

# WHERE YOUR GODS ARE, THERE YOUR HOME IS: A MOTIF IN ITALIAN-AMERICAN AND ITALIAN-CANADIAN POETRY

John Paul Russo\*

This essay examines the role of the “religion of the home” at various stages of the immigrant’s journey, from rupture to settlement, as presented in writings of John Ciardi, Joseph Bathanti, Mary di Michele, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, and Antonino Mazza.

*Là dove sono i tuoi dei, là è la tua casa: il tema del viaggio nella letteratura italo-americana e italo-canadese*

Il saggio esamina il ruolo della ‘religione della propria casa’ nelle varie fasi del viaggio, dal momento del distacco dell’emigrante a quello dell’insediamento nella nuova realtà, come dimostrano gli scritti di John Ciardi, Joseph Bathanti, Mary di Michele, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco e Antonino Mazza.

## **Introduction: A Virgilian Motif**

When I began teaching a world literature course in Miami, I found that many of my students who were first or second generation Americans responded deeply to Virgil’s Aeneas. The *Aeneid*, and mainly the books of wandering, impressed them as an immigrant epic that spoke directly to their own experience and family memory. The epic proem mentions flight from the shores of Troy (*Troiae ... ab oris*); arrival on the Italian coast (*Italiam ... Laviniaque venit/litora*); being thrown about (*iactatus*) on land and sea; and the goals, «until he could found a city and carry in his gods to Latium» (*dum conderet urbem/ inferretque deos Latio*). The goals are to secure a location where one could guarantee political stability and to introduce the traditional gods. Aeneas would have ritually borne these gods in his arms, statuettes of the Lares and Penates (family ancestors; protectors of food supplies and home perimeter). These family gods ensured safe crossing and a profound sense of continuity between two worlds, the old and the new, which instilled through his *pietas*

\* University of Miami.

Aeneas holds in an ideal balance. The pattern of immigration must have been often repeated in the ancient Mediterranean.

The student response affirms the pattern yet again. Examining the work of Italian-American and Italian-Canadian poets in light of the Virgilian motif, one can hardly expect exact correspondences. Indeed, some writers reject the past and its gods in silent or occasionally vocal apostasy (Child 71-72). Still the theme of family relatives, ancestors, and the sacred is strong and enduring. In the event, though the journey is full of complication and struggle, and, moreover, may remain unfinished for several generations, many poets never lose faith in their 'family gods' whom they enshrine in their poetry.

### **Second generation Italian American: John Ciardi and the Religion of the Home**

When John Ciardi (1916-1986), a second generation Italian American, came to arrange his *Selected Poems*, he was «a bit surprised at how heavily Italo-American it is» (Cifelli. *John Ciardi*: 438, 440). About 30% of his book concerns his family or Italy. It opens with a section called "Tribal Poems", signifying the close bond of his Italian-American community. His first book, published when he was 24, is titled paradoxically *Homeward to America* (1940). 'Home' is no longer the ancestral home of Campania and Calabria; home lies in the opposite direction; the title suggests he is still en route, culturally, socially, psychologically. In his elegiac "Letter to Mother", whereas his mother «found your America» (after the «rankness of steerage», the «landing in fog», the «tenement, the reek, and the shouting»), for him the journey continues because it is a mental journey «across the sprung longitudes of the mind/ and the blood's latitudes» ("Letter to Mother": *Collected Poems* 1). It demands as much as his mother's journey «across the enormous wheeling imperative sea»: the phrase which echoes Shakespeare's «rude imperious surge» (2 *Henry IV*.3.1.20), might have been more successful without the superfluous 'enormous'. Now with her death he has only her 'high example': the rest is hard work; «there will be no Americas discovered by analogy» ("Letter to Mother". *Collected Poems* 1). The word 'discovered' invokes the rhetoric of exploration as in Columbus's 'discovery' of America.

If Ciardi cannot progress except by his own arduous effort, as a poet, he can only disclose the stages of self-discovery in and through analogy, i.e., by metaphor and symbol. In this process the religion of his forefathers proved a living resource for a wide range of poetic motifs. Published in mid-career, his lyric "The Lamb" reveals just how close Ciardi stood in relation to the immigrant past. The poem recalls the family feasts at Holy Easter beginning about the

time he turned four when he experienced the most traumatic event in his life: the death of his father in a car accident. Soon after, his mother moved the family six miles out of Boston's Little Italy to Medford, then a suburb on the edge of the country, and more resembling his mother's rural background in Italy than the streets of the North End. The Mystic River bordered their back yard. Every Sunday the extended family would gather at her home for an elaborate dinner: «it was like Christmas every Sunday», reported one aunt (Cifelli 19).

