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ITALIAN AUSTRALIAN POETRY BY FIRST GENERATION WRITERS: AN OVERVIEW

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ITALIAN AUSTRALIAN POETRY BY FIRST GENERATION WRITERS: AN OVERVIEW[1]

Poetry in volume form written by Italian migrants in Australia began to appear systematically at the end of the 1940s, a period which marked the beginning of mass Italian migration to Australia (350,000 between 1947 and 1972). Between 1947 and 2004 thirty-seven first generation poets have published 85 volumes of poetry, with 65% of these texts being published after the mid 1970s. Italian was the language used in 71 volumes some of which also included poetry in dialect, 5 volumes were entirely in English, 8 in Italian/English, one in Italian English and French. There is also a considerable corpus of material published in anthologies. Savoca has published a brief study on early Italian Australian poetry while Rando La Cava has examined the oral dialect poetry of migrants from the Aeolian islands.

The development of Italian Australian poetry constitutes a specific example of the wider phenomenon of ethnic minority writing and can be explained in part by the substantial increase of the Italian born in Australia (from 33000 in 1947 to a peak of 289000 in 1971), in part by the more varied socio-demographic parameters which marked post-1947 Italian migration, in part by the changes that post-war migration brought to Australian society, culture and identity. The advent of Australian multiculturalism in the mid 1970s and its subsequent mutations (Castles 52-54) can be considered a contributing factor encouraging the development of ethnic minority writing which, however, has consistently remained largely outside the established literary canon. It is one of the many tensions inherent in Australian multiculturalism which has not led to an integral socio-political inclusion of the CALD (culturally linguistic and diverse background) migrant who, as a tolerated object, is never simply present but is "positioned" in specifically perceived roles (Hage 89-90, 136). Italian Australian poet Luigi Strano deftly and succinctly captures this tension in *New Australian Alien* (Strano, *Fifty* 6): " . . . it all depends / on what the papers / say / whether / today / you are a wog / a new Australian / or an Alien."

Italian diaspora literature, as indeed other ethnic minority literature, has been the object of some debate in the Australian and North American contexts by critics such as Joseph Pivato and Sneja Gunew who have examined among other things how ethnic minority writing as an identifiable category has the potential to provide an

added dimension to the mainstream in the context of cultural difference, social change and political reform and exploring questions relating to individual and group identity, language, immigration, the ethnic writer, ethnic history and literary criticism.

Pivato introduces a category of literary production that is multilingual and cross-cultural and argues that ethnic minority writing belongs to the category of "new" or "other" literature. As such it also raises questions not only concerning theme and content but also its relationship to the literary canon and the dynamic interaction between literary phenomena and social structures. Writers vary their linguistic choices at a highly individualistic level that represent cultural identity and generation gaps as well as stages in development.

Gunew (*Framing Marginality* in particular) outlines a theoretical framework for analysing ethnic minority writing in Australia by changing the definition of what is considered "Australian literature" and challenging conventions that appear to be attached to migrant writing. She proposes a return to the question of belonging given that interrogations of the national emerge from both local communities and global diasporas and suggests that the way ahead in terms of analysing cultural texts seems to be to denaturalise the classificatory categories invoked to stabilise and legitimate all types of nation-building. In *Haunted Nations* she argues that there cannot be a full understanding of Australian culture and identity without the inclusion of minority cultures. This inclusion will allow the investigation of the representation (or of the absence) of the "other" and provide alternative ways of considering Australianess. Gunew's arguments present interesting links with Bhabha's (309) observation that minority discourse as a subaltern voice of the people can transcend time and space and with the claim made in Said 44 that the exile/migrant can apply a double perspective - things are seen both from point of view of what has been left behind and of the here and how. The vision of the new world is filtered through the one left behind thus leading to the development of an original/unique sensitivity and the construction of a new morphology of the present.

Italian Australian writing can be considered a case in point both in terms of the representation of the vision of the new world and the old as well as the language employed to express this vision. Most Italian Australian poetry by first generation writers is written in Italian. Some 30% of texts are produced in English and about

17% in dialect with a significant minority of authors writing texts in two out of the three possible combinations. While language choice is often determined by functional and contextual parameters there is, nevertheless, a substantial overlap of thematic patterns across the three areas of language use. Although much of the corpus deals with themes not explicitly linked to the migration experience that explore feelings, affects, questions of life and philosophy, characterising and distinctive thematic patterns found in Italian Australian poetry include, the migrant's reaction to and relationship with Australia and its people arising from the transition to a new world and a new life, the fascination with the natural environment, the comparison between the old land and the new in some cases viewed from the perspective of nostalgia for one's native land.

