

Italian culture

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In recent years, ethnic minority writing has played a major role in shedding light on the complexity of the Canadian identity. Italian-Canadians figure among the numerous communities active on the Canadian literary scene. In the last decade in particular the Italian-Canadian literary corpus, which traces its development alongside the growing Italian-Canadian community, has seen numerous publications, especially novels.

This paper discusses language, specifically the tension arising from the Italian word invading the Canadian text, as a representation of hyphenated identity in the following Italian-Canadian novels: Frank Paci's *The Italians* (1978), *Black Madonna* (1982) and *The Father* (1984), Caterina Edwards' *The Lion's Mouth* (1982), Mary Melfi's *Infertility Rites* (1991), Nino Ricci's *In a Glass House* (1993) and Antonio D'Alfonso's *Fabrizio's Passion* (1995).

The novels trace the process towards defining an identity which is torn between two conflicting cultures, the Italian and the Canadian. The analysis of these narratives shows that the tension and the negotiation between the Italian and the Canadian components of the bicultural identity represented at the level of the events narrated are also at work in the texture of the writing. Language causes friction between the two cultures presented in the narratives: the question of identity is played out in the weaving of the words.

In the Italian-Canadian novel, Italian elements are an impediment in the quest towards Canadianness. Although the new generation embraces Canadianness through education, friends and lifestyle, the presence of the old country remains through the influence of parents, customs and language. Otherness as represented by the old country can never be completely erased even in the second generation. The Italian component, therefore, is

something of a weed which keeps resurfacing. The same occurs at the level of the writing.

The novels discussed are written in English—Canadian English as opposed to American, British or Australian English—in a Canadian context and for a Canadian audience. The Italian word surfaces now and then thereby breaking the flow of the English-Canadian text. The presence of the heritage language in the English text is what Francesco Loriggio calls “ the device of the stone” (39) or, to use Enoch Padolsky’s words, the “ linguistic stone” (56). The Italian word within the English text is like a stone or a stumbling block.

The presence of the “ heritage” language within the “ ethnic text” is a device used by the writer to illustrate the tension and negotiation at work in a bicultural identity. Italian may take up as little space as a word or as much as a sentence, but in each case there is a noticeable effect on the narrative. Italian surfaces in different forms to break the flow of the English text: as a translated or untranslated word; as a literal translation of a phrase or sentence given in English; and as an English sentence having a latinate structure.

There are two major reasons for the Italian word “ contaminating” the English text: the first is purely to give the text an Italian flavour—to mark l’italianita of the writing; the second, which I focus on in this paper, serves a specific function in illustrating the duality inherent in the Italian-Canadian identity. The Italian word is present when there is no appropriate English equivalent: this points to the difference and, in extreme cases, to the incompatibility between the two cultures expressed within Italian-Canadian reality.

And, the Italian presence, either as a word on the page or in the nuances of the sentence structure, points to the fact that within an Italian-Canadian reality there exists a constant process of translation. The tension existing between elements of the Italian culture and the Canadian society in which the characters must constantly negotiate a space for their identity is especially evident in what I call “ the irreplaceable Italian word. ” In such instances the English translation would not do justice to the Italian original.

Examples include the following discussion of polpi in Frank Paci’s *The Father*, polenta in Paci’s *The Italians*, calle and vaporetto in Caterina Edwards’ *The Lion’s Mouth*, and la busta in Antonio D’Alfonso’s *Fabrizio’s Passion*. In Paci’s *The Father*, Oreste Mancuso who represents Italy, wants to instill a strong sense of the Italian heritage in his sons, whereas his wife Maddalena upholds Canadianness or the Canadian way. The tension between these two characters, and therefore between the two cultures, is illustrated in the following passage:

He [Oreste] brought up a bowl of dark grapes and set them on the table beside the polpi, a dish of fish stewed in large quantities of oil and red peppers... The dish was so strong that no-one else in the family could eat it. A fresh loaf from the bakery rested beside his favourite dish. (63-64) In this passage, the word polpi breaks both the English language and the Canadian culture by highlighting the Italian one. The word polpi refers to Oreste’s favourite dish, something from the old country that he will not give up, like making his own bread and wine.

In this scene the bread was made by Oreste in his bakery, and he has just finished making wine. The word polpi also emphasizes the tension between

the members of the family: Oreste who represents the ways of the old country, and Maddalena and Stefano who want to become Canadianized. It is significant, then, that no one besides Oreste can eat the polpi because they are too strong, signifying “too old country.” The rejection of the polpi by the rest of the family is symbolically a rejection of Oreste and of the old country.

In *The Italians*, the narrator (speaking from Alberto’s perspective) comments on Giulia’s tendency to prepare too much food: “To judge from the meal’s size, she still hadn’t got over the years in the old country when they had been forced to eat polenta almost every day. They had scarcely seen meat then...” (74). The word polenta disrupts the English passage in two ways. First, the mere presence of the Italian word causes tension within the first sentence. Second, the word polenta causes a shift in setting, from the overabundant Christmas meal that Giulia has prepared in the present to the poverty experienced in the Italy of the past.

The presence of the Italian word results in the juxtaposition of the Italian setting and the Canadian one, thereby pointing to the fact that the Italian past (the poverty which caused a diet of cornmeal and bread) is an undeniable component of Italian-Canadian identity. In other words, the Italian past is responsible for the behaviour of the present, in this case Giulia’s fear of regression. The inclusion of specific Italian words in Caterina Edwards’ *The Lion’s Mouth* also takes the reader back to the Italian setting.