As in southern Italy in this period, Easter surpassed Christmas among the major feast days. Each Lenten season Ciardi's mother purchased a lamb which would «frisk and feed» on the family plot and be «my loveliest playmate» (*Collected Poems*: 111). The lamb was «clumsy and beautiful»; it was humble, was «a beast of knees»; it had a bleat that 'Quavers'; and its eyes were «two damp surrenders/ To the tears of the world» (111). On Holy Thursday began «the ritual death and resurrection of the lamb» (Cifelli 18); the lamb was taken down to the cellar and slaughtered; young Ciardi knew what was happening and «wept a little» (*Collected Poems*: 111). On Easter Sunday the lamb «rose,/ From the charnel cellar» and «Glowed golden brown/ On religious plenty» (111-112). The poem expresses divine immanence, the foremost quality of southern Italian Catholicism, implicating its presence in food as manifested by the Pascal Lamb upon a bountiful table; the food is sacralized as «religious plenty» (112)<sup>1</sup>. The enjambment of «rose/ from the charnel» (111) enacts the concept by the movement of the eye to a new line; the 'golden' brown skin enacts it by reference to the color of the sun and the heavenly sky. These are just two of many links in the web of correspondences between the divine narrative and life in this world.

“The Lamb” ends with the poet stepping back from memory and making a declarative statement in the form of a prayer in the present tense:

I praise the soil  
 In the knuckle and habit  
 Of my feeding parents  
 Who knew anciently  
 How the holy and edible  
 Are one (112).

<sup>1</sup> For the sacred hearth of the Romans, the Italian Americans substituted the kitchen table (Cinotto 120): *siamo fratelli e sorelle quando tutti i piedi stanno sotto una tavola* (we are brothers and sisters when all our feet are under the table). The ritualism of Sunday dinner is or was a common feature in Italian American households; even weekly suppers were a “communion” (Gambino 16). For Ciardi's ‘gods’, see “The Nostoi of John Ciardi and Jorie Graham”, from which I draw and emended several paragraphs here.

Like many Italian immigrants, Ciardi's mother had a kitchen garden behind her house; the habit of the knuckle (*nocca*) refers to garden work in which the knuckles get dirty<sup>2</sup>. In "Three Views of a Mother" she is «loam-knuckled in spring» and speaks a «language of roots from a forgotten garden» (163-64). Roots is a triple pun on the plant's roots, on the roots of the family tree, and on the linguistic roots of her Calabrian dialect. "Forgotten" describes a garden that has long been abandoned, a synecdochic condensation of the very immigrant past that it evokes. Paradoxically the garden is memorialized by the poet, and no longer forgotten. The «holy and the edible» (112) express the unity of God and nature, though not in the pantheistic sense. God participates actively in His creation, which He made; yet, as a transcendent figure, he is not his creation.

### **Third generation Italian-American poet and novelist: Joseph Bathanti and Restoration**

A third-generation Italian-American poet and novelist, Joseph Bathanti grew up in Pittsburgh where he was familiar with the religious processions that marked the calendar in his East Liberty neighborhood. Religious motifs run through many of his nine volumes of poetry, as even their titles suggest: *Communion Partners*, *The Feast of All Saints*, *Restoring Sacred Art*, *The 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*. In the title poem of *Restoring Sacred Art* Bathanti recollects a time in his youth when he and a friend carried a statue of the Virgin Mary from a car to the restorer's workshop a few blocks away. One of the young men is the poet narrator, who parodies the religious processions that went back to the early twentieth century. The other, "Philip", is presumably the restorer. Together they lift the statue out of the trunk of a Chrysler. The word Chrysler is a near-homonym of Christ, vehicle of salvation. Dressed in 'her tattered robe della Robbia' in imitation of the High Renaissance (but the plaster and the paint are chipped), Mary looks «stiff as a mob hit», which is in the linguistic register of the urban ghetto (though 'mob hit' puns on her great popularity); bodies of dead mafiosi were often transported in the trunks of cars, and the cars were occasionally abandoned on quiet streets or in vacant lots (106). Nonetheless, as if alive, Mary 'smiles', a