The more prominent and representative first generation Italian Australian poets are Luigi Strano, Enoe Di Stefano, Mariano Coreno and Lino Concas. Their writing presents not only continuity in terms of the historical and contemporary aspects of the Italian Australian diaspora but also subjective expressions of personal sentiments. Such themes are also found in the works of other poets such as Valerio Borghese's brief expressions of existential introspection which recall the early poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti ("La verità" [Truth][2], Cincotta 29; "Avevo" [I had], Cincotta 30) and the introspective subjectivity found in the more discursive prose poetry of Walter Cerquetti and Paolo Totaro. Totaro's poetry in particular takes the reader on a journey into the deepest recesses of his soul and to experience the spiritual anguish of the existential condition.

Luigi Strano migrated to Sydney in 1929 where he achieved a secure and respected socio-economic position. However Strano did not aspire to live by bread alone and, between 1959 and 2002, has published twenty volumes of poetry and two volumes of memoirs. Shortly after his arrival in Australia he learned English, Latin, Greek and German and began to publish poetry in Italian Australian newspapers. Initially his texts (sonnets, *canzoni,* and ballads) were written in literary Italian and were generically closely modeled on the Italian classical literary canon. Throughout the 1930s stylistic and thematic changes led him to progressively assimilate and adapt not only traditional and modern Italian poetry but also English and Anglo-Australian models to achieve his own brand of literary communication and to write not only in Italian but in English and Calabrian. Strano's poem "To Kath Walker" (Strano, *Fifty* 7), clearly inspired by "We are going" and presenting a style and language

reminiscent of her poetry, is an interesting example of his ability to present a unique morphology of the present from a perspective of dual sensitivity through which Strano expresses an understanding of the more radical diaspora experienced by Indigenous Australians. The poem is significantly prefaced by a quotation from Dante's *Inferno* (VII, 121-123) where in the fifth circle of hell the hot-tempered and the slothful are punished by immersion in smoking mud.

> . . . miles and miles of bushland,
> once a paradise of wild flowers
> … and haunted by the sound
> of the didgeridoo,
> are now graveyards for old cars
> and garbage dumps!
> Poetry is life,
> and this land of yours is dying
> rubbished and raped by white men:
> how can I possibly wonder
> that you wish to move away?

Enoe Raffaelli Di Stefano arrived in Sydney in 1949 and became a well-known personality in the Italian Australian community through her work with various community organisations. Her artistic aspirations found expression in painting as well as in the production of poetry and narrative. While Di Stefano's narrative presents an investigation of the diaspora experience based on socio-cultural parameters and with generally positive outcomes, her poetry (five volumes published between 1970 and 1997) is a detailed sensitively-expressed lyric diary that presents a complex and not always positive comparison of the ambience, the traditions, the temporal and natural spaces of her native land and of her adopted country. Lino Concas migrated from the island of Sardinia to Melbourne in 1963 where he became a secondary school teacher of Italian and has published six volumes of poetry between 1965 and 1998 that focus on the existential aspects the migration seen as integrat and dominant part of the life experience. Mariano Coreno reached Melbourne in 1956 where he has been engaged in various occupations, never however losing sight of his activity as a writer and his deep commitment to social issues. He has published eight volumes of poetry between 1962 and 2001 articulating a substantially pessimistic perception of life and migration.

