CONSTANTLY TRANSLATING FRIULIAN IDENTITY

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze the works regarding two trilingual Italian-Canadian female writers, Dôre Michelut and Mary di Michele who have chosen to concentrate on the Friulian language, either as bridge or mediator to gap the distance between cultures and languages (Michelut in "Loyalty to the Hunt" and "Ouroboros") or as inspiration and source for translation and poetic creation (di Michele in "The Flower of Youth"). In an attempt to come to terms with my own tricultural identity I will include a few poems that I had translated from English into Friulian or vice versa.

Tradurre l'identità friulana incessantemente
Il presente contributo mira ad analizzare alcune opere di Dôre Michelut e Mary di Michele, due scrittrici italo-canadesi che ricorrono alla lingua friulana, da un lato come ponte per mediare la distanza tra le proprie lingue e culture (Michelut in "Loyalty to the Hunt" e "Ouroboros") e dall'altro come fonte d'ispirazione creativa per le proprie poesie e traduzioni (di Michele in "Flower of Youth"). Nella parte finale sono incluse anche alcune poesie che l'autrice del saggio, anche lei trilingue, ha tradotto dall'inglese al friulano e vice versa al fine di venire a patti con la propria identità transculturale.

Introduction

To be raised, still a youngster, in a foreign country like Canada, where geographical spaces, cultural norms and the languages spoken were decidedly unlike those of the homeland can be deeply distressing, causing marginalization and conflicting family tensions. Many immigrant children, in order to avoid being in conflict or disagreement, created two opposite worlds related to their private family sphere or public social sphere[1]. When I was growing up in Canada in the 50's and 60's, playtime and school time were lived in English,

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[1] Cf. Dino Minni's account of the split identity of his protagonist in *Other Selves* «He did not know at what point he had become Mike. One day looking for a suitable translation of

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community interaction was spent speaking that little Italian that we were taught, while family life embraced all forms of our Friulian language and cultural heritage which meant that I was living in 'constant translation', switching from one language and culture to another, often struggling with wrenching feelings of being uncertain about who or what I was. Joseph Pivato, in *Echo,* underlines how immigrant writers, especially of my generation, «share the advantage of having translated reality from one context to another all their lives. Italian-Canadian writers take this activity further through the use of a second language in their works» (108).

It was not until I read Dôre Michelut's much quoted essay "Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue", first published in *Tessera* (1989), and republished in *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing* (1998) edited by Joseph Pivato – which spoke of the conflicting linguistic and cultural issues Michelut encountered in coming to terms, not only with her Friulian heritage tongue but also with her acquired English language – that I was able to understand my own dilemma of displacement living in a multilingual and multicultural world that was constantly being translated. What type of identity clash, then, does a bilingual author and self-translator come across? Michelut understands that it is not her rediscovery of her childhood mother tongue, a language that undoubtedly springs from memory and gut feelings that are within her, but rather her attempts at writing and giving meaning to all three of her languages. Michelut writes:

> 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 (145).

Through the act of writing, Michelut finds a place of discovery, not only of her linguistic boundaries and the creativity that can derive from them, but also of understanding herself, her Friulian heritage, her female world, and her changing identity.

There are various reasons why authors living in-between languages and cultures decide to self-translate their works. One reason could be that the need to write in a foreign language seems more accessible for international publication and a wider reading audience. Some authors feel they need to have complete control of both the source text and its translation. Bilingual writers, such as

his name and finding none, he decided that Mike was closest. By the end of the summer, he was Mario at home and Mike in the streets» (163).

Arianna Dagnino, begin to self-translate because they believe that the translations made by professional translators are incomplete and do not represent their true voice. In her article "Dialogically assisted self-translation in the "translab": A case study in the Italian-English language combination" she writes:

> To prepare my book proposal, I asked an Australian literary translator to translate the first two chapters of the book. It was undoubtedly a good translation, and professionally done; however, I must admit I was far from satisfied with it. To me the text sounded hollow – almost soulless. My voice, the rhythm of my literary voice, was not there (85).