<sup>2</sup> Some immigrants had a private plot on a rooftop, balcony, or back shed where, often within a strictly limited space, they would plant vegetables and tomatoes. There they would take a siesta and enjoy the sun, even on cold afternoons, and remember the 'old country'. I recall an Italian consul pointing to a small room in the consulate and saying with considerable passion, "This is Italy!" He was speaking legally of extraterritorial status; but his emotion indicated something more. *That* is what the immigrants felt about their private spaces.

sign of divine favour. The Christ Child's hand is «held up in a boy scout pledge» (106). The divine is connected to the familiar world of the teenagers' way of understanding a 'pledge'. In the first lines, then, one is introduced to the world of everyday life in which the divine is immanent everywhere.

In the mock procession the narrator takes Mary «in a headlock», «Philip takes the feet», and they «shuffle down Liberty Avenue» (106). This bearing of Mary horizontally is an unceremonious parody of the real procession in which she is carried aloft with the bearers in lockstep (Camboni 206). (In Solzhenitzyn's *Gulag Archipelago* a Soviet citizen spends five years in Siberia for carrying a newspaper portrait of Stalin horizontally.) The men pass «one Italian joint after another» (“Restoring Sacred Art” 106), like Stations of the Cross; then “Saint Joseph's Cathedral” by which the Holy Family is temporarily reunited; reach the studio and carry Mary upstairs, making jokes at her expense:

You've got to lose some weight  
 Too many cannolis  
 When are you going to start exercising?  
 We offer her a smoke (106).

When they set the statue down, Mary appears tired, «her lips are wet», «her smile thinning» (107); and Christ has lost two fingers – has the 'pledge' been respected? In the workshop this Virgin and Child are one among other “Virgin and Child” statues; their mothers try to quiet the children «Their tears», which would have been plaster, are «like gravel hitting the linoleum»(107). The artificial flooring popular in the 1950s and 60s was a cheap substitute for a nice rug, and maintains the low linguistic register. As Camboni points out, the atmosphere of the poem is suffused by the «simple religiosity of the community», «a humane and lively religiosity» (206)<sup>3</sup>. The actions of the principals, seemingly disrespectful or sacrilegious, remain within the realm of the familiar, are a form of love; they can even 'talk' to her, 'insult' her, another feature of southern Italian religious tradition. But they are also devoted to her. They who were taking the statue to be “restored” are themselves restored. The narrator has helped 'restore' the statue by carrying it to the workshop, but he has also “restored” himself by writing his poem.

<sup>3</sup> In “Collins Avenue”, Camboni writes, «the poet brings to the fore the sense of belonging that holds together the immigrant community, that is, indeed, the glue that fastens the generations to one another, to the land of origin as well as to that of adoption. For, if the children cannot understand the Italian words of their fathers and grandfathers, they still know that 'They belonged to us, these old men,/ and we to them; but we had no old country,/ only Collins Avenue'» (38).

### Francesco Loriggio on the Rise of Italian-Canadian Literature in the 1970s

To turn to Canada, in the mid-1970s Italian-Canadian literature had a new birth, and the results would exert a powerful impact on Canadian literature as a whole. This was a time when, according to Francesco Loriggio, «rummaging publicly through your past wasn't discouraged, as it had been in earlier decades and it was to be later» (*Dreams* xiv). The coterie spirit blossomed among the Italian Canadians, many of whom were associated with the University of Toronto; Mary di Michele records their lifestyle in «Life is Theatre or O To Be Italian in Toronto Drinking Cappuccino on Bloor Street at Bersani & Carlevale's» (*Stranger in You*: 40-41). Though many of the Italian Canadians were bi- or trilingual, they were writing mainly in English, and not infrequently about the popular immanentist Italian Catholicism:

I scavenge topology like a mudfish  
ready to sacralize every mote by the brute  
force of will, the dumb attraction to God,  
that is graceless (Di Cicco. "Deep as the Exhaustion on God": 45).

One of the highlights of the decade was Di Cicco's «groundbreaking» (Golini 170) anthology *Roman Candles* (1978), with poems by seventeen poets, fourteen of whom had been born in Italy. During the 1980s, a mere decade later, the Italian Canadians underwent a 'transformation', one for which Italian Americans had needed a generation and more. The Italian Canadians had speeded up an evolution «that would see us change from immigrants to ethnics, from the 'swarthy Southerners' our parents were or we had been into White Europeans, and hence – eerily – into accomplices of the establishment» (Loriggio. *Dreams*: xiv).