In the subordinate narrative (Marco’s story), the author uses nouns such as vaporetto and calle that are specific to the Venetian setting: Seeing the floating station for the vaporetto before him, Marco realized he had been going in the wrong direction... (21) Stopping at the top of a bridge and

gazing down at the twisting calle, he saw the last of the evening crowd... He began running, pushing his way down the calle, then turning off down a narrow, empty fondamento (30). He broke into a slight run. Calle. Bridge. One more—the last narrow street was blocked off. (37)

In this passage the Italian words which describe Marco's Venice cause the reader to experience the Italian component of the novel. The vaporetto is a common means of transportation in the water city. An English equivalent such as "boat" or "little steamer" could have been included, but no English word could do justice to the image created by the word vaporetto. Similarly, the word calle could be replaced by "narrow street," as in the last sentence quoted above. The calle, however, is one of Venice's specific attributes. In fact, The Collins Concise Italian-English Dictionary gives the meaning for calle as "narrow street (in Venice). The fondamento refers to the platform or quay at the edge of the water—where manmade construction meets one of the natural elements, water. The fondamento represents stability, a product of man's rationality, whereas water represents nature's uncontrollability and unpredictability—as in the recurring Venetian floods, one of which is described in Edwards' novel. The presence of Italian words in the above passage, as in the novel itself, which are very specific to the city of Venice, creates an image of the setting inhabited by Marco, a setting which is at the root of Bianca's (the Italian-Canadian protagonist) quest for identity.

Venice—the calle, the vaporetto, the water—is an ineffaceable component of Bianca's identity as well as Marco's. The passage quoted above reflects Marco's unstable and precarious situation: his lack of direction, psychological and physical (given that "he had been going in the wrong direction"), and

his sense of panic are indications of his impending nervous breakdown. The words italicized in the above passage are simultaneously associated with motion—the constant motion, therefore instability—and the maze which qualifies Marco’s psychological state.

The author has chosen these specific Italian words to create a detailed image of the Italian water city and to illustrate the vulnerability of an individual’s identity. In the last chapter of Fabrizio’s *Passion*, the narrator takes the time to explain the connotations of the *busta* (the envelope) which is an integral part of Lucia Notte’s wedding as of many Italian-Canadian weddings: Peter is tripping over Lucia, their hands encumbered by white envelopes handed to them by the guests after the handshakes. Those famous Italian envelopes...
La busta.

How to describe this seemingly simple object intrinsically linked to Italian-American weddings? This tiny white envelope seals what consideration or dislike one family holds for another... Each envelope is a potential time bomb. It can celebrate a friendship or insinuate a subtle disenchantment. All confessed, yet nothing ever openly spelled out—one family’s unbreakable loyalty to you as well as another’s hypocrisy. (226-7) The *busta* holds nuances and connotations that the “envelope” does not. What the narrator does not spell out is that the *busta* is the carrier of a monetary amount given to the newlyweds as a gift.

It is the specific amount of money contained in the envelope which “can celebrate a friendship or insinuate a subtle disenchantment.” The word *busta* in the above passage is more than a simple envelope; it is a symbol of the traditional Italian wedding in Canada. It brings together the friends and

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relatives from the old country in the setting of the new country. The word *paesano*, or *paesani* in the plural, which appears in several instances in the novels has several connotations. In Italian a *paesano* is a person who is from the same town, or nearby town, in Italy.

For instance, in commenting on his first weeks in Mersea the narrator of *In a Glass House* points to “ the strange half-familiar faces of the *paesani* who came to visit” (3). Here, the word *paesani* refers to people originally from Valle del Sole, Vittorio’s hometown, or from neighbouring towns. For the Italian living abroad, such as the Italian-Canadian, the word *paesano* has taken on a broader meaning to refer to Italians of the same region. And, in regions outside of Italy inhabited by few Italians, *paesano* refers to Italians in general.

This meaning of *paesano* has also been adopted by non-Italians to show kinship or goodwill, be it sincere or not. It is sometimes used to make fun of the Italian as well. Mario Innocente (*In a Glass House*) comments on the non-Italian’s use of the word *paesano* in the passage below: “ Mario,” he [the German] said. “ Mario, Mario, como stai, *paesano*? ”... “ That was the guy I bought the farm from,” he [Mario] said. “ Those Germans —*paesano* this, *paesano* that, everyone’s a *paesano*. But the old bastard just wanted to make sure I don’t forget to pay him. ” (31)

The passage shows the Italian’s mistrust of non-Italians who try to ingratiate themselves by relying on the inherent friendship implied in the word *paesano*. Although Mario Innocente is not fooled by this, his young son Vittorio is lured into a false sense of friendship by the bullies on the school bus: “ Italiano,” I [Vittorio] said, clutching at the familiar word. “ Ah, Italiano!

” He thumped a hand on his chest. “ Me speak Italiano mucho mucho. Me paesano. ” When the other boys got on the bus and came to the back, the black-haired boy said they were paesani as well, and each in turn smiled broadly at me and shook my hand. (49)

Vittorio soon discovers that the pretense of friendship is simply a way of making fun of him. The word paesano, then, brings together the Italian and the non-Italian, be it positive or negative, sincere or not. For the Italian-Canadian, the word creates a link between the new country and Italy by defining and uniting those of the same origin; at the same time the word allows the non-Italian, or the Canadian, to enter into the Italian culture albeit under false pretense. The word paesano brings together the two components of Italian-Canadian identity in uniting the true sense of the word with the meaning adopted by non-Italians.

In each of the examples quoted above, the presence of the Italian word highlights something specifically Italian within Italian-Canadian reality and emphasizes the fact that this component cannot be erased or replaced within a Canadian context. The author’s choice to include the translation of an Italian word or sentence renders the text accessible to the reader who does not read Italian. It therefore establishes a certain openness—the will to reach beyond a minority audience. On the other hand, the absence of the translation renders inaccessible certain sections of the novel to readers who do not read Italian.

In this case, it can be argued that the author risks alienating the non-Italian speaking reader, thereby establishing a certain degree of elitism for the novel. Arun Mukherjee distinguishes between the two by labelling the reader

a “ cultural insider” or a “ cultural outsider” (44). Of course, in certain instances in which the Italian word appears without the translation the meaning is not lost for the reader. In other cases, the translation is necessary to understand the allusion made and the nuances of the action.