Other authors such as Nancy Huston, write their original work in one language and self-translate simultaneously, to the point that it is impossible to distinguish which version is the original. As underlined by various critics, Huston began translating her work into English following a refusal by a French editor to publish *Cantique dei plaines*. Anna Lapertina quotes Huston's disappointment and her decision to rewrite her work for an English publisher finding, in the end, that she worked better having two texts in two different languages:

> Alors […] je me suis mise à le traduire, et là j'ai découvert que la traduction pouvait m'aider a réviser […] c'est depuis ce temps-là que je fais toujours une traduction dans les deux sens avant de donner mes manuscrits. Donc me voilà avec deux versions […] (Huston cited in Lapertina 68).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the works regarding two trilingual Italian-Canadian female writers, Dôre Michelut and Mary di Michele who have chosen to concentrate on the Friulian language, either as bridge or mediator to gap the distance between cultures and languages (the case of Michelut in *Loyalty to the Hunt* and *Ouroboros*) or as inspiration and source for translation and poetic creation (the case of di Michele in *The Flower of Youth*). Through translation and self-translation these female writers not only bridge the gap between cultures and languages, easing feelings of displacement, but above all creatively rewrite and reinvent themselves as new.

In an attempt to come to terms with my own tricultural identity I will include a few poems that were important during my childhood and that I had translated a few years ago from English into Friulian or vice versa.

"A Story / Ne Storie"

In her early poetry, Michelut underlines the importance of finding linguistic categories and equivalences, which can translate and redefine the different

sensations and feelings connected to her two linguistically different worlds. In the poem "The Third Voice Gives Birth" from the 1986 collection entitled *Loyalty to the Hunt*, she tries to define the «preciso agro del diospiro. L'inglese impazzisce: borbotta, mi spinge verso strade desolate» (35). The unvoiced Friulian term for the persimmon tree, *cacar,* is harsh and guttural, like the bitter-sweet and tongue-twisting taste of its fruit, indescribable but the perfect 'objective correlative' binding taste and tongue. The feelings and the word can only be transmitted with the sounds of her third language, her third space, her mother tongue.

The last narrative poem of the section, written in English and Friulian, "A Story / Ne Storie", is perhaps the most emblematic regarding language as place and body, resulting in being the most quoted because of a series of symbolic meanings. For the young immigrant, on her return voyage to her home town in Friuli, the sounds of her native Friulian tongue, that are beginning to form on her palate, seep through her mouth and knock against her teeth, «like ice-cold well water» (37). In addition, what seeps into her mouth is also the sad and bitter taste of oral tales, connected to the lives of Friulian people obliged to migrate: «Cjamini in chiste lenghe dai murs bagnats cun trist, cal filtre ta le me bocje, ca mi bat sui dinc' come aghe glaze di laip» (36). Her town has been emptied of its inhabitants, customs have changed and the singing she hears from the church choir is only that of the «muni» and a «befane» (36).

In "Ouroboros", published in 1990, various degrees of layering inform the reader of her triple vision as ethnic writer, her double bind as female but above all her capacity to write herself as 'new' through the different languages of her fractured self.

> Languages, like mothers, are identities we grow within. If I experience life in one language, that experience belongs to that language. What I'm left with is capacity for that which was experienced. When I translate, I am concerned with expanding that capacity (76).