### Mary di Michele: Seeking Home

Mary di Michele (b. 1949), one of only two women appearing in *Roman Candles* (the other being Mary Melfi), writes that «perhaps the central event in my life that turned me towards poetry was immigration» ("Langscape": 128)<sup>4</sup>. In

<sup>4</sup> A neologism of her own coinage, 'langscape' emerged from her habit of setting the occasional Italian word in an English line. The Italian words were virtually self-explanatory, either by themselves or in context (*enigmatico*, *pronto*, *tutto il mondo*); they also form part of the music of the line and also musical (*farfalla*). Because the Italian words «were not translated into English, they seemed to have the quiddity of rocks and things, the beauty, the density, and resonance of outcrops on a geological plane» ("Langscape": 126, 130).

1955, her family emigrated from Lanciano in the Abruzzi to Toronto where she grew up, attended the University of Toronto, and published her first book, *Tree of August* in 1978. Italy figures variously in her poetry and fiction, from childhood memories to numinous landscapes, from returns as an adult to a poetry of revisitation and the use of Italian words and phrases in her texts.

Her religious reference draws on both Christian and pagan sources. In “Mimosa”, a family portrait in three dramatic monologues, di Michele’s sister, the patient “Marta”, describes her older sister “Lucia” (di Michele) (*Stranger in You*: 15). Di Michele did not opt to use her own name “Maria”: Lucia was likely chosen as a substitute because it is the name of the medieval church in which she was baptized, “Santa Lucia,/ in an ancient town, Lanciano” (“Born in August”:11). Lucia, says Marta, «would talk about the ancient rites» (15):

the old gods and the new gods,  
as if they were related and equal,  
mythology and religion,  
a pagan temple and a catholic church (7).

Each line balances between concepts; in three lines a caesura separates the hemistiches of three lines; the balance is formally meant to signify their equal value to the poet, these two feeder streams to her religious consciousness. «I remember the Italia of the *praetutti*», she boasts in “Luminous Emergency” (85). The Praetutti (‘before’, in the sense of earlier than, ‘all people’) was an obscure Osco-Umbrian tribe settled in the northern Abruzzi ca. 500 BC. «Latin blood legend traces the wolf», she writes, “In us instinct is not extinct, it’s latent» (“Invitation to a Recessive Gene”: 58).

However much she declares ‘equal’ treatment with regard to religion – and it is a strange declaration on the face of it, yet another duality – her best work draws more on classical mythology and the older folk traditions of the Abruzzi. Her grandmother’s house in Lanciano looked out on the snow-capped Maiella, the massif of the central-southern Apennines, «brilliant as the naked shoulder of a god in moonlight» (“Luminous Emergency”: 86). The pomegranate in her grandmother’s garden exerts a totemic power; it is the sacred fruit of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, queen of the underworld. Di Michele tears open a pomegranate, «it recognizes me/ with *benvenuto* in all its myriad, ruby eyes» (“Benvenuto”: 6). The eyes welcome her to the realm of the dead. The powerful elegy on her grandmother, “A Strange Grace”, which begins «Love always dressed itself in black», invests the woman with the attribute of Juno Lucina: «the miracle/ of a child emerging with the first light» (which the child sees) (*Stranger in You*: 2). Then there were the poets from the Abruzzi region that

influenced her, Ovid, magus of the woods and mysterious mountains, born in Sulmo (Sulmona), only 27 miles (43 km.) from Lanciano; and D'Annunzio, the quasi-pagan, from Pescara ("Luminous Emergency": 85). She likens herself to the half-giant wrestler Antaeus, son of Gaia, whose strength endured as long as he touched his mother Earth; Hercules held him high and strangled him. «Italy is my earth, I return to it and always find creative renewal there» ("Landscape": 135)<sup>5</sup>.