In *The Italians*, for instance, it is necessary for the reader to know the meaning of the words “ ero ubriaco” (20; “ I was drunk”) in order to understand the reason Lorenzo gives for raping his wife. Another such instance occurs in *The Lion’s Mouth*: *Stasera mi butto* is the title of “ the silly pop song” Marco and his bride-to-be had danced to the summer before their wedding (30). The reference to the pop song has a number of implications that the reader who does not read Italian will miss. The English equivalent of *Stasera mi butto* is “ Tonight I throw myself” or “ I abandon myself tonight. The meaning is very important because it refers to Marco’s status in his marriage: by marrying Paola—a wealthy but overly demanding and domineering wife, whom he does not love—Marco abandons “ his” self, losing his own identity in order to improve his social status. At the same time, the reference to the song foreshadows Marco’s one night stand with Elena, the woman he has loved since childhood: Marco abandons himself to Elena that same night (*stasera*), thereby unknowingly entangling himself in a terrorist plot and jeopardizing his marriage and his reputation.

The process of translating is an undeniable step in writing for the Italian-Canadian author. Joseph Pivato makes this point in *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures*: “ Independently of the language or languages the Italian writer uses, he or she is always translating. It often seems that the translating process becomes more important than the distant Italian reality that it may

be evoking” (125). Translation is a way of bringing together the two worlds which make up the Italian-Canadian reality.

Bianca, the narrator in *The Lion’s Mouth*, is very conscious of the activity of translating inherent in the process of narration and in her Italian-Canadian reality. Edwards’ novel highlights the complexity of the presence of Italian words, and their English equivalents: Bianca simultaneously reads her aunt’s letter written in Italian and translates it into English for herself: “ Bianca, se sapessi, Se sapessi,” if you knew, if you knew, “ Que [sic, Chel disgrazia di Dio. ” God’s disgrace? I must be translating incorrectly, a disgrace from God. “ Barbara scossa. ” Barbara has been shocked? it? shaken?... Worse, Marco (you, you) suffered a nervous breakdown. ” *Esaurimento nervoso*, the words translated literally as an exhaustion of the nerves. (9-10) This passage illustrates the interplay between levels of the text and the complications resulting from the presence of Italian as well as the negotiation involved between “ the Italian” and “ the Canadian” components of the narrator’s Italian-Canadian reality. The narrator translates for her own benefit: to ascertain that she understands the written Italian word, she feels compelled to find the English equivalent.

This illustrates the constant need to bring together the two components of her reality in an attempt to better understand herself. The narrator points to the importance of the translation process necessary when the Italian word, in this case her aunt’s letter, enters her own Canadian context. The narrator takes her role as translator very seriously in finding the appropriate word, which testifies to the notion that the Italian-Canadian lives in a state of constant translation. Fabrizio, the narrator in *Fabrizio’s Passion*, shares the

same attention to detail in the act of translating: “ When I finish the pasta, faccio la scarpetta. Literally, this translates as ‘ to wet one’s shoe,’ that is, to soak a piece of bread in the tomato sauce, and wipe clean one’s plate!)” (65). In the two examples mentioned, the act of translating is an attempt to unite the two worlds which comprise the narrator’s reality, that of the Italian-Canadian. This is done in two simultaneous ways: first, by stating in Italian that which has its origin in the Italian world (the aunt’s letter; the way one cleans the plate with bread); and second, by giving the English equivalent so that the non-Italian reader, rather than feel alienated, feels connected to that Italian world being described.

The tension existing between the Italian and the Canadian is rooted as deeply as the structure of the sentence, virtually beneath the texture of the writing. The stilted sentence is an English sentence which sounds Italian—a sentence which has a latinate structure as opposed to an anglo-saxon or germanic structure. It is important to stress that the stilted sentence is different from the literal translation. In *Infertility Rites*, for instance, Nina is asked “ When are you going to buy your baby? ” (11) which is a direct translation from the Italian idiom meaning “ when will you have a baby. This is a literal translation purposely used to maintain the Italian flavour and to indicate that the words were spoken in Italian. The same is true of the following: “ I pour myself another cup of American coffee—what mother calls ‘ coloured water”(137). The expression “ coloured water” is a direct translation for the Italian cliché on American coffee. In *The Lion’s Mouth*, Bianca reads in her aunt’s letter that her cousin Marco has had “ an

exhaustion of the nerves”—the literal translation of esaurimento nuovo meaning a nervous breakdown (10).

In these examples, the objective is not to sound English but to transmit the Italian idiom into English words without remaining faithful to the nuances of each language. This is usually done to indicate that the words are originally spoken in Italian. In the stilted sentence, on the other hand, Italian is not present as words but at the level of the sentence structure, a characteristic which has been criticized as badly written English, or simply bad writing.

I would suggest, instead, that the presence of latinate structures within the Italian-Canadian novel represents, to use Pasquale Verdicchio's words, "the utterances of immigrant culture" (214) and mirrors the reality of the Italian-Canadian experience. The following passage from *Black Madonna* illustrates the latinate structure present in a conversation between Assunta and Marie, who represent polar opposites of the Italian-Canadian duality: "Ma, I'm going to Toronto," Marie said abruptly. "They. . . She couldn't find the Italian word for "accepted." [sic] "They took me. "Ma, I have to go. More times I go to school, better job. " "You tell to your father... These things, I don't understand... You go to school—good. You smart—good. But you crazy. Your head in the clouds. The older you get, the crazier you get. I don't understand you. To Toronto you want to go?" (70-1) In order to communicate with her mother, Marie is forced to speak like her. Although Marie's "More times I go to school, better job" is not correct English, the structure is correct in Italian. Likewise, Assunta's "These things, I don't understand." and "To Toronto you want to go? (where the (in)direct object precedes the verb) have an Italian structure. The sentence "You tell to your father," on the other hand,

is a direct translation of the Italian. Moreover, the subject of their conversation consists of the “push and pull” characteristic of the old way versus the new way: the traditional Italian mother does not want her daughter to leave home, whereas Marie wants to experience the freedom of Canadian society. In Fabrizio’s *Passion*, Fabrizio uses an Italian sentence structure when he says “I am fourteen years old but am thirty in my head” (72).

