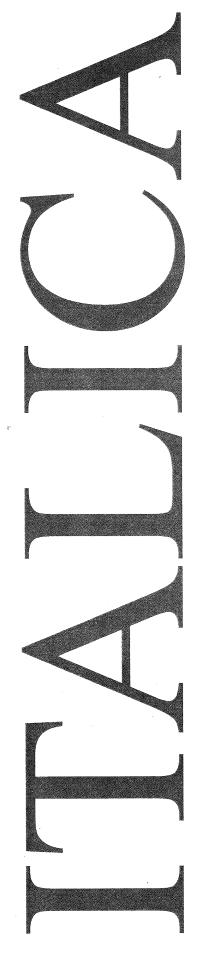
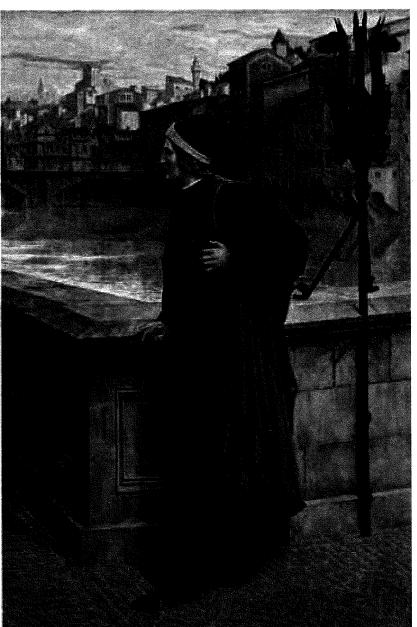
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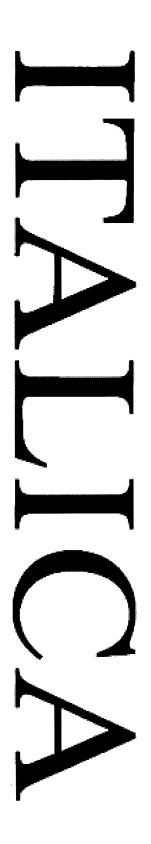
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Michael Lettieri

Editor



From the Editor

This is another issue of which *Italica* is proud. It contains studies which are diverse, original and important, and which add significantly to our understanding of the Italian language and culture. On the occasion of the seven-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of Dante's birth, its cover celebrates our Supreme Poet and father of the Italian language.

Italica relies on the generosity and help of many people and institutions for its operation. We gratefully acknowledge their essential contributions. Thank you to everyone who contributed in different ways to the publication of this issue.

Buona lettura!

MICHAEL LETTIERI

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Reflections from the Borders of Poetry

NICOLETTA PIREDDU Georgetown University

Abstract: The U.S. tour of female poets Mia Lecomte and Candelaria Romero after the publication of the volume *A New Map. The Poetry of Migrant Writers in Italy* prompts a discussion on the status of female writing and migration in the framework of contemporary Italian poetry. Attention to these new poetic voices not only highlights the need for a more complex notion of subjectivity and identity but also reopens the debate about the function of poetry as a genre and its relevance in the classroom as a critical and pedagogical tool.

Keywords: Women's poetry, migration literature.

Throughout most of history – as we read in *A Room of One's Own* – the nameless author whom Virginia Woolf calls Anon and "who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman" (51). For their part, with their signatures, Italophone migrant poets like Mia Lecomte and Candelaria Romero have come a long way since the dark ages denounced by Woolf, when lack of attribution and lack of public recognition ultimately amounted to lack of existence for the female poetic production. After the publication of *Ai confini del verso*, a comprehensive collection of poems written in Italian by foreign authors and edited by Mia Lecomte, a U.S. tour introduced their work to the English-speaking audience through the volume *A New Map*. The Poetry of Migrant Writers in Italy, co-edited by Lecomte and Luigi Bonaffini. These accomplishments represent a very promising turn in contemporary Italian literature, for many reasons.

First of all, by choosing to write poetry these Italophone migrant writers act within a field still mostly defined by a ponderous legacy. If we ask our classes or even a more extended audience what associations 20th- and 21st-century Italian poetry generates, the most common answers we obtain are probably Ungaretti's hermeticism or Montale's high, tragic lyricism. I am far from implying that the poetry of later decades is scanty or not worthy of attention. From Pasolini's antinovecentismo and Sanguineti's experimental neo