For these and other Italian Australian first generation poets the expression of their feelings and attitudes of their transition to and their engagement with the new country both at a personal and collective level is a dynamic and varied one that is subject to change over time. In Strano's earlier poetry there is a positive engagement with the urban environment. "Sydney" (Rando, *Italian Writers* 126), written in 1940, is perceived as the city of his dreams whose memory "will always be the nearest to my heart"[3] taking precedence over the memory of his native land. Despite this, acceptance is never complete. Drawing on an image derived from the peasant culture of his native Calabria, Strano writes in a later poem: "I often plant in my garden / the fig tree / the sweet fig / of our land, / but like many of us / poor human transplants / it grows well / but rarely gives fruit" ("Il fico"[The fig tree], Rando, *Italo-Australian poetry* 81). Australia's social landscape is consistently perceived as a less inviting and encouraging aspect of the new country, characterised by the degrading materialism of a Saturday afternoon spent drinking beer and betting on the horses ("Sabato dopopranzo" [Saturday afternoon], Rando, *Italo-Australian Poetry* 76). It is a society that leaves little scope for the expression of difference and relegates to the fringe those (migrants, aborigines) who cannot or do not wish to assimilate. "U Pappu a l'Australia" [Grand-dad in Australia] (Strano, *Inquietudine* 9), significantly written in Calabrian, is a strikingly realistic depiction of the existential anguish of elderly parents brought out to Australia by their children for the sake of family reunion. Even more so than Luigi Strano, Domenico Marasco's somewhat homespun expressive style finds Australian drinking practices highly uncivilised and pubs places where " . . . you see drunk people / like dirty dogs / with fists thrust in your face . . ." ("Birra e ubriachi"[Beer and Drunks], Marasco 25) while the unemployed migrant who goes from factory to factory looking for work finds only "frantic people / who laughed in your face" ("Disoccupazione" [Unemployment], Marasco 33) so much so that even at Christmas time Australians display a cold heart despite the hot weather. Much of Rocco Petrolo's poetry, written predominantly in English, presents an ironic discourse on Australia and a critical commentary on the customs and attitudes of a society characterised by manifestations of racism ("Blow the bloody thing," Petrolo 11) and lacking a humanitarian dimension: " . . . As long as I'm alright / Jack, you may / live or you can die, / but don't ask me!" ("The Well Behaved Society," Petrolo 5).

Compared to Luigi Strano's poetry, themes that relate to the collective aspects of the diaspora are less evident in Enoe Di Stefano although the poem "Lucia" (Di Stefano,

Mio 29) can be read as emblematic of the situation of isolated aged Italian Australians forced to end their lives in a nursing home in a foreign land while "Discorso vuoto" [Empty speech] (Cincotta 63) subtly criticises the patently insincere speech inevitably delivered whenever an Italian politician is sent on a lavishly funded token visit to Australia's Italian community. Di Stefano however focuses on the feelings and reflections triggered by the experiences of the woman migrant. The temporal and spatial dislocation that marks the transition from Italy to Australia, the strange and different material and spiritual facets of the new country, the memory of pre-migration places and experiences mark the first two volumes (*Terra australis* and *Voci di lontananza*). In the following two volumes (*Mio e non Mio* and *Se Rimarrà qualcosa...,*) Di Stefano explores the concept that even if the time spent in Australia has weakened her ties with her native land, the new country, despite its positive aspects, does not fully satisfy all the migrant's spiritual aspirations. Although she no longer feels that she can entirely belong to Italy (" . . . Ever less at each encounter / I belong to you or you to me / my native land / and this thought torments me . . ." — "Mio e non mio" [Mine and not mine] Di Stefano, *Mio* 1), Di Stefano realizes that she has not achieved acceptance of the new country: "I love you Australia / even if it's a limited love / with reservations . . . / The road has been long / but one day you will have me . . . / [when] you will gather my meager remains" ("Australia", Di Stefano, *Se rimarrà* 30). She can, however, appreciate the material security Australia has to offer as well as its natural beauty even though there are instances of doubt. The silence that descends with sunset in the eucalyptus forest creates an environment of doubtful happiness ("Foresta australiana" [Australian forest] Di Stefano, *Terra Australia* 11) and limited joy is also to be found in the celebration of an Australian Easter through the sense of dislocation provided by the inversion of the seasons[4] and the different practices that mark its celebration: ". . . A useless prison of memories / Easter in spring / this Easter is in autums / rich with fruit, not promises" ("Pasqua australiana" [Australian Easter], Cincotta 64 = Di Stefano ---). In her latest work (*L'Itinerario*) Di Stefano reflects on the outcomes of a life spent between two worlds. The memory of her Italian past is now distant in time and it is no longer possible to contemplate alternatives that might have been despite lingering reservations on her relationship with Australia. Lingering reservations about the Australian experience are also expressed by Anna Maria Guidi whose poetry conveys both the fear of passing time that carries with it bitter disappointments as well as ongoing hope deriving from the realisation that permanent settlement carries with it a sense of belonging ("From Australia with fear," Cincotta

85). By contrast the urban environment in "I muri, il vento" [The walls, the wind] (Cincotta 89) has meaning for the present with sea and sunlight bringing spiritual relief and hope for the future despite Sydney's oppressive summer humidity exacerbated by furnace-like heat and the briefly nostalgic recall of the Tyrrhenian sea. This poem can be taken as an example of the way Guidi is able to superimpose physical environment and metaphysical states through an incisively descriptive process: "Exhausted skyscrapers / sacrificed on the furnace / of the city . . . / Thoughts [made] lazy by the sun / and the sense / of a long tomorrow" (Cincotta 89).

