ESTUDIOS DE LA MUJER

en el ámbito de los países de habla inglesa

Volumen III

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UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID

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INDICE

NAMING IDENTITY IN THE POETRY OF MARIA MAZZIOTTI GILLAN

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Listen, America,
this is my father,
Arturo,
and I am his daughter,
Maria.
Do not call me Marie.

1.

During the past two decades American poetry by Italian American women has experienced a remarkable growth and established itself as a major complex field of inquiry for literary analysis. The keystone book which brought the field of Italian women writing into the limelight and practically set the agenda for years to come is, of course, Helen Barolini's *The Dream Book.* [1] In her Introduction, Barolini identifies and situates the main forces, and as a result the topics, which inform this literature: the question of silence, the ambivalent patriarchal order, the obsession with lost origins, surviving stereotyping while reconstituting a new cultural identity, and basically the issue of (re)discovering the woman author. The anthology

[1] See Helen Barolini, *The Dream Book. An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*. New York, Schocken Books, 1985. The "Introduction" (3-56) is a truly brilliant

was usefully subdivided into the following sections: memoirs, nonfiction, fiction, drama, and poetry.[2] Among the poetesses that were active in the eighties and who have since continued with even more engaging works, we can recall Phyllis Capello, Diane Di Prima, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Daniela Gioseffi, Kathryn Nocerino, Claudia Menza, Rachel Guido de Vries. Women poets[3] who have emerged in the nineties include: Gianna Patriarca, Rose Romano, Donna Masini, Adele La Barre, Victoria Repetto, Maria Fama and Giovanna Del Negro.[4] To be sure, if one merely peeks at their production, the diversity and range of their diction and the topics explored makes it difficult to place them under the same aegies. One can easily argue that the poets just mentioned can also be anthologized under such established or devised critical categories as, respectively, avant-gardist or of linguistic dissolution (Diane De Prima), social protest (Daniela Gioseffi), ethnic

social, historical and methodological essay.

[2] This model was followed by the two other milestone anthologies that have come out since then: Anthony J. Tamburri, Paolo Giordano and fred gardaphe', eds. *From the Margins. Writings in Italian Americana*. W. Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991; and Mary Joe Bona, ed. *The Voices We Carry. Recent Italian/American Women's Fiction*. Montreal: Guernica, 1994 [note: the publisher Guernica has since moved to Toronto].

[3] The reader is reminded that I am concerned solely with poetesses, and that many other Italian American women writers, most of whom have chosen as their main artistic venue different genres, such as fiction or non-fiction, cannot because of space limitations be referred to here. This field would include people like Diane Cavallo, Tina De Rosa, Mari Tomasi, Rita Ciresi, Dorothy Bryant, Ann Paolucci and Helen Barolini herself, among many others. See for instance the many younger women writers introduced by the journals *VIA voices in italian Americana* and *Italian Americana* since the late eighties.

[4] Once again I must caution the reader that these "lists" are merely indicative of a burgeoning field of women writers of Italian American descent, and it does not absolutely intend to be exhaustive. A complete annotated bibliography of Italian women poets is still lacking. For fiction writers, including men and women, the situation is not so bleak; see Serafino Porcari, "Italian American Fiction: A Selected Bibliography...1950-1993," in *Italian Americana*, Vol., 1995, and Fred Gardaphé, *The Italian-American Writer*. Spencertown (NY): Forkroads, 1995.

lesbianism (Rose Romano and Victoria Repetto), lyrical identity search (Gianna Patriarca), urban parodic metaphysics (Kathryn Nocerino), imagistic contemplation (Claudia Menza), or psycho-sexual loss/search of self (Donna Masini). And of course, if one were to develop a multiperspectival hermeneutic, many stylistic aspects of these poets criss-cross not only among themselves but, and perhaps more importantly, with the poetry of women poets that one would find grouped under other, broader sets of critical/archival paradigms, such as ethnic literature, post-avantgardism, psychological fragmentation of the Modernist ethos, finally demise and recomposition of subjectivity.[5] Dulcis in fundo, the perennial issue of identity. Of all shapes, forms and stripes.[6]

[5] The observations that follow have been inspired in part by similar inquiries in contiguous social and ideological spaces. See for instance Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Loose Canons*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992; Gugelberger, Georg M. "Decolonizing the Canon: Considerations of Third World Literature," in *New Literary History*, 22, 1991:505-524; Ahearn, Carol B., "The New Pluralism and Its Implications for Italian-American Literary Studies," *in Italian Americans in Transition*, Ed. by J. Scelsa, S. La Gumina, L. Tomasi, New York, The American Italian Historical Association, 1990:203-08; Calderón, Hector, & Saldivar, José D., eds. *Criticism in the Borderlands. Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991; Rodriguez, Richard. "Mixed Blood. Columbus' legacy: A world made *mestizo*," in *Harper's Magazine* (Nov. 1991):47-56.

