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Recent perceptions of rural Australia in Italian and Italian Australian narrative

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ABSTRACT

The publication in 2008 of the English translation of Emilio Gabbrielli's novel *Polenta e Goanna* based on Italian migrants in the West Australian goldfields brings into focus the themes of the bush, the outback and migration that since the mid 1850s (Raffaello Carboni, Rudesindo Salvado) have emerged as a constant thread in texts produced by Italian Australian writers. Italian settlement in rural and outback areas of Australia during the late 1800s and early 1900s has remained a largely unsung saga while most Italians migrating to Australia after 1947 ultimately settled in urban areas. Among the few who have written creatively about their experiences even fewer have engaged in themes related to the bush and the outback. Only four narrative writers – Giovanni Andreoni, Giuseppe Abiuso, Ennio Monese and Franko Leoni – have written about non-urban Australia in substantially social realist terms. More recently, this trend had taken a post-modern perspective in a few Italian Australian (Emilio Gabbrielli, Antonio Casella) and Italian writers (Stanislao Nievo, Dario Donati, Paolo Catalano) who depict the Australian outback as providing a solution to the protagonists' life quest and promote a discourse on nature as a dynamic, positive and vital element that contrasts with man's static negativism. This paper proposes to explore this latest trend and the resulting temporal and spatial dislocations that arise from the mapping of two overlapping cultural and geographical contexts.

Engagement with rural Australia by Italian Australian writers can be traced back to the mid 19th century with writers such as Rudesindo Salvado (1851) and Raffaello Carboni (1872) who, with the exception of Pietro Munari (1897), discuss in their writings the positive values they perceive in Australia's natural setting and in its indigenous people (Rando 2004: 28-39). This trend has continued as a minor but consistent theme in Italian Australian writing until the present time.

Although post 1945 Italian emigration was primarily from rural Italy to Australian urban areas (a theme superbly treated in Venero Armanno's *The Lonely*

Hunter (1993) and *The Volcano* (2001) – Rando 2004:119-120), some authors of Italian origin have written in essentially social realist terms about the experience of settling in areas that were still wilderness. In Giovanni Andreoni's (1967) novel *Martin Pescatore* the existential choice taken by the main character, an Italian bank employee whose search for a Rousseauan utopia in Australia culminates in a total identification with the spiritual values of the Australian bush, is in contrast to the feeling of alienation of the immigrants who face the desert and the outback in other narrative by Andreoni (*La lingua degli Italiani d'Australia*, 1978; *L'australitaliano come linguaggio letterario*, 1982 and Zuccherò, 1995). For Giuseppe Abiuso (*Cuore d'Australia*, 1979 and *Diary of an Italian Australian Schoolboy*, 1984) the bush and the outback are depositories of Australianness and it is there that the CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) migrant must direct the search for a sense of belonging to the new land. *La memorabile biografia di Carlo di Priamo, vignaio da Poggibonsi* (1983), Franco Leoni's fanciful tale of the founding of the Australian wine industry in the 1840s by a Tuscan transported as a convict is the only one to parallel in fiction the real life experience of Italian farming success in places such as the North Queensland sugar belt and the Riverina, which have constituted a highly visible aspect of the history of Italian migration to this country. In the short story *Essere australiano* Ennio Monese (1979) emphasises the difference between the friendly nature of rural Italy and the wild Australian lands in which the immigrants find themselves having to work, at least in the early days of settlement: the bush and the outback are places that instil fear in the individual leading him/her to seek refuge in the urban environment.

Emilio Gabbrielli too initially perceives the outback as strange, mysterious and threatening. *Incident at Ayers Rock* (Gabbrielli 1988), his first published short story on an Australia theme, relates the encounter of second-generation Italian Australian Rosa B., born and bred in Melbourne, with the arcane mysteries of the Australian outback. Rosa joins a group excursion to Ayers Rock and experiences mixed feelings about the monolith when she reaches her destination: awe and a sense of magic at its colour and majesty, at the complex processes of nature that have constructed it, at its delicate ecosystem; but also feelings of fear, anguish and apprehension, of some hidden and unspecified menace in the vast surrounding emptiness, the steep climb and its smooth slippery surface with the ever-present threat of sending the unwary tourist hurtling below. In fact Rosa is the only person to see a strange hitchhiker who had joined the group plummet to his death from the summit of the rock. His body is not found and Rosa lives on doubting whether what she saw really happened, but deciding not to insist on further searches nor to report the incident to the police. However:

with the passing of time and the increasing certainty of what I had witnessed, a huge burden of guilt has remained, and for more than a year I have had this recurring nightmare in which I see that man flying free in the air and then falling to the rock below. This dream instilled such terror and anxiety (Gabbrielli 1988: 210).

