

THE POETIC VOICE OF FRIULANI WRITERS IN CANADA

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“Lost in Argentina”

“Lost in Argentina” is the title I gave to the story about my great uncle, Augusto Sabucco. From Friuli he went to Buenos Aires in 1900 and sent back a few letters to my great grandfather, Luigi Sabucco. And then there were no more letters. When I went to Buenos Aires in August 2007, I did some research in the archives of immigration to Argentina for the turn of the last century. I searched the manifests of ships which disembarked Italian immigrants at the ports of Buenos Aires. I could not find any record of him. My great uncle Augusto Sabucco had disappeared.

Friulani writers in Canada all deal with this lost history in their families and towns. As they compose stories and poems they try to reconstruct this lost history from the fragments. Immigrant families kept few records or documents so that stories are often passed down by word of mouth. I have studied the “Oral Roots of Italian-Canadian Writing” (*Echo*: 77-100).

The Friulani workers wandered the world but there are few written records. They did leave their mark in many places. You can visit the opera house in Manaus in Brazil and see the mosaic work of the boys from Spilimbergo. They went up the Rio Negro to the middle of the Amazon jungle to produce their art, a de-territorialized art. They ate piranha fish instead of *baccala*. As writers and researchers we have only fragments of this history, fragments scattered in distant parts of the world.

These immigrant writers have another disadvantage: Friuli is a minority culture with a minority language. How do you express that culture in another language such as Italian, or English or French? The rules and practices of translation seem to breakdown. The writers within Friuli itself produce a minority literature that can only be read by a few people in Italy.

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The best description of a minor literature is found in Kafka who was trying to understand the role of Yiddish writing in Warsaw, Poland, and Czech writing in Prague, a Prague dominated by German. For Kafka a minor literature can serve to focus an ethnic group's collective life, a medium to articulate conflict, and the maintenance of traditions central to public life. Politics and art are closely related in a minority literature.

In their study of Kafka, theorists Deleuze and Guattari also explain that a minor literature has a strong social and political function and uses a language with an aspect of de-territorialization. The territory of Friuli, the land itself is the central reference point of the language. Writing in Friulano outside of Italy is an exercise in faith alone. We will look briefly at three writers who compose in Friulano in Canada: Rina Del Nin Cralli from Codroipo, Ermanno Bulfon from San Martino di Codroipo (1942-1985), and Doris Vorano from Nogaredo di Corno, near Coseano.

These Friulani writers with immigrant backgrounds have the unusual experience of writing in an oral language, which is a minority language in Italy and is now de-territorialized by being used in Canada. What is the purpose of using such a language so far from Italy? These writers have the obsession to write, to express their experiences in their language of emotion. They also have the need to record their immigrant experiences. And they have the heavy responsibility of speaking for the voiceless migrant workers who wandered the world. They are speaking for our grandfathers and grandmothers and for our parents. These writers are speaking for the ordinary peasant farmer who never had a voice in the class structure of Italy and who, as an immigrant, never had a voice in an English-speaking country. And it is with some courage that these writers use the Friulano language in their work, even if it is only in parts. For one of his Italian poems Silvano Zamaro has the dedication to his parents in Friulano, «A Derna e Checo che mi jan insegnat la lenghe dal cûr» (*Autostrada...*: 25).

One of the most interesting publications is a collection by women writers from Friuli called *A Furlan Harvest*, which was edited by Dôre Michelut in 1993. Two of the five women included in this anthology, Ausilia Borteli and Rina Del Nin Cralli write poems in Friulano, «la lenghe dal cûr». Rina Del Nin Cralli's poems focus on looking back at Friuli with titles: "Nostalgjie e tulipans" and "Siúm", a poem about returning to Friuli in a dream. Rina has published many poems in Italian newspapers such as *Il Ponte* and *La Cisilude* and publications from the *Famee Furlane* in Toronto. The striking aspect of Rina's poems is the heavy emphasis on nostalgia. Poem after poem is focused on homesickness for Friuli. This is evident in some of the titles: "La Tiare c'ò ai lassat", "Unevore di Strade", "L'Etat D'oro", "Il distac", "Mame", "Primevere", "Il Campanon", "Sentade su la Panchine", and "Il sis di Maj" about the Friuli earthquake of 1976. Rina even composed a version of the Canadian na-

tional anthem into Friulano. The poems epitomize the de-territorialized language of the immigrant in both the language used and the dominant theme of longing and loss.