This does not work grammatically in English but is often used in Italian. Likewise, in *The Lion’s Mouth*: “But where have you been?... We waited an hour, but since you didn’t have the courtesy to even phone...” (37-38) and “So loud you have to have that record?” (42) have an Italian sentence structure. Such a structure is appropriate here given that the sentences are spoken by an Italian, Marco’s mother. Bianca, too, is guilty of using the Latin sentence structure: “Her bedroom, that evening I visited, was sparse, cell-like” (116).

The following passage appears at the end of *The Lion’s Mouth*, in the Epilogue: This week, Barbara arrived and I must play the wise aunt with a trunkful of distractions. Poor child—as I write she is standing in the living room, staring out the window at the still leafless trees and mud-filled garden, wondering what place is this. . . So I begin again my life in this city, this land. (my italics, 178) Even though narrating her tale has given Bianca a clear focus on both components of her cultural makeup, the stiltedness of the italicized words emphasize the influence of Bianca’s Italian heritage.

It is also significant that the first phrase, “wondering what place is this,” refers to Barbara, the Italian girl visiting from Venice, taking in the novelty

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and difference of western Canada. The presence of the heritage language within the “ ethnic text” has led to accusations of bad writing, and the use of the stilted sentence may be perceived as the writer’s inability to master the English language. On the contrary, these “ ethnic markers” or “ linguistic stones” are devices purposely used by the writer to illustrate the tension and negotiation at work in a bicultural identity. As Pasquale Verdicchio argues:

By stressing latinate vocabulary, by the insertion of Italian syntactical forms, and by the inclusion of linguistic elements that represent the utterances of immigrant culture, these [Italian-Canadian] writers have altered the semantic field of English, thereby denying expected meaning. (214) The fact that the Italian word interrupts the flow of the English text is a way of illustrating the symptoms of otherness which are an undeniable characteristic of Italian-Canadian reality. The presence of the Italian word within the English text should not be interpreted as a barrier between the two (Italian and Canadian) cultures.

Rather, the meshing of Italian words with English words should be seen as the negotiation necessary in order to bring the two cultures together. Arun Mukherjee writes that “ Ethnic minority texts inform their readers, through the presence of other languages... about the multi-cultural and multilingual nature of Canadian society” (46). Through their fiction Italian-Canadian writers suggest that in order to come to terms with the element of “ schizophrenia” inherent in a bicultural identity, the individual must undertake the process of reevaluating the heritage culture.

By using the “ device of the stone,” the Italian-Canadian writer attempts to illustrate the continuous transfer from one culture/language to the other experienced by bicultural individuals.

His mock indignation is a response to a question, couched in diplomacy, about many Canadian storytellers' affinity for subjects that some people might consider weird and unwholesome. In the case of his latest book, the Giller Prize-nominated *Where She Has Gone*, the “ weird and unwholesome” subject is incest, between the narrator and his half-sister. It occurs to one that this would not be out of place in a Canadian movie, as beguiled as our film-makers are with the weird and the unwholesome. He quotes Freud, about taboos being the foundation of civilization. You could argue that civilization began when this taboo was created, that the guilt that created led to civilization. And there's something formative about the incest taboo. Anthropologists have found that it was one of the first taboos. “ But there's a lot of it going on in our society. Incest occurs a lot more often than we care to acknowledge—usually as part of an abusive relationship. One person is always unwilling. “ Obviously, since there's such a strong taboo against it, people want to do it. “ The incestuous relationship in question comes at the end of a trilogy—*Lives of the Saints*, *In a Glass House* and now *Where*

She Has Gone—that constitutes a sprawling, ambitious immigrant saga drawing equally from Ricci's Italian heritage (his parents were immigrants) and his Ontario “ Calvinist” upbringing. “ I didn't start out to write an immigrant saga,” he says. “ I started out to write anything but an immigrant saga. My original idea was to explore an intense relationship between a brother and a sister. “ It started out as a piece of erotica. A friend told me

that you could write erotica and sell it for \$200 a pop in New York. " I didn't want to talk about ethnicity.

I was primarily influenced by British literature. Fortunately, I had older siblings who did well in school and interested me in reading. I didn't get it from my parents. They encouraged education, but in a more general sense. " Which brings us around to Canadianness, film and the weird and unwholesome. He says maybe it's a reaction against the reserve imposed on us by " our strict Calvinist heritage. " This is a very strange irony—Ricci, a Catholic, talking to another Catholic about " our strict Calvinist heritage"—and it doesn't go unnoticed.

The distant, unemotional and introspective nature of much of our storytelling, then, " may just be the result of our living in a cold climate," he shrugs. " Maybe it's much more banal than we think. " Brian Gorman. " Getting Weird and Ugly With Nino Ricci. ". [www. canoe. ca/JamBooksFeatures/ricci_nino. html](http://www.canoe.ca/JamBooksFeatures/ricci_nino.html). Magical Complexity By Naomi Guttman Nina Ricci has already received much deserved acclaim from writers across the country and abroad for this book, and I can only concur. Lives of the Saints, a book which any writer would be glad to have accomplished at any time, is all the more praiseworthy for being a first novel.

The year is 1960, but in Valle del Salle, the poor Appenine village in which the novel is set, you would not know it: there is no electric power, grain is still cut with a scythe, and a snake bite is a sign that the evil eye has paid one a visit. Vittorio Innocente is the adult narrator telling the story of his boyhood: when the action begins Vittorio is turning seven. His father has left <https://assignbuster.com/italian-culture/>

to seek his fortune in “ America” several years before and Vittorio and his mother, Cristina, live with her father, Valle del Salle’s old mayor, in relative comfort.

But Vittorio’s parents are estranged by more than an ocean and though Vittorio, with his innocent eyes, provides the filter through which all is told, it is really Cristina who is the central figure of the novel. It is she who is bitten by a green snake during a rendezvous in the barn with her nameless blue-eyed lover; she who wages a battle of pride with the village in which she was born; and she who eight months into the pregnancy which has become a symbol of her scorn and thus the source of this battle, engineers an escape to Canada, taking her son with her.

