Città senza donne and the Italian Literature of Migration

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Several scholars have dealt with the figure of Mario Duliani from an historical and political point of view (e.g., Bruti Liberati 152-53, 191-92; Harney 260, 264, 305; Perin; Salvatore). Here, however, I will consider Duliani's work, Città senza donne, mainly as a literary piece, usually referred to as one of the first texts of Italian-Canadian literature and, in a wider sense, of the Italian literature of migration to North America, apart from Father Francesco Bressani's Breve Relazione.

The Italian diaspora led to the production of many Italian literatures of migration across the globe, which share several general aspects as well as reflect the uniqueness of the cultural experience of the Italian immigrant in different countries and periods. Such experience has found its most original expression in the production of literary works in many languages, but our analysis here will be focused on Duliani's Italian version of La Ville sans femmes, that is Città senza donne, published in Montréal in 1946, a year after its French version. Città senza donne is usually mentioned as part of the literature of migration written in the Italian language, that letteratura dell'immigrazione produced all over the world, which was at the centre of a conference held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1990; and which resulted in a 600-page volume, edited by Jean-Jacques Marchand and published by the Fondazione Agnelli. Very briefly, the Italian literature of migration could be considered as the writing of people who came into contact, in another country, with a different way of being and had to relate to it by reconsidering their own.

The character of the Italian migration to North America has kept changing over the years, as well as the figure of the immigrant. If in many instances the image of a poor peasant coming to America in a last chance for survival has become almost stereotypical, the more recent reality is what Ugo Rubeo calls emigrazione di lusso, where the shift is from the literary experience of the emigrante-scrittore — that is, a person with little formal education whom the trauma of the migratory experience made become a writer and who wrote very often only one book with very strong autobiographical connotations — to the opposite one of the scrittore-emigrante, the intellectual or academic who came to America not with the intent of performing any manual work, but who
carried with him a contemporary cultural baggage. The Italian literature of migration to North America inevitably evolves through works with various themes (male/female, lower/upper class, rural/urban, non-educated/educated, poetic/historical, etc.), witnessing the different perceptions of the migratory experience by individuals of diverse social and cultural background, class and historical periods. Among the scrittore-emigranti we can remember Amy A. Bernardy and Beppe Severgnini, and among the emigranti-scrittori Ottorino Bressan and Aldo Giosseffini.

If the geographic, chronological and linguistic contours of the Italian literature of migration to North America can be easily set – we will consider it here as the literary production in Italian of people who took part in the migratory stream starting around 1880 – more complex is the detection of its many intrinsic characteristics. The process of contextualization, that is the placement of literature within historical, sociological or psychological contexts, has in general become one of the most influential approaches to literature. As Berheimer critically observed, contextualization means that many factors such as culture, class and gender are taken into account to fully appreciate the significance of a literary text. However, a literary work cannot be evaluated simply as a direct effect of such factors. As Hillis Miller sustains, the specific literariness of a text cannot be understood “by historical, sociological or psychological methods of interpretation” (102), it has to be analysed rhetorically, and in performing a rhetorical analysis one has to study both the intrinsic and extrinsic relations of literature – conceiving the extrinsic ones as intrinsic themselves. The outer world is not simply reflected in literature, but it manifests itself in the intrinsic relations of a literary work. According to this form of contextualization of literary study, the fundamental questions Who wrote this literature? When? Why? How? are therefore asked viewing the literature of migration from its inner and intrinsic relationships, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the nature of its literary import and its many implications.

Mario Duliani can easily be considered a scrittore-emigrante who unexpectedly had to face war-time internment, adversities and deprivations that usually were not experienced by an intellectual coming from overseas, thus forcing him to acquire a more direct knowledge of the reality of the immigrant condition. Duliani published his story in 1946, at the end of the Second World War, basing his account on notes that he had taken over the years of internment and that he later re-organized more in a thematic rather than a chronological order. He had been released from confinement in October 1943, after 40 months spent at both interment camps in Petawawa and Fredericton, and in the years immediately after he seems to have also dedicated himself to re-ordering the camp notes on which both the French and Italian versions of Città senza donne would be based. Whatever his political affiliation and convictions were, it is quite clear that the internment had psychological conse-
quences on him, which were reflected in his account, just as the confinement affected the behaviour of other ex-internees who, in the same years, anglicized their names or emotionally dissociated themselves from their previous experience. In his words, Duliani decided to let a larger audience become acquainted with the consequences the internment had on many 'enemy aliens' and their families. The original French version was mainly meant for a French-Canadian audience and, including an expression of Canadian patriotism, it was aimed at rehabilitating his image in front of the francophone community to which he belonged, as well as the Canadian authorities. The Italian version was instead addressed to the smaller group of Italian-Canadians, as both the subtitle Il libro degli italiani d'America and the added chapter, Gli italiani d'America, leads one to conclude. Evidently, Duliani considered the experience of the Italians in Canada of little interest to the larger English-speaking population, which was still hostile to them. Perhaps, too, the different layout of the two books reflected a desire to put his Italian identity in the background. Certainly there are many references and quotations inserted in his narrative which are taken from French literature and culture, and very few from his Italian cultural background, which somewhat distances his account from his Italian audience.