[6] See the illuminating observations by Radhakrishnan, R. "Ethnic Identity and Post-Structuralist Difference," in JanMohamed, Abdul, and Lloyd, David, eds. *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990, 50-71.

II.

A poet whose work seems to span several territories and not always in predictable ways is Maria Mazziotti Gillan.[7] Leaving aside the knotty and often ambiguous pursuit of how to locate and characterize identity politics in a general way, I would like to focus on this poet's specific poetic experience, isolating the themes and the stratagems deployed in the text, and attempt to sketch what appears to be a paradoxical poetic, one which takes off from same the terrain all the women poets mentioned above cohabit, but which takes chances in constructing or at least subscribing to a vision that succeeds in wedding the old and the new, the traditional and the radical, the simple and the complex, a poetic which refuses to take sides because it seems to perceive the possibility of making contraries co-exist. And defiantly so.

One final theoretical point. Poets who attack long-encrusted locutions or splinter everyday words or word-clusters would be automatically considered avant-gardists, yet by and large the task of the poet as the founding cultural chiseler of the language of the tribe is truly that of finding or inventing the language itself.[8] And within language, of finding the right word. The poet deals with words, the Word, actually the Noun, the **lexis**,

[7] The main text of Maria Mazziotti Gillan's I will be referring to from hereon is *Where I come from*. Toronto: Guernica, 1995, abbreviated 1995. Other texts referred to or implied are: *The Weather of Old Seasons*. Merrick (NY): Cross-Cultural Communications, 1993; and the anthology she co-edited with her daughter, Jennifer, *Unsettling America. An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

[8] For a philosophical view of the issue, see Heidegger, Martin. 1971 [1946-1950]. "What Are Poets For" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, transl. by A. Hofstadter. New York: Harper, 89-142; for a view focused on contemporary American poetics, see Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*. St. Paul (MN): Greywolf Press, 1992; for an analysis of the issue of the language of Italian Americans in general, see the groundbreaking essay by Robert Viscusi, "*De Vulgari Eloquentia*: An Approach to the Language of Italian American Fiction," in *Yale Italian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Winter 1981:21-38.

the **onoma**, essaying to shock it out of its torpor, and recharging it with political, symbolic, visual, enigmatic allusions.[9]

This line of inquiry can rest on the authority of such critical luminaries as Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, Husserl, some pages from Heidegger, the New Critics, Jakobson's structuralist poetics and so on. In the poetic mode, all practicing lyricists, from Petrarch to John Donne to from Holderlin to Eliot. Its "results" consistently yield revealing identities, names of places, basic structures of language-and-being. We can call this the **ontological function** of poetizing. However, there is another approach to Poetry as the origin of language, and this consists in reworking the part of speech in terms of another of its fundamental functions, namely, that of **naming** reality (or whatever reality is under consideration). This poetry is really concerned not so much with establishing WHAT something is, but with the fact THAT it can do something, that it will have an effective impact (on someone, something in the culture). This poetic use of language will of necessity rely more on the verb, on the phrastic or dynamic or intersubjective properties of the utterance. From the Bible and Homer and down through Plato, Dante, Vico, Nietzsche, and Ricoeur, the poetic word has also been conceived and experimented with in terms of its founding capacity, or its somehow "magical" power to in-vent or devise a "world" of sorts.[10] This poetry by and large focuses on the possibility/ eventuality of **what** it can disclose not in terms of Being but in terms of Becoming, so to speak.[11]

[9] For the theoretical background to this framing of the nature of poetics, see Paul Ricoeur, *La Metaphore vive*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

[10] I have developed this hypothetical rhetorical hermeneutics in my book *Prefaces to the Diaphora*, cit., and in my 1995 article "Turning in/to the Diaphora."