Di Michele's "My Hart Crane" introduces a topos that she inherits from a long tradition of Latin and Italian poets stretching back to Ovid and Virgil: the stillness and silence of high noon, especially in the summer heat; Dionysus/Bacchus, Pan; *daemon meridianus* or the noonday devil. At midday, comments Nicholas Perella, the sun reaches its greatest strength and plenitude which may be empowering, but also overpowering – 'menacing' and 'bewildering', leaving one in a state of torpor, indecision, even sunstroke and panic. «Fierce or enervating heat, unshadowed, absolute light, and uncanny silence combine to make noontide, especially in the Mediterranean lands, a time of the negative demonic power of nature» (Perella 5, 6); Ovid connected this hour to «uncontrollable erotic energy» (5-6). To disturb at this hour a lounging god (Pan, Dionysus) or bathing goddess (Diana), especially with an erotic motive, provokes their immediate and violent wrath. Noon is the "hour of Pan", when ordinary time stops: «the time he [Pan] rests», writes Theocritus, the siesta being the tactical retreat from deadly solar power. Silence reigns; nor will the shepherd dare play his pipe: «I am afraid of Pan» (7).

In section IV of "My Hart Crane" entitled "The Hour of Pan", di Michele imagines the moment in which Crane threw himself overboard to his death in the Gulf of Mexico. She activates the rich, paradoxical associations of the topos in depicting the ambiguous suspension in time:

Is wasn't storm, it was calm.  
It wasn't cold or midnight  
As one might expect it was  
Hot and high noon. It was the hour

Of Pan, of panic, when the shadow  
Has no where to go but back  
Into the self (81).

The three negatives emphasize a world on hold during the shadowless heat of noon: «Midday threatens to destroy the world that was built up by the morn-

<sup>5</sup> Di Cicco makes the same allusion in "Italy, 1974": «The earth was mine as it was to antaeus (sic)/ when the bole of his wrist touched his mother» (*Roman Candles*: 34).



ing [...] man loses his grip of (sic) reality», comments Cornelis Verhoeven on the negative valence of the topos. Panic is the «a troubled, senseless movement toward nowhere in particular [...] it is its own goal, to regain tranquility» (55), which can lead to death. The shadow is the physical representation of the *daemon meridianus*, here the fear of death, variously shown in the tradition as monkish acedia or modern stress and depression that can be kept at bay by externalization or distancing; ‘back’ into the self implies its origins within a suppressed psychic chaos. She has already become a shade to herself, on the edge of a dangerous zone. In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, it is in the heat of the noonday sun that Edna goes for a swim off Grand Isle in the Gulf of Mexico, leading to the novel’s ambiguous ending: suicide or awakening or both?

Rilke is one of the modern poets whose classicism influenced di Michele. Her ekphrastic “If Stone Dreams” recalls motifs from Rilke’s poems “Archaic Torso of Apollo” and “O Fountain Mouth”. A statue of a satyr in a museum presents an unfathomable mystery: «with his head propped on a wineskin;/ we cannot know if he dreams» (*Debriefing the Rose*: 50). A half-human half-goat attendant of Dionysus, the satyr is drunken and lecherous. Since it is a stone, surely he does not dream, he is not even alive... and yet Bacchus has given the sleeping demigod the power to awaken (in) the imagination:

he sleeps in drunken stupor and his snores  
though silent still insist. The need to be  
drunk, we share this need to let consciousness

go. Satyr is the mentor  
of blackout. He is the Bacchus we worship

within us (50)

Bacchus ‘sleeps’ because there is no more stress, no more feeling in his ‘broken hip’ (a broken statue, a fragment); he has undergone the Bacchic de-individuation and dissolved in the All-ness of nature. The power of Bacchus/Dionysus is transformation, or rather the loss of form itself and any distinction among the human, the natural, and the sacred<sup>6</sup>.

In one of her finest poems, “Somewhere I Have Never Traveled”, di Michele describes a journey to a border. The title is taken from E.E. Cummings’s “Somewhere I Have Never Travelled, Gladly Beyond” (sic). Cummings portrays romantic love, di Michele depicts her disturbing in-betweenness

<sup>6</sup> «The noonday devil commands silence and halts the rhythm of life in order to impose his own» (Perella 47-48).

of homes, countries, and languages that has haunted her entire career: a no man's land that is a ghostly prelude to death:

I arrived at the Canada-US border.  
Flags fluttered though there was no wind.  
Mine was the sole vehicle at the crossing.

I pulled up to a booth. Nobody  
was there. I got out of my car  
to peer behind the wicket: darkness

except for the blinking light of a phone.  
I had my Canadian passport ready  
declaring my Italian birth. The photo

didn't look like me. It felt strange to be  
neither here nor there, neither coming  
nor going. I arrived at the US-Canada border,

flags the only things moving.  
The sun was low but I cast no shadow (*Bicycle Thieves*: 79).