In this work Michelut attempts to give shape and form to her life by presenting a mixed-genre journal of memories, reflections, poems, tales, scattered dreams and bits of conversation recording a year's pilgrimage through time, space, language and self. She writes herself through memory, shifting from one language to the other or presenting the same work in three linguistic versions. Though the work is presented in what seems a chronological order of 'happenings', with specific entry dates, the events and impressions narrated move timelessly and comment not so much on her sense of alienation or difference but rather on her experience of woman as writer moving towards the painful process of creation and co-creation, of writing and reading self. «I grant the

text my time» she writes, «become the audience the writer creates, because I want to participate in the power that makes the writer (per)form » ("Ouroboros": 66). Thematically she underlines the importance of nature, the magnetism of the female world and the myths related to the female body. In her poetry, women escape gender limitations through dystopic rebirth journeys towards what can be defined as «green world archetypes» (Pratt 22). Michelut's personal struggles with culture, gender and language are equated in green-world descriptions of a Friuli where female lives are linked to life-giving fonts of water and where mother-daughter relationships re-enact patterns of the archetypal triple goddess: virgin maid, nurturing mother and crone, the last seen as the old and wrinkled Friulian *befana,* both earth mother and witch, dispenser of life-giving gifts but also cunning hag and sorceress of the underworld[2]. The *befane* seems to have caught the attention of Michelut and is pictured in many of the narrative poems of the collection, probably remembered through the folk stories she had heard as a child.

> Lezion III
> […]
> Ne vecje, culi cotulis lunghis e neris, cun parsore un gumalòn colorât, a vignive four dal curtîl frà lis cjasis. Aveve dò brunzìns picjâs tal piunz pasât su li spàlis. A ere vignude a cjòi âghe. Ben ch'a mi pasave, la cjàlavi: a veve ne mûse dûte ingrìspade. Mi ha dat ne cjalàde par sot. Alore soi alzade, e j soi làda davôur (88).
>
> Lesson III
> […]
> An old woman with black voluminous skirts and a coloured apron walked out from between the houses, two pails strung to a yoke on her shoulders. She had come for water. I stared. In passing, she glanced at me, eyes sharp and piercing through a face of weathered wrinkles. It was an order of sorts. I got up and followed (88).

Michelut's self-translations show her capacities as creative writer as she moves between languages and cultures. It is difficult to decide which of the poetic pieces comes first, the English or the Friulian for the impression is of writing both texts simultaneously, testing and feeling the rhythm, syntax and lexis as she shifts from one composition to the other. Fundamentally Michelut has come to terms with that part of her that is linked to her Friulian identity. It seems to be a world of myth, nursery rhymes, affections and nature. As she herself concludes:

[2] For a more detailed discussion of female archetypal patterns in "Ouroboros" see my "From Mother Tongue to Mother Earth".

> From another dimension, Italian must resemble a brilliant, thick orange and green canopy; English, an underwater garden, with tendrils of ivy undulating miles high; Furlan, a carpet of emerald moss in a twilight world (99).

A Novel in Verse

In *Flower of Youth,* a collection of poems and essays published in 2011 by Mary di Michele, the journey to Italy to attend an international conference in Udine on Italian-Canadian writing is transformed into a dialogic exchange and transcultural metamorphosis for the poet herself. The writer calls the book «a kind of novel in verse» (84), perhaps because she had originally wanted to write a novel on Pasolini, as she had done on Caruso, but was overcome by the emotions that Pasolini's Friulian poems and stories transmitted. She is in Casarsa della Delizia where she travels through Pier Paolo Pasolini's countryside, reflecting on both Pasolini's youthful and problematic past and her own personal search for creativity and understanding. As she herself states, in Pasolini she found many affinities of thought and temperament, even if the two lived in different times and spaces.

The collection is divided into four sections. The "Prologue" opens with a detailed account of the journey of di Michele to Casarsa, in search of Pasolini's tomb and home and underlines the feelings of abandonment, decay and loss she experiences at seeing the cemetery where Pasolini is buried. Even the pink house, Pasolini's maternal home, recently transformed into a museum, is also flanked by uncultivated land, full of weeds and waste[3].

In the cemetery, on a bench in the shade of cypresses, di Michele cries for a man she has never met. She hears a voice whispering to her in Italian, a language that she cannot write, and that only after several attempts she can barely transcribe: «*Vado fuori dal paese e il cielo è scoperto, / Il mondo più grande che ho pensato, / Dove non c'è nessuno le stelle sono miliardo*» (17), and then translate into English «I leave the city and discover the sky, / The world is bigger than I realized, / Where there's nobody the stars are myriad» (17).