[11] I discuss the profound implications the focus on becoming can have for interpretation in general in my book *Prefaces to the Diaphora. Rhetorics, Allegory,and the Interpretation of Postmodernity*. W. Lafayette, Purdue UP, 1991.

This type of poetic has a political soul markedly different from that of the avant-gardists. A poetry in which isolating, touching, lighting up the naming function of the word is a poetry intrinsically concerned with naming the world, pointing toward reality, and a social historical symbolic life-world at that.[12] We can call this a **gnostic** or **cognitive** poetry. To name something corresponds not to merely mentioning a word-that-refers-to-something the first time, in a casual sequence of "new" words or things we discover. To name something is to bring it into existence from the void or nullity of non-Being, or forgetfullness, or suppression.

And here we inevitably bump into the issue of identity, not only in its inward-bound, psychological, gender-marked aspect, but also and simultaneously in its external, reality-driven, socially-influenced dimension.[13] In the present case, if I mention the proper name Italy or list a cluster of personal/critical problems as somehow related to the geopolitical entity called Italy, I have already excluded all other possible nations or ethnic or cultural backgrounds.[14] And that affects and pre- or co-determines the sense of the ensuing reading. Beyond that, we would have to ask why a writer needs to express this identity, and how it is wrung out of the chaos, how it is fashioned, what pathways or better said labyrinths of the soul must be traversed before the poet can frame or chisel or utter this memory, this image, this claim.

[12] In this perspective, we can make full use of the theoretical insights derived from psychoanalysis –which has played a key role in feminist criticism of the past thirty years,– without losing sight of the social and political realities within which the poetic text is (circum)inscribed.

[13] Very crucial to an understanding of this dialectic in women's writings are the groundbreaking observations by Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977.

[14] This critical angle would correspond to pursuing the questions according to Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Le Differend*. Paris, Seuil, 1984.

III.

If we look at the poetry of Maria Gillan, the naming is carried on not simply or exclusively as a defiant screaming for long overdue public, social, communal acceptance, tolerance of one's difference, or specific cultural subtexts. The naming is just as crucially dependant upon a phrastic construct, a verbal texture which makes it possible to refashion a sequence, (re)construct the possible meaning of an experience, give it a memory because a story, however short and brilliant, is always already a history of consciousness, an indelible account, a complex of thoughts and situations. In the poems the loci of memory make up a sort of series or suites on specific interlocutors, such as the daughter, the mother, the husband, interspersed more or less chronologically in the recent collection *Where I Come From.* These sequences therefore establish a cluster of themes, and circumscribe a poetic journal, a phenomenology of feelings, of the feelings of a woman who ushers a new typology, a more complex picture of the Italian American woman, and the Italian American woman poet at that. We can take the cue from a line of "The Crow" (67-9), "We are driven women,/ and we'll never escape/ the voices we carry within us."[15]

The voices borne in the bosom of these women speak a different language from that of earlier generations. In Mazziotti Gillan's case, the voices that speak inside her cultural (un)conscious(ness) register a set of polarities in fluid dialectical relation as they attest to an emotional and existential development (the poems that deal with "accepting" reality, the "passing" of time, the "foreknowledge" of emotional storms to come). They also evidence a conflict to be resolved (the evolution of her feelings toward

[15] It is this last line, incidentally, that returns in the title of the next best collection of Italian women writers, Mary Jo Bona's *The Voices We Carry*, cit.

her mother, oscillating from resentment and distance to the recapture of her deeper self later on in life, as she becomes a (the) mother herself). Yet another poetic journey could be attempted by re-tracing the painful emergence of the author's social and cultural identity, and the corresponding sense of entitlement and respect. Let us briefly explore this last topic.

In the poem "Public School No. 18, Paterson, New Jersey" (12-14), the poet or narrator recalls in quickly sketched images what must have been a painful experience as a child:

> Miss Wilson's eyes, opaque
> as blue glass, fix on me:
> "We must speak English.
> We're in America now."
> I want to say, "I am American,"
> but the evidence is stacked against me.