More recently the post-modern Italian writer Stanislaw Niewo has written about the Australian outback as a place where migrants can fulfil spiritual dreams.¹ In the

¹ Prior to Niewo, Emilio Salgari (*Il continente misterioso*, 1897) and Luigi Santucci (In Australia con mio nonno, 1947) had written novels on the Australian bush and outback. Unlike Niewo, neither writer had visited Australia and both present Australia as an exotic and savage land characterised by jungles

short story *Il tempo del sogno* (Nievo 1993), the protagonist, Santino, a Sicilian who had migrated to the Western Australia goldfields region, was taught to converse with volcanoes by his Aboriginal wife. He undertakes a journey to the Bungle Bungle hills in the Kimberly desert, which constitutes a contact point with the world beyond the material one. The purpose of the journey is to contact his recently deceased wife, Wandina, with the help of Kuneg Oondon, a friend who speaks with the dead and has promised to be his interpreter. More than on physical description Nievo concentrates on the magical nature of the place and its people, since they provide a key to one of the great mysteries of life and a connecting link with worlds beyond apparent reality. The Aborigines are a people without volcanoes, but they read the wind, write with sand, listen to the mountains, they fit in everywhere since they have kept in touch with the earth. The Bungle Bungle hills have the ability of being able to travel over the ground, propelled by a magnetic force that moves them on a surface no one has ever seen. These unique properties make them ambassadors of the Dreamtime, a place of origin where men and nature speak to each other. Through their fascinating hypnotic dance the hills tell Santino that he is to travel to Mt Etna in Sicily where he will be able to meet Wandina for one last time.

The outback thus provides a vital link in Santino's quest for communication with his dead wife, which is also a quest for an ideal state where barriers do not exist and all beings can talk freely to each other. It hypothesises a utopian state related to a post-scientific context achieved not by the use of technical means but through the warm flux that pulses in the heart of all creation. The Bungle Bungle hills in the Australian desert and Mt Etna, the Sicilian volcano, have this ability since

beyond the [...] geological data something more alive, something bigger and more important, exalted him. It was to do with the childhood of the world, a time common to all creatures when men, animals and things talked to each other, whispering in secret moments to those who listen (Nievo 1994:406).

Rural Northern New South Wales provides the setting for some of the chapters of *Le isole del paradiso* (Nievo 1987). The first part of the novel is set in Melanesia in the 1880s and relates the ill-fated attempt to found the colony of Nouvelle France at Port Breton in New Ireland which brought to Australia the immigrants who were to found the rural settlement of New Italy in 1882. Although only a few chapters are set in this country, Australia is an important element in the novel since it is the Australian bush that provides the immigrants with a second chance, allowing them to achieve their dream which was that of establishing farms of their own, and enabling them to shake off that state of dissatisfaction that had led them to leave their native land in an attempt to seek elsewhere the resolution to the questions of life and destiny.

While the first part of the novel presents a "historical" perspective (the story of the past), the second part of the novel, which has a contemporary setting, contains a "cyclic" one connected to the primordial cycle of the land and links the Australian bush to similar settings in other places. In this second part the author enters the novel as one of its protagonists, tracing the story of the events before, during and after the

and deserts, dangerous wild animals and cannibals. Filippo Sacchi's novel *La casa in Oceania* (1932) derives from the author's visit to Australia in 1925 and is a rocambolesque story set in the Queensland sugar cane belt that relates the adventures of Giorgio Breglia, son of an aristocratic Piedmontese family fallen on hard times, and his attempts to replenish the family fortunes by working in the canefields (Rando 2004:24).

Port Breton settlement. It is a search that from Italy takes him to Spain, France, Switzerland, Melanesia and ultimately to Australia. He becomes in effect the last emigrant as he establishes a link across time with the original colonists leading to a mystical reunion across time and space, life and death, with the Friulian migrants dispersed in New Ireland and Australia (Mattei 1990). Unlike the original emigrants, Nievo, the post-modern protagonist, manages to penetrate at least in part the mystery and magic of this timeless place as he establishes a *rapport* and an empathy with the land, its original inhabitants, their traditional beliefs and their contemporary problems. It is this experience that enables him to gain a perception of the vital substratum of the natural cycle that lies under the surface scientific rationality of the contemporary Western world, a world where the pre-eminent role of human values has been displaced by the prestige given to technology and social engineering.