When you read these poems in Friulano you begin to notice a pattern: «Ma il mê cûr al e' simpri la», and «I nestrîs paîs 'o vin lassat».

Cun rimplant
E dolor di cûr
'o vin bandonat
Il nestrî Friûl
(Del Nin Cralli. *Manuscript*).

This writer from Codroipo makes us look at the quality of the language. It seems as if this language lends itself to expressing feelings of nostalgia. With over 100 years of emigration from Friuli the oral language has been shaped with words of longing and loss. Rina's poems demonstrate the many ways of expressing these feelings with this oral, and now, written language.

These writers are using the Friulano language in the English-Canadian context to recreate a virtual Friuli, its culture and language. How do you think and talk in Friulano in Canada? The English-Canadian culture and language has an influence on how Friulano is used. It is not so much the effect of language interference as the change in perspective. The writer composes poems in Friulano on experiences in Friuli, but does this from another country far away, a country not imagined in the language of Friuli. How do you say Canada in Friulano and what does it mean? You can only talk about Friuli. This is illustrated by the title on Ermanno Bulfon's collection of poems, *Un Friûl vivût in Canada*. Canada has to be created in the imagination of Friuli as an extension of Friuli, a continuation of «me tiare», «nestrîs pais», and «il nestrî Friûl». These words take on different meanings in Canada, in the context of a different language and culture. In modern Friuli the Friulano language is becoming a language of nostalgia and this is doubly so when spoken in Canada.

In the anthology she edited, *A Furlan Harvest*, Michelut explains the dilemma of the Friulano language, which she calls Furlan, «Furlan alphabetized in the first part of [the twentieth century], was not taught in schools, hence, most Furlans speak their mother tongues but prefer to write in Italian» (16). The anthology, *A Furlan Harvest*, is the result of a series of writers' workshops Michelut conducted at the Famee Furlane in Toronto in order to rediscover the literary culture of Friuli and promote the work of local writers. However most of the writing in the anthology is in Italian. Only some poems by Rina Cralli, Ausilia Bertoli and Dôre Michelut are in Friulano.

The Famee Furlane in Toronto is the largest in North America and has tried to promote the Friulano language through sponsoring courses at the University of Toronto.

In Toronto in 1977 Ermanno Bulfon published a collection of poems in Friulano entitled, *Un Friûl vivût in Canada (A Friuli lived in Canada)*. The title suggests that Friuli, or at least a Friulano culture, can be reconstituted in Canada. Does Ermanno Bulfon literally believe that you can live as a Friulano in Toronto, or is he suggesting you can do this only symbolically, or is he being ironic? It is only when you begin to read the short lyrical poems in Friulano that you detect the sense of loss. In the poem, "Sabide in Canada", there is the obvious loss of the immigrant who must leave his family, country and culture behind. But there is also the sense of loss due to the changes in the region of Friuli. The poems recall a rural Friuli of small towns, church bells, a sunny quiet country of farmers and fields. The titles are: "La Mé Cjase," "Mê Mari," "Il Mê Païs" and "Friûl di Primevere". In this last poem addressed to Friuli as if it were a familiar person he comes back to visit, Bulfon declares that

Tu sês
 simpri compagn,
 Friûl, simpri compagn.
 Ognî volte ch'o torni
 ti cjati a spietâmi
 content
 ta muse
 di amis e parinc' (44).

As much as he might deny it, this is a Friuli that was disappearing for the 30-year-old Bulfon in the 1970s. So "Friûl di Primevere" is wishful thinking. And it is odd to find in poem after poem this deep sense of loss for these simple country pleasures in a young man. This man too had to leave Friuli behind. This nostalgia is tempered by the realities and necessities of emigration. In the poem, "L'emigrant", he explains the deep regrets of having to leave Friuli for the cold of Canada, but all for the hope of a new future:

'O ài lassade
 la mê tiare.
 Un siúm.
 Mi sumìi ancjemò
 e speri
 al doman plui biel
 dai nestrìs fruz (38).

