance, as a travelling theory that returns strengthened, altered, modified.

## 2.4 Race Theories and Eugenics

The founder of the Italian school of criminology, Cesare Lombroso, is a highly influential figure in the scientific culture of the late nineteenth century. The history of race is very peculiar in Italy not only because of Lombroso and the Southern Question but also because of colonialism.

Firstly, Italy's colonial enterprise started when most of the other European empires were collapsing. Furthermore, Italian colonialism was the effect of an unplanned solution to internal economic issues (an *imperialismo straccione* [tramp colonialism]). It was mainly southern Italians who

escaped poverty and social unrest by enrolling in the military campaigns in Africa, unaware of what they were signing up for. Lastly, Italian colonialism was perceived as disorganised, given that it lacked a structured ideology of superiority (hence the myth of *Italiani Brava Gente* [the nice Italians]) (Del Boca 1984; Labanca 2002; Ponzanesi 2004). For example, the relative proximity in race and class between the Italians in Africa (originating primarily from Southern Italy)<sup>3</sup> and the relatively light-skinned people of Eastern Africa, where a mix of races and religions coexisted, could not sustain a clear dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonised. This situation of proximity was also theorised by anthropologists such as Giuseppe Sergi, who claimed that Italians were part of a Mediterranean race rather than an Aryan race (which he considered to be of Barbarian descent) and, therefore, closer to Africa ([1895] 1901). Sergi controversially placed Ethiopians and Mediterraneans within the same stock (*stirpe*). According to him, the Mediterranean race, the “greatest race in the world”, was responsible for the great civilisations of ancient times, including those of Egypt, Carthage, Greece and Rome. They were quite distinct from the peoples of northern Europe. These theories were developed in opposition to Nordicism, the claim that the Nordic race was of pure Aryan stock and naturally superior to other Europeans. The common origin implied the absence of repulsion between the peoples of the two areas and a desire for union. That view was censored and denied with the rise of Italian fascism. Attempts were made to establish a legal opposition between the colonizer and the colonised through a racial model of superiority that penalised forms of *madamismo* and *meticciato* (interracial relationships).<sup>4</sup> But as had already happened with anti-homosexuality laws, Dall’Orto explains, very few Italians in the colonies felt threatened by the new legislation and instances of concubinage and interracial relationships continued, or possibly increased given the larger number of Italian soldiers deployed in Africa during the war against Ethiopia (Ponzanesi 2004).

Moving forward to more modern times, some recent interventions have reflected on this issue and have addressed the *foreclusion* of race in the Italian public sphere, trying to understand what kind of power mechanisms it has served and still serves in the present day; these scholars and activists strongly argue for the (re)introduction of the concepts of race, racism and

3 John Dickie analyses the stereotypical representation of the South in the post-Unification period (1999). The Mezzogiorno was widely seen as barbaric, violent and irrational, an ‘Africa’ on the European continent, while paradoxically integrated into the imaginary of the emerging nation.

4 *Madamato* or *madamismo* was the Italian term for the consorting of Italian men with local women whereby Eritrean women effectively considered themselves married while there were no legal implications for their Italian partners. See Ponzanesi (2005, 2012a).

especially *racialisation*<sup>5</sup> in the public debate in Italy as critical tools that can give us a better understanding of past and contemporary phenomena of exploitation and marginalisation in Italy and in Europe.

In their introduction to the issue of the online journal *Darkmatter* dedicated to racism in Italy, Anna Curcio and Miguel Mellino argue that the problematic disavowal and *foreclusion* of race in Italian public debate (even in the anti-racist movement when it comes to anti-southern racism) goes hand in hand with the increase in racial conflict and racist episodes in the country. Inspired by the field of Critical Race Studies that has its roots in the American civil rights movement, Curcio and Mellino see the introduction of the lexicon of race in the Italian public sphere as a way to challenge contemporary Italian racism, and they give an account of contemporary Italian history that seeks to trace the work of racialisation. They also aim to develop a framework where the imbrication and the complex relation between different forms of racism in Italian history are taken into consideration:

We want to argue that racism has *fractured* the Italian national space right from the birth of the modern nation in 1861 and, consequently, the terrain has been prepared for the contemporary racialization of international migration. In fact, it is not possible to understand the contemporary postcolonial migrant as the key representative of race without taking into account the cultural, political and economic construction – and hence their role within historical Italian capitalism – of its main ancestors: the southerner and the colonial other (during the first liberal and fascist moment), the Jew (in the later fascist period), the southern migrant (second Post-war Republic). (Curcio, Mellino 2010)

Curcio and Mellino do not argue that there is a simplistic linear continuity of racist and racial patterns throughout different historical phases and geographical locations. In fact, they argue quite the opposite, pointing out that racial discrimination in Italy has targeted different groups of people. Therefore, Italian racism should be seen not as fixed and immutable but rather as connected to the relation of its production and transformation.

