

Italian Canadiana

The Representation of Italy in Caterina Edwards' The Sicilian Wife and Rita Ciresi's Sometimes I Dream in Italian

Maria Giuseppina (Giusy) Cesari

Volume 34, 2020

New Perspectives in Italian Canadian Writing: Dynamics of Cultural Inheritance

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087293ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37446>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (imprimé)

2564-2340 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Cesari, M. (2020). The Representation of Italy in Caterina Edwards' The Sicilian Wife and Rita Ciresi's Sometimes I Dream in Italian. *Italian Canadiana*, 34, 27–33. <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37446>

Résumé de l'article

This paper wishes to explore how Caterina Edwards, an Italian Canadian writer, and Rita Ciresi, an Italian American writer, share a strong, although very different, personal and authorial relation to Italy and the Italian language. I shall be focusing on their similarities rather than differences: they are brought up in North America, their mother tongue is English, they (and their characters) travel from/to Sicily, Venice, Edmonton as well as New Haven, Venice and Rome in a complex chronotopic framework. Old and new myths, mystery and parody are intertwined in their innovative texts. These “new travelers” are part of a new cross-border literary community where Italy plays a significant role as much as their countries of origin, Canada and the US. Is Italy a place to visit, a crime scene, a mythical land, a country of passionate desire, or... just a dream?

The Representation of Italy in Caterina Edwards' *The Sicilian Wife* and Rita Ciresi's *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*

Maria Giuseppina (Giusy) Cesari

UNINT University (Università degli Studi Internazionali), Rome

Abstract: This paper wishes to explore how Caterina Edwards, an Italian Canadian writer, and Rita Ciresi, an Italian American writer, share a strong, although very different, personal and authorial relation to Italy and the Italian language. I shall be focusing on their similarities rather than differences: they are brought up in North America, their mother tongue is English, they (and their characters) travel from/to Sicily, Venice, Edmonton as well as New Haven, Venice and Rome in a complex chronotopic framework. Old and new myths, mystery and parody are intertwined in their innovative texts. These “new travelers” are part of a new cross-border literary community where Italy plays a significant role as much as their countries of origin, Canada and the US. Is Italy a place to visit, a crime scene, a mythical land, a country of passionate desire, or... just a dream?

Keywords: new travelers, myth, journey, Mafia, Italian Canadian/American, literature.

“O rinnovarsi o morire!”
(Gabriele D’Annunzio, 1892)

1. The New Travelers

Caterina Edwards, an English born author writing in English, and Rita Ciresi, an American born author also writing in English, may seem entirely dissimilar for their ethnic and national background. As an Italian Canadian author (Caterina Edwards) and an Italian American author (Rita Ciresi), they have been inspired by two different cultural traditions and far-off settings for their works. While Caterina Edwards grew up in a small Italian Canadian Anglophone community of multicultural Western Canada (Edmonton, Alberta), Rita Ciresi’s upbringing took place in one of the most densely populated areas of Italian American assimilation and acculturation in New England (New Haven, Connecticut). When I first thought of comparing two women writers who seemingly belonged to two different cultural traditions, however, I decided to focus on their resemblance rather than their dissimilarity. I realized that—despite their distinctiveness—these writers have something significant in common, because they share a strong, although very

different, relation with Italy and the Italian language. But, above all, their relationship is very innovative in many ways, in the light of their life experience and the content of their literary production. I shall be focusing on two of their works, Caterina Edwards' *The Sicilian Wife* (from now on *TSW*), published in 2015, and Rita Cirese's *Sometimes I Dream in Italian* (from now on *Sometimes*), published in 2000.

Caterina Edwards and Rita Cirese both belong to a new generation of Italian Canadian and Italian American women writers: they were brought up in North America, their mother tongue is English, but they speak more or less Italian. Caterina Edwards used to translate Italian for her mother. "I'm told that as soon as I could talk, I became my mother's translator" (2009). These writers use Italian words or dialect in their texts as "Buried Caesars" (Viscusi, 2006) or hidden signs of their Italian heritage. They regularly come back to Italy for work, for studies, and for visiting, as Caterina Edwards has acknowledged in a recent interview ("Interview with Shelagh Rogers"). Their knowledge of Italy is broad and built upon the classics, personal experience, family roots, and probably the image of Italy in both continents, besides their own Italian Canadian and Italian American experience. These two authors are completely different from the early traditional writers who described the immigrant journey. Becoming more and more numerous each year, I would define them as "the new travelers."

