

WRITING THE DIFFERENCE: THE MINORITARIAN PERSPECTIVE OF ITALIAN MIGRANTS IN QUÉBEC

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Abstract: *Canada and the United States have an established literary tradition linked to immigration and minorities. However, for Canada, this tradition was mainly, if not exclusively, expressed in English. Instead, the historical context of Québécois literature reflects the close link between the French language and a single cultural community: this has made it impossible to include minority voices in the context of Québec's literary context. Today, now that Québécois literature begins to look ahead, taking exploratory journeys towards "foreign lands", diversity has become the main theme of emerging writers. Certainly, in the younger generation, as in the previous ones, identities are still only defined starting from a pre-established cultural and family background, perhaps Québécois, but perhaps also Haitian, Algerian, Chinese, Polish or Italian. Marco Micone and Fulvio Caccia, among the first, wrote from a space that is at the same time both internal and peripheral to Québec society. Their 'marginality' is expressed, above all, through targeted choices of language and form: the provocative mixture of continuity and diversity, affiliation and dissidence, as well as the importance they give to language, characterize their writing and make a significant contribution to the development of Québécois literature.*

Keywords: *immigration; Italian; Canada; Québec; marginality*

1. INTRODUCTION

Canada was for a long time considered by thousands of immigrants as the country of the last frontier, and yet in recent decades it has developed a multicultural policy attentive to the ethnic singularities of which it is composed. And while for the Canadian immigrant the debate with the "other" language is carried out in binary terms, language of origin/English, in Montréal the linguistic binomial becomes a trinomial. Montréal is now the city where the difference is articulated, where "the difference is written", to paraphrase a very famous 1985 issue of *Vice Versa*.

My discussion will focus on the analysis of the immigrant culture in Québec that has long been censored by the ruling classes which, for decades, have imposed a uniformity of mentalities and the exclusion of potentially dangerous groups. It is clear that the Italian community will necessarily be the object of this analysis because, in addition to being numerically the most important group after the English-speaking and Francophone communities, it is also the one to which the two writers Micone and Caccia belong. They now represent the whole community of migrant and

transcultural writers in Québec for whom writing in French has become a political manifesto.

Since 1946 to today, Canada has welcomed 5,000,000 immigrants. In Québec at present this includes more than 800,000 members of ethnic minorities, almost 300,000 of whom are of Italian origin. Since the Second World War, five million Italians have had to leave their country. The social reforms that followed one after another in Italy failed to satisfy the less well-off classes: in fact, a 1951 census showed that at that time over six million peasants still did not own property or land, and a very high percentage of these resided in the South of Italy. Following violent peasant revolts, the Italian authorities granted land to only 5% of the rural population, since the ruling classes preferred emigration rather than the ceding of land. The exodus was huge, but the host countries reacted positively to the arrival of the immigrants because these individuals represented an ideal workforce, especially because of their modest wage requirements. Therefore, we can say that emigration would never have existed if it had not helped consolidate the economic and political power of the ruling classes of the host countries. This also applies to Québec, of course.

2. ITALIAN POST-WAR MIGRATION

How did Québec react to this massive post-war exodus? We must remember that, in the 1950s, immigrants had heard little, very little, about Québec and even less of its cultural particularity. Therefore, they emigrated to Canada, or worse to America, and not to Québec.

Twenty years later, in spite of Law 101, 70% of young Quebecers of Italian origin continued to attend English schools, since, on the one hand, English speakers had gained political support among immigrants without having to resort to either economic or social threats; while, on the other hand, many French-speaking Quebecers wanted to marginalize the Italians, and immigrants in general, so as to protect spheres, such as that of the civil services, which had always been under their control. Starting in the 1980s a huge step forward was made: simultaneously with the birth of an urban literature in Montreal, there was the emergence of texts containing a multiplicity of different languages and voices, since, as Fulvio Caccia states: it is not the state that makes culture, but men; and, I would add, all men, of all nationalities and ethnicities. From that moment on, Québec has been the scene of a pageant in which languages, dialects and idiolects intertwine with ideological positions, coming from writers of different origins.