5 Curcio and Mellino define the term ‘racialisation’ as follows: “by racialization we mean the effect on the social fabric of a multiplicity of institutional and non institutional practices and discourses oriented towards a hierarchically connoted representation of physical and cultural, real and imaginary differences and hence to the disciplining of their material and inter-subjective relationships. Oversimplifying, we think that the concept of racialization, since it is highly saturated with the disturbing colonial and imperial legacy of race, is more suitable than others connoted with more neutral meanings (such as ethnicization or multiculturalism, for instance) to describe in an effective way the economic and cultural processes of essentialization, discrimination, inferiorization and segregation, that is of symbolic and material violence, to which certain groups in the Italian and European social space are nowadays submitted” (Curcio, Mellino 2010).

Their claim is that modern Italian history shows how race and racialisation worked as powerful tools to produce social and cultural hierarchies, and specific forms of discrimination and exploitation anchored to a specific colonial narration of the nation that should be explored and investigated in details with its interconnections:

In the present context, contemporary Italian racialization must be interrogated as a constitutive part of a broader local kind of post-colonial governance aimed at the management of the main political and economic transformations (the so-called transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist society) of the last twenty years, that is at the reorganization of the whole social fabric in the wake of economic globalization processes, the by now irreducible migration and mobility of labor as well as the long run effects of anti-colonial and feminist enunciations that reshaped the labor market and general social relations from the 1970s onwards. (Curcio, Mellino 2010)

## 2.5 Contemporary Thinkers

The last point is pretty much connected to the first one, referring not only to postcolonialism as a river with many tributaries, but also to Italy as already having done her bit to boost the field. Italy is, therefore, not late but, on the contrary, the initiator and promoter of postcolonial studies. We can think of several contemporary thinkers who re-address issues central to the postcolonial discourse, such as the operation of the nation state, empire and globalisation vis-à-vis patterns of migration, capitalism and sovereignty (Verdicchio 1997; Agamben 1998; Hardt, Negri 2000; Mellino 2005; Mezzadra 2006; Dainotto 2007; Passerini 2011; Lombardi-Diop, Romeo 2012; Ponzanesi 2012b; Giuliani, Lombardi-Diop 2013).

In his book, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive* (2002), Agamben looks closely at the literature of the survivors of Auschwitz, probing the philosophical and ethical questions raised by their testimony:

In its form, this book is a kind of perpetual commentary on testimony. It did not seem possible to proceed otherwise. At a certain point, it became clear that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to. (Agamben 1999, 13)

We could go on by saying how influential Roberto Dainotto's work has been to rethink Europe, or the work of Chambers on the Mediterranean as contesting the law of the soil and proposing other forms of cultural connections,

both historical and figurative; and that Negri has contested globalisation as a new form of empire and put forward a proposition for an alternative in the forms of multitudes, which will inspire many alter-globalists.

The list could go on *à la Bayart* about what is intrinsic to Italian thinking and discourse and about what has been imported or even stolen. The bottom line is that, as Edward Said has written, neither countries, nor thinkers, nor disciplines have a monopoly on the politics of epistemology or critique of causation, as Bayart imagines the postcolonial field claims (cf. Stoler 2011, 138). The more interesting question is how theory travels, as Said has pointed out, and what its impact is for the configuration of a particular scientific field and what conventions of knowledge production have made Italy finally embrace the field and claim an entitlement to it.

### 3 Conclusions

So, do we need postcolonial theory or have we been postcolonial all along? What does postcolonial theory add to the richness of sources, historical legacies and theoretical traditions that Italy already has in its own right? Can we be provincial and jingoistic and say, like Bayart for France, that we have already done our bit? That postcolonial theory has nothing to offer, that for all its usefulness postcolonial studies is largely unnecessary in Italy?