Coreno's first four volumes of poetry *Gioia straziata*, *Pianto d'amore*, *Ricordanze* and *Sotto la luna*, are characterized by a Leopardian-like sentimental pessimism and present reflections on love, death, the meaning of life, anguish, time fast passing. These volumes are dominated by a search for an unfindable equilibrium, a vain attempt to resolve the enigmas posed by life and little is explicitely stated about the migrant condition although *Pianto d'amore* marks the initial introduction of images with Australian referents: "[everything in life] Is all bitter / like the voices of Aboriginals / lost in time" ("Triste distacco" [Sad parting] Coreno, *Pianto* 15). In *Vento al sole* Australian themes and engagement with the existential condition of the migrant become predominant, a discourse continued in *Yellow Sun*, a collection of Coreno's English poetry (including some Italian poems from the preceding volumes rewritten in English) which is in large measure the result of the substantial encouragement given to Coreno by Judith Wright. It is also in this volume that Coreno's social themes begin to emerge.

In the development of Coreno's poetry Australia initially represents spiritual marginalisation, isolation, a life experience that is melancholic, destructive and fatal. This theme begins to take shape in "Emigrato" [Migrant] (Coreno, *Ricordanze* 21) and is developed in "Australia" (Coreno, *Vento* 25) where there is some hint of the possibility of finding acceptance even though in the final analysis the diasporic condition is no less agonising than the experience of love since for Coreno migration represents exile. Forced to live far from his native land it is only in the idealized memory of a pre-migration past that it is possible to find some inkling of happiness ("Ritorno" [Return], Genovesi 165) even though the reality of life in the native land was one of endless suffering, a life without hope that offered poverty as its only element of merriment ("Ciociaria," Coreno, *Ricordanze* 17). The humble migrant who exchanges his "sweat / in the patience of the day / for a secure future / . . .

among the uneasiness of foreign roads" ("Emigrante" [Migrant], Coreno, *Vento* 16) has to confront a land that cannot offer a sense of belonging or spiritual satisfaction: "I work so many hours a day / that when I am free / I feel lost, / unable to move a finger. / Yet, / they call me, almost despisingly, / 'new Australian'" ("Al ritorno da scuola" [Coming home from school], Genovesi 145). In contrast to the concepts expressed in Luigi Strano's poetry, even the attempt to seek a reconciliation with the new land and its society remains unrequited in an environment that marginalises people (Aborigines, CALD migrants) who are perceived as not belonging ("Questi giorni che ora consumo" [These days that I am now consuming], Cincotta 51).

As in the case of Mariano Coreno the initial reaction to the migration experience articulated by Lino Concas in his early poems (Concas *Poesie Volume I*) is the sense of isolation and exile resulting from the transition to Australia, seen as a foreign land given the impossibility of assimilation. In "Sardegna (Canto dell'emigrante)" [Sardinia (Song of the migrant)] (Concas *Poesie Volume I* 44-46) Concas invokes his native Sardinia not to abandon him in such a remote land while in "In terra straniera" [In a foreign land] (Concas, *Poesie Volume I* 43) he draws on the image of the kangaroo to create a metaphor for his sense of metaphysical disorientation: " . . . the kangaroo at the end of the day / closes his arms in a cross / after swift leaps / in a circle open to the sun. / I too find myself naked / in the evening among shadows . . . / lost among paths / in a foreign land." Engagement with the new country becomes a dominant element in Concas' later poetry. *L'uomo del silenzio* (Concas, *Poesie Volume 2* 142-191) explores and reappraises the physical and metaphysical rites of passage from the old land to the new ("La nave" [The ship] Concas, *Poesie Volume 2* 142), Australia's history, society and urban landscape ("Melbourne," Concas, *Poesie Volume 2* 150), the meaning of the world of the Aborigine that has almost disappeared ("Australia senza battesimo" [Australia without baptism], Concas, *Poesie Volume 2* 144) but that has left significant traces for those who desire to seek them. The poets's gradual understanding and acceptance of the new land is encouraged by the realization that the host society too has become more accepting of "the other". Christmas in Australia has now become "happy without snow" ("Natale a Melbourne" [Christmas in Melbourne], Concas, *Poesie Volume 2* 225) because of the blending of both "ethnic" and angloceltic cultures,

The search for possible equilibrium between cultural traditions constitutes also one of the central elements of the poetry of Paolo Totaro[5] who writes both in Italian and

English and is one of the very few writers to depict the sound track of Australia's multicultural work environment rich in linguistic dislocations. Although his collection of over 100 poems is largely unpublished — a number of his poems have appeared in magazines and anthologies and some of his English poems were published in O'Connor M. *Two centuries,* making Totaro one of the very few Italian Australian poets to be published in a "mainstream" anthology — his work is worthy of consideration given the unique perspectives provided and bold linguistic experimentalism.