And it was at this historical moment, and not by chance, that the first issue of *Vice Versa* was published, and it can be considered as an example of the new phase of Québécois literature. In fact, the creation of *Vice Versa* in 1983 is emblematic because of the choice to publish it in three languages: French, Italian and English, shifting and de-dramatizing the tension between English and French that has always existed in Québécois society and, thus, introducing the Italian community as an active partner in the culture of Québec. As stated by Lamberto Tassinari, editor of the magazine, "L'Italian devient un troisième pôle, une langue qui rompt la dualité au Canada et qui représente toutes les autres langues et identités, exclues de la communication officielle...L'italien est une provocation pour dire que la manière la meilleure pour rejoindre les autres passe par la langue" (Canzutti, 1998-1999:15). The first issue of *Vice Versa* was officially launched at the National Library, on rue Saint-Denis, with great media coverage, but most of the 'cultured' public reacted to the magazine with coldness and, I would say, diffidence, given the objective of the magazine itself, which was to redefine the Québécois identity.

What then was the goal of the creators of the magazine? Their original idea? *Vice Versa* tried to make visible the social transformations underway and to grasp the profound meaning of the relationship and coexistence of individuals and peoples in the post-industrial era. In other words, the magazine immediately sought to define *migrant ethnicity*, meaning ethnicity as a result of ethnic group, in the usual sense of nature and race, seeking in it the signs and principles of a new humanism. Therefore, Caccia, D'Alfonso and the other editors proposed migrant ethnicity as a force for change and a place for investigation and for the affirmation of Québécois identity. In fact, for the often silent Québec, which seemed to have given up on a dream, solving the immigrant problem meant getting rid of the "maladie Québec" and radically redefining Quebec's identity. So, *Vice Versa* sought to awaken this unexpressed cultural wealth by introducing more languages and dampening the French/English polarization, thus providing the example of an unprecedented equivalence of languages and cultures.

3. "LA TRANSCULTURE" IN *VICE VERSA*

After the publication of Nepveu's article "Qu'est-ce que la transculture?" in 1989, studies on the role played by the magazine *Vice Versa* multiplied. This trilingual magazine, founded by intellectuals of Italian origin, Fulvio Caccia, Bruno Ramirez and Antonio D'Alfonso, and directed by Lamberto Tassinari, became a transcultural laboratory in Québec, as well as place for the affirmation of a new concept of identity. The prefix "trans" designates a moment of transition and the adjective "transcultural" perfectly defines the network of relationships existing in Québec between the various cultures that populate it. For the *Vice Versa* editors, it was not a matter of baptizing a new literary movement, but of stirring up a debate within Québécois literature, Canadian literature, and literature *tout court*. In their introduction, Caccia and D'Alfonso lay claim to the otherness, the difference, of the creator of Italian origin, borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari the concept of "minor literature" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1975). Caccia e D'Alfonso define the status of the intellectual of Italian origin in Québec as "minoritaire à l'intérieur d'une minorité, à cheval sur trois cultures et autant de langues" (Caccia, D'Alfonso, 1983:201). To reinforce this concept, Caccia often used expressions such as Scarpetta's *impureté postmoderne*; Juteau-Lee *fuyante* ethnicity or

Weinfeld's *affective* ethnicity; Vattimo's *faiblesse forte*; Deleuze and Guattari *mineur* and *devenir minoritaire*; without forgetting the Kafkaesque notion of literature and language.

D'Alfonso even aspired to the creation of an 'italic', deterritorialized literature, since he claims that migrant writing represents the radical otherness in Québec, thus moving away from the positions of Caccia and especially of Micone, who aspired to assimilate migrant writing into Québécois literature. Moreover, Pierre L'Hérault himself, author of an article on *L'intervention italo-québécoise dans la reconfiguration de l'espace identitaire québécois*, affirmed that the two cultures, the Italian and the Québécois, have found a common ground in the concept of a shared otherness, linked to the common destiny of the two groups, both minorities from the linguistic and identity points of view.

Therefore, the key word for *Vice Versa* is *transculturel*, written in three languages on the cover: "Magazine transculturel. Transcultural magazine. Rivista transculturale". In *transculture* Tassinari and Caccia find

la capacité de symboliser sa propre blessure qui agit comme force fondatrice de l'identité, équilibrant de la sorte la tentation d'échapper au passé ou d'y sombrer (Tassinari, 1983:23).

