The Food of Memory – Mary Melfi’s Conversations with Her Mother

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During a conversation in Siena with Mary Melfi, we followed her journey to the land her mother had left behind in search of a New Life across the Ocean. Our springboard was the kitchen table where mother and daughter would sit, retrieving their immigrant story. Listening to Mary Melfi’s reading of her ‘conversations’ with her mother, as recorded in her memoir Italy Revisited, we observed how the ‘food’ prepared at that table in a Montreal kitchen nourished a complex intricacy of the real and the imagined; we had a sense of the contradictory, entangled feelings with which memory paves the return to the past while promoting the advance to self-discovery.

In her mother’s kitchen, Mary Melfi was doing what Joe Fiorito did (or was imagined to have done) at his father’s deathbed. In the memoir The Closer We Are to Dying, Joe Fiorito recalls how he “asked [his father] for the old stories” because he wanted to know who he was, who his father was, and where his family had come from. “These old stories,” he claimed, “were the foundation on which the family had been built, they were the very material of which each of us […] were made” (70). Similarly, in her mother’s kitchen, Melfi was looking for her roots and constructing her identity—a common game or quest for the immigrant psyche, troubled as it so often is by the discomfort of hyphenation, of being neither this nor that, and complicated by conflicting feelings of self-indulgence, excruciating angst or ineradicable shame. This discomforting experience of hyphenation is recounted by Fiorito in his perhaps fictional memoir: “My playground pals were English and Irish and Slovack, all Canadian kids; I was one of the gang, but I wasn’t […] I was not like my cousins, and not like the neighbourhood tough, neither was I like the other Canadian kids” (280). A similar malaise is described in the biotext Diamond Grill by Chinese-Canadian Fred Wah, who recollects his school-day interactions with kids of many other racial identities—Italian, Doukhobor, or British: “There’s a whole bunch of us who’ve grown up as resident aliens, living in the hyphen.” For many
immigrants and their children, living in the hyphen—straddling the Old World with its clutching roots and the New World of pressing expectations—has sharpened the quest for home. For, as Vladimir Janélévitch says, quoting Victor Hugo: “one cannot live without bread, but one cannot live without one’s homeland either” (cfr Prete 123).

For the author of Italy Revisited, as for many others, this quest is performed with a familiar accomplice: Nostalgia. Melfi writes: “Why, why, why...? Why am I in my mother’s kitchen on the hunt for my roots? Am I just playing a game here? The name of the game is Nostalgia” (142). A composite of nostos (return) and algia (ache), nostalgia inflects Heimweh, the mal du pays, the desiderium patriae, a feeling proper to exile, whose only remedy can be the urgent return to the site of one’s infancy, or to one’s own primary home. But once it has entered the domain of literature, as in Baudelaire, Antonio Prete reminds us, (17) the malady known as nostalgia becomes emptied of its pathological meaning; the desire for the distant homeland turns into “nostalgie des pays et des bonheurs inconnus,” “angoisse de la curiosité.” While there is no implied return, what does emerge is memory as a game with the past, as Melfi clearly states:

One plays the game by recreating the past. I didn’t say creating because part of the game includes changing the past to please oneself. One plays to have fun, to be happy, but happiness is elusive. Like playing Snakes and Ladders, one goes up, down - one never knows if one is winning or losing. One can be on a winning streak and then, go back down. Playing with the past is no different. (142)

In this game memory proves to be a “tricky business,” as historian Margaret MacMillan puts it in The Uses and Abuses of History (47), something of which Margaret Atwood is well aware:

Individual memory, history and the novel are all selective: no one remembers everything, each historian picks out the facts he or she chooses to find significant and every novel, whether historical or not, must limit its own scope. No one can tell the stories there are. (175)

It is no wonder, then, that Melfi claims to be re-creating the past her own way, hunting for her roots in the kitchen where her mother is busy cooking biscotti and offering her daughter recipes, reminding her that the past she wants to recreate in her Memory Book is “make-believe.”

In her memoir The Guthrie Road, Rosemary Sullivan reminds us:

We need to locate ourselves on the ladder of our own ancestry to give a meaning to time. But then, in spite of the illusion of objectivity that documents seem to offer, the past is not stationary or fixed. Everything depends on how the narrative of the past gets told. (60)
Documents, photographs, and audio recordings may hide more than they reveal; the past, as fabricated by nostalgia—the malady of things lost, as well as angst over one’s own future—remains unapproachable. A healing return is impossible, because, as Dionne Brand argues, for the people of the Diaspora, “flight is as strong as return” (27).

Mary Melfi describes her return to and flight from her Italian homeland as follows:

The first time I returned to Italy I wasn’t interested in my home town. I spent a day and a half there. Like others of my generation I was eager to take a look at my old town, meet with my grandparents but it wasn’t on the top of my agenda. I wasn’t interested in my roots back then. My roots were entangled in la miseria, and if anything I had to disentangle from them. (316)

On her return to Casacalenda, Mary quickly kissed her grandparents goodbye and escaped from their town to Rome, Florence and Venice. Dazzled by its art, she let herself think that Italy, “the tourist Mecca,” rather than Casacalenda, was her home town; her teachers had tricked her into believing that Italy was a poor country and in these fabled cities she learned otherwise, and felt cured:

Actually, Italy was more than its art, it was itself a master Sculptor—she placed her hand on me and I was cured of my deformity (my shame). (316)

But that was not the cure for her nostalgia, nor was tourist Italy the goal of her intimate journey, of her quest for home, the first place looked for in order to feel at ease even when running away from it. In 1977 she did not know that she needn’t rely on Michelangelo to feel proud of her heritage. Back then she was young and her direction was centrifugal. But, when we get older, as Rosemary Sullivan points out in The Guthrie Road, we discover:

we are mostly all prodigals. Acceding to the centripetal pull, we return. I remember DH Lawrence saying that we are a ‘mystery to which the mind can gain no access.’ We eventually have to admit that we cannot grasp or say, finally, what anything means. We can only live the mystery of ourselves in relation to others. (59)

The primary “other” Mary Melfi had to come to terms with was her mother—in order to re-visit her own childhood, to meet the girl she once was, to make the mirror reflect who she really is, she must return to her mother’s kitchen. That is a destination in which the burden and shame of the poverty her mother fled are lightened, and moments of reconciliation become possible. Her angst over her identity assuaged, she finally finds
the food for her Memory Book, however tricky memory may be:

In the kitchen there are no family secrets. In the kitchen there is no place for shame [...]. In the kitchen miracles are commonplace. [...] when you are in the kitchen your search stops. [...] your survival assured, your body reaffirmed, reappraised, you can relax and seize the day. (332)

It is the ideal kitchen and thus the ideal place to defeat discomfort that makes it possible to recognize the worth in doing biography and autobiography—that dance between the remembering and forgetting of the awful things that were done to us and the awful things we did to others, as Atwood puts it. It is also one of the best places for (auto)biographers like Mary Melfi to come as close to truth as is humanly possible, and to carry out what Rosemary Sullivan calls “a rebellion against the impossible fact that a life can so easily disappear” (Confessions 69)—to realize that all the energy, passion, individuality that constitutes each one of us can one day, brutally or casually, stop.

It is also the best place, in the case of an Italian-Canadian daughter who feels the distress of being in an unaccustomed land where writers from different origins have found themselves, to become aware of the fact that, as Nathaniel Hawthorne says in The Custom-House:

Human nature will not flourish, anymore than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth. (Jumpa Lahiri’s epigraph to Unaccustomed Earth)

Works Cited

Fiorito, Joe. The Closer We are to Dying. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1999.