The (auto)biographical dimension in Italian Canadian and Italian Australian narrative: Frank Paci and Pietro Tedeschi's "steel city" novels

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A number of narrative works by Italian Canadian and Italian Australian writers are based more or less explicitly on individual or collective biographical or autobiographical elements whereby "real life" aspects of the migration experience are taken as the basis for the production of fictional accounts. This paper proposes to explore how and to what extent Italian Canadian writer Frank Paci and Italian Australian writer Pietro Tedeschi have used these elements to produce their works of fiction.

In the Italian Australian context personal accounts, memoirs and autobiographies by first generation writers constitute a long-standing tradition going back to the mid 19th century (Rando, 1992), their publication has continued up to the present time, the latest in order of appearance being Jim Scarano's From Scrub to Skyscrapers / Dai boschi ai grattacieli (2001), Luigi Strano's Rocciosa è la vita. Memorie / Rocailleux est le chemin. Mémoires (1999) and Carmelo Caruso's Sotto un altro cielo (1998) / Under Another Sky (1999). This mode of expression seems equally popular in the Italian Canadian context (e.g. Giuseppe Ricci's L'orfano di padre. Le memorie di Giuseppe Ricci, 1980).

Closely paralleling this trend to write personal accounts about the migration experience is the fact that some narrative works by Italian Australian and Italian Canadian writers are based more or less explicitly on biographical or autobiographical experience while in other novels such as Maria Ardizzini's Il sapore agro della mia terra (1984), Bianca Zagolin's Une femme à la fenêtre (1988), Giovanni Andreoni's Martin Pescatore (Andreoni, 1987) and Rosa Cappiello's Paese fortunato (1981), the protagonist can to a certain extent be identified with the author and some of the other characters can also be identified with living people, but the characterization and the thematic presentation tend to transcend a strict adherence to the (auto)biographical genre, thus making this element less central to the development of the work.

Despite this, autobiographical fiction seems to be a popular choice with some writers. In certain texts this basis is very obvious and transparent in that the characters and events presented have an explicit identification with the experience of the author. Usually this type of writing covers episodes in the life of the writer over a period of one or two years which are seen as particularly significant and life-changing and which are identified with migration. In the case of Pietro Tedeschi's Senza camicia (Tedeschi, 1986) it is the difficult and indeed desperate life experience of the writer/protagonist which leads to his decision to emigrate. In Enoe Di Stefano's Avventura australiana (1996) there is the minute description of the thoughts, trials and tribulations of the protagonist as she comes to terms with a new life in a new country. Andreoni's Martin Pescatore (Andreoni, 1967), although not in the same transparent autobiographical terms, deals in part with the writer/protagonist's metaphysical travail, based on his life experience, in his transition from the old country and culture to the new. Charles D'Aprano's novel in progress The Swallow also has a number of elements in common with the foregoing but it also presents an aspect which so far is not to be found elsewhere in Italian Australian narrative (although it is an important theme in poetry). It is the re-evaluation of home society and culture which takes place after the consummation of the migration and settlement experience. In D'Aprano's case this leads to the postling of a new and unique "Italo-Australian" cultural identity (whereas in poetry it leads to nostalgia, rejection or acceptance) and herein lies perhaps one of the most potentially innovative.
Italian migrant family in a steel-producing Canadian city to university graduate and aspiring writer. Migration is a substantial life-changing experience. Accounts of this experience relate the anger, frustration, the hopes and disappointments lived by the immigrants. For the first generation this includes the traumatic experience of leaving one's native land and of having to begin all over again in and adapt to a new country while for the second generation there is the attempt to "find one's place" at a point somewhere between two different cultural contexts that present some irrecconcilable elements. For both the first and second generation writing about such experiences is one way of making sense of this process, of attempting to understand where one is coming from and where one is heading.

Pietro Tedeschi reports that writing about such experiences has been a sort of liberating therapy whereby "attraverso voli di fantasia pindarica, più o meno creativa o valida, mischiando futuro e passato, allegorie, situazione immaginari riprendeva contatto con la realtà del vivere quotidiano". When asked why he chose to relate his experiences in a fictional form, Tedeschi replied that he was not sure about dates and that, over time, he had lost track of a number of precise details and information about people. However, his intention of representing a "real life" situation is quite explicit:

Di fronte a questo spettro universale a questo fascio di nuove impressioni, dal fondo della mia mente a barlumi, riprendeva forma il desiderio, l'urgenza di registrare di cronicizzare questi fatti, queste nuove esperienze irripetibili. Il desiderio di far partecipe anche i "non presenti" a queste nuove sensazioni. La descrizione dell'ambiente, il momento storico di questo grande paese, di questa nuova frontiera aperta al mio e al futuro di tanta gente. E qui ancora la frustrazione, l'ostacolo della mia impotenza a tradurre il pensiero, le sensazioni in parola scritta in maniera idonea comprensibile: scervo, il discorso, dalle banalità di una retorica fin troppo facile.

For Frank Paci writing about such experiences reflects the process of achieving "...a form of integration without being swallowed by the anonymous forces of assimilation" (Pivato, 1994) as well struggling with questions of identity and the shame of being ethnic (Pivato, 1994). He states that I reacted strongly against my family wanting to be exactly the opposite of what they were. In my adolescent years I experienced some sort of Cartesian turn of consciousness when my safe secure worlds came crashing down on me... You can make a pretty good argument that writing is a form of mythologising to compensate for the loss of the old myths. Another factor has been my lifelong fascination with language, the power of language to give meaning and to transform factuality. But the ultimate reason for my turning to writing was that for me it seemed the only way to find out who I was and why I was on earth. These things build up slowly, of course, but by my adolescent years I experienced some sort of Cartesian turn of consciousness when my safe secure worlds came crashing down on me... You can make a pretty good argument that writing is a form of mythologising to compensate for the loss of the old myths. Another factor has been my lifelong fascination with language, the power of language to give meaning and to transform factuality. But the ultimate reason for my turning to writing was that for me it seemed the only way to find out who I was and why I was on earth. These things build up slowly, of course, but by my second year in university, when I wrote my first story and carried it around in my back pocket, I seemed to jump from one level into another - and the path opened up for me. (J. Pivato “Interview with F.G. Paci” in Hutcheon and Richmond 1990, 231).

This statement has a direct correlation with the narration of Marco Treccori’s (a character in a number of Paci novels) development as a writer and intellectual. Pietro Tedeschi emigrated to Australia from Reggio Emilia in 1952 at the age of 27 years after obtaining trade qualifications as a fitter and turner and working at the Officine Reggiane. He initially found employment at the Port Kembla Steelworks, subsequently passing to EPT upon recognition of his Italian trade qualifications. After his retirement in 1979 he was an active participant in Italian community activities until his death in 1998. For over 30 years he wrote reports on local Italian community events, essays and short stories for the Sydney based Italian language newspaper La Fiamma. His literary production also includes a collection of poetry and two novels. The first novel Senza camicia (Tedeschi, 1986) relates the events leading to the central character’s decision to emigrate to Australia from Reggio Emilia in the early 1950s. The second novel 53B (completed ca. first year in Australia, 1953) describes the central character’s experiences in Australia. In the two novels Tedeschi traces the central character’s physical and metaphysical journey from unsettlement in Reggio Emilia, an industrial city down but not out in the years immediately after the end of the second world war to potential resettlement in Wollongong, a developing industrial city without the technological sophistication and worker awareness of Reggio Emilia. Senza camicia begins with the worker occupation of the Officine Reggiane, Morcia’s subsequent unemployment and struggle to make ends meet, his decision to emigrate with the accompanying condemnation of Italian Catholic Democrat government policy on emigration (the government treats Italian workers and peasants like two legged animals) and ends with Morcia boarding ship to leave for Australia. The second novel 53B begins with Reggio’s arrival in Wollongong, the ups and downs of life in the migrant camp and his experiences as an unskilled worker beginning his Australian working career at the local steelworks. Pietro Tedeschi emigrated to Australia from Reggio Emilia in 1952 at the age of 27 years after obtaining trade qualifications as a fitter and turner and working at the Officine Reggiane. He initially found employment at the Port Kembla Steelworks, subsequently passing to EPT upon recognition of his Italian trade qualifications. After his retirement in 1979 he was an active participant in Italian community activities until his death in 1998. For over 30 years he wrote reports on local Italian community events, essays and short stories for the Sydney based Italian language newspaper La Fiamma. His literary production also includes a collection of poetry and two novels. The first novel Senza camicia (Tedeschi, 1986) relates the events leading to the central character’s decision to emigrate to Australia from Reggio Emilia in the early 1950s. The second novel 53B (completed ca. first year in Australia, 1953) describes the central character’s experiences in Australia. In the two novels Tedeschi traces the central character’s physical and metaphysical journey from unsettlement in Reggio Emilia, an industrial city down but not out in the years immediately after the end of the second world war to potential resettlement in Wollongong, a developing industrial city without the technological sophistication and worker awareness of Reggio Emilia. Senza camicia begins with the worker occupation of the Officine Reggiane, Morcia’s subsequent unemployment and struggle to make ends meet, his decision to emigrate with the accompanying condemnation of Italian Catholic Democrat government policy on emigration (the government treats Italian workers and peasants like two legged animals) and ends with Morcia boarding ship to leave for Australia. The second novel 53B begins with Reggio’s arrival in Wollongong, the ups and downs of life in the migrant camp and his experiences as an unskilled worker beginning his Australian working career at the local steelworks. Frank Paci emigrated to Canada from Pesaro with his parents in 1952 at the age of 4 years and grew up in steel producing Sault Ste Marie (Ontario) becoming a high school teacher and obtaining an MA in English in 1980. His first novel The Italians (1978) was followed by seven other novels with a ninth, Italian Shoes, which deals with the return journey to Italy by the 1B generation central character, currently in press. The Italians became a bestseller and has also been published in a French translation (1990) but it his second novel Black Madonna (1982) that has so far proved to be his most popular book. Most of Paci’s novels to date feature the 1B generation central character Marco/Treccorci as he progresses from childhood experiences in a working class Italian migrant family in a steel-producing Canadian city to university graduate and aspiring writer.
Marco Trecroci's family came from the gentle countryside of central Italy to settle in an industrial Canadian town characterised by cold, ice and steel production. Paci's series of novels represent a mainly metaphysical journey about the getting of intellectual and ethnic wisdom of the central character Mark Trecroci. His progression through school, university, activity as a writer and the journey back to Italy represents a cycle of uncertainty-rejection-reacceptance of dual ethnicity, a process of internalising the dialectic of the two cultures (Italian contadino cultural traditions from parents and the Canadian culture around him outside the home) while at the same time coming to grips with the Western cultural tradition (particularly philosophers and literary critics) also ending in cultural duality - identification with high culture and with the contadino culture of his ancestors (Novilara in the Marche).

But it is Paci's first novel _The Italians_ that sets the tone for his subsequent production and it is the one that most strikingly represents the relationship between the migrant worker and host country industrial culture. _The Italians_ narrates the story of the Gaetano family from the standpoint of Lorianna the daughter, Alberto the father, Bill the youngest son and Aldo the eldest son with Giulia the mother having no part in the narration although she is distinctly present as a character. Somewhere coming from Romagna to the steel-producing town of Marionville in northeastern Canada, Alberto has achieved some of the goals that led him to leave the old country. At the cost of forsaking his talents as a musician and an _artigiano_, he has become a leading hand and valued worker at the local steel plant. The _miseria_ he and Giulia had experienced in the old country is a thing of the past though still a shadow on the present despite their well-stocked cellar and they are proud owners of the house painstakingly renovated and refurbished by Alberto. Their children are nicely on the way to being _sistemiati_ (Lorianna through marriage and the two sons in contexts that promise to take them away from a working-class future), despite some worrying interferences and considerable generational friction in the process. All this, however, changes when Alberto has a life-threatening accident at the plant bringing each member of the family to confront both their essential self and their relationships with each other.

By contrast Tedeschi's _53B_ tells the story of Reggio, a single man in his mid twenties, who emigrates from Reggio Emilia to Australia in the early 1950s to escape the long term unemployment he had experienced as a result of adverse socioeconomic conditions. He is initially sent to the migrant camp at Bonegilla where he participates in the Italian migrants' revolt against bread rationing and is subsequently assigned to the labour force at the Port Kembla steelworks as an unskilled worker despite the fact that he had obtained trade qualifications in Italy. Reggio needs to create his space both in the migrant camp and in the steelworks. His space at the migrant camp, a place of transition until he can find more permanent accommodation, is marked both by his association with his Italian friends, all young single men, and by the attempts he and his friends make to establish a rapport with some of the other migrants at the camp, mostly made up of English families. In Reggio's case this leads to a passionate but discrete affair with a young English married woman. On the work front Reggio finds that he literally has to start from scratch in conditions which are decidedly inferior to those he had experienced in Italy. However, despite his lack of English and his somewhat bemused puzzlement at the primitive working environment, he manages to establish a good working relationship with his Australian foreman. For both Alberto and Reggio the dictates and constraints of the industrial process are determining factors in their life experience in the new country. Both find that a considerable part of their lives is controlled by the steel plant and for both this sometimes leads to attitudes and behaviour that is to some extent contradictory. Despite Alberto's twenty year association with the steel plant, the environment has remained to some extent unfamiliar and potentially alienating:

During spring and summer he'd always stare at the water while walking to work. It reminded him of the Adriatic. But in the winter ice covered the whole channel from Lake Superior, and the warm waters of his home were even harder to call to mind.

The plant was like a giant fortress rising squarely from a bend on the northern bank of the river. He never lost his amazement at how such a structure could function, let alone exist, in the limitless expanse of snow and ice. Past the gate and administration buildings its mills of dull red and turquoise formed a gigantic maze. (Paci, 1978)

Reggio's first impression of the Port Kembla steelworks located on the coast in a sandy landscape is that of a barren and chaotic environment:

_The view was impressive... interlacing of trestles; girders; pipes of all sizes; corrugated iron; steel hoppers generated a forest of vertical structures painted in the same reddish brown tint of the mineral stockpile on the right flank. Further on, in the same direction, another set of black dunes, presumably coal, was topped by clouds of steam coming from a stumpy chimney..._

At the centre of the view, between the foreground and the two toned blue ocean, a large strip of sandy marsh, patched with still water, dry trees and dusty bushes, gave the impression of a colourless no-man's land. (Tedeschi, 1991)

For Alberto the steel plant has become a way of life, albeit quite separate from his from his home at home with his family, even though it is through his work at the steel plant that Alberto has been able to realise the goals that had led him to emigrate to Canada. Work at the plant is a means to an end “He had worked hard to get up the rungs of the ladder of seniority since he felt it was a father's duty to make the best money possible so his wife and children should not live like animals (Paci, 1978)... he wholeheartedly subscribed to the saying in the plant that half of one's life was wasted in working so the other half could be enjoyed with some degree of comfort” (Paci, 1978). Over the twenty years he has worked there he has come to identify with and take pride in the WCCF, the AWF, the GWF, the SWCF, the MWF, and the SWCF, to regard them as a part of himself. It is this process of becoming a fictional member of the working class that has allowed him to make his peace with the steel plant and to come to terms both with his own essential self and the expectations of his family. But it is also the process that has made the steel plant the central and dominant figure of the novel, a creation of the mind of the writer as much as the product of the physical reality of industrial Canada. For Alberto the steel plant is the symbol of his journey to the new world and a place to which he must return to make sense of his life and to achieve some of the goals that led him to leave his home country. The steel plant is a place of work but also a place of identity and belonging, a place where he can be both a man and a worker, a place where he can be both a part of the community and a symbol of the community. For Reggio the steel plant is a place of work but also a place of alienation and conflict, a place where he can be both a man and a worker, a place where he can be both a part of the community and a symbol of the community. The steel plant is a place of work but also a place of identity and belonging, a place where he can be both a man and a worker, a place where he can be both a part of the community and a symbol of the community.
The two texts thus constitute a valuable contribution to the substantial corpus of fictional and sociocultural environments of the new country in a context where the two protagonists, Alberto and Reggio, are emblematic elements of the migrant workforce that ensured the economic viability of the steel industry in Canada and Australia. Although the protagonist of the tradesman himself (Tedeschi, 1993) while “the humblest, the dirtiest, the most impersonal jobs… were especially reserved… for the Italians” (Tedeschi, 1993) ever though “the big Diesel locos which pulled the trains on the railway network inside the Steelworks, showed in big letters the name ANSALDO” (Tedeschi, 1993). However Reggio is prepared to shed his cultural high ground and adapt to local work practices by proposing a quicker and more practical way of clearing the flooded area. His contribution to the gang's effort earns him the praise of his Australian foreman and gives him a feeling of being accepted:

He pointed at me with a grin. “I couldn't have done it without the help of me mate here….” I didn't understand one word Fred had exchanged with his compatriots, but I had grasped the real meaning of the definition “mate” for the first time… Right down in the gut I felt good. (Tedeschi, 1991)

Despite the fact that the economic viability of the Port Kembla Steelworks depended entirely on the availability of migrant labour, the acceptance of such labour is extremely circumscribed since Reggio soon discovers that unlike the British, Dutch and German migrants, Italian skilled workers’ qualifications were not recognised, a state of affairs that led to paradoxical situations in which the foreman sought “advice from the [Italian] fitter's labourer because he knew more than the tradesman himself” (Tedeschi, 1993) while “the humblest, the dirtiest, the most impersonal jobs… were especially reserved… for the Italians” (Tedeschi, 1993) even though “the big Diesel locos which pulled the trains on the railway network inside the Steelworks, showed in big letters the name ANSALDO” (Tedeschi, 1993). However, these constraints notwithstanding, Reggio's initial perception of Australia is positive and enthusiastic though critical and not necessarily acceptable in all its aspects. Australia is seen as a place that offers a fresh beginning, new opportunities and new experiences and, in a sense, challenges that need to be resolved. He is engaged in finding his way in a natural environment which presents a rugged beauty despite some hidden dangers (quicksand and poisonous insects), the social environment of the Berkley migrant camp where tolerance and acceptance is only skin deep (“We can make backwards somersaults, offer them the moon wrapped in ribbons but on the first occasion that dormant sense of distrust and contempt towards us will spark alive immediately.” Tedeschi, 1993) and a work environment that relegates him to the bottom of the hierarchy. Despite his difficulties, Reggio's first year in Australia has changed him from the passive, limp, withered human being who had set foot on the boat in Genova to an assertive, self-confident and critical individual whose perceptions of the world have been set in focus and whose horizons have been widened (Tedeschi, 1993) thus forming a basis for further exploration and contact with the new country and, potentially, to identify with it. In this process he has shed the relationships formed during the voyage to Australia and in the Berkley migrant camp (except for Sandro with whom he shares his new lodgings in a Warrawong Italian boarding house) freeing him to form new relationships both at work and socially. His initiation into the industrial environment of the steelworks has played an important part in this transformation.

Alberto, on the other hand has, over the years, formed his own world which is Italian Canadian at home both in family and socially. The only social activities are a visit from his compare and a dinner organised by the local Italian community in honour of his son Bill who has become a famous ice hockey player. At the steel plant he has formed contacts with migrant workmates (his best friend there is the Ukrainian Yukich) while his only contact with “real” Canadians are with the young worker he disciplines and who contributes to his accident and the officials who visit him at home after the accident.

Alberto's sense of identity with Canada is also qualified. While appreciating the material benefits of life in the new country and how they have been instrumental in allowing him to provide for his family, he is also aware that this has been achieved at the cost of a less rich and varied life and of daily toil both through his work at the steel plant (economically viable because of the migrated workforce) and the time and effort required to repair and refurbish his home. For Alberto Canadian values are questionable, in some cases incomprehensible, and present the potential “loss” of his children. He considers ice hockey deviant and cannot understand Bill's passion for the sport nor why he leaves school to play the game professionally. Aldo's religious crisis, which dashes the high expectations he had for his son, is, in Alberto's view, triggered by Aldo's relationship with the Canadian Evylyn while Lorianna's less than ideal marriage to Lorenzo is welcomed because he is Italian (not Canadian) although Lorenzo's initial position in refusing to accept any of the ways of the new country (including the language) is instrumental in provoking Lorianna's desperate marital plight. It is only through his gradual acceptance of the new country (including the language) and the imminent birth of the second child that he sees Lorianna as an equal partner and his new family as meaningful.

Both novels are based on biographical elements and relate the protagonist's rapport with the industrial and sociocultural environments of the new country in a context where the two protagonists, Alberto and Reggio, are emblematic elements of the migrant workforce that ensured the economic viability of the steel industry in Canada and Australia. Although the protagonist of each novel is represented at different stages of his migration experience they can be seen as providing a sort of continuity in that Reggio, the newly arrived migrant worker, is engaged in the process of coming to terms with and initially adjusting to his new situation while Alberto represents a long term dynamic process of adjustment as re-definition.

The two texts thus constitute a valuable contribution to the substantial corpus of fictional and...
non-fictional accounts that represent a view of the physical and sociocultural environment encountered by Italians who have migrated to Canada and Australia and have experienced the dislocation of geographical, climatic and social situations so different from the ones they had known in Italy. Some of these accounts, in particular the ones produced in the last fifty years, also indicate how the individuals who produced them came to terms with their new environment, finding their own sense of personal and socio-cultural space. This is, in fact, also the case of the two novel discussed in this paper which describe how Alberto has created his niche in Italian Canadian space over the twenty years of his migration experience and how Reggio has coped with the initial impact of living and working in Australia.

Notes

1 Brief reviews of the Caruso and Strano memoirs can be found in Rando (2000).

2 Typewritten autobiographical notes by Pietro Tedeschi (ca. 1988).

3 Typewritten autobiographical notes by Pietro Tedeschi (ca. 1988).

4 Sport as a new country identifier expressed through ice hockey is an important theme in a number of Paci's novels. It is virtually non existent in Italian Australian narrative despite the considerable value placed on sport in Australia. The only short story that presents sport as a central theme is Archimede Fusillo’s (1987) Memories of Sunday cricket in the Street while the second generation protagonist in Andreoni’s (1982) becomes captain of the First XI cricket team at school as part of an all-out but ultimately unsuccessful effort to become completely Australian.

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Differences between Italian and Northern Renaissance

In some areas the Northern Renaissance was distinct from the Italian Renaissance in its centralization of political power. While Italy and Germany were dominated by independent city-states, parts of central and Western Europe began emerging as nation-states. The Northern Renaissance was also closely linked to the Protestant Reformation and the long series of internal and external conflicts between various Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church had lasting effects, such as the division of the Netherlands. Basically, the Northern Renaissance is an Italian-Canadian Narratives of Return.

Analysing Cultural Translation in Diasporic Writing. This book examines the concept of translation as a return to origins and as restitution of lost narratives, and is based on the idea of diaspora as a term that depicts the longing to return home and the imaginary reconstructions and more. The author analyses a corpus made up of novels and a memoir by Italian-Canadian writers Mary Melfi, Nino Ricci and Frank Paci, examining the theme of return both within the writing itself and also in the discourse surrounding the translations of these works into Italian.