avant-garde to the more recent production of Zanzotto, Luzi, Caproni, and Magrelli, to name just a few, Italian poetry has been recognized in a solid corpus of critical works which, especially at the turn of the new millennium, have provided comprehensive retrospective overviews. Two, among many others, are Daniele Maria Pegorari's Critico e testimone. Storia militante della poesia italiana 1948-2008 and Alberto Bertoni's La poesia contemporanea. Several bilingual anthologies have also made this rich and diverse poetic production available to an American audience - most recently Luigi Ballerini's *The Promised Land*, which highlights precisely the stylistic innovation and variety of Italian poetry after 1975. Therefore, not only is there no lack of poets in contemporary Italy but, at least according to Alessandro Carrera, the problem is in fact the precise opposite, namely, an eccessive proliferation of poetic voices and prizes, most of them without a real impact on the cultural scene ("Sterminata" 79-80). For his part, in Apologia del critico militante and La poesia italiana oggi, Giorgio Manacorda ascribes the marginalization of the poetic genre in Italy to the death of militant criticism (that is, an evaluative, rather than simply descriptive or promotional appraisal) on poetry.

In this challenging, divisive context, contemporary female poetic voices resonate even less, although paradoxically, according to Beverly Allen in her introduction to the anthology *The Defiant Muse*, it is in poetry that we can find "the most complete history of women's writing in Italy" (xvi) because in a male-dominated realm the poetic genre allows female writers to problematize subjectivity. For its part, Cinzia Sartini Blum's anthology Contemporary Italian Women Poets foregrounds the complexity of contemporary female poetic practices, alerting not only to the continuous underrepresentation of Italian women's positions in the history and criticism of poetry, but also to the risk of turning the denunciation of women's exclusion into a ghettoization within the rigid boundaries of gender (xvi-xvii). Therefore, on the one hand, authors included in this comprehensive volume - like Alda Merini, Amelia Rosselli, Maria Luisa Spaziani, or Giulia Niccolai, who transposed their psychological or cultural otherness into poetic language (often a plurality of languages, in the case of Rosselli and Niccolai) could be seen as antecedents of Italophone female poets. On the other hand, however, migrant writers do not aspire to be assimilated to an established, unified genealogy. Rather, as Mia Lecomte underscores in her introduction to A New Map, they welcome a crossfertilization between Italophone and native Italian poetry able to help the former enrich their language but also to free "the exhausted, self-referential language of [Italian] poetry from its baroque and hermetic excesses and from the experiments of a certain avantgarde, now in rear guard" (14), be it male or female.

As has happened with narrative fiction since the 1990s, migrant voices can redefine the territory of Italian poetry. The expressions "migration literature in Italy" and "Italian literature of migration," that Graziella Parati and Armando Gnisci have proposed in volumes like Mediterranean Crossroads and Creolizzare l'Europa, highlight the need to approach this new corpus of works as much more than a self-contained, marginalized production, alien to the Italian national tradition. By choosing Italian as their expressive means, migrant authors imply an Italian audience as their preferred interlocutors, and show the desire to initiate a dialogue between cultures, facilitating knowledge and respect of differences. They hence also promote new connections with Italy's own history and literature of migration, as well as crosscultural relations with Italian poetry outside of Italy, above all with the rich Italian-American production (Italian-American poets and poetry scholars like Peter Carravetta, Joseph Perricone and Justin Vitiello have penned the English translations of several poems in A New Map).

Although the adjective "Italophone" aligns this literary production with other European traditions like the Anglophone or the Francophone, Italophone writers do not perceive Italian as the idiom imposed by former colonizers, a linguistic legacy through which the subaltern or post-colonial subject can strike back in order to undermine social hierarchies and the power structures of a specific imperial discourse. Rather, as Mia Lecomte observes (*Map* 13), Italian also functions as a new and neutral expressive ground, which writers elect to share their experiences and their aesthetic principles. Yet, in this foreign idiom arduously conquered without imposition, the migrant can also "talk back" (Parati, *Migration* 53), to resist the normativity of the host culture.

Italophone poets do not root themselves in a specific cultural context, but, rather, connect multiple cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences. In Candelaria Romero's words, it is not a matter of "integration (in the social-political sense), but of a feeling of familiarity, soft, made of little pieces" (*Map* 248). Unlike the idea of immigration or emigration, which implies a one-way passage to or from a new national context, from an origin to a destination, their migrant status emphasizes the accumulation of different experi-

ences through displacement, hence also the transformation of the subject itself into a multiple and hybrid entity. For these authors migrancy becomes an existential dimension and also the very condition of writing. The autobiographical elements in their works do not simply respond to the poets' need to become visible through real-life testimonies. By focusing on individual experiences, migrant Italophone poetry undermines the hegemony of the universal subject. It defies homogeneity – avoiding the risk of speaking for someone else - and preserves plurality by championing the uniqueness of each self and life story (Map 15). The diminished prominence of the lyric I that has taken contemporary Italian poetry beyond orphic and neoclassical modes becomes, in migrant writers, a guarantee against the strong subjectivity associated with traditional forms of power, be it that of patriarchy, of Eurocentrism, of the nation, of whiteness, or all of the above. Their poetry expresses an identity in progress, made of traces of many worlds, excerpts of cultures, echoes of values. Furthermore, by downshifting the self and adopting free verse, poetry moves closer to oral tradition, intensifying spontaneity, connection, and communication with readers.