Totaro's later Australian poems express the challenge of the awareness that participation in the culture of his adopted country leads to contributing to its transformation. There are explicit references to the diaspora although they are by and large veiled by the need not to indulge in nostalgia. In this context Totaro's plurilinguistic lyric experimentation is particularly interesting and displays a rare sensitivity towards the human condition of the migrant. Many of these poems written in a mix of languages relate to salient aspects of the presence of CALD first generation migrants in Australia. References to Australian pluriculturalism are found in "Lydia Nausicaa: in Memoriam," a moving elegy for a young friend. In "6 pm cleaners" (Cincotta 133) plurilingualism becomes the symbol of the brotherhood between workers from Italy, Spain and Latin America, a brotherhood that in "Homer: fish shops" (unpublished) is extended also to Greeks, while poems like "Port Kembla" (Cincotta 132) express the theme of the "non meaning" of life in the punishing environment of the blast furnaces at the steelworks.

Extremadura
coke havens
altiforni hornos
de fundicion
aqui la vita è breve
meaningless
non ha significado

hermanos o calor
red-hot-white
blanco fierro
c'è ancora l'hope
y l'esperanza

da l'estremadura
tu veinist you came
frade meu brothero
español ancora
and yet
el pianto mio
my cry
si confounds se mixa
col tuo

Totaro's poems on the condition of the migrant worker present interesting parallels with the work of Pietro Tedeschi, a writer of populist origins whose poems relate to workplace experiences of the 1950s and 1960s when newly-arrived Italian migrants found themselves at the bottom of the industrial pecking order. Tedeschi's texts deal, among other things, with the monotony of work, the infernal atmosphere of the steelworks compared to Dante's *Inferno* ("Acciaierie" [Steelworks], Tedeschi, *Le rime* 36-39) and a life severely limited by the requirements of an exploitative industrial process ("Hostel '58," Cincotta 127). The uniqueness of Tedeschi's poetry lies in the way he has managed to give voice from the "inside" to a common aspect of the Italian diaspora and to articulate the experience of a class that has by and large not been able to express what the transition from a largely rural Italian context to the urban industrial environment of Australia has meant.

While Australia's urban and social landscapes are view by mixed feelings, most first generation Italian Australian poets have more positive things to say about Australia's natural settings. Most Italian migrants who came to Australia after 1947 settled in costal urban areas or in areas relatively close to these. It is this environment that is described most Italian Australian writing. Renata Spadoni's "Kirribilli his Domain" (Cincotta 120) presents glimpses of nature (a kookaburra, a jacaranda tree) in an urban area near Sydney's city centre that seem to exclude the migrant's presence despite her attempt to engage with the environment. Walter Cerquetti uses an interestingly contrived Australian imagery to describe a Perth park as a liberating oasis amidst urban chaos: ". . . . Refuge from the noise / of the tunnels, from the battery of / traffic lights . . . / Among the pioneer pines, my soul / changes like the flip side of a coin. / I am immersed in the kingdom of the eucalyptus. / The opossum

its sentry . . ” (“Le colline di Gooseberry” [The Hills of Gooseberry] Cincotta 44). For Paolo Totaro enchanting Pittwater, on the coast north of Sydney and surrounded by an immense national park, on whose shores he lives, constitutes an idealised oasis of peace in sharp contrast with the hectic and alienating environment of NSW politics: “O rododactyylos eos[6] / prelude to summer here in Australia / the north west wind / that in an hour / will upset the sea / and the straight lines / will be for the rest of the day / uncertainly ruffled” (“Linee diritte” [Straight lines], unpublished). Pittwater, where the calm dawn sea is later disturbed by the midday trade winds, represents a serenity that perhaps mirrors a conscience disturbed by the tension between a wistful aspiration to interior peace and the reality of social conflict (“Volontà di sorridere” [Desire to smile], Cincotta 130). The difficulty of saying things that really count (“Volontà di parlare” [Desire to speak], Cincotta 129) is perhaps another way of expressing that active participation in the culture of the adopted country is a no less wistful aspiration than past participation in the culture of the country of origin.