There is profound sadness in leaving Friuli. He still dreams about it, and yet 'al doman plui biel' is in Canada. This is the future for the children, 'nestris fruz'. Is this concern for the future of our children a political question? Bulfon reminds us of the long history of emigration from Friuli to other parts of the world. We can be lost in Canada as much as in Argentina.

Doris Vorano moved from Friuli to Montreal, Quebec, where the major language is French. In North America dominated by English, French is a minority language. Quebec is a society, which makes everyone aware of the language issues and the importance of culture in language retention. In her book, *Obsessed with Language* Chantal Bouchard examines the history, language politics and translation in Quebec. In this French minority context, Vorano writes in Friulano, a minor language. It is a kind of double remove from Friuli. In her collection of poems, *Puisis e Riflessions*, Vorano has a section entitled: "Il me paîs", devoted to Friuli. The first poem, "Friûl" deals with the language itself:

O ce che tu âs
Di plui biel
La to lenghe
Che quant tu la sintis
A' ti pas il cûr,
A samee une misture
Di sintimentz nascuindûs (21).

Her next poem, "Il passât da nestre int" deals with the emigration history of the Friulani people. The poem recalls the long, suffering stories of the people in Friuli and ends by asking us to forget this sad history.

E a te omp
No ti reste
Che dimenteâ (26).

In poem after poem we find the heavy sense of loss. The titles give some indication of this: "Nostalgie da tiare", "Il mê paîs", and "Come un mimo", laments the wandering of the immigrant who is left without roots, without a language and cannot be understood, even when he/she returns to Friuli. In her poem, "L'emigrant", she is both optimistic and pessimistic about the future.

L'emigrant a lè
E al restara simpri
Un anime
Plene di sperance
Plene di ricuars

E plene di siums,
 Che mai no podaran realisâsi
 A tuart o a reson (29).

For Vorano the immigrant condition is one of perpetual hope and nostalgia for what has been lost. Friuli has changed, the immigrant has changed and there is only the memory and the language.

In her book on Canadian ironies Linda (Bortolotti) Hutcheon gives us a critical perspective on the role of nostalgia in the writing of Italian-Canadian authors as they contend with the cultures and languages of North America:

For immigrants, the need to resist that dominant culture – however liberal or well-meaning – may be intensified because of the weight of cultural tradition, made heavier (not lighter) by distance and time, by memory, by a sense of exile or simply nostalgia. Therefore the drive towards self-definition within a new culture may well involve separation from this ethnic past, at least temporarily. And irony is a useful device for articulating both the pull of that tradition and the need to contest it (*Splitting Images*: 51).

Hutcheon herself is an example of this ironic distancing as she explains her own conflicted relationship to her Friulano roots in “A Crypto-Ethnic Confession”.

One of the ways of manipulating irony is by code-switching as described by Deborah Saidero in her study of the plurilingual writing of Dôre Michelut, a writer who even changed her name from Dorina Michelutti. «Nelle opere di molti scrittori italo-canadesi si trova di frequente il ricorso alla sperimentazione plurilinguistica, che si avvale sia del code-switching tra l’inglese e/o francese e l’italiano, sia dell’impiego di varie forme dialettali dell’italiano» (“Plurilinguismo...”: 87). In 1986 Dôre Michelut published her collection of English poems, *Loyalty to the Hunt*. In this volume she included two poems in Italian and one in Friulano. The Friulano poem is called “Ne Storie”, a story, and laments her own loss of the Friulano culture and language. Her Friulano poem has the English translation on the facing page.

Cjàmin in chiste lenghe dai mûrs bagnats cun trist,
 cal filter ta la me bòcje, ca mi bàt sui dinc’
 come agge glaze di laip. A’mi ven ingrîsul
 quant che chiste storie di displazlès a’ mi buse
 par strade, a’ mi clame lazarone, a’ mi dîs – Dulà
 sêtu stade fin cumò? Fasin i conts a cjase.