The following stanza relates how her mother "scrubbed" her scalp, how she was made to feel "dirty" and "ashamed." The third stanza returns upon the struggle with language, with being forced by external pressures to forget Italian and focus on "proper" English. Nevertheless, the sense of shame is carried on beyond language: "Without words, they tell me/to be ashamed./I am." The condition of the self is imposed by the gaze, the forbidding authoritarian Master opticon. Being poems of reminiscence and confrontation/acceptance, the next stanza leaps ahead, only to recall another ready-made external label: "Years later, in a white/Kansas City house,/the Psychology professor tells me/I remind him of the Mafia leader/on the cover of *Time* magazine." Clearly this person has had to struggle against all sorts of diminishing stereotyping, and for a long time. The next stanza is in fact constituted solely by two verses but delivering an eruption of the growing gnarled emotion: "My anger spits/venomous from my mouth" followed in

the next two stanzas by a defiant declaration of one's ownness, no matter what, deploying a bullying, indeed threatening counterattack:

> I am proud of my mother,
> dressed all in black,
> proud of my father
> with his broken tongue,
> proud of the laughter
> and noise of our house.
>
> Remember me, Ladies,
> the silent one?
> I have found my voice
> and my rage will blow
> your house down.

We have here a great many topics that will return in Mazziotti Gillan's later poems, and are present also in a number of other Italian American poets. The complexity of the necessity to show pride in one's family and customs (no matter how 'imperfect' or 'different') is of course a topos that extends to other ethnic and cultural groups as well. It is a first stand, a fundamental positioning. The family is what Mazziotti Gillan's poetry is mostly about, and the complex emotional dynamics among its members. From the standpoint of a core identity, the poetic I finds security, trust, and a sense of purpose in the parents, in the house, and in its irreplaceable specificity.[16]

[16] Yet the "myth" of the "security" of the Italian American family has slowly been eroded, especially through the increased critical attention paid to the social history of actual case studies. See Barolini *The Dream Book*, cit., 6-7 et infra. See also her recent collection, *Chiaroscuro. Essays of Identity*, W. Lafayette (IN), Bordighera, 1997, especially 37-50.

But time doth pass and changes do occur, as the formerly cowered and shamed bright little girl is now a grown person. And this adult poet has earned her right to speak, demand respect, show her wounds and laurels: "Here I am/and I'm strong/and my skin is warm in the sun/and my dark hair shines" (56-57). Pressed so hard to become some vague emulation of a WASP, or the generic American, some culturally very deeply ingrained "American" traits surface through the text: defiance, readyness to fight, capacity for fairness. At the same time, however, one gets the sense, in re-reading the poems in *Where I Come From*, that the discovery, acquisition or reclaiming of a cultural identity requires (or at least highlights) an analogous if not parallel search for and conquest of one's own I, the person's (or the speaking persona in the poem) sense of self, her subjectivity.

We can see both developments, that of the search for the poetic center, or ego, and that of the social-cultural identity associated with being somehow "Italian," if we were to regroup the collection. Poems like "Arturo" (50-51), "Growing up Italian" (54-57), "In Memory we are Walking" (58-59), "Columbus and the Road to Glory" (80-84) revolve around experiences or type of emotions we would call of ethnic identity and validation. A growing and ever more complex topos of recent intellectual and political discourse, an author's ethnicity sooner or later must be dealt with, exposed, talked about. Whatever this turns out to be, it should be defended, publicly circulated. It is a sacrosanct right of every citizen. Against this recognition, a certain degree of <u>réssentement</u> is perceivable, of course, and at times even a note of bitterness, yet there is also in the background an emotional predisposition to healing, to silent participation. Being made to feel a stranger, a foreigner, in one's own country is of course a deeply alienating experience: "I woke up cursing/all those who taught me/to hate my dark, foreign self" (56). It polarizes an inside (the home) / outside (school, work) dialectic, and evidences that the continuity is unsteady, fractured somewhere,

or that someone thinks it is so. In any case the very acquisition of a consciousness requires also an inner split or capacity to distinguish between the concept of one's I and **how** that individual I defines itself against the members of one's family, parents foremost. Here the freshly regained sense of a positive social, cultural identity crosses over into psychological space. The lifeword of subjectivity is inhabited by several nodal forces. In Maria Mazziotti Gillan's poems the speaking persona develops her female subjectivity against a problematic relationship to the mother, who appears distant, introverted, predictable, and soon outgrown. We can clearly perceive how it is the daughter, one autonomous and rational woman never caught in the more traditional claustrophobic bond with her mother, who chooses in full awareness of the chasm to reconcile herself with her mother. And without any guilt, the speaking persona forges her own self, a different self, an independent ego. There is an Oedipal resolution of sorts going on. Indeed it is thematically pertinent and, more broadly, culturally significant, that in Mazziotti Gillan's poetry the Italian American woman deals explicitly, tenderly yet resolutely, with those proverbially unspeakable situations or feelings within the Italian American <u>domus</u>, as when a daughter has her first heartbreak – "The Shadow Rushing to Meet Us" (16-17), – or has to accept that her son will be moving out of the house – "Poem to John: Freshman Year; Drew University, 1983" (28-29), – and even a tender love note to her husband (37-38).