The bush and the desert present an environment so new and different from the landscape of their past that some Italian Australian poets tend to use metaphors and concepts which reflect their European experience. Australian nature uncontaminated by the presence of the white man is for Raffaele Scappatura a “Green treasure . . . / where the patriachal Baobab reigns supreme / beside . . . the powerful Kingkarri / with spires like a gothic cathedral” (“Emigranti” [Migrants], Rando *Italian Writers* 271) while for Emilio Gabbrielli the tree-shaped bushes that appear on the journey back from Uluru are almost like cypresses (“Tornando da Ayers Rock” [Returning from Ayers Rock], Cincotta 71). Very few writers, however, perceive the bush and the outback as places of existential and metaphysical significance that can potentially provide meaning to the redefinition of life and identity. This is particularly the case for Luigi Strano and Giovanni Andreoni. For Strano, who since the late 1970s has been living in Mt. Wilson in the Blue Mountains, an area reminiscent of his native Aspromonte, the Australian natural setting can present cruel and tragic aspects (“Bush fire,” Rando and Andreoni 350) but the wide open spaces, the welcoming landscape, the untainted sky and the primordial bush can often provide a setting for serene contemplation, a sense of peace and stability, a place for thought and philosophy (“Forse non tutto è stato invano” [Perhaps not all has been in vain], Rando, *Italian Writers* 128). In his early poetry Giovanni Andreoni perceives as extremely harsh Australian natural environment as a place that can hold the key to

the fundamental mysteries of human existence as well as to the formation to a new and more fundamentally truer identity through the achievement of a mystical union with the Australian bush. Conceptually complex, Andreoni's poetry, particularly the texts written during his first years in Australia (Rando and Andreoni 358-359), has similarities with similar angloaustralian poetry. In "Nella croce del sud" [In the Southern Cross] (Rando and Andreoni 358-9) this distinctive feature of the Australian sky becomes a symbol of spiritual light and the desert dawn ("All'alba saprai" [At dawn you will know], Rando and Andreoni 359) is represented as the harbinger of a new and vital force.

Integral to the appraisal of the new country is the reappraisal of the land left behind, a looking back that contains not only elements of nostalgia expressed in varying degrees by some of the writers but also a critical re-thinking of the past in the light of present day experiences. Luigi Strano's feelings and attitudes towards his native land articulated in poems written in the 1950s and 60s such as "Castellace" (Strano, *Acquerelli* 8) and "La mia terra" [My land] (Rando, *Italian Writers* 127) are complex and not without contradiction, underscored but by no means dominated by nostalgia. They range from the denunciation of the hate and violence endemic in his home town to the realization that the place and its meaning can never be forgotten even though returning there for the occasional visit can be a mixed experience of sadness and joy.

While Strano's later poetry focuses on his engagement with Australia and rarely looks back to the old country (notwithstanding an implicit linking in some poems between the Blue Mountains and the Calabrian Aspromonte), Lino Concas revisits and reassesses his native Sardinia initially from the point of view of an exile's nostalgia and subsequently from the critical perspective of the social and existential conditions that have forced the poet to leave. His later poetry (Concas *Poesie Volume 2*) abandons nostalgia to explore possible points of contact and equilibrium between Australia and his native Sardinia. The collection *Malee* is "the expression of feelings . . . of something that burns inside [me]" (Concas, *Poesie Volume 2* vi) and juxtaposes the contrasting realities of Sardinians and Aborigines, both living "on the fringes of the modern world" (Concas, *Poesie Volume 2* vi), both having been subject to invasion and dispossession and then forgotten. In the search for connections between places and times that appear so very different but that can contain significant common meanings ("Uomini nudi" [Naked men], Concas *Poesie Volume 2* 19), the collection *Muggil* explores the links between the "primitiveness"

of the Australian Aboriginal and the Sardinian shepherd whose traditions have been obliterated by modern society. The comparison between Australia, that has now become his land too, and his place of origin is the macrotheme of *L'uomo del silenzio* [Man of silence] (Concas *Poesie Volume 2* 139-191). This collection explores the possibility of conciliation between the two worlds by juxtaposing an Australian present with a Sardinian past that is still very much alive both in memory. The merging of Australia and Sardinia is continued in the final section of the volume, *Cobar* (Concas *Poesie Volume 2* 194-245) creating a link between the desolate mountains of his native Sardinia and the red deserts of Australia ("Il mio paesaggio" [My view] Concas, *Poesie Volume 2* 196-197) and reaching an ideal though not uncritical fusion between the two worlds.