* * *

A'si sînt i gorcs dal flun Stèle davôr la sagrestie
ca inglutisin la fevele e ca la partin vie pal mont a tocs.
E nû a'si cjatîm dome quant châl ribute il flun in
in bocje al contestorîs...
(*Loyalty*: 36).

In 1989 Dôre published her essay, "Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue", which explores the place of Friuli and the Friulano language after she had to learn standard Italian and English. She laments that Friulano is in a remote third place.

The balance that Furlan and English struck within me long ago is so very entrenched it feels saturated and inaccessible. At a certain point, my two acquired languages, Italian and English were forced to come to terms with each other within me. It was this experience that led me to consider ways of approaching the more remote Furlan ("Coming to Terms...": 145).

The essay is an elegy to this mother tongue. It is also a statement about the role of the ethnic minority writer as translator of a language, a literature and a culture. Some writers like Dôre Michelut are translating among their three languages. The Friulano writer is not only translating a different language, but also reconstructing a literature, which existed orally and is rapidly disappearing (De Luca 104-109). In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha explains that this cultural difference «structures all narratives of identification, and all acts of cultural translation» (242).

In this short paper I have tried to look primarily at those writers who use the Friulano language in Canada to see what it tells us about the nature of culture in Friuli and in North America. There are other writers who deserve to be included in any study of Canadian writers with roots in Friuli. Marisa De Franceschi can speak Friulano well but publishes in English with books such as *Family Matters*. In Montreal, Bianca Zagolin writes in French about her experiences of dislocation in the novel, *Une femme à la fenêtre*. And in Toronto the late Gianni Grohovaz wrote in Italian and Fiumano dialect in *Strada Bianca* and *Per ricordar le cose che ricordo*. Grohovaz was a displaced person from Fiume and understood the fragility of human culture. In 1983 he published *To Friuli from Canada with Love*, a history of the Canadian response to the Friuli earthquake of 1976. For over a decade Silvano Zamaro lived in Edmonton and published *Autostrada per la luna* before returning to Friuli.

The subtext of this essay can be expressed with the question that Ermanno Bulfon asked in 1979 at the Conferenza Regionale dell'Emigrazione held in Udine, «Spariamo o non spariamo?» ("L'Intervento...": 55). Will we disappear as Friulani in Italy and in the world?

In 1991 Giovanni Battista Passone published *Nogaredo di Corno 1468-1990*, a history of this village under the Comune di Coseano. My mother comes from Nogaredo di Corno, which is about 20 km west of Udine. Her family name is Sabucco. The church records in Nogaredo show that the name Sabucco has appeared there since 1468. Like many other families in Friuli the Sabuccos had been there in the same town or village for 600 years. All this changed in the 1800s, especially after Italian unification, when many young men from Friuli began to leave to work in other parts of Europe and the new world. My grandfather Mondo left Nogaredo for Canada in 1904. He returned in 1914 to fight in World War I. My grandfather's oldest brother, Augusto went to Argentina and disappeared. A younger brother, Marco went to the United States.

Whole towns in Friuli were depopulated as families went abroad, *al di là da l'aghe*. Friuli underwent many major changes, as did other regions of Italy. The difference in Friuli is that this depopulation meant there were less people speaking Friulano, less people supporting and promoting a distinct Friulano culture. The arrival of modern mass media after World War II, the spread of standard Italian, meant that even fewer people would be speaking Friulano. What is happening to this culture in modern industrialized Italy? In an Italy with a falling birth rate, and a world where fewer and fewer people speak Italian, what will be the position of Friulano?

I began this essay with a lost uncle. I will close with a lost city. My uncle Janni Sabucco lived in Fiume just before World War II until the Italian population of 70,000 were forced to leave in 1947-48. Fiume became part of Yugoslavia and changed name to Rijeka. In 1953 Janni Sabucco chronicled these last years of the Italian Fiume in a little book, *Si chiamava Fiume*. The fragility of human culture is also explored by Caterina Edwards who returns to these events in her recent book, *Finding Rosa*. Not only was Fiume and other cities lost, but all of Istria which had been part of the Republic of Venice for hundreds of years. We are still living in the shadow of this loss.

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