Australia as the final solution to a quest is also a key element in the novel *La balena azzurra* (Nievo 1990, 2000). The protagonist Miriam, a young Australian statistician who is part of a research team engaged in the study of sounds emitted by whales, has her third and most significant encounter with the blue whale, the subject of her study, on the south western tip of the Australian continent, establishing a primordial elemental tie between the females of two species, so different in genetic terms yet so close at a psychic-etological level.

A link between the existential aspects of life experiences and rural Australia is also established in Dario Donati's (1991) novel *Australia Australia*. The protagonist, Domenico, travels to Australia to visit childhood friends Laura and Nereo whom he had not seen since they migrated to Bairnsdale in Victoria some thirty years previously, although he has remained in contact with them. Arriving in Australia in January, a time marked by drought and bushfires, Domenico is struck by the bush he travels through on his journey from Melbourne to Bairnsdale:

Un paesaggio che ha una sua triste solenne bellezza [...] l'Australia della siccità [...] l'immagine dell'Australia che mi porterò nel cuore [...] Il cielo è coperto a tratti da nuvole basse e minacciose che rendono il calore opprimente e fanno impazzire delle piccole mosche che a nugoli ci assalgano da ogni parte (Donati 1991:32, 46).

Domenico however finds this strange landscape somehow attractive despite its aridness and sense of isolation, a perception extended to the town of Bairnsdale itself where the protagonist "ha l'illusione di trovarsi in una cittadina del West U.S.A" (Donati 1991:46). He realises that this environment has had an effect in influencing and changing his friends and other Italians who had settled there many years ago. Laura and Nereo display more grit and initiative than they had in their youth back in Italy but Laura, who Domenico remembers as cheerful and docile, has become somehow hardened and sullen. These observations and his reflections on migration both as a life experience and as marking a distancing from one's roots lead Domenico to the conclusion that for Australian Italians:

amicizia, prosperità, anche amore del guadagno. [...] E' l'unica maniera per molti di noi, oggi cinquantenni o sessantenni, di soffocare l'irriducibile nostalgia per la nostra terra che è insieme rimpianto per la giovinezza che non ritorna più (Donati 1991:242-243).

Rural Australia constitutes a peripheral though important theme in Paolo Catalano's (2003) novel *Dingo*, which narrates the transition of Bruno and Rosa from Siderno Superiore in the Calabrian Aspromonte to Perth and the surrounding bush. Like Monese's protagonists Bruno initially finds work in the bush as a *boscaiolo* and, despite the derogatory appellation *dingo* used by Anglo-Australians to address him, tends to identify with the bush setting rather than the city, which is perceived as much more alien and alienating. Although it is ultimately in Perth that Bruno achieves material success, it is in the Australian bush that he finds values beyond the material and locations and dislocations between past and present in his life-long attempt to reconcile the tensions between his Calabrian past and his Australian present. From his pre-migration concept of Australia as "una specie di palla gibbosa [...] che racchiudeva grandi distese desertiche e grandi diversità di animali e piante" (Catalano 2003: 119) Bruno comes to the realisation of the similarities and differences between the Australian forest and the Calabrian countryside "un sapore di casa [...] una terra che rassomigliava sì alla sua, ma solo se non ti allontanavi più di tanto, perché, oltre le coste abitate, avresti incontrato il deserto" (Catalano 2003:168, 175). In the final rite of passage Bruno returns for the first time in forty years to Siderno where "fra le balze feroci d'argilla raggrinzita, che erano la sostanza delle colline sopra il paese antico" (Catalano 2003:267) he bids a final farewell to his native land. Back in Australia, the journey to the remote West Australian coast, where the albatross nest to witness "il loro danzare nell'aria per poi posarsi nei nidi, stanchi del continuo lottare contro le correnti e contro le dicerie" (Catalano 2003:273), brings Bruno's rite of passage full circle, thus overcoming nostalgia and finding reconciliation and acceptance with where he is and what he has become.