Another salient characteristic of this poetic voice is that this female speaking persona has a deep love for her father, which discloses an emotional aspect of Italian American poetics and writing emerged only recently, as Mary Jo Bona's anthology clearly attests, and represents I think an interesting field of artistic expression. Not all Sicilian American, for

instance, have been monsters to their wives and daughters.[17] In reviewing *The Voices We Carry*, Signorelli-Pappas wrote:

> I am struck by the pattern of strong, nurturing father-daughter relationship that emerges. This pattern seems to reverse the more usual tradition of Italian American daughters who have close, even claustrophobic, bonds with their mothers but reject the authoritarianism of their sterner, more domineering fathers.

In Maria Mazziotti Gillan's poetry, the father is a strong moral model and a loving person. The lines are simple as they recount with a few efficaciously cadenced everyday phrases:

> My father was grateful
> to get a job as a dyer's helper in a silk mill.
> And when he hurt his back lifting
> the heavy rolls of silk,
> he became a night watchman in a school
> and when he could no longer
> walk the rounds ten times a night,
> he got a job in a rubber factory,
> gauging the pressure on steam boilers
> to make sure they didn't explode.
> He worked the night shift for nineteen years,
> the boilers so loud he lost 90%
> of the hearing in both ears.

[17] See the interesting journey a rebours through her mother's peers by Giovanna Del Negro, *Looking Through My Mother's Eyes. Life Stories of Nine Immigrant Women in Canada, Toronto*, Guernica, 1997.

After such an intensive, knuckle-breaking blue-collar curriculum, the account frames the social, political, and ethical dimension of the person:

> My father, who at eighty-six still balances
> my checkbook, worked for a man
> who screamed at him
> as though he were a fool,
> but by teaching himself the basic laws of the USA,
> he learned to negotiate the system
> in his broken English,
> spoke up for immigrants
> when they were afraid to speak,
> helped them sell property in Italy
> or send for their wives and children. (81)

The father appears to embody character traits which are positive and morally inspiring, whether they be Italian or American. Indeed it appears that, of the two parents, the father represents America and the mother Italy.

As we saw above, the relationship with the mother was marked by silence, or non communication. The one with the father makes several references to speaking, to entering into a dialectic relationship with one's society. We could even that in a way the American self (half?) gains access to speech (however "broken"), while the Italian self (half?) remains hidden in the silence of the shadows. This quasi-chiastic symbolic arrangement can be imagined or demonstrated if we follow the two paths separately. To continue with the above "Columbus..." poem, where the speaking persona is now looking at her father, dressed "in his one good suit," we shift from the personal/familiar recalling to the social/cultural inscription of a dream, a faith, "loving America, believing it to be/the best and most beautiful

country/in the world,/a place where his children/and the children of the others/could go to school, get good jobs," (81-82).

The poem then follows with the apparently necessary but by now predictable shortlist of contemptuous epithets aimed at Italian Americans for the past two centuries. I don't particularly see the need for, or understand the compulsion of, the writer, at this juncture in history, to have to rehash these misnomers in public again as if to cleanse oneself through some exorcism, or as if to throw them back "in the face" at the society that formerly employed them for vicious stereotyping. This act of linguistic counterpelting hides a vicious irony built into it: the degrading words get mentioned again: the very presence of the word will recall, also, those negative connotations the poet is clearly attempting to deconstruct.