As always with a first-person narrative, there is a delicate balance between what can be told and how. Vittorio is an expert listener, and because he is a child during the action of the tale, he gives very little in the way of interpretation. And so, as with all well-made things, the novel has the effect of appearing to be simple, which it is not, for it is terribly difficult to maintain that balance between the point of view of an adult regarding his childhood with adult insight, and that of the intuitive knowledge and fantastic distortions of the child he was at the time.

Yet Ricci has been able to negotiate the distance between those voices with grace. The novel’s tension is cunningly built, the language is beautiful, and the symbolism plainly in view without coyness or flag-waving. Through Vittorio’s eyes we learn about the village, its characters, its colour, its superstitions and the envy, “ invidia,” that distances villager from villager. The life of the village and the drama that is unfolding in Vittorio’s home is

told with precision, care, a wonderful eye for detail rendered through the child's experience, as well as a perfect ear for dialogue.

In fact with his gift for translating the specific idiom of the people of Valle del Solle—the true-sounding syntax, the well-chosen Italian word or phrase—I felt as though I were reading in Italian and translating for myself, an experience much like watching a wonderful foreign film with sub-titles and feeling that one has actually understood the words as they were spoken. And it may be said that this novel is filmic.

In its use of colour, place and time, its ability to tell the story not only of Vittorio and his family but of an entire village, it conveys the magical wisdom of childhood and the complexity of what are supposed to be simple lives in such a compelling narrative that, in the right hands, *Lives of the Saints* could be as grand and sublime a spectacle as *Fanny and Alexander* or *My Life as a Dog*. Of course no film could capture the lyricism of Ricci's descriptions: the image of the sun rising "round and scarlet, sucking in the dawn's darkness like God's forgiveness, the mountain slopes slowly changing from a colourless grey to rich green and gold. And then there is silence: ... the silence of the house would wash over me, filling my head like a scream, crowding out my private thoughts. The silence seemed to issue from every nook and cranny of the house, to dissolve furnishings and leave me suspended in a pure, electric emptiness, so volatile that the crunch of my mother's hoe threatened to shatter the house to its foundations. Without giving away the ending, I will say that my only qualms about the book came in the very last chapters where, though I understand its fictional necessity, as a feminist I question the implications it engenders.

Early in the novel “la maestra” tells Vittorio and his classmates that a saint can be found anywhere at all, even among their ranks. Ricci reminds us in this novel that all lives, no matter how common they appear, are the locus for turmoil, the stuff, if not of sainthood, of drama, and can be fashioned into that category of novel to which *Lives of the Saints* certainly belongs: the novel one wishes will not end. Fortunately for us, it is the first of a trilogy and so the end will not come so soon. Guttman, Naomi. (1990). “Magical Complexity; Review of *Lives of the Saints*”.

Matrix 32: 74-5. The Hyperbolic Project of Cristina: A Derridean Analysis of Nino Ricci’s *Lives of the Saints* By Roberta Imboden Jacques Derrida’s “Cogito and the History of Madness,” catapulted him into the centre of the French intellectual world. This essay, a commentary on Michel Foucault’s book, *The History of Madness*, is seen as an excellent example of the deconstructionist method at work in relation to metaphysics. What Derrida examines from this rather large tome is a few passages that Foucault writes about Descartes.

Foucault’s thesis is that Descartes, in his analysis of the Cogito, was the first philosopher to separate reason from non reason, from madness, and that this split was either a cause of, or at least, was representative of, the attitude which resulted in the first internment of mad persons within institutions in human history. That Descartes is responsible for all sorts of divisions, of separations, in the modern Western human psyche, such as that between mind and matter, between reason and the emotions, is common in philosophical analysis, but Foucault’s thesis is unusual in his emphasis upon the reason/madness split.

If one then applies Derrida's subsequent insights to Nino Ricci's prize winning novel, *Lives of the Saints*, an understanding of the novel will appear that should not only further illuminate the power of this first novel, and the talents of its author, but also explain to students of literature what I was not able to explain to my own students, not until now, why Cristina, the heroine, had to die in the prime of life when a world of love and of freedom beckoned to her for the first time.

Derrida, who prefaces his remarks with a special tribute to his teacher and mentor, Foucault, claims that in the Cogito of Descartes, in its pure moment before it attempts to reflect, to articulate, this bipolar split never took place, and that the Cogito is valid for both the mad and the sane person. What this Cogito is about is "the hyperbolic project" (52) which is "an unprecedented excess" (52) that "overflows the totality of that which can be thought... in the direction of the non-determined, Nothingness or infinity" (57), toward non-meaning or toward meaning.

This project takes one beyond all limits, all barriers, all contradictions, all opposing opposites. It is the element of excess that causes Derrida to claim that the Cogito involves madness, derangement (57), since the hyperbolic project seeks to move beyond what the world would refer to as that which reason, logos, can itself attain, but it is not clinical madness, that is, what psychiatrists would consider to be a chemical disorder of the brain. It is the madness of the Cogito which simply refuses the limitations that the world of common sense says are necessary in order to be sane.

It is madness in which doubt is a central element, since it is a state of mind in which all things are possible, in which, in a sense, the figure of Ivan
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Karamazov looms, shouting his now famous, “ everything is permitted. ” But, for the distraught Ivan, this phrase refers only to the world of morality. For the Cartesian Cogito of Derrida this phrase is more far-reaching, since it is primarily epistemological: all visions of reality, and of one’s response to that reality, are possible. Such a state of mind is madness in the most fundamental sense.

Not surprising is the fact that this state of the Cogito, when reason and madness have not been separated, is also an intense moment; consequently, this is simultaneously a state of mind in which reason is at its apex of intensity, as is madness. It is the moment of the full power of reason, and therefore the moment of a mad reason, an ancient, all powerful reason that is very different from the reason of which Foucault speaks in relation to Descartes. The reason of which Derrida speaks is not a truncated, chained and bound reason, but rather, a reason of “ mad audacity” (55).

That this project is a movement toward the non-determined means that it cannot be “ enclosed in a factual and determined historical structure” (60), cannot be captured within a concrete world that demands clear delineations, separations, within a history that must move from the past, through the present, toward the future, “ for it is the project of exceeding every finite and determined totality” (60), the project of exceeding “ all that is real, factual and existent” (56).