One of the central themes in Antonio Casella's (1991) novel *The Sensualist* are the (dis)locations in time and space that result from migration. Although the novel is set in Perth, rural Sicily and rural Australia become important elements as events force Nick Amedeo and his Australian wife Joyce to confront themselves and their personal histories. The past invades the present as Joyce's journey takes her back in memory to the north-west of Western Australia, a vast alien land feared by its white inhabitants, while Nick returns in spirit to the harsh environment of the mountains of Sicily conditioned by its myths and implacable rituals. The rugged, desolate mountains of Sicily can spawn very violent and even animalistic behaviour: after much inner searching and obtaining confirmation from his aged uncle Basili, Nick finally recalls the suppressed childhood memory of the honour slaying of his mother by his *nonno*.

Although the sociocultural backgrounds of Nick and Joyce are vastly different, there are some similarities in the landscapes associated with their formative years. Both Sicily and rural Western Australia are harsh arid lands that inspire isolation, strong feelings, and a sense of mystery. Joyce has never visited Sicily, and her view of the island is in part embodied in Nick's vitality and sensuality, while her perceptions of its social and geographical characteristics are mediated not so much by Nick as by her uncle Desmond and sister Flo. Young Joyce at Binji Cross is fascinated by Desmond's idyllic view of Sicily as a "country of eagle's nest villages hanging precariously from white clay ridges in the sun [...] the island of shepherds that knew Arcadian joys and smelled of civilizations" (Casella 1991:4). After Flo had visited Nick's home town she told Joyce that it was "dirty and unkempt" (Casella 1991:87), its inhabitants like the Aborigines, but found the Sicilian countryside quite inspiring "with more arrogance than a beauty queen and white stone ridges as lonely as the

Australian outback” (Casella 1991:88). This common geological feature provides a point of contact with Joyce’s origins, for Joyce too is a migrant to urban Perth from:

a land where a woman, more so than a man, might be lost and none would notice. A country that still mourned its sparse down of she-oaks and salmon gums; a landscape that listened for the music of black-boys played like zithers by the easterlies (Casella 1991:4).

While in *The Sensualist* the rural settings of Sicily and Western Australia are marked by a sense of harshness, loneliness and alienation, their role in *An Olive Branch for Sante* (Casella 2006) assumes more positive values. The rural environment is presented largely as wholesome and spiritual while the city is either non-existent or, when it makes an appearance in the Australian section, is vapid and alienating. This latest novel by Casella is the story of Australian born Ira-Jane, a product of contemporary Australia who, despite her conviction that “memories are self-indulgent, a sign of weakness, a wasteful sentimentality” (Casella 2006:1), decides to explore the Sicilian roots acquired through her adoptive *nonni*, and her Sicilian born half brother Sante who desires to discover his connection with Australia, a country he feels part of but has never experienced. Ira-Jane’s trip to Sicily to re-establish contact with the daughter of her *nonni* leads her to meet Sante Marzano, of Italian Australian parentage, conceived in Australia, born and raised in the hilltop town of San Sisto (province of Messina). Sante decides to “return” to find a future in the more progressive climate of Australia and ends up working in Clem Franzetti’s olive plantation in Western Australia.

It is in the countryside of both Sicily and Australia where the protagonists of the novel go to find spiritual solace and in some cases transformation. Sante’s mother, Ira La Rocca, first appears in the novel seeking solace under her own centuries-old olive tree – “the tree of her childhood [...] There she sat to dream and listen” (Casella 2006:33) – while her husband, Don Alfio, returns to his home in San Sisto to find restful peace. In Australia Sante and Ira-Jane seal their spiritual union in the Kimberlies. In this “remote, galactic landscape [that] spoke of times far more ancient than the Mediterranean” (Casella 2006:305) both young people find what they are seeking – an identity beyond the confines of the space and the culture they were born into: “She could see it now. Ira-Jane without Sante was a leaf searching for a tree. Sicily brought them together, it took a pool in the Kimberlies to crystallize the significance of that event” (Casella 2006:305).

The latest novel to date that deals with Italian migrant experiences in rural Australia is *Polenta and Goanna* (Gabbrielli 2008) based on the meeting and intermarriage in the early twentieth century between Western Desert Aboriginal people and Italian migrants in the remote northwest goldfields region of Western Australia, which presents themes of anti-racism and the gradual and tentative establishment of intimacy and kinship between two different groups of people from radically different cultures. A post-modern twist is provided by the fictionalised account of an Italian writer’s search in outback Australia (similar to the motif presented in Nievo’s *Le isole del paradiso*) to recover a lost Italian-Aboriginal identity.