But we must recognize that, for all its usefulness, postcolonial studies is largely unnecessary. Most of the issues it has explored had been explored previously or were simultaneously being investigated by other theories, which often managed to avoid the pitfalls into which postcolonial studies fell. (Bayart 2011, 65)

If there is a question of fashionableness, more than a fad, in the upsurge of postcolonial studies in Italy, then that is not only because at last postcolonial studies (as well as colonialism) has finally landed in Italy, it is also because Italian studies in its many inflections and variations, as mentioned above, has travelled outside Italy and cross-pollinated and intersected with other discourses. One of these discourses is postcolonial theory, re-entering Italy, therefore, not via the back door but through a kind of mirror giving recognition that this is what we have been doing all along, and yet with that slight difference in coordinating the different strands under a new paradigm. This new paradigm, despite being fragmented, full of pitfalls and dead ends, makes it possible to put the many particularities of Italy into a transnational and comparative context, highlighting both dissonances and consonances.

There is, therefore, a special quality in this 'delay'; it is not just second-hand, Anglo-Saxon centric, discursively colonising and theoretically forced

but, as Rada Ivekovic (quoted in Stoler) says, “‘delay’ fashions a history in its own right, inviting the reconfiguration of a field and perhaps even ‘the creation of new disciplines’” (Stoler 2011, 138).

The postcolonial turn in Italian studies is, therefore, not just a novelty or a new academic fashion but the confirmation and consolidation of a genealogy in Italian studies that has a long tradition and roots in different discourses connected to the history of Italian migration, racial formations and intellectual thought based on the specificity of the Italian nation formation. This relates to Italy’s denied but pervasive colonial legacy and the fragmentation of its identitarian politics based on ethnic, racial and religious complexities. These are not imported or emerging concepts because of the increasing success and academic establishment of postcolonial critique but pressing issues that find an articulation and connection thanks to a new language and methodological tools that stem from a new global understanding of patterns of domination and resistance that have historical and geopolitical specificities that need to be accounted for. Yes, this demonstrates that, if Italy has been postcolonial all along, critical awareness and critique of its postcolonial condition have been lacking or scarcely brought to light. We can conclude therefore that Italy not only needs postcolonial theory but that within a wider European and international scholarly landscape its belatedness and specific critical apparatus can yield new, important insights into the origin and future of postcolonial thought.

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## Post-Colonial Memories

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I remember with amazement when, just after my first novel *Khadija* was published (2005), Irma Taddia, Professor of “Storia e Istituzioni dell’Africa” at the University of Bologna, told me:

In Italia in ambito letterario le colonie sono passate inosservate. L'Italia ha avuto una quasi inesistente memorialistica ottocentesca. I protagonisti della colonizzazione non hanno lasciato documenti autobiografici di qualità, come quelli di altri Paesi europei. In *Khadija* si mescolano documenti storici, memorie e ricordi familiari in modo ironico e critico con una qualità di scrittura.<sup>1</sup>

The book, based on a family story concerning a grandfather who lived and died in Ethiopia at the beginning of the last century and his woman, a Muslim Oromo, tells of the journey of this Italian who, at the end of the 1800s in an little discovered Ethiopia, was to find himself divided between the wonders of discovering another world and the political conquest ambitions of the Europeans.

In that same year, I won the Vigevano prize. I also received many and excellent reviews, but the essence of the subject I dealt with was not fully recognised. ‘Memorialistic’ to me means not so much retrieving family memories, but undertaking a critical historical study in order to put the facts into the right context, first and foremost the city of Harar, a Muslim enclave in a Christian empire, a UNESCO world heritage site, the home of Hailé Selassié and his father, the great Ras Makonnen, the Emperor’s general. The story of my grandmother Khadija, born in Harar between the 1870s and 1880s, had been told to me by my mother and I had always found it steeped in exoticism. In 1948 my mother left Treviso for Eritrea – the former colony was under the protection of the English while awaiting its future destiny – to join my other grandfather Francesco Bellio, an Italian diplomat from Treviso in Veneto (1890-1967), at Asmara, where he had

1 See *Africa. Trimestrale di Studi e Documentazione dell'Istituto per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, settembre-dicembre 2005

'emigrated' in 1935 and where he had organised the distribution of water to Italians, taking out contracts on wells and using horses with barrels and later Fiat trucks. It was there, in that beautiful city built by the Italians (see the photography book *Asmara. Africa's Secret Modernist City* by Denison, Ren and Gebremedhin, Merrell Willcox House 2006), that my mother met my father, Leone Pastacaldi, the son of an Italian diplomat from Livorno and of Khadija, the indigenous woman of Harar. My father lived through the period of the race laws but, as the son of a rich Italian who had not abandoned him, he studied and was educated in refined luxury, which was a rare thing for those times.