Their journey back to Italy is voluntary and so is their authorial and personal relation to the country of their ancestors: Caterina Edwards seems to have a close personal link to Italy through her Italian mother and her Sicilian husband, whose family stories and experiences must have influenced the plots and characters of *The Sicilian Wife*. On the other hand, Rita Cirese's knowledge of Italian Americans in New Haven gives us a commentary of later generations traveling back to Italy after being immersed in Big America. Both of them resort to the oral tradition passed on to them: vernacular voices can be heard throughout their novels and/or short stories in the form of ancient folk tales, mottoes, proverbs, catchphrases, such as "Che si dice" (*Sometimes*, 117-118) or "gli anni di piombo" (*TSW*, 49), or even core concepts such as "omertà" (*Sometimes*, 46; *TSW*, 61).

Furthermore, Italian words are peculiarly translated into Italian within the English text, such as "*a boss, a latitante, a fugitive*" (86) (original italics) in *The Sicilian Wife*, or "[...] *The Cousin*. What do you think of Cugino?" (12) (original italics) in *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*. This last narrative strategy seems to correspond to everyday practice for authors with a hyphenated identity,¹ as well as to a desire for explaining themselves and building a dialogue with the readers. Several characters of the two books address people with Italian name titles, an enduring habit of Italian immigrants and their descendants in North America, such as "signora Mazzolin" or "Commissaria" (*TSW*, 61;55) or "Nonna",

¹ For an in-depth analysis of Italian words invading the English text see Licia Canton.

"Mamma" (TSW, 86; 90; 92) in all its variations like "Mama" (*Sometimes*, 6, 9, 10) and its male counterparts "Babbo", "Nonno" (*Sometimes*, 26; 27).

The genre and the tone of both books are very innovative, the style for Caterina Edwards (*The Sicilian Wife* is a novel as well as a noir),² the tone for Rita Ciresi (*Sometimes I Dream in Italian* is blooming into a parody). As for the settings, their stories are located all along a triangle. Sicily, Venice and Edmonton are the settings for *The Sicilian Wife*, with Sicily as a focal point, while New Haven, New York and Venice are the settings for *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, with New Haven as a focal point. As an island and a harbour, in Southern and Northern Italy respectively, Sicily and Venice become real and symbolic points of departure and/or arrival as well as *topoi* of Italian emigration to North America.

The only *topos*' they have in common is Venice, although Caterina Edwards' focus is on Sicily. Venice is the place to go and visit in Ciresi's short story, and it is Sam's (Fulvia's husband) passionate motherland in Caterina Edwards' novel, since "He has too much nostalgia" (290). Venice is the symbol of Northern Italy for both writers; for Caterina Edwards, it is an artistic, beautiful but still corrupted city where a migrant cannot return to, in this Sicily and Venice are alike. For Rita Ciresi, Venice is a dream place where all Italian Americans go "on a Perillo bus tour" (190), hence her ambivalent feelings of attraction and extraneousness at the same time. Both writers pay their tribute to Italy as the land of splendid natural and artistic beauties, be it the Venetian Saint Mark's Square, "the lacy facade of the Doge's palace, the Shadowy Bridge of Sighs" (*Sometimes*, 188) or the ruins of a glorified past, such as "the stones of *Magna Grecia*" (TSW, 153) in Sicily.

They also seem to go hand in hand with a new line of studies in Italian critical studies, although the reasons are very different. The onset of Italian Canadian and Italian American Studies within the regional context for Sicilian or Venetian authors is a response to a historical consideration that migrants identified themselves locally or regionally, considering the village of origin/*paese* as relevant, but also to a new field of interest, the building of a regional literary canon through a cross-border perspective. Let us take the example of the anthologies edited by Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis, *Sweet Lemons 1 and 2* (2004; 2010). They collect authors of Sicilian descent from both Canada, the US and Italy. Or, let us look at this new canon through a horizontal regional perspective by taking the example of Chiara Mazzucchelli's critical study *The Heart and the Island* (2015) on Sicilian American literature. This trend also corresponds to a growing revival for regional works in Italian literature

² "Still, I don't have a chosen genre, per se. I'm drawn to new challenges. I've published a novel, a collection of short stories, a book of novellas, and a play. I'm not interested in repeating myself" (Edwards, "Interview with Susan Olding").

and criticism. Italian works are conversely written in Italian with words/mottoes/sentences of dialect (Sicilian, Venetian, Neapolitan, Sardinian, etc.) within the Italian texts. Sicilian writer Andrea Camilleri and Sardinian writer Salvatore Niffoi are well-known examples³ of this literary revival of local stories and dialects versus global stories and standard Italian.