Polenta and Goanna, significantly published in Italy and not Australia, is the English version of the original Italian text (Gabbrielli 2000), which predates the SBS transmitted documentary *Hoover’s Gold* (2006), directed by Franco Di Chiera. The

film documents the little-known experiences of Italian migrants who were hired by an American engineer in Western Australia, J. Edgar Hoover (who was to become US President), in the early years of the 20th century to work in one of the then richest gold deposits in the world, in particular the Sons of Gwalia mine at Leonora. Gabbrielli extrapolates this story beyond apparent reality to a quest for the fundamental meanings and values of human existence.

What makes Gabbrielli's work different with respect to the themes developed in the narrative of most contemporary Italian Australian writers is the fascination with the outback linked to the perspective of the intellectual who has come to Australia after the main wave of Italian migration and for reasons that are to some extent different.

In *Polenta and Goanna*, the outback takes on a completely different role compared to his prior short story *Incident at Ayres Rock*, becoming a place that can promote the search for the deep and fundamental meanings of human existence. The novel grafts the historically-based story of Italians who migrated to Western Australia in the early 1900s to work in the gold mines with the ancient arcane mystique that the fictional narrator experiences in the Australian desert. It is a mystique that has parallels in his fascination with the Norman castle that he came across by chance in the North African desert, which may provide a vital link with "the 'dead hills' in Australia, the skeleton near the high-tension pylon and Nino Pezzato's uncle" (Gabbrielli 2008:38), a possible key to the unravelling of these Australian stories.

These Australian stories are imaginatively combined, providing a skilful tale of cultural adaptation and the blending that occurs between the Italian miners, the desert environment and its original inhabitants. One significant example is the story of Angelo Bellini, whose relationship with Aboriginal people has led him to adopt a way of life in close contact with the desert environment to the point that, when the protagonist narrator finally finds him, he appears Dantesquely mute in his lack of ability to converse in his native language: "in the last years of his life he had buried his original instrument of communication and was now, not unhappily, disinterring something he had pragmatically turned his back on forever" (Gabbrielli 2008:215). It is through his close contacts with the Aboriginal families of the Italian miners and their descendants that the protagonist narrator, sharing a meal of spaghetti and kangaroo tail, finally comes to the realization that:

I was enjoying a spiritual communion with these people, with whom I did after all have something in common. [...] And I thought I heard a human cry of recognition rising over the parched lake that night, like a challenge: a cry of solidarity with the bones turning to dust at the Norman Castle, the bones lying in the cemetery in Gwalia, the bones of Angelo Bellini soon to be laid to rest in the sand, the bones scattered in the deserts and the 'dead hills'; even the bones of a friendly unknown skeleton (Gabbrielli 2008:235).

Gabbrielli's novel, Casella's *An Olive Branch for Sante* and Stanislaw Niewo's narrative depict the Australian outback as providing a solution to the protagonists' life quest and promote a discourse on nature as a dynamic, positive and vital element that contrasts with man's static negativism. For Niewo the Australian outback is a vital and essential part of nature that in his works is conceived as an extremely powerful elemental force but substantially docile and harmless (Sgorlon 1990). Casella's first

generation Sicilian character Nick Amedeo identifies with counter-hegemonic views of both Italian and Australian spatial contexts, while second generation Ira-Jane and Sante propose a multiple conceptualisation of Australia that defines it also as a Sicilian space. Donati and Catalano also present the Australian natural setting as a place of resolution although with less positive outcomes.

The situations depicted in these novels can be seen as characterised by counter-discursive elements that function to interrogate the temporal and spatial dislocations resulting from the mapping of two overlapping geocultural contexts. As Hall (1990:223) points out, in diasporic contexts cultural identity is, in one sense, a matter of becoming as well as of being, an observation that can be extrapolated to the question of identification with a specific place or places and the resulting sense of identity and belonging. These novels can thus be considered as providing a specific example of the general observation made by Bhabha (1990) regarding the potential of Australia's pluricultural society to present "alternative" views from the periphery. Italian/Australian writers have added to an Australian motif an Italian dimension and an Italian Australian myth, thus enlarging it beyond the geography of either Australia or Italy. In this regard, they can be seen, together with the literature produced by other CALD writers, as one way of constructing the different points of identification that constitute cultural identity and its specific location(s).

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