The lyrical poems that follow in the second section, entitled "Impure Acts", are written in the first person, as if they were translations of Pasolini's Friulian poetry written during the war when he, and his mother Susanna, were evacuees in Versuta near Casarsa. Many of these English poems have the same rhythms

[3] Further considerations on the "Prologue" to di Michele's *Flower of Youth* can be found in my articles "Lo specchio dell'io: ritornando da scrittrici", and in "Gunn, Edwards and di Michele: Nomadic Spaces".

and rhyme scheme as Pasolini's works but here Mary di Michele takes inspiration and closely follows Pasolini's fictional autobiographical diary, *Atti impuri*, published posthumously in 1982, which revolves around his discovery of homosexual love, with its conflicting source of ecstasy and guilt. Other themes used by di Michele are directly related to Pasolini's biography as found in the diary entries: the context of the war, the tragedy of the death of his brother Guido, the pedagogical experience with the students of Versuta, his contacts with the peasant world and with the Friulian landscape and language. Though his homosexual encounters will eventually lead him to a scandal that will force him to leave Versuta, the village where the poems are set, Mary di Michele in this collection focuses on the period before these revelations, imagining Pasolini's romantic and sexual desires as opposed to the spiritual anguish that he must have cultivated during that specific time and place in Friuli.

In the poem "The Return", Pasolini recalls his happiness and amazement during his summer visits to Casarsa with his brother Guido. A close reading of the poem compared to the original diary entry, informs the reader of how di Michele not only meticulously creates, rewrites and then self-translates but she also foregrounds the importance of *furlan* and «the incredible cadence of that tongue» (27) as the language which, for Pasolini, best conveys the feelings of inexpressible memories.

[…]
I woke to that crisp and candid air I knew
so well, to the smells of fire, of polenta,
of the iron pot, my grandmother stirring it.
        All around I heard breathing.

horses, humans, the whooshing wheels of bicycles.
Bells were calling us to vespers, voices
rose in prayer, in gossip, the incredible
        cadence of that tongue.

The open vowels, the sibilants, fricative,
strangely familiar inflections, flowering,
deflowering my ear. A feeling
        everywhere and inexpressible, filling

me with aching wonder at what I already
knew. There would be joys, triumphs, there would be –
enormous losses and extraordinary consolations,
        I could be – and I was – sure of it (27-28).

The moment is always one of expectation and amazement, especially in the morning when he wakes up to the smells of the *fogolâr* and the *polenta* that his grandmother mixes and stirs. As in a dream or a presentiment, he hears the sounds and voices around him, the bells that call him to vespers, whispers that rise in prayer, but also in gossip expressed in a language (Friulian) full of open, hissing and fricative vowels, announcing future joys and triumphs, but also extraordinary losses and consolations.

The diary entry reads:

> Oh, il risveglio in quella luce fredda e candida! Ristorato dal sonno, mentre il meriggio volgeva alla sera, sentivo respirare intorno a me una vita la cui troppa famigliarità mi dava una specie di struggimento. Col cuore devastato dall'emozione riconoscevo i vecchi gesti (e li interpretavo in un ordine particolarissimo di affetti e ricordi: indizi di avvenimenti cari e dimenticati); riconoscevo gli odori serali del fumo, della polenta e del gelo; riconoscevo le inflessioni della lingua, le sue vocali aperte, le sue sibilanti che giungevano, in un attimo di strana lucidità, a sfiorare il senso segreto, inesprimibile, nascosto in tutto quel mondo. Tutto ciò mi pareva un'avvisaglia di gioie future, di avventure minime ma capaci di straordinarie consolazioni; ne ero certo (*Atti impuri*: 34-35).