## **1 The Adventures of an Italian Between the 1800s and 1900s. A Duel in Livorno and the Escape to Harar. The Meeting with Khadija**

My grandfather Giuseppe Pastacaldi (Livorno 1870-Harar 1921) – who was mentioned numerous times in the books signed by the minister Ferdinando Martini, governor of Eritrea from 1897 to 1907 – lived in Harar, where he carried out diplomatic and commercial duties for the Italian government until his death, and where he is buried in the Catholic cemetery. Around 1890, after killing a fellow student in a duel at the University of Pisa, he fled to Aden where his sister lived, married to the vice-consul, then sometime later moved to Harar, at the time considered somewhat the Rome of Africa. The city was a crossroads for the great ambitions of the Europeans and for commercial interests, as well as the privileged observatory over the world of the Ras, the Menelik Ethiopian governors. The French poet Rimbaud too lived there for one year between 1880 and 1881 as a slave trader.

In Harar my grandfather was a correspondent at the local agency for the Italian Colonial Society of Aden, founder of the agency of Mombasa in 1898 and, as such, director of logistics for the house of Bienenfeld, on behalf of the British, in the area between Mombasa and Lake Victoria (he was also an agent in Addis Ababa). He received the gift of a wife (in recognition of his important role in the city), a young girl from an equally important family of that geographical area, an Oromo of the Darot family, also known as galla (a more derogatory term). The Oromo ethnicity is the main Ethiopian ethnic group still today, mostly made up of families of shepherds and warriors. But this gift was not at once accepted by my grandfather. The very young Khadija, only thirteen years old, fled on horseback, returning to her parents. This was however enough to win the heart of my grandfather who went and brought her back, living with her as his companion for the rest of his life. Despite his countless trips to Italy, my grandfather never left Khadija, being faithful to her right up to his death. My grandmother converted to Catholicism and took the name of Maria.

We know from the stories of the journalist Indro Montanelli how in those times, at the beginning of the 1900s, native women became companions but never wives in the same way as Charmutte, a sort of prostitute, often used for a certain time and then discarded. The colonial history of Eritrea is full of this sort of tale: very few know that in those countries the customary law allows time-limited marriage. For some or perhaps many of these native women, to live with an Italian was seen as a temporary marriage of which they were proud, apart from then having to suffer abandonment and the contempt of everyone, including the natives themselves, as the writer Erminia Dell'Oro has documented so well.

Seven children were born of this union, the last of which was my father. My grandfather died a natural death in Harar in 1921, my father being only two years old at the time. At the suggestion of my grandfather on his deathbed not to go to Italy – he feared the risk of racial marginalisation for his children –, my grandmother left Harar and Ethiopia, and moved to Eritrea to allow her children to attend one of the few schools open to mixed-races, at Asmara, the first-born Italian colony.

Following a conversation with Irma Taddia and Gian Carlo Stella, who created a splendid colonial library at Fusignano (with 3,150 books), I found out that in the diplomatic archives of the Farnesina (the Italian foreign ministry) there was a dossier on my grandfather. In Rome I was able to read the notes on my grandfather and his diplomatic history, also drafted by Federico Ciccodicola (1860-1924), colonel and Plenipotentiary Minister in Ethiopia at the end of the 1800s, and I could also read letters concerning my grandfather signed by the same Minister for the Colonies Ferdinando Martini.

## 2 The Fascist Stereotype of the Colonies in Photos

Right from the start of my historical research for literary purposes, I looked very carefully for photographic documents both in the Universities and in the archives of certain professors holding specialist chairs, as well as at the ISIAO, the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (decommissioned in 2011), and at the Italian Geographical Exploration Society headquarters in Villa Celimontana in Rome. Also at the National Diary Archive, in Pieve Santo Stefano.

As far as the photos were concerned, I was able to ascertain that the natives and the local scenes were always photographed according to a stereotype that Colonial/Fascist Italy had constructed by means of powerful documentary material collected by the Istituto Luce (the state-owned company promoting Italian cinema). This was later disseminated according to Fascism's dicta (now digitalised). Among the photographs, there are a large number of erotic photos of native women taken in seductive poses,

covered in leopard skins (clearly by the photographers or lovers involved). Rarer are photos in which the women adopt more natural poses. Blacks, children, monkeys, camels. Local life and custom is almost never depicted in a natural way and, in the very rare cases when it is, one remains fascinated by how much more the photos manage to tell of those lands than some studies.

On this point, I would like to recount an eye-opening fact on how the information was controlled: I had the opportunity of reading the reports of Dino Buzzati, special envoy in Italian East Africa for the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, collected and studied by Paris Nanterre University at the Centre de Recherches Italiennes. From these studies it emerges that the journalist and writer Dino Buzzati was censored by *Corriere della Sera* that would not publish an interview with Amedeo d'Aosta on the colonies. From that moment onwards, Buzzati's chronicles were seasoned with exclusive local colour.