Consequently, Derrida refers to this project as demonic, probably because it violates the ancient codes of both the Judaeo-Christian and the classical Greek worlds. Both the warnings of eating the apple of the tree of knowledge and that of succumbing to hubris are warnings not to follow the hyperbolic

project, not to attempt to grasp with one's mind all that is and all that could be. But the excessive moment of the hyperbolic project ends when one reflects upon and communicates the Cogito to oneself and then to others.

One cannot be mad if one is to communicate this meaning in discourse. It is at this moment, when one breaks the silence, in reflection and in speech, that one safeguards oneself against the epistemological madness of non-distinction among infinite visions of reality, of beyond reality, and of the infinite possibilities of responses to these visions. Now is the basic, fundamental moment of separation of reason from madness, the moment of difference. Speech violently liberates, differs itself from madness and simultaneously imprisons it (60).

Only then can finite thought and history reign (61), for finite thought is dependent upon a process that must involve exclusion, as is history, which is dependent upon concrete events, and the exclusive choosing of events in order to make up the story that is history. This articulation of the hyperbolic project, the “ attempt-to-say-the-demonic-hyperbole... is the original profundity of the will in general... is a first passion and keeps within itself a trace of violence” (61). That is. the attempt to communicate the intense moment of the hyperbolic project is the human will's passionate attempt to make concrete this project of excess. This moment of intense passion is doomed forever to failure, but its titanic, gargantuan effort founds the world and history (57). No wonder that it carries traces of violence. The actual creation of the physical universe, according to the big bang theory, was certainly violent. Speech, language, is that which regulates the “ relationship between that which exceeds and the exceeded totality” (62).

Speech separates the world of the hyperbolic project, the world that exceeds, the world of excess, from the world in which we live, the world that is exceeded by the hyperbolic project. Speech emerges from the silence and separates us from the pure Cogito, makes a difference between us and its project, and forces us to make choices, to decide. Since we can no longer have the possibility of grasping all possibilities, we must decide what finite possibilities we must choose. We no longer can live in a world of hyperbolic doubt whose condition is that all is possible.

We now are thrown into a world of dazzling light where certainty emerges as a safeguard against madness, for communication functions in such a manner that it “inspect(s), master(s), limit(s) hyperbole” (59), since reason knows that the total derangement of the hyperbolic moment “will bring subversion to pure thought” (53). It is most probably because of the implied suffering in the action of speech that Derrida says that speech operates within a “caesura” (54), a “wound” (54). that “opens up life as historicity” (54). Furthermore, the moment of communication, of speech, is one of crisis for two reasons.

Firstly, reason is in grave danger, since in moving from its origin, the pure Cogito of the hyperbolic project, it is in danger of forgetting its origins, of “blanketing them by the rationalist and transcendent. its unveiling (of) itself” (62). It is then, ironically, that reason is “madder than madness” (62), for reason moves toward oblivion of this origin, and therefore toward non-meaning. Madness is at this moment closer to “the wellspring of sense” (62), and, subsequently, is closer to the rational, however silent it is. Reason is now “separated from itself as madness, is exiled from itself” (62). Thus, the

communication of the Cogito is the choosing of reason, an act which divides the reason of meaning from the labyrinth of non-meaning; but the price is the loss of identity with itself and the loss of the possibility of infinite possibility. Secondly, in this moment of crisis, hubris is born of articulation, and although hubris is coincident with creation, its major quality is in excess that must operate within finitude, a quality that the concrete world of history is likely to punish severely.

My thesis is that reading Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* in the light of this particular Derridean essay is essential for the understanding of the main character, Cristina, the woman whose presence, through the narration of her young son, Vittorio, dominates the entire novel. She lives in a hill-town in the Italian Appennines with her son and her father, the mayor of the town, who is accused of having sold out to the fascists.

Her husband, absent for four years since he emigrated to Canada, supposedly to create a new life for Cristina and Vittorio, writes monthly letters of wild scribble, but, for Cristina, he is simply absent and for Vittorio, he is simply a shadowy, violent memory. The tension of the novel revolves around a scene, from Vittorio's perspective, which is composed of a stable, a muffled shout (1), followed by a green snake escaping from the stable and a pair of blue eyes that run away toward a car.

The combination of these events results in the pregnancy of Cristina, and in the very traditional and superstitious people of the village shunning her. To establish Cristina as the Cartesian-Derridean Cogito, it is best to begin by analyzing her silence, as it is observed by the narrator, Vittorio. From the perspective of the reader she tells us nothing of what she truly thinks or

feels. What happened in the stable? We can only guess, but that is exactly what we must do.

Her only comment is to Luciano, one of her friends in Rocca Secca, “ Anyway I have my own trouble to worry about. I hope he didn’t leave me a little gift—he got very excited when he saw that snake” (66). After this incident, “ a deep silence... descended on the house the very walls, the floor, the splintered table, seemed to have grown strangely distant and mute, as if guarding some secret themselves” (57). Cristina “ withdrew into shadowy silence” (74), broken mainly by her “ quiet sobbing at night mingling with the sigh of the wind, like something inhuman” (77). The silence seemed to issue from every nook and cranny of the house” (77). Of his mother’s relationship to himself, in particular, Vittorio says, there are “ no words now to bridge the silence” (74). There are only “ silent meals” (74) and the silence between Cristina and the grandfather, her father, more or less extends until the end of the novel. A second characteristic that marks Cristina as the embodiment of the Derridean Cogito is the strange non-delineation between reason and madness that surrounds her.

In relation to the element of reason, she is one of the best educated women in the village. But most outstanding is her absolute contempt for the superstition of the villagers who seem to have inherited an ancient pagan superstition that intermingles with Catholicism and erupts every year in the procession of the Virgin Mary whose statue is carried throughout the town. All the doors and windows of the houses of the village are open except for those of Cristina. Their being steadfastly shut makes her a living testimony to rationality itself.