Vice Versa was created after the earlier experience of an Italian magazine, the *Quaderni culturali*, founded in January of 1980, also by intellectuals of Italian origin. The magazine was the organ of the Association of Italian-Québec Popular Culture. It was started in the Montrealese neighborhood of Saint-Michel, a neighborhood with a large Italian community, which was the magazine's intended readership, which explains the choice of the use of Italian. The title chosen, *Quaderni culturali*, reflects the nature of the articles which focused on cultural activities: debates, theatrical performances, film screenings. Anchored in the social reality of Montreal, it focused on the history of the migrant community and, above all, on the experience of the Italian community. The magazine published seven issues, published between 1980 and 1982. The first series, with two issues, appeared in Italian in 1980, and dealt with political topics. The last two issues, published in 1982, mark a progressive opening to the three languages, as evidenced by the titles of the sections "Allarghiamo il discorso/Elargissons le discours.../In wider terms". It was in this issue that the magazine's transformation into *Vice Versa*

was announced. On a single page was written: "*Quaderni culturali* cambia nome! Change de nom! Changes name!". Lamberto Tassinari forged the path that led a periodical like *Quaderni culturali* to become a transcultural journal. Tassinari remembered the fracture within the editorial board between those who wanted to preserve the political and social aspect of the old periodical, and those who wanted to attribute a new dynamism and meaning to its trilingualism, move away from the ghetto of the community and turn toward the greater society.

With *Vice Versa* the experience of emigration transformed into a tool for analyzing reality and became a means for facing future developments. The heavy handed graphics of *Quaderni culturali* gave way to the more abstract and conceptual graphics of *Vice Versa*. Looking to the future, *Vice Versa*'s founding intellectuals sought stylistic, formal, linguistic or writing solutions that aimed to create bridges, establish dialogue, overcome differences and reduce inequalities. The future society which they were thinking of was a shared space in which all, while maintaining their diversity, could have a dialogue, and achieve their aspirations and desires. We must remember that a first attempt at linguistic openness had already been made by the publishing house Guernica, created by Antonio D'Alfonso in Montréal in 1978 and, from the beginning, dedicated to the publication of authors of foreign origin, but also of English-speaking poets. Guernica made translation its main mission, thus anticipating the linguistic openness proposed four years later by *Vice Versa*. An important contribution to this goal can be found in the publication of the anthologies *Quêtes. Textes d'auteurs italo-québécois*, edited by Caccia and D'Alfonso, and by *Sous le signe du Phénix. Entretiens avec quinze créateurs italo-québécois*, edited by Fulvio Caccia, which gather the testimonies of intellectuals of Italian origin who write in English or in French in Québec in various artistic fields.

In the title chosen by Caccia, the evocation of the *Phénix/Phoenix* refers to a concept of the Italo-Québécois identity in the making. It was about to undergo a transformation that would necessarily result in something different from its initial condition. The text also emphasizes the membership in a community and the social promotion of the descendants of emigrants, often poor and uneducated, who became artists, creators and key players in the cultural life of Québec. The figure of the *Phénix*, emblematic representation of the migrant creator, refers to the continuous metamorphosis to which every culture is subjected, but even more so to the migrant's *mestizo*

culture. Through the use of the figure of the *Phénix*, a symbol of continuous metamorphosis, Caccia suggests that “ce délicat travail de mutation culturelle, auquel est soumise toute société et, à plus forte raison, toute communauté immigrante” (Caccia, D’Alfonso, 1983:200) never stops. That means, for Caccia, that immigrant culture emphasizes the ‘acculturation’ phenomenon of every culture¹.

For Caccia, Italy allows the Québécois to “se confronter à sa propre origine pour affirmer son américanité, et cela en faisant l’économie du rapport conflictuel avec la culture-mère: la France” (Caccia, D’Alfonso, 1983:260). The challenge is to “se réorienter, de recommencer la culture française ailleurs et autrement” (Caccia, D’Alfonso, 1983:261). This acculturation, however, is experienced with sadness by the writer and leads to emptiness, loss, and crisis.

The texts of Italian migrant writers focus on the dramas and tragedies of Italian immigrants and their descendants, whose stories seem to remain under the shadow of an iniquitous destiny that pursues them from Italy to America. The journey to the new continent does not change the fate of the characters but, on the contrary, helps to radicalize their existence by adding the inequalities of American capitalism to the injustices of European history. Immigration was a traumatizing experience for most Italian families; the shock of adaptation, the pain, manifested themselves in the syntax, in the rhythm of the dialectal language spoken by the parents. This dialectal language, an agglomeration of regional archaisms, of Italian and English expressions, thus becomes the language of memory and exile for the second generation.