I was able to see the true face of the Africans in the colonies not remoulded by the colonialist vision in Rome in some collections of photographs belonging to the Geographical Society at Villa Celimontana (now digitalised). I saw others from a few private collections, among which I would like to cite the collection belonging to a former Eritrean chauffeur and kept by his wife, or those of the heir of a wine maker in Eritrea.

### **3 The Historical Research Basis of my Novels and the Africans Dealing with the Violence of Colonialism and the Current Dictatorship**

I discovered the documents useful to reconstruct this period mainly in the Braidense Library in Milan, where I was able to read the books by Enrico Cerulli (1898-1988), the diplomat and linguist, governor of Scioa and Harar, and the bulletins of the Rome Commercial Geographical Society (as well as the historical fund, the Giotto Dainelli Fund, of the anthropologist Cipriani). The bulletins of the Commercial Exploration Society in Milan were extremely interesting carrying articles by Italians resident over there for business reasons.

Giulia Barrera, a historian and archivist at the *Direzione Generale per gli Archivi di Stato* in Rome, cites my grandfather in her study entitled *Patrilinearità, razza e identità. L'educazione degli italo-eritrei, durante il colonialismo italiano* (Patrilineality, race and identity. The education of the Italian-Eritreans, during Italian colonialism) for *Quaderni storici* (April 2002). Giulia Barrera had me read her notes on the letters that my great-grandmother wrote from Livorno, on the death of my grandfather. From these letters (found by the academic in the archive of the Vicariate apos-

toloc of Asmara) it emerges that my grandfather's Italian family was very concerned for the mixed-race grandchildren, so much so that they sent an uncle, my grandfather's brother, to check out the health of the grandchildren and their needs. Giulia Barrera includes my grandfather in the list of Italians that took full responsibility for their children's education, giving them their name and also their heritage.

#### 4 The Denial of the History and Emotions of Colonialism

In the postcolonial memory that has conditioned my life, I feel the need to highlight the existence of a hiatus. There is an ancient memory, written in the history books, then a fascist memory and this too more or less described by historians, a memory which is also very critical, and then a leap to the present day. Over the past thirty years, the massive presence of many Africans in our Italian regions coming from Ethiopia and Eritrea has never been connected to past history. There is on the part of the Italians a stubborn ignorance, in the most literal sense of the word, despite the popularity of the numerous works by the historical journalist Angelo Del Boca. And, yet, in the homes of Italians there are photographic or personal documents (diaries or letters) of which present-day Italians have only a vague and confused memory. Africa is remembered solely for its exotic character or for the dramas of recent years, which have to do with poverty and deaths at sea. But luckily in depth studies on the work and the role of the colonisation Italians are growing. I quote the book by Francesca Locatelli from the Centre of African Studies (formerly, University of Edinburgh), entitled *La comunità italiana di Asmara negli anni Trenta tra propaganda, leggi razziali e realtà sociale* (The Italian Community of Asmara in the 1930s, between propaganda, racial laws and social reality), appearing in Riccardo Bottoni's *Impero Fascista* (Fascist Empire) in 2005. The very well-documented recent books of Nicholas Lucchetti, a historical researcher, entitled *Italico ingegno all'ombra dell'Union Jack* (Italian ingenuity in the shade of the Union Jack) and *Italiani d'Eritrea 1941-1951* (Italians of Eritrea 1941-1951), published by Cinque Terre. Also the lovely documentary made in 2007 by the director Caterina Borrelli on "Asmara, Eritrea" (Anonymous Production 2007), providing a concise history of colonial and pre-colonial Eritrea, up to the time of its terrible dictatorship. This red line of violence between past colonialism and the current African dictatorships, of which the Nobel prize-winner for literature Wole Soyinka has often spoken in Italy too, is not easy to unravel.

I published my last novel entitled *L'Africa non è nera* (Africa is not black) - I quote the title of an article by Curzio Malaparte written for the *Corriere* in 1939 - on the Italians in Asmara, the first colony in absolute, for the publisher Mursia. It is a laborious work of historical investigation, which

starts in 1935, continues with Fascism and the race laws, the Ethiopian war and the end of the colony with the invasion of the British, the fleeing of the Italians - many of whom were deported as prisoners - and the ten years of British administration.

This is a history of colonisation that has never been tackled in depth before, namely a history that, if it were better known, could help the modern day integration and make sense of the escape of those Africans who come to die on our coasts, at Lampedusa, dreaming of only one thing, freedom.



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