2. *The Sicilian Wife and Italy: Old and New Myths*

The Sicilian Wife by Caterina Edwards tells the story of three women: the first one is Fulvia Arcuri, a Mafia princess born in the Arcuri Mafia clan in Sicily. Although she is supposed to be “feeding the flame of honour” (88) of her family because her father is “a man of honour” (87), she escapes to locus aemoenus, Edmonton (Canada). She wishes to free herself from the suffocating ties and duties of her criminal Mafia family. Her Venetian husband, Sam Mazzolin, is murdered when he returns to Italy from Canada after leaving her. The second woman is the Chief of Alcamo Police, Marisa DeLuca, the first woman *Commissario* in western Sicily. She investigates the murder case but hardly survives her task when her car is bombed. She has to fight against male prejudice, Mafia association, and corruption.

The third woman is Sicily itself because the island can only have a female connotation, it's the land of Persephone and the Greek goddesses. “She said ancient Sicily was a centre of goddess worship” (153), in Sicily there is “the lake of where Persephone was taken and Erice, the city of Aphrodite”(154), where Icarus “flew too close to the sun” (84), where “Persephone was picking flowers...(84) and “Demeter was standing on the mountain of our Enna”(84). Sicily is a mythical land where old and new myths exist together. Sicily is the country of the four elements of the Ancient Greek Philosophy: air (I) earth, (II), wind (III), fire (IV) (hence the titles of the four parts of the book). It is the land of Empedocles “you could still sense what Empedocles's sacred city used to be: powerful and beautiful (153). “Sicily was Magna Grecia” (83). But, most of all, “In Sicily you could touch the past, taste it” (156). Fulvia tries to escape Sicily and the past to re-invent herself elsewhere, in Canada: “But for most people emigration from the past to the future is not so simple” (2).

Sicily is also the land of fairy tales and magic spells, where a black-bird or a lizard might as well speak to Fulvia as a child, “just like in fairy tales” (13), and would reward her with “three wishes or a special gift” (13). But it is also the land where the *malocchio* or “evil eye” (95, 203) governs men's destiny, the dead speak to the living saying that “la

³ Andrea Camilleri created the character of Commissario Salvo Montalbano, a chief policeman from a small Sicilian town whose Sicilian identity is a strength for his investigations, whereas Salvatore Niffoi's settings and characters are Sardinians speaking Italian and Sardinian dialect.

viu niura (...) I see it black" (272). Evil and good, rescue and damnation oscillate throughout the novel and weigh on the heroine's faith. "For I was born to original sin and need redemption" (122)—says Fulvia. A sense of doom pervades the whole novel, what the Greeks called ἀνάγκη or *tuké* (destiny), we can feel that Sicily is not a stable living place, but the kingdom of ruling dark forces.

The old dark forces conjure with the new ones, the Mafia groups, the so-called *cosche* (209) governing the island and foreshadowing other overwhelming forces like corruption, bribery, and politics. Caterina Edwards reads the Mafia myth both in the light of the traditional Italian American cliché but also in the light of the Italian Mafia's ongoing saga that Mafia is being connected with government officials and unsolved crime stories. Above all, she makes Aldo Moro's assassination the hottest issue, as an enduring myth of the dark forces within Italian politics. The sense of doom remains, the ancient forces of *hybris* (impious act/conceit) leading to the gods' revenge (νέμεσις) and the gods' envy (φθόνος των θεών) are still at work. Neither Fulvia nor her husband will be spared as the author warns the readers in the incipit: "(...) for Fulvia Arcuri, the journey would be a perilous one" (2). She concludes by resorting to the healing power of storytelling: "But she (Fulvia) longed to tell the story of her long and perilous journey" (352).

3. *Sometimes I Dream in Italian* and Italy: The Parody and the Homecoming

Angel Lupo's "circular journey"⁴ in *Sometimes I Dream in Italian* is quite distinctive because Rita Cirese frames it in a broader perspective. She combines it with the Italian Americans' immigrant journey to the US, by focusing on their life in New Haven first, and then she moves on Angel's journey to Italy and homecoming. The story is centred upon the lives of two sisters of Italian descent, Lina and Angel Lupo who have to live up to their Italian past and learn Italian. "We did not speak Italian naturally, like our parents; we were Americans, and it was a foreign language" (43). A subtle irony pervades the whole book when Lina tells her sister Angel that her husband considers her very erotic because she "talks Italian to him" (178) and also when the author describes New Haven's Little Italy (3-19) with all its typical foods and *macchiette*, preserving "Real and Imagined Legacies" (Gardaphé, 151-161) of that enclave. The irony reaches its peak when the girls transform their father's name from Carlino Lupo into Charles Patrick Wolf by "making a false driver's license" (40) and the author parodies their Southern heavy accented Italian: "We needed to learn Italian (...). We did not speak Italian naturally, like our parents: we were Americans, and it was a foreign language" (43).