The children of immigrants deny their parents’ language; they refuse it. The learning of the *predominant* language and the frenetic adherence to the values of the consumer society are the means to make the break. In this regard, I refer to the tetralinguistic model of Henri Gobard, which modulates our relationship to languages. First, Gobard claims (Gobard, 1976), there is a *vernaculaire*, the maternal language, of rural origin. It designates the *ici*. Then, there is a *véhiculaire* language, a language that is urban, of the State, bureaucratic, and commercial. It is spoken everywhere and causes the first step toward

deterritorialization. The *référentiaire* language, then, is that of culture. It is the language of *over there*. Finally, there is the *mythique*, the religious language: the language of the afterlife.

If we want to apply the stated model, we can say the different regional dialects of immigration are a *vernacular* language: Sicilian, Neapolitan, Milanese. English is the *predominant* language for most Canadians with the exception of the 15% who have attended French-speaking schools in Québec. The *predominant* language corresponds to the first break with the *vernacular* language, the language of origin, it is the first manifestation of the difference. English is the reference language for many Canadian Italian speakers and works to create a reterritorialization. Finally, Italian is the mythical language.

English then is useful to the Italian-speaking intellectual to recover his past, to understand it. It is in English that he can trace the genesis of the rejection of his language of origin and it is in this language that he will write most of his works except for a part of the Italophones, those of Québec, who have passed from English as a *predominant* language to French language as a *referencing* and cultural language. However, whether he wants it or not, the Italian intellectual will have to deal with Italian. He will do it either by ignoring it or by reappropriating it. For example, for Caccia Italian will always be the Eden-like language of before. Dialect instead will be discarded by the Italian-speaking creator: he prefers fragments in the Italian language as indices of Italianness and immigration within his work.

In an interview published in *Vice Versa* in 1984, Micone explains how he created a language suitable for his *pièces*. At the beginning, he wrote in an international French, fearing that a more popular Michel Tremblay style of French would ridicule his purpose. Then, he realized that the normative language was too neutral and so he tried to create a popular language that was not a mere imitation of the current French Québécois, but the language spoken by the Italians in Montréal. In any case, the immigrant does not have a language all of his own. Against the myth of the passage to Paradise, Micone proposes the soberest vision of immigration as a loss and the immigrant as the victim of an adventure he has not chosen: not only a simple economic adventure, but a process that changes one’s vision of oneself. Language then becomes the main agent of the victimization of the immigrant. The Italian-speaking writer’s search for identity then passes through the theme of the loss of the country of origin, to which is added the

¹ Here Caccia takes up Todorov’ concept of “acculturation”, which states: “On voit bien la différence entre l’être acculturé, à l’aise dans les deux cultures, et l’être déraciné, qui a oublié sa langue d’origine mais n’a pas appris celle de son pays d’adoption” (Todorov, 1989:364).

conflict between the values of the host country and those of the motherland.

This is precisely what the Italian playwright Marco Micone wanted, deliberately choosing French as the language of expression in *Gens du silence* (1985), his first theatrical *pièce*. Structured on peasant and worker roots, the migratory experience and their participation in becoming Québécois, Micone relies on class solidarity and the common working origins of immigrants and Québécois to overcome the differences.

For the writer of Italian origin, there is no inferior culture just as there is no inferior individual; however, there is a dominant culture imposed by groups of individuals, who are also dominant, thanks to the economic and political power they hold.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The city and the culture are no longer unique literary allegories but bifid realities to be assailed politically and culturally, since it is precisely the diversity of the minorities that constitute and represent the process of modernity fundamental to the great western metropolises.

Now that Québécois literature is beginning to look ahead, taking exploratory journeys to 'foreign lands', diversity has become the main theme of emerging writers. Marco Micone and Fulvio Caccia, among the first, wrote from a space that is at the same time internal and peripheral to Québécois society. Their 'marginality' is expressed above all through targeted choices of language and form: this provocative mixture of continuity and diversity, affiliation and dissidence, as well as the importance they give to language, mark their writing, giving the literature of Quebec a significant and evident development.

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