From the beginning of Città senza donne we can sense how, even if he was an internee among other internees, he was not an immigrant among other immigrants, even though his attitude towards them was based on respect and understanding of their condition. The gap, reflected in the constantly present awareness of the different social status of each internee, is mediated by the fact that Duliani is a scrittore-emigrante, who not only writes about other immigrants, but also shares their same painful condition and trauma. He is a scrittore-emigrante voicing the internment experience of other immigrants in his own personal way, while not an emigrante-scrittore, he is at least an internato-scrittore. While writing mainly to his own benefit, he also intrinsically expresses an imagery that belongs principally to the migratory experience of the internees, that is, to the internees as immigrants. The fact that he so often makes reference to members of the Italian community who had achieved a higher social status — like doctors, entrepreneurs, and restaurateurs — was perhaps an attempt on his part to present to the larger audience an image of the Italian immigrant contrasting with the stereotype of the poor peasant.

If we adopt a different approach from the historian's in analysing Duliani's work, endeavouring to contextualize it in the ways mentioned, we would go beyond the evaluation of the factual information we can gather from his account — which can be confirmed through other sources — and concentrate on those aspects, evaluations and anecdotes that render the work a unique one for the comprehension of the episode of internment in the wider context of the Italian migration experience. In fact, his work being neither a documentary
report nor a novel, but as he defines it "un documentario romanzato" (13) which contains the characteristics of both genres, one can find the book having its own particular relevance in what it reveals of the experience of one internee among others. While lacking the detachment and objectivity of an historical account, it still holds the attraction of being the only first-hand account available of this sad episode. Even if in its literary achievement it falls short of other diari di guerra e di prigionia existing in the literature of Italy as, for example, Le mie prigioni di Silvio Pellico (1832) to which Duliani himself makes reference at the end of his book. We should not diminish a book such as Duliani's by measuring it against empirical notions of historical truth. Duliani's endeavour should be interpreted by considering it in relation to the aspects of the internment he decided to describe, and the way he described them, in order to appreciate his contribution toward a better understanding of the Italian immigrant experience during this traumatic time. The simplicity and straightforwardness of his style reminds us not to indulge in over-elaborate readings: the book was meant to be read by the average audience of the time, by those immigrants who needed to find some sort of explanation for the sad events that marked the life of the Italian community in Canada during the Second World War. This does not mean that we always agree with him or accept the way he portrays life in an internment camp. For us post-War readers, aware of how tragic life had been in other concentration camps in Europe, at times it is hard to consider the Canadian experience in the rather benign light he wants us to.

Through history, as well as in Duliani's work, the internment can be perceived as a disquieting halt and moment of impasse in the on-going migratory process, an instant in time which, in its stillness, contrasts sharply with the image of movement the story of migration typically conveys. A sense of sadness and humiliation, but also mutual understanding and empathy, relates Duliani to his fellow internees and creates a very special bonding among them. However, in his first-person account, his social and cultural background, as well as his personality, are constantly present, giving his portrayal of life in the camps of Petawawa and Fredericton a particular imprint. He is a participant witnessing one of the most devastating experiences for the Italian community in Canada; however, his account is a very personal one, continuously shedding its own style, sensitivity, viewpoint and linguistic register. The objective role of witness is many times too closely affected by his urge to express or "justify" his own personal experience. Being both a journalist and a playwright, Duliani alternates detailed descriptions of the life in the camp with monologues and dialogues, the latter considered among the parts where he achieves his best results from a literary point of view (Salvatore 522). The hybrid nature of Duliani's work was for him a way to recount his experience documenting and representing at the same time, that is, documenting what he wanted and representing what he wanted. What meaning can be attributed to
his choices and omissions is a matter to be discussed by historians. For example, why did he give such detailed