The poetic and literary texts are very similar. The poem is the translation and recreation of the diary entry and both texts underline the recognizable inflections of the language: its open vowels, its fricative sounds that in a moment of strange lucidity for Pasolini, had came to touch the secret, inexpressible sense hidden in that whole Friulian cultural context.

In "My False Faith", di Michele explores the collapse of Pasolini's Catholicism in the face of his emerging homosexuality. We see a young man who walks away from the sunny and bright fields to enter a dark and damp church to kneel at the feet of the Madonna and implore forgiveness, pray to change: «to be like other men – upstanding – not to hide watching, different and desiring» (60). But the Madonna seems distant, indifferent, silent, while Pasolini is in search for forgiveness for what he considered his faults and sins. Mary di Michele does not judge the poet because Pasolini judges himself, seeing his desire as sin and himself as the devil. The poem "Devil Among the Angels" like the former poems, draws inspiration from *Atti impuri.* However, in this poem di Michele shows greater freedom, choosing to add more descriptive details than are present in the original text.

> In maggio tutte le sere andai a Rosario: furono momenti soavissimi. La chiesa spopolata, le rare candele, il pavimento umido come di fantasmi primaverili, e il canto nudo, vibrante delle litanie, da cui, un po' alla volta, ero stordito (*Atti impuri* 37).

Devil Among Angels

The church seemed vacant […]
Some votive candles flickered
and smoked. The floor oozed a vernal

dampness, smelling of earthworms and new grass
At the back, by the fountain of holy
water I stood mouthing *mea culpa*,
[…]
that litany to which, little by little,
I had become stone-deaf (35).

The volume ends with three translations of a poem by Pasolini, in which the Friulian poet imagines the day of his death. The first two versions were written and revised by Pasolini. Only in the third version, does di Michele rework the original poems and recreate something original and new that includes references to the violent and ruthless murder that Pasolini encountered in 1975.

Il dì da la me muàrt

Ta na sitàt, Trièst o Udin,
jù par un viàl di tèjs,
di vierta, quan' ch'a mùdin
il colòur li fuèjs,
i colarài muàrt
sot il soreli ch'al art
biondu e alt
e i sierarài li sèjs,
lassànlu lusi, il sèil.

Sot di un tèj clìpit di vert
i colarài tal neri
da la me muàrt ch'a dispièrt
i tèjs e il soreli.
I bièj zovinùs
a coraràn ta chè lus
ch'i ài pena pierdùt,
svualànt fòur da li scuelis
cui ris tal sorneli.

Jo i saràì 'ciamò zòvin
cu na blusa clara
e i dols ciavièj ch'a plòvin

tal pòlvar amàr.
Saràì 'ciamò cialt
e un frut curìnt pal sfalt
clìpit dal viàl
mi pojarà na man
tal grin di cristàl (*La meglio gioventù*: 79).

44-49 The Day of my Death

In some city, Trieste or Udine.
on an avenue of lindens,
in the spring, when leaves
burst into colour
I'll fall
under a sun that blazes
yellow and high
and I will close my eyes
leaving the sky to its splendour.

Under a linden, warm and green,
I will fall into the darkness
of my death, a death that squanders
the lindens, the sun.
Beautiful boys
flying out from school,
curls at their temples.
will be running in that light
I have only just lost.

I will be young still,
in a pastel shirt
and with soft hair spilling
into the bitter dirt.
I will be warm still
and a boy running on the warm
asphalt of the avenue
will lay a hand
on the crystal of my lap (di Michele 77).

In *The Flower of Youth*, most of the biographical material is found in the *Epilogue*, towards the end of the collection, this mainly because biographical elements are secondary elements in Mary di Michele's final poetic scheme. Though touching the limits of autobiography when working on Pasolini's memoirs, di Michele focuses more on how he experienced and transmitted his

inner trauma since he spent much of his life inscribing ecstatic and traumatic moments in the Friulian tongue. From 1945 to the year of his death in 1975, Pasolini wrote, rewrote, revised and perfected the language of his first Friulian poetry collection *La meglio gioventù* (1941-1953), which he republished in 1974 with the title *La seconda forma de "La meglio gioventù".* Never quite satisfied, in 1975 just before his death, that same poetic corpus, including a further and decisive section called *Tetro entusiasmo,* came out with a new title: *La nuova gioventù* (*Poesie friulane* 1941-1974).