The Italian past is the Italian American past, and the family's immi-

⁴ I am referring to Helen Barolini's *A Circular Journey*, where she depicts her circular journey from Syracuse, NY, to Italy and back to the US.

grant journey is part of the family story tales, although Italy is looming in the background consciously or unconsciously, as Angel sometimes even dreams in Italian (hence the title), a classic example of another “Buried Caesar” (§ 1). The parody reaches its climax when Angel decides to visit Italy with Dirk, her boyfriend of German descent. Angel leaves the US as an American tourist but, when she arrives at Rome airport, Angel’s *nostos* takes place. In the midst of the confusion and the faces, she feels she belongs to Italy and defines it “a big party from my past” (186), while Dirk is “clearly a foreigner” (187). When she realizes that she is perceived as being similar to Italians, her homecoming is complete: “[...] people spoke English to us if we were together, and Italian to me and German to Dick if we were apart” (187). Rita Ciresi empathizes with the perspective of Italian Americans in Venice, where people would go on their honeymoon because “(...) everyone goes to Venice”. “Yes, every Italian American”—says Dirk—“I am Italian American”—answers Angel (190). Venice is a romantic city where “German tourists and vacationers from New York and New Jersey” (190) go on black gondolas. Venice is also a special place where Angel gets engaged, and she symbolically gets lost and then finds her way again: “It’s easy to get lost in Venice, but the natives help you find the way” (198). Angel’s education and *nostos* have been completed by returning to Italy. Her journey can be regarded as a subsequent free choice.

Conclusion

The chronotope⁵ of the two stories works in the opposite direction. It goes from Italy to Canada and from the past to the future for Fulvia Arcuri, from the US to Italy and from the future to the past for Angel Lupo. This can be explained by Caterina Edwards’ hyphenated identity of Italian Canadian—where the hyphen means a fragmented or a double identity—to be confronted with an Italian American writer like Rita Ciresi returning to Italy from her American mainstream positioning. Although their fictional and authorial identity building, their personal and national background, their chronotopic relationship with Italy are different, these “new travelers” are part of a new cross-border literary community where Italy plays a significant role as much as their countries of origin, Canada and the US. Is Italy a place to visit, a crime scene, a mythical land, a country of passionate desire, or... just a dream?

Works Cited

Bachtin, Michail. “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes towards an Historical Poetics.” In *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time*,

⁵ The Bakhtinian theory of the chronotope applies a spatial-temporal frame to narratives to analyze the authors’ narrative strategies.

- Plot, Closure, and Frame*, edited by Brian Richardson, James Phalen, Peter Rabinowitz. Pp 47-63. Ohio State University Press, Ohio 2002.
- Barolini, Helen. *A Circular Journey*. New York: Fordham University Press: 2006.
- Canton, Licia. "The Clash of Languages in the Italian-Canadian Novel." *Adjacencies: Minority Writing in Canada*, edited by Licia Canton, Domenico A. Beneventi, Lianne Moyes (pp. 143-156). Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2004.
- Ciresi, Rita. *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- D'Annunzio, Gabriele. "Giovanni Episcopo," *I Meridiani*. 1892. Milano: Mondadori, 1988.
- Edwards, Caterina. *The Sicilian Wife*. Westmount: Linda Leith Publishing Inc., 2015.
- . "Interview with Susan Olding," <http://susanolding.com/interview-with-caterina-edwards>. Retrieved 15 December 2016.
- . "Interview with Shelagh Rogers." *The Next Chapter* radio broadcast, "Caterina Edwards on *The Sicilian Wife*." <http://www.cbc.ca/listen/shows/the-next-chapter/segment/11315534>. Retrieved 10 January 2017.
- Gardaphé, Fred L. *Leaving Little Italy: Essaying Italian American Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Mazzucchelli, Chiara. *The Heart and the Island: A Critical Study of Sicilian American Literature*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015.
- Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis. (Eds). *Sweet Lemons: Writings with a Sicilian Accent*. Mineola, NY and Ottawa: Legas 2004.
- . *Sweet Lemons 2: International Writings with a Sicilian Accent*. Mineola, NY and Ottawa: Legas, 2010.
- Viscusi, Robert. *Buried Caesars and Other Secrets of Italian American Writing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.