Unlike Strano and Concas who reach fusion and reconciliation between the old and the new Di Stefano's poetry expresses continuing reservations with regards to the new country intermingled with memories of her native Trentino ("Ritorno" [Return], Rando, *Italo-Australian Poetry* 45) and the periodic emotive visits back to Italy to see again places that she holds dear ("Autunno romano" [Roman Autumn], Di Stefano. *Voci* 10). She feels a deep attachment to her place of origin and its traditions ("If my being has roots / they are between the Adige[7] and the hills" — "Rovereto", Di Stefano, *Voci* 13) and a visit to Canberra triggers nostalgic memories of the mountains of her native region and the realization that to overcome nostalgia she must accept an irresolvable dilemna: "beyond the whispers / of this quiet present / I see quivering pine trees on the slope . . . / of my native land / And search for a reply / to reconcile present and past" ("Non resta che subire" [We can only endure], Di Stefano, *Voci* 17). Although in her latest poetry Di Stefano no longer questions why her destiny has led her to divide her life between two worlds an underlying nostalgic element nevertheless persists in her contemplation of the past: "One day now far away / I played the lottery . . . / I left . . . / my radiant Adige / for an unknown shore . . . / Did I win the prize? / I've never known" ("Il lotto della vita" [Lottery of life] Di Stefano, *Itinerario* 4). A similar articulation is found in Anna Maria Guidi's poetry, significantly written in the Roman variety of Italian, which looks back to the Roman setting and experiences of her pre-migration youth from the standpoint of her diasporic situation. These poems, which contain stylistic elements modeled on the tradition of the Roman dialect poet Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli, present the lightly nostalgic memory of the now distant *passeggiate* at the Pincio in the company of her

mother (“C’era ‘na vorta . . .” [Once upon a time], Rando, *Italo-Australian Poetry* 53-54).

The distance in time and space that separates the migrant from his/her native land has led some writers to contemplate places, persons and things left behind, the memories of youth, the impossibility of expressing family affection with a more intensely expressed nostalgia, especially in texts written between the 1940s and the 1980s. Separation from Calabria creates in Giovanni Calabrò “ . . . such a wound in my heart / that it can never be healed. / When I left you I was a young lad / and I lost your sun and your splendour " (“Calabria mia” [My Calabria], Calabrò 9) while Renata Spadoni evokes the sad memory of her native Istria, lost but not forgotton (“Istria scomparsa” [Vanished Istria], Cincotta 119). Nostalgia and the pain of separation are however not the only sentiments evoked by looking back on past lives in now distant places. Marasco's *Ricordi* contains a number of poems that describes daily life in his Calabrian village, the natural beauty of Calabria and the cultural glories of its ancient past that are in dramatic contrast with its current state of degradation brought about by exploitative "foreign" governments. Pino Sollazzo looks back not with nostalgia but with a critical appraisal of the political and social conditions endemic in Southern Italy, Calabria in particular, that have forced millions of its inhabitants to emigrate because of systemic violence and injustice and articulates the existential anguish that this phenomenon has created (“Gioia Tauro” and “I nuovi barbari” [The new barbarians] Sollazzo 49-50, 60).

Looking back seems less central in Paolo Totaro’s work. His early poetry expresses the rebellion of a young intellectual towards the elitist culture of his place of origin. "Il comizio" [The meeting], written before migration) is a *passeggiata* in the ancient historical centre of the city of Naples and a metaphor of the passage from Benedetto Croce's neo-idealistic philosophy, studied by many students in the Italian south at the time, towards Gramsci and Togliatti's brand of marxism. The poet and his friends discuss the fact that Naples presents very few opportunities and that they would soon have to leave, perhaps for the most distant corner of the world that with prophetic perspicacity is identified as Australia. The old, the new, the exotic, the familiar are the themes of "Sono passato anche per la Guinea" [I’ve also passed through New Guinea], written in 1960 when Totaro traveled the world on behalf of Italian car maker Fiat. Addressing his far-away parents, he invites them to come to Sydney to see his new life. He recalls with yearning the sound of his mother's footsteps when in

the dead of night she would get up to make the coffee that would send her back to sleep; the image of his father, and his abandoned land in Puglia with its wine, olives and wheat, another lifetime ago. The exotic totems brought from New Guinea become "two obscure Christs" that share space on the walls of his Sydney home with two other familiar totems brought from Naples, the miniature portrait of a baroness aunt and the "mute" square of a Sacred Heart.