But this rationality is strangely interwoven with madness in the snakebite incident. First, at the very beginning of the book, when she is bitten by the snake in the stable, she waits quietly in front of her house for the ride to the hospital. DiLucci, who gives Cristina the ride says to her, “ You’d think you were just going to the market” (16). He seems disconcerted by her “ unexpected calm” (16). Then, Vittorio says that the tourniquet “ sank into her leg... but my mother did not wince or grimace” (17).

Finally, she slowly succumbs to a trancelike, rigid state which sends her into the deepest possible form of physical silence. She is literally outside of what one would normally refer to as a rational state, but, she never rants, raves or rambles. Instead, she is inhumanly calm. She seems to transcend both fear and pain. Before the onset of the results of the venom she is “ rationally silent,” telling her father again and again that what she was doing in the barn was feeding the pigs, and when she overcomes the venom and fully returns to her conscious state. he is “ bright and alert” (18), again “ rational,” but silent. It is almost as if the brief period of the rigid trancelike state is simply a deepening of the rational/mad silence that will surround her throughout most of the novel. The non-delineation of madness/reason on this rather basic level, when examined in the light of other non-delineations, leads to an extremely important aspect of the Derridean hyperbolic project, that of epistemological madness.

But the major point at the moment is to look at these other non-delineations in relation to Cristina’s being the Derridean Cogito, and to her subsequently being involved with the hyperbolic project. The relationship between Cristina and Vittorio, the most important relationship in the novel, is a good

example of Cristina's sense of lack of division, of boundary, and threatens the villager's view of what they perceive as the most fundamental of relationships, that of mother and son.

The implication of the villagers who hurl accusations at her in her role as mother is that she behaves toward him more like a sister or friend than a mother since she refuses to send the seven-year-old Vittorio into the fields to do agricultural work at 4: 00 a. m. , as the other mothers do. The extreme case is Vittorio's only friend, Fabrizio, whose father forces him to remain in the fields so long that he cannot go to school. Instead, Cristina and Vittorio are accused of playing together like children all the time.

But this relationship of mother/sister/friend also is, simultaneously, a mother/lover relationship. At the age of seven an upset Vittorio is told that he can no longer share his mother's bed. His grandfather says, " Next month you'll be seven. That's no age to be sleeping with your mother" (34). Then, when Cristina takes Vittorio to the cave of the underground pool, Vittorio discovers a pair of tinted glasses in the straw, similar to the shattered pair that he found when the man with the eyes of the blue flame ran from the stable.

The relationship of mother/lover emerges when Vittorio suddenly sees his naked mother standing above him as she is about to dive into the pool. No sensuous touch ever occurs; the entire scene has a preternatural quality about it. At this moment, through Vittorio's eyes, we see a truly beautiful woman, one, whom he says, bears no resemblance to the other village women, a " smooth and sleek" (33) woman who takes on the qualities of some ancient Greek goddess, such as Calypso or Circe. Like them, she has beauty and power for good and for evil.

If Calypso, she has the power to grant men immortality and eternal youth (Homer 58), although she may also deter them from their lawful, faithful wives. If Circe, she has the power to turn men into swine (118-119)—therefore, Cristina’s reference to feeding the pigs when she was in the stable—and has the subsequent power to return them to their human form with an unearthly beauty that heretofore they had not possessed. Thus, Cristina is eternal beauty, love, and eternal faithful relationship, as well as ugliness, treachery and unfaithfulness.

This non-delineation, non-difference, non-choice, non-separation is evident also in her relationships with mature men. In being unfaithful to her long absent husband in Canada, she is faithful to her blue-eyed lover, for, in the imagination of the careful reader, the hints and fragmented pieces of Vittorio’s memory draw a picture of a youthful love of Cristina for a young German soldier, a love that preceded her marriage to Mario of her own village. The German was her first, and in a sense, her only lover.

The dim memory of Mario given to us by Vittorio is anything but that of a lover. He is seen as a violent figure who hurled an object against his mother’s face, a memory that is questionable, but, nevertheless, Cristina does have a small scar on her face in the shape of a “disjointed cross” (Lives 37). But two other passages give foundation to Vittorio’s memory. Cristina says of Mario to Alfredo, “The only way he knows how to talk is with the back of his hand” (95).

Then, when Vittorio sees the letter with the “small neat script of bright blue” (158), he says that this writing is not that of his “father’s violent hand” (158). Thus, her infidelity is true faithfulness. Furthermore, if the reader is

tempted to see the blue-eyed soldier as a fascist, a member of a military machine ruled by fascist ideology, careful reading indicates that this young man was probably a communist who, somehow, in a way never explained, deserted the army and most likely was involved in some sort of dangerous, heroic undercover, or partisan action against the Nazis.

And Cristina, in her silent way, lives for years with secret rendezvous, probably in Rocca Secca, with this lover, while simultaneously living in harmony with her fascist father who is just as traditional in his attitudes as the rest of the villagers. She does not choose. She does not have to because she does not speak. One can continue to multiply this non-delineation, non-difference way of living by adding that no line exists between desire/love and duty or Cristina, nor between meaning and non-meaning.

She lives desire, her love for her lover, for Vittorio, for her father, but she also is a dutiful daughter and mother, and no duty exists for her vis-a-vis her husband since she appears to feel that she has been abandoned. Some men in her family had gone to the New World and returned, but some, like Cristina's paternal grandfather, have disappeared. Her feeling of abandonment is exhibited when she hurls at her father the accusation that her husband i-as probably been sleeping with every whore in America (154). Furthermore, she appears to live in some beyond world of meaning/non-meaning.

The literal reading of the text sees a talented, vibrant woman living the daily life of deathly isolation and suppression of all that she is. This text is that of a meaningless life. But Cristina wishes to grasp the totality, no matter what it means, and it is here that the text of a meaningful life lies. Derrida actually

claims that this action is the origin of meaning (Writing 57.). What she most passionately desires in this project is to grasp the totality of freedom, a freedom that cannot really be thought.

