

## Introduction

The Proceedings of the international conference *Cultural Crossings: the Case Studies of Canada and Italy* held at the Faculty of Modern Languages of the University of Pisa in November 2008 inaugurate Diagosfera's section dedicated to literary criticism. The essays contained in the volume fit in the work programme delineated by the series, aiming to publish texts that allow the reader and the scholar to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries, to experience and promote encounters between civilizations and different forms of artistic expression.

This programme fully supports the idea upon which the conference was based. Its aim was to contribute to the forty-year-old tradition of Canadian Studies in Italy and to explore, with the help of scholars specialised in different fields of study, disciplinary practices and conventions inherent in the poetical and political dimension of culture writing, as James Clifford would say.

A parallel aim was to investigate, from an interdisciplinary point of view and starting from the 1960s onward, some of Canada's most innovative aspects and avant-garde characteristics. Divided into four fields of inquiry – literature, cultural studies, social sciences and education – the Conference paid special attention to the comparison between Canadian and Italian approaches to key issues such as: the fiction produced by Italo-Canadian writers, the image of Italy in Canadian literary works and intratextual references to different art forms such as sculpture, photography and urban landscapes. The conference also examined the recognition of collective or/and individual rights of immigrants, stereotypes regarding immigrants, the nature of cultural rights, Canada as a model of political, social and constitutional coexistence of different groups and the pressing issues of globalization vs. the concept of national identity. The participants also explored topics related to teaching Canadian Literature in Canada and in Italy, reflected on attitudes to education and on its role within Canadian and Italian cultures.

Embracing the wider practice of writing about and among cultures the essays collected in this volume focus on different meaning systems – as is brilliantly emphasized in the comments by Vita Fortunati, Anna Grazia Mattei, Laura Forconi Ferri, and Luca Codignola – ranging from the analysis and interpretation of cultural “texts” such as the architecture of Galleria Italia, the graphic signs of the urban map of Toronto, the monuments recalling the Italian-Canadian immigrants – elements that are at the centre of Oriana Palusci's contribution –, to the

reception of an international literary star such as Margaret Atwood in Spain (a topic highlighted in Pilar Somacarrera's contribution) and the reflection on the collision and convergence of cultures as experienced by the Canadian playwright Lawrence Jeffery during his travels in India and Africa.

The political dimension of culture writing comes to the fore in the essays focused on Italian and Canadian university systems, as highlighted by Gianluigi Pelloni's contribution, in Luigi Bruti Liberati's reappraisal of Canadian Foreign policy and critical approach to multiculturalism and in Letizia Lindi's reflections on linguistic diversity and linguistic rights. The emphasis on education constitutes a leitmotif repeated in Joanne Spataro's essay on pre-service Teacher education programs, in Bill Lane's considerations on the relationship between the world of performance and the world of scholarship, between theatre and the Academy in Canada, and Viktoria Tchernichova's essay on teaching transculturality and the relationship between the notion of local and global in Canadian literature.

The essays dealing with literary texts and with the relationship between memory and identity (as is the case with Eva Darias Beautell's contribution) confirm once again the fact that Italy as an intercultural or intertextual presence in Canadian literature and culture is a topic that could be presented in a relatively neat historical schema divided into four points of view, or into four different approaches. The first group includes stories focused on the experience of immigration, in which Italy represents a synecdoche of Europe. The second group comprises the various novels in which the point of view of the immigrant is continental (as for instance in Nino Ricci's *The Lives of Saints*). In most of these works Italy represents the locus of memory, an abandoned and nostalgically remembered past that permeates the text, as Francesca Romana Paci's essay demonstrates. The third group embraces poems and novels that are focused on Italy but whose style betrays a "postcolonial anxiety of tradition", to slightly misquote Harold Bloom; this is a topic also at the centre of Biancamaria Rizzardi's contribution. But it is interesting to note the progressive emergence of an innovative approach towards Italy. There is a large group of contemporary Canadian writers who see in Italy a geographic, cultural and historical fact and treat it simply as one of the possible potential subject matters for their poetry and fiction (as happens for instance in Anne Michaels or Michael Ondaatje).

In other words, it is almost possible to perceive a sea-change in recent Canadian attitudes to Italy and it is worth pausing to ask what might have caused this. Part of the answer may lie in the demystification of Italy (and of Europe) that has taken place over the past fifty years and during which Canadian writers have travelled frequently to Italy both as tourists and guests of universities and cultural institutions. Another part of the answer is probably bound to questions

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of demography and immigration. The post-centennial immigration and the arrival of official multiculturalism may have put paid to the old nationalist agenda and tradition of Canadian culture, but they also resulted in the expansion of what might be called Canadian concerns. Italy is no longer the hypnotic cobra it once was. It is simply a part of a larger context to which Canadian writers from all backgrounds are responding.

As Sam Solecky maintains, one should not undervalue the coincidence of the appearance of first-rate Canadian writers at precisely the time when European culture was in decline because of the disappearance from the scene of the major figures of High Modernism as well as the great European *maîtres à penser*. In other words, the centre can be magisterial and can provoke cultural anxiety only so long as its artists are unquestionably dominant. When they are not, a seismic shift in disempowerment occurs of the kind noted by Les Murray when W.H. Auden died.

One of the signs of the fragmentation of Canadian literature's "power structure" is the change that has occurred in the past forty years in Canadian writers' attitude to Italy. This can be seen in its most radical version in the works of Moyez Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Dionne Brand, for whom Italy is not even an absent presence, neither locus of nostalgia nor source of resentment.

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