To continue with the poem, the next stanza represents yet another shift in this father/social world/America interrelation, heightened by the concrete reference to the cultural icon of Columbus, and the tradition of its now contested or threatened (Quincentenary Celebrations of 1992) celebration:

> For those Italians, living
> in their tenements, surviving ten hours a day
> at menial jobs, Columbus Day was their day
> to shine, like my father's tuba, polished
> for the occasion, my father, grinning
> and marching, practicing his patriotic speech. (82)

A new sequence can be opened here concerning Mazziotti Gillan's position on Christopher Columbus as an Italian American cultural icon of inestimable depth and importance. We can call it middle of the road tolerance, multicultural privilege, historically "corrected." It is not as belabored and

tormented as Viscusi's take on the same issue.[18] Nevertheless, in this social space in which the subjects are called to interact, to negotiate and celebrate, the speaking persona shifts frame and re-calls her mother, who had entirely different ideas on what a good daughter ought to do: something along the lines of: shut up and don't make a fool out of yourself. Here the female subjectivity of the speaking persona crosses over to her father's territory, a needed leap to break off the unsatisfying relation, end a dependency:

> Let us pick up our flawed hero,
> march him through the streets of the city,
> the way we carried the statue
> of the Blessed Virgin at Festa.
> Let us forget our mother's orders,
> not to make trouble,
> not to call attention to ourselves,
> and in honor of my father and the men of the Società
> .....
> **I say: No to being silent...** (83-84, emphasis added)

The father figure is the sole focus of the poem "Arturo," a poem where the conflating of self/father/social identity (as an Italian American) attains another level of clarity:

> I told everyone
> your name was Arthur,
> tried to turn you
> into the imaginary father
> in the three-piece suit

[18] See Robert Viscusi, *An Oration upon the Most recent Death of Christopher Columbus*, W. Lafayette, Bordighera, 1993. See also my review in *DIFFERENTIA review of italian thought*, Vol. 6/7 (1994).

that I wanted instead of my own.
I changed my name to Marie,
hoping no one would notice
my face with its dark Italian eyes. (50)

This particular daughter not only is not berated or abused by her father, but is also actually feeling guilty for having desired at some point he'd be someone else. The poignancy of this sense of self-loathing, created by racism against Italian Americans, needs no elaboration at this juncture, having been explored in other contexts.[19] The poetic persona is ready to re-collect, to disclose herself to, a renewed bond or a newfound bond of affection and inspiration: "Arturo, I send you this message/from my younger self, that fool/who needed to deny/the words." (50) As in the previous poem, here once again we are told of his humble and honest virtues: "At eighty, you still worship/Roosevelt and J.F.K.,/read the newspaper carefully,/know with a quick shrewdness/the details of revolutions and dictators," his love of family: "For the children, you carry chocolates/wrapped in gold foil." It is high time for final re-cognition, sealing an identity and a relationship, as well as an historical and ideological vindication:

I smile when I think of you.
Listen, America,
this is my father, Arturo,
and I am his daughter, Maria.
Do not call me Marie. (51)

[19] See for example the chronological account by Mangione, Jerre, and Morreale, Ben. *La Storia. Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*. New York: Harper, 1992; and Tomasi, Lydio F., Gastaldo, Piero, & Row, Thomas, eds. *The Columbus People*. New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1994.

If we turn our gaze now to the second hypothetical path sketched above, we notice that not only mother and daughter have little linguistic exchange, but that if we only go back two generations, we meet up with a wall of silence, the unspoken silent awe of troubled origins, the invisible yet deeply felt past. In fact, a key poem to resonate with this primeval silence, "My Grandmother's Hands" (64-66), begins, emblematically enough, with the line: "I never saw them." As a result, the entire genealogy is marked by rupture and indefiniteness, even though it is entrusted to the filial link, to the traditional weavers of a common tongue, at least a homespeak of sorts. A woman's genealogy is constantly threatened by censure, troubling gaps, indifference and silence. Her grandmother is clearly from another world, a faraway somewhere:

Once she sent a picture of herself,
skinny as a hook, her backdrop
a cobbled street and a house
of stones.
In a black dress and black stockings,
she smiles over toothless gums,
old years before she should have been,
buttoned neck to shin in heavy black.
Her eyes express an emotion
it is difficult to read. (64)

How could it be read if it has never spoken: the eyes alone, the idea by itself, do not suffice. The poem in a way reminds us of the limits of visual representation, of the paradoxes of photography. The description is obviously a re-projected construction, an imagined simple but cohesive social view, humble and yet noble. But notice also how the break in the threadbare narrative of history occurs violenty, in mid-breath, suggesting a destinal event:

I think of my mother's mother
and her mother's mother, traced
back from us on the thin thread of memory.
In that little mountain village,
the beds where the children
were born and the old ones died
were passed from one generation
to the next, but when my mother married,
she left her family behind. The ribbon
between herself and the past
ended with her,
though she tried to pass it on. (64)

A memory grounded in nothing less than the archetypal bed where generations are born and die in continuity, irrespective of external configuration or at least unmarked for ethnicity, nationalness, specificity of provenance.[20] History breaks into this simple, silent cycle when the mother marries and migrates. Her leaving signals a dramatic repositioning of the subject, who attempts to keep alive the cyclic continuity through the practical administration of home life, as recounted in other poems of *Where I Come From*. But the ribbon is broken, despite her doomed attempts. Seeing and doing alone perhaps do not suffice: words are needed, a speaker speaking, someone who may listen, perhaps understand. The genealogical experience takes a different route, one fraught with consternation, frustration, the hand of inexorable change:

[20] Compare Barolini, *Chiaroscuro*: "My own conviction is that I am an American writer writing through my material for everyone, not just for Italian Americans...Italian Americans are not writing only to be read by Italian Americans any more that African Americans write only for African Americans, or the West Indian Novel laureate Derek Walcott is writing only for West Indians Americans! We all write as Americans for everyone who will read us...," 69.

And my own children cannot understand
a word of the old language,
the past of the village so far
removed that they cannot find
the connection between it
and themselves, will not pass it on. (64-65)

The speaking subject takes stock of this situation by placing herself in the space in-between, with a view and a sense of the old silent faraway of her foremothers. At the same time, there is a marching toward a future family space which cannot even begin to understand, listen, absorb, or somehow touch that elusive origin. The tone is absorbing, melancholy, disquieting:

They cannot possess it,
not in the way we possessed it
in the 17th Street kitchen,
where the Italian stories and the words
fell over us like confetti.

Consistently with a property of poetry to evoke huge philosophical issues in deceivingly simple phrases, the itinerary can be understood as an attempt at assigning experience a value, or giving one's past a name, a continuity, a symbolic coherence. Yet as rooted as it is in hard reality, the consequences seem inevitable, and the speaking persona squares off with her own role in all this, being as she is in-between two worlds, two incommunicable realities, the silent foreign past and the noisy common future:

All the years of our growing
were shaped by my mother,
the old brown rocker,
the comfort of her love

and the arms that held us
secure in that tenement kitchen,
the old stories weaving connections
between ourselves and the past,
teaching us so much about love
and the gift of self
and I wonder: Did I fail
my own children? Where
is the past I gave to them
like a gift? (65)

There is a dead end here, where the background drama of migration is consummated, where the origin, the original, the provenance, the recognizable din of history is ripped off its axle. And there is little else left to forge new recourses.

Now the journey requires that we deal somehow with this wound, with this fading memory, with that unnarrated because unnarratable chapter of the Italian American poet's social and cultural unconscious. And much like her mother did with her, the most the poet can do is try to give her children something of that continuity, although at this juncture it doesn't – it cannot! – find expression in anything cultural, ethnic, national, socially or historically marked. The poet turns inward, breaks onto the tenderness and closeness of the familial, mother-to-children universe. Mother Earth in its full power and mystery. Finally, the perception that the weaves and patterns of one's history are variously configured and subtle silk threads, tenuous perhaps, but a home of sorts, perhaps a deeper trans-historical, indestructible *domus*:

The skein of the past
stretches back from them to me to my mother,

the old country, the old language lost,
but in this new world, saved and cherished:
the tablecloth my grandmother made,
the dresser scarves she crocheted,
and the love she taught us to weave,
a thread of woven silk
to lead us home. (67)

The identity of the self and the naming of the home coincide. It is a poetic that explores precise dynamics in the social/emotional characteristics of Italian Americans, and women of Italian descent in particular. A poetic which reveals new facets of Italian American writing, hints at possible cultural rhetorics, attempts a manageable, dynamic, affirmative yet compassionate ethos. It also illuminates on analogous cultural situations among other hyphenated literatures, or "minor" literatures in Deleuze's term.[21] Not to make the poetic we explored universal and applicable to other fields, but to suggest that it is translatable. It can be moved. It moves.

Names can be translated, but can the essence remain the same?

[21] See for example Anzaldua's article in the anthology edited by Fernandez *In Other Words*, listed in the references.

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