For Pasolini, rewriting and revising his early works becomes therapy. In some poems he repeats both the title and the metric and prosodic structure of the original but at the same time meaning is often reversed underlining how migration to new spaces along with the passing of time can change our identity and our vision of difference. Mary di Michele's recreations of Pasolini's works take up the central part of her publication and act as a source of inspiration, not only for her own work, but also for those writers who suffer because of displacement caused by language and identity or who, in unfavourable circumstances, suffer trauma.

***Rosis par memoreâ* / Remembrance Flowers (*Fruts pal mont*)**

One of the most interesting and important moments of one's youth is when parents tell us stories about their past, about how things happened when they were children in Friuli and about how they fought and survived the war before sailing on a boat to Canada. The war stories in particular both frightened and attracted me. My father's brother had been one of the founders of the Osoppo-Friuli Brigades, an autonomous partisan group of Catholic inspiration which fought in the Friulian mountains around Udine and Pordenone. I had heard so many stories of the February 1945 massacre at the *Malga di Porzûs,* especially of the murder of Guido Pasolini, who was only 19 at the time, along with thirteen companions whose firm decision to continue the resistance struggle in the service of Italy alone rather than for the communist ideals of Yugoslavia, led to their tragic execution near Porzûs. These were men who sacrificed their lives so that Friuli would remain in Italy.

War poems are always sad and sometimes distressful. The following war poems are related to Friuli and Canada, my two nations, my two identities. They have something in common: the dead soldiers' relationship to nature where they lie in peace surrounded by flowers and their undaunting love for their country and life.

Stelutis alpinis (*Arturo Zardini, poete furlan*)

Se tu vens ca sû tes cretis,
la che lôr mi àn soterât
al è un splaç plen di stelutis:
dal miò sanc l'è stât bagnât.
Par segnâl une crosute
Je sculpide li intal cret:
fra chés stelis nâs l'erbute,
sot di lôr jo duar cuiet.

Cjôl sù, cjôl une stelute:
je a riscuarde il nestri ben,
Tu i dâras une bussadute,
e po platile tal sen.

Cuant che a cjase tu sés sole
e di cûr tu preis par me.
Il miò spirit ator ti svole:
jo e la stele o sin cun te.

Stelutis Alpinis (Edelweiss)

Come up to these craggy cliffs
where they have buried me;
there is a glade of star-shaped flowers
watered in my blood to set us free.

A tiny chiselled cross stands there
to mark my place of rest;
among the flowers and the grass
I am at peace, beneath the crest.

Choose and pick a little flower
in memory of our love:
and after you have kissed it,
place it near your heart.

When at home you are alone
and ardent, pray for me,
my spirit will surround you
like the *stelute*, I'm there with thee (translation mine).

In Flanders Fields (*Col. John McCrae, Canadian poet*)

In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
between the crosses row on row
that mark our place; and in the sky
the larks still bravely singing, fly
scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the dead. Short days ago
we lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
loved and were loved and now we lie
in Flanders Fields.

Tai cjamps di Fiandre

Tai cjamps di Fiandre si plein i papavars,
rie dopo rie tra lis crôs che segnin il nestri puest;
e tal cîl lis lodulis cjantant inmô con ardôr a svuelin,
nancje sintudis tra i bots di canon.
O sin i muarts. Pôcs dîs indaûr o jerin vîs, o sintivin l'albe,
o viodevin i barlums dal tramont,
o sin stâts amats, o vin volût ben e cumò
o sin pognets tai cjamps di Fiandre (translation mine).

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