Although characterised by a diaspora-centered discourse the corpus produced by first generation Italian Australian writers contains a variety of themes, content and concepts as well as often diverse styles and means of expression that present an often complex mix of *gravitas,* poignancy, irony and humour. Migration and more general life experiences are in many ways seen as two interrelated aspects of the individual's search for the meaning of life. For Luigi Strano life is a rocky road that leads to a succession of painful and joyous experiences but that needs to be lived to the full and at the highest level of one's humanity since "it's the only thing we have" ("La vita non è ombra" [Life is not a shadow], Rando, *Italian Writers* 126). Enoe Di Stefano's poetic journey, doubts and nostalgia notwithstanding, presents an integrated contemplation of life and the migration experience indicating a measure of acceptance of her adopted land as well as the achievement of an equilibrium between past and present. It is a journey that has been undertaken by millions of Italians who have left their land even if expressed in autobiographical terms (O'Connor D. 9). Anna Maria Guidi develops in her poetry a sense of the relationship with the place to which she has migrated although aspects of the diaspora are much less evident as is also the need to overcome the dislocation brought about by the migration experience. Guidi's poetry focuses on the places where she has lived or which she has visited and reveals a particular sensitivity in linking the contemplation of the landscape and the environment with the personal meaning it holds.

The migration experience perceived as the courageous translocation from one society to another, representing constant dynamic change, a linguistic melting pot, with its challenge of not overlooking the reciprocal recognition of the continuity and dignity of each individual person are central elements to Paolo Totaro's work which present a wide variety of themes often expressed in strikingly original linguistic articulations ranging from the unforgettable childhood traumas of war, to the dilemma of whether to follow music or other paths, to the expressive tension and a search for possible equilibriums between catholic and marxist, humanistic and scientific, Italian and

Australian cultures, his relationship with the environment in which he lives and the people that are important in his life (Jesuit teachers, parents, wife, children). Lino Concas' poetry, on the other hand, is the expression of an intensely lived internal life in which the diaspora is an important over-riding element, where the discovery of hope and love in the adopted land alleviates existential anguish and where the Sardinian shepherd and the Australian Aboriginal meet and recognise each other in a universal bond of suffering, love, hope and redemption. Mariano Coreno engages in the contemplation of an existentialist state characterised to a large extent by anguish caused by the realisation that migration has brought neither fortune nor happiness but "the same moon / and the same desperation" ("Sono andato all'estero" [I went abroad], Genovesi 143) although in his latest poetry (*Stelle passanti*) social issues are highlighted and elements of optimism are introduced through the gradual acceptance of the new land and the contemplation of nature despite a pervasive and persistent feeling of being excluded from full participation in life in the new country.

For some writers the passage to a new world and a new life is seen as an acceptable realisation of a richer and fuller life. For others, however, the long crossing has not lived up to its promise. The dream did not become reality and nostalgia triggers a sense of not belonging either to the past or to the present, a metaphysical wandering that cannot be fully resolved. While some poetry deals with the social realities of the diaspora most provides perceptions of the thoughts and feelings that constitute the inner life of the migrant, the constant and ever-shifting appraisal of two different worlds and two different cultures in the attempt to demythologise and remythologise past and present in the light of new experiences.

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ENDNOTES

[1] An initial version of this paper was presented at the Conference on "The Italian diaspora, Literature, History, Society" organized by Comune di Orvieto / Fordham University / City University of New York at Orvieto (Italy), 13-14 January, 2005. Financial support for attending this conference was provided by the Faculty of Arts Research Committee, University of Wollongong.

[2] Poem titles are provided in the original language followed by a translation in square brackets except where the title constitutes a place name or a person's name.

[3] Quotations from poems written in Italian or dialect are provided in English translation. Translations are as far as possible literal.

[4] This sense of dislocation is also expressed by many other writers. For Gennaro Cozzi Australian seasons are for "half a year too short" ("Fori staggione" [Out of season] Cincotta 54) while for Maria Valli "Spring in Australia / is the worst season./ It withers roses / and strips the jacaranda / of its violet flowers . . . / Only the clouds, friends of calm weather, / their magic awakening / And suddenly you hope against hope / that your heart has not died" ("Le nuvole" [Clouds], Valli 64).

[5] Paolo Totaro has been living in Australia since 1963 as a result of the diaspora of FIAT corporate executives who promoted Italian industry abroad in the wake of Italy's economic miracle. His considerable managerial skills and his wide cultural interests — he has University degrees in Law and Music — led him to accept an offer to create the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council in 1975. From 1977 to 1989 he was Foundation Chair of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW and in that role pioneered many important and fundamental multicultural initiatives. He subsequently held other appointments in positions involving constitutional and legal reform as well as in higher education. A busy schedule that also includes journalism and television appearances and an interest in science has not prevented him from the practice of chamber music and writing.

[6] Rosy-fingered dawn.

[7] River that flows past the writer's home town Rovereto.