For both female and male poets included in *A New Map* we can talk of a veritable "translingual imagination" (to borrow a term from Steven Kellman), which transposes, translates into Italian verses the dislocation and estrangement resulting from their authors' international lives. Candelaria Romero claims that her dream is to write in all the languages that shaped the different phases of her life: Swedish, Spanish, Italian, her great-grandmother's Guarany, and English (*Map* 248). This dream comes true in Barbara Serdakowski's poems, where lines alternate in Polish, French, English and Italian – as in "Nie boj sie," "Senza Ali," "Scrivo," or "L'atempo" (265-81). Likewise, the sequence of places that recur in Mia Lecomte's selections *For the Maintenance of Landscape* – Arles, Pompei, the Hudson, Switzerland, Naxos – reflects memories of and participation in the idioms and cultures evoked by her personal, discontinuous geography.

Yet, to be sure, the writer's polyhedric perspective, expressed in one or more foreign languages, no matter how freely chosen and how empowering, is not a mere source of jubilation for having broken away from a constraining national tradition. It also generates grief. Not accidentally, Hannah Arendt has always stressed the irreplaceability of her mother tongue, and the painful distance that separated her from the English language she acquired. Likewise,

Julia Kristeva laments the "silence of polyglots" (Strangers 15) who believe that a new language is "a resurrection" (15). In fact, not speaking one's mother tongue means "[l]iving with resonances and reasoning that are cut off from the body's nocturnal memory (...). Bearing within oneself like a secret vault (...) that language of the past that withers without ever leaving you" (15). In the poetry of migration we often feel the inevitable ambivalence of exile - a plurality of visions, an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, as Edward Said has connoted exile (Reflections) – yet at the same time we see the scars left by detachment and distance. "Il poeta che non ha cittadinanza è un ospite del mondo" (Confini 87), writes Albanian poet Gezim Hajdari, and his verses connote the uprootedness of the self as an incessant sequence of deaths and rebirths, as a daily creation of a new homeland, "una patria senza mappe nè bandiere," "a country with no maps or flags" (Map 132-33) – or, as we read in Mia Lecomte's "Albula," "Un rifugio che non è mai una casa," "A refuge that is never a home" (Landscape 24).

Migrancy produces multiplicity without completeness. There is tension in its openness. The self can often be divided, lacerated. In Candelaria Romero's words "Ora qui/ Ora là/ Ma sempre a metà" (Map 254-55). Or, in the Christmas memories of Paraguayan poet Egidio Molinas Leiva, "Da una parte:/ cantici stranieri/ palloncini dorati appesi e alberelli/che nascono da scatole (...) Dall'altra:/fiori di cocco" (168-69)2. Even the richness of Serdakowski's multilingual verses is swallowed by an inner void - as she laments in "Vuota di parole" (272) or "Senza parole": "words, mots, palabras, slowa/ Non vorrei più usare parole di altri/ Ma allora quali? Se non ho le mie" (286-87). In "Firenze," Brasilian-born Heleno Oliveira discovers his "anima (...) nuda espropriata", "nera come l'Africa" (232-33). In the apostrophes of the Italo-Argentinian Livia Amalia Palazzolo language itself is "tradita abbandonata/ confusa (...) Madre morta/ripetuta/sfuggente" (242-43). The very configuration of landscapes and territories in Mia Lecomte's poetry suggests that living and traveling are enriching yet alienating experiences, journeys "into non-belonging" (Landscape 57) in which appropriation coexists with expropriation of emotions and memories: "places are always 'of others' - she claims - yet are inevitably ours as well (...) by proxy" (57).

"Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom" (*Room* 112), Virginia Woolf wrote. And since, for her, women "have had less intellectual freedom than

the sons of Athenian slaves" (112), hence not even "a dog's chance of writing poetry" (112), Woolf emphasizes the need for women to possess not only economic independence but also the well-known "room of one's own" (112), a material and symbolic space that can enable female literary production. Yet, whereas in Woolf the construction of a private domestic space makes poetry possible, Italophone migrant female writers find in poetry itself that domestic space, a sense of belonging, the veritable house of being that Martin Heidegger associated precisely with poetic language. Therefore, it is even simplistic to claim that Italy offers migrant writers a home. More importantly, it is Italy that, through authors like Mia Lecomte and Candelaria Romero, gains a place, a home, on a new, interactive map, one that does not draw rigid national borders but rather charts the circulation of works across and beyond borders, hence reminding us that we are all meticci, half-blood, cross-breed. For Italophone female authors, this new transnational literary map is also a performative site where, as we can see in the international "Compagnia delle poete" created by Mia Lecomte in 2009, poetry is staged precisely as poiesis, a "making" where creation coincides with creolization. Faithful to the idea that poetry should be not only understood but felt, the female authors who participate in this company promote poetry through orality and theatricality, operating within their common migratory experience but giving voice, through individual performances, to the specific components of each poet's plural identity.

Judging from the *poete's* interaction with the audience during their presentation of A New Map in Washington D.C.,4 their authenticity, vitality, and approachability elicit powerful responses inside and outside academia, about poetry and language, gender and literary genres, the self and self-translation. It is legitimate to wonder whether these works appeal to readers above all for the often exotic quality of the empirical reality they evoke, as though migrancy and cultural otherness could be treated as values in themselves. Yet, this question pertains more extensively to any poetic creation. As Luigi Ballerini observes, "[t] he social relevance of poetry must be demonstrated practically, that is poetically, and not by resorting to social agendas" (Promised 18). In other words, the meaning of the poetic text "results from the activation of language and not from its ideological or confessional usurpation" (20). Judging from my own students' reception of Italophone poets I daresay that their verses do not easily succumb to ideological or theoretical reductions. This is yet another proof of what I experienced in my recent seminar on history, theory, and practice of translation: there is a surprising interest in poetry, which is not taught enough. Several students in my class decided to work on contemporary poetry for their final research papers precisely because they had never been exposed to those formal challenges before. One student who attended the *poete*'s presentation concentrated, in particular, on Candelaria Romero. Another one, although a native speaker of English, took the harder path and translated contemporary American poetry into Italian.

The consensus generated by this felicitous encounter with poetry - written, recited, and staged - prompts me to evoke, by contrast, the dangers that Alessandro Carrera locates in poetic performances whenever poetry is not also consistently read, discussed and purchased: "La poesia concepita come promozione, evento, (...) festival, tournée o maratona di letture muta lo status dell'arte del verso dalla letteratura all'installazione" ("Sterminata" 83), that is, a non-reproducible aesthetic form that dooms poetry to irrelevance and perishability despite its aspiration to eternity. The most mortifying instance of this pursuit of mundane recognition, for Carrera, is offered by the poet on television who, as in the sad spectacularization of Adriano Spatola at the "Maurizio Costanzo Show" that Giulia Niccolai recalls, degrades himself by feeding his own provocative excentricity to a medium and an audience only able to demean his art, taking it for silly triviality if not even madness. However, after listening to and watching the poete it is still possible to believe in what Carrera defines as the power of poetry to create a shared discursive space able to host and involve new participants ("Sterminata" 87).

"[Q]uel che io so dire vuole uscire/ non posso dimenticarlo/né tenerlo più per me solo/ve lo vorrei dare./ Voi saprete ricevere?" (Map 306-7). This apostrophe in "Piccole poesie veneziane" by Spale Miro Stevanovi? makes me think of Giulia Niccolai's assimilation of poems to frisbees (Frisbees), linguistic inventions and uncommon images to be thrown out to the audience to stimulate their reactions, breaking down the barriers between writers and readers. I, too, wish to throw out my own (more prosaic) frisbee on the possibilities of poetry, from the borders of poetry itself, that is, as a comparatist more at home in crossdisciplinary and intercultural approaches to fiction than in the specificities of the poetic genre itself, yet convinced that adding some more verses to our syllabi can open up attractive new trails to explore in the classroom and in research.

"Molte volte oggi ho passato la frontiera/della mia pelle dentro e fuori" (Lecomte *Landscape* 80)".

Notes

- ¹ Although published after *The Promised Land*, the two collections *An Anthology of Modern Italian Poetry* and *A Selection of Modern Italian Poetry in Translation* span the entire 20th-century, hence they include only few authors from most recent decades.
- ² In addition to "strange," as in Justin Vitiello's translation, "stranieri" evokes, of course, also "foreign," hence it further emphasizes the cultural otherness in which the "I" finds itself.
- ³ The group's agenda and their performative repertoire can be found on their website www.compagniadellepoete.com/.
- ⁴ The event took place on December 7th, 2012, at the Italian Cultural Institute in Washington, D.C.

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