Ordinary language and speaking rhythms render place, things, happenings, as mysterious – car, blinking light, passport, phone. Mary di Michele creates the circumstances that mimic a journey to the underworld. These include the uncertainties of time and space («neither here nor there»); the non-natural happenings (flags blowing without wind, sun without shadow, preternatural silence); the missing Charon, toll keeper; she remains alone. The second time she mentions her arrival, a repetition that places her in a state of ultimacy, it is sunset, and she appears to be 'viewing' the border from the other side – not Canada-US but US-Canada – and she no longer casts a shadow, having become one. Has she crossed over this liminal space? Or is she caught between, in a liminal zone? (Rao 244-245). Mary di Michele interprets her own poem to mean that «though the speaker is caught between countries» and, one may add, between states of being and non-being, «she resides in the langscape (sic) of the poetry of the poem, in poetry that maps not only where we walk and live but who we are and the language we speak and dream in» ("Landscape": 138).

### **Pier Giorgio Di Cicco: Poet Priest**

Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, comments Joseph Pivato, «began Italian-Canadian writing and changed Canadian literature» (9). He was born in Arezzo in 1949; he

emigrated with his family first to Montreal in 1952, then Toronto in 1956, Baltimore in 1958 where he lived in poverty until 1967, and finally back to Toronto. His long American sojourn during his formative years led Ferdinando Alfonsi to include him in his 1985 anthology of Italian-American poets. Di Cicco attended the University of Toronto where he received a B.A. in 1973. His return to Italy in the following year proved to be an 'epiphany'; it «awakened his Italian identity» (Pivato. *Pier Giorgio Di Cicco*: 273). Six books of poetry followed in quick succession. A charismatic figure, he was the unofficial leader of the Italian-Canadian writers; and before they scattered across Canada, he memorialized their collectivity in *Roman Candles*. This manifesto as much as an anthology exhibits the common themes, styles, conventions, and cross-fertilizations which, however diverse are the individual writers, characterize their poetry. In sum, it exhibits the coterie spirit. Italian-American poets have nothing quite like it in their longer, more diffuse history. Di Cicco became a monk in 1984 and was ordained in 1993; for fifteen years, this hitherto prolific writer did not publish. When he resumed publishing, in 2001, it was in the self-effacing role of the poet-priest, without ceasing to be innovative and prolific.

Unlike di Michele's ambiguous Pan, Di Cicco's adaptation of the topos is invariably positive. With it he might connect with his personal past, with the memory of his father, who died penniless in Baltimore, with his older brother killed in a bombing raid over Arezzo in 1944, or with Italy. "Nostalgia" cycles between the present and past; between the cold springtime in Canada and a Tuscan summer at midday with its iconic «cypress» and «green lizards basking beside the/ cathedral» (*Roman Candles*: 32). The link between the lizard and the cathedral is better understood when one reads elsewhere of «wind in trees beside the cathedral» ("Donna Italiana": 98). Far from being touristic scenery, the cathedral of Arezzo is the poem's spiritual anchor, around which are oriented the natural world and the comings and goings of ordinary life. The memory does not last, as more snowflakes extinguish the 'brief' moment of sunshine and «light draws itself in on the farthest sky» (*Roman Candles*: 32). Yet there is something 'far beyond' 'farthest', and it is Italy:

Italia, far beyond that, always, Italia  
and the rooms of warmth, the landscape searing  
its edges at noon (32).

Midday: his thoughts turn to his kindly, credulous father, a barber by trade who never adapted to the New World:

under a few cold lilies, my father dreams  
cicadas in vallemario. I am sure of it,

he left me that, and a poem that is only a  
 dream of cicadas (32).

According to Perella, cicadas are commonly an «emblem of midday tension». Their «wild stridulation» together with heat and light «seem almost to be perceived as a single sensory phenomenon» (13); their monotonous repetitive sound does not put an end to silence but rather accentuates it, in the way a noise machine suppresses all other sound, with the exception of its own. In keeping with this aspect of the topos, di Michele depicts «this cacophony of cicadas» (*Luminous Emergencies*: 77); Kate Chopin could not have cicadas on the Gulf of Mexico, but the noonday demon called for an unpleasant attendant and so bees accompany Edna Pontellier into the waters. But again, Di Cicco sees the cicadas in a positive association with the sun in ‘vallemaio’, a town in Lazio (Di Cicco sometimes uses lower-case to democratize, even with ‘god’). For him, noon is empowering, like the Kantian sublime, not depotentiating, like the Burkean sublime. His father’s dream is inherited by the son. As it had begun, “Nostalgia” ends on a mixed note: while the memory of Italy makes him feel «a little marvelous», reality brings back the feeling of «the sunken/ heart of exiles» (*Roman Candles*: 32).