It is a freedom that “wants it all”: to be a dutiful daughter of a traditional, fascist father, to be a passionate lover of a blue-eyed fugitive communist, to be a respected educated, highly rational citizen of a traditional, uneducated superstition-haunted village, to be a loving, playful mother, yet a mother who never tells her son anything. It is a mad project of excess that can be implied by these few words. But not completely thought, for Cristina is grasping for that which goes beyond words and thoughts. This mad project, best labelled epistemological madness, is the major mark of the hyperbolic project of the Derridean Cogito.

The villagers unconsciously understand this quality in Cristina, for they, too have an epistemology, since everyone does, and her behavior and silence are seen by the villagers as a derangement, a displacement, a subversion of their “rationality,” their “raison d’être,” for her very existence threatens all their beliefs, their epistemology. Cristina’s existence not only threatens their view of reality in relation to Catholicism as they live it, but also their ancient superstitions, especially their complex view of the ability of one person to curse another, that is, the power of a person to exercise effectively “the evil eye. But, most important, her existence threatens the villagers’ understanding of human relationships, especially of those between men and women, of family relationships in general, of the place of women in society, and of the consequent possibility of their freedom. Thus, Cristina upsets the foundation of meaning for the villagers; her existence threatens the clear

certainty of their lives with doubt. That Cristina's threat is as powerful as it is, is derived from its being rooted in the intensity of an ancient mad rationality. She grapples toward all possibilities, the villagers toward none.

Not surprising, because Cristina's very existence is perceived by the villagers to be a threat, the unspoken accusation against her is that she is mad in the sense of the supposed madness of witchcraft. Since they dimly perceive that she attempts to grasp the totality of reality, and that somehow she lives within a forbidden space, she surely must be in touch with the demonic and suffers from a subsequent dangerous madness. One could object to this analysis, saying that the witch-craze existed a few centuries ago, but it must be remembered that these villagers appear to have a completely pre-scientific mentality.

In the days of the witch craze, at the centre of all the lore surrounding witchcraft, was the belief that the Devil would assume human form and it is then that the woman witch would have sexual intercourse with him (Malleus Maleficarium 27). In the earliest days of the witch craze, a phenomenon that some historians believe grew out of the attack upon heretics (Russell 229), many men were accused of witchcraft (279), but many women, especially women from the upper classes, were attracted to these heretical sects because it was only there that they could enjoy something that resembled equality (282).

This factor, plus many other social factors, finally made women the sole victims of the witch craze, and as this phenomenon centred more and more upon women, the accusations moved from those of heresy, toward those of sexual intercourse with the Devil. The link between Cristina's Father's

accusatory “comunista” and Alfredo’s dire, oblique prediction that Cristina’s unborn child will have a serpentine head is reminiscent of the historical link between sexual relations with the devil and heresy, for to the religious, fascist father, the term “comunista” implies the worst kind of heresy of his time.

That Vittorio describes the eyes that he saw at the stable as turning magically a luminous blue as they caught the sunlight... (and that they were) “bright flames that held me” (Lives 12) is not surprising. To him, obviously, the Devil, who must take male human form in order to have sexual relations with a woman, really had ‘visited’ Cristina in the stable. Once again, Cristina lives the logos/madness non-delineation, for although the witch lore follows her everywhere, her reaction to it is that of scoffing rationality.

She laughs while saying, “Stupidaggini” (57). Although the rational reader, too, scoffs at the link that the villagers see between the Devil and Cristina, there are indications in the text that in a profound mythical sense, there is a link between Cristina and the demonic. This point is strengthened by the underground cave scene. The hot spring sulphuric waters of this underground place where Cristina obviously feels very safe and at home have reverberations, as does the river that she and Vittorio must cross, of Hades, and of the river Styx.

A this point, let us not forget that Derrida refers to the hyperbolical project as demonic, for it symbolizes the pursuit of excess, of forbidden knowledge. Furthermore, of course, for the pure Cogito which Cristina at this moment, personifies, there is no division, no boundary, between reason and the labyrinth, between meaning and non-meaning, between God and the Devil.

Cristina is usually so self-contained, so stoical, so powerful in her seeming control of herself.

But on two occasions before the climactic leave-taking of the village, she concretely, actively, displays the hyperbolic project's element of mad excess, once in a violent physical fight with one of the village women, and once in the dance at the end of the festival. One day after school some of the schoolmates of Vittorio beat him. When Cristina hears of the event, surmising that one of the mothers of these boys had provoked the incident because of the rumors of the snake and of her pregnancy, Cristina races through the town and into the woman's house and attacks her.

Cristina attempts to strangle her, but the frightened, amazed woman pulls away in time. Later, at the end of the festival, Cristina grabs Vittorio's arm and takes him to the centre of the dancing and begins to dance, to whirl very quickly. Vittorio finds the entire situation mad, wild, dizzying. Dancing/strangling: a strange dual manifestation of this project. Finally, as she and Vittorio leave the village forever, Cristina articulates what she thinks and feels to the villagers.

In a driving rain, standing beside the truck that is going to drive them to the dock in Naples, she stops, and at all the villagers who are watching her from balconies and windows, she hurls these words. Fools... You tried to kill me but you see I'm still alive. And now you came to watch me hang, but I won't be hanged, not by your stupid rules and superstitions. You are the ones who are dead, not me, because not one of you know what it means to be free and to make a choice, and I pray to God that he wipes this town and all its stupidities off the face of the earth! 184) This is the moment of articulation,

of speech, of separation of reason from madness, of her declaring a difference between herself and madness. It is the moment that she publicly articulates decision, her decision to leave her fascist father and his village of narrow superstitious tradition, to cease being a dutiful daughter and village citizen, and to choose to go to her lover, a man who is not her husband, according to law, and to go to a world that is radically different from that in which she has always lived.

She no longer attempts to grasp the totality. She knows that definite decisions, choices, must be made, that she must declare that differences exist that cannot be lived simultaneously. The nightly sighs, and sobs of hyperbolic doubt are over, and her taunting, proud shouts at the staring villagers are the shouts of a sudden manifestation of certainty, of a rational certainty that separates her from their superstition.

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Ricci By Brian Gorman " Are you saying my book is w