The contrast between the cold of the New World (the ‘cold’ hospital in Baltimore, the ‘cold’ lilies, Canadian snow) and the warmth of Italy are polarities in Di Cicco’s early poetry. «I am obsessed with warmth. Is it not common...», “Nostalgia”: 32). In “The Man Called Beppino”, an elegy to his father, Di Cicco laments «the man who lost his barbershop during the war» and tried to re-establish it in Baltimore (Pivato. *Anthology*: 96). Cheated by the mall manager, he dreams of «a large/ Italian sun»; his hair «will shine like olive leaves at noon», olive being a totemic plant of the Italian people, transformed into an victor’s wreath or a saintly halo (97). In “Italy, 1974” crickets replace the cicadas *nella campagna*: they «measure out/ the dark earth» (*Roman Candles*: 34), like a poet’s measure across the foisonous (‘dark’) land. Not midday only, but midnight too, its closest counterpart, has the sacred power of transformation: «the stars were/ wincing like sun on wet shoals» (“Italy, 1974”: 34). At this moment he achieves unification with nature: «the landscape flowed from me [...] The earth was mine» (34). Similarly, in “Memento d’Italia” he returns to his birthplace, Arezzo, and seeks out places he recalls from his earliest youth. One of them is the small café-restaurant in the train station looking out on the tracks, possibly his last memory of Arezzo. Nothing has changed in twenty years, not the lovers leaning together, nor the passers-by, nor «the pig-tailed girls lugging/ a suitcase», nor «most valid, the/ noon sun, searing the

air», like a ‘mirage’ (35). He feels the presence of his father who would have seen the same mirage at noon.

“Donna Italiana” represents a further attempt to connect with his past, with his father and elder brother, and with his *antenati*, his Lares, by means of the common bond of noonday sun in all its plenitude. From them, from the feminized landscape, he draws a power to assuage the grief of family tragedies so that his «ribs burned all/ the nights of my/ life» (Pivato. *Anthology*: 99).

song of three thousand years, of little old men with the  
eyes of saints, they walk on the hillsides in the mid-day heat,  
ghosts, wishing me well. They are my grandfathers, and  
my great-grandfathers (99).

They are «my gentle men», «ghosts in the hills behind/ Arezzo», watching him with their «gentle eyes at night», his spiritual guardians (99). He has had to return to Italy to find them, and specifically to his birthplace. From the perspective of the hilltop at high noon, as he emphasizes, «at that/ precise hour», he looks down upon the town and the landscape around it, and experiences plenitude: «hives of sun over the rivers, imagined paths across distant slopes», «farmyards/ kneeling over fields/ of grass», where «kneeling implies the human world’s paying homage to the natural world» (100). Now the pain is relieved, «the ribs burn less», because «a woman is/ the country that I love» (100).

### **Antonino Mazza: What will be our lives!**

Di Cicco has achieved a wholeness of vision and the language by which to express it that few Italian-American or Italian-Canadian poets have equaled. One Canadian writer expresses his response to his father’s death that left him only with a sense of absence and unfulfillment. In “Death in Italy, written in Canada”, Antonino Mazza mourns his father who returned to Italy to die in the town of his family ancestors in Italy. Mazza had been the «dutiful son», «built a chapel for his parents/ in the town’s Holyground» (*Roman Candles*: 40). In Canada; and had named his son after his grandfather according to southern Italian custom. There is an emptiness in his Canadian home because he and the family friends «appeared/ to pay their last respects in absentia» (40). It is more painful «not to have seen one’s father die» than to have been present at his side: «Ah God, are they not our families, without/ a place to go back to what will be our lives!» (40). It is at once a question and an exclamation implying an answer. To paraphrase, What will our lives be like, we who do not have a place, a home to return to, to

die in (in Italy), we who still feel the deep attraction to our ancestral home in Italy but are caught between two worlds? What will become of *us*?

The answer must lie in Virgil's motif: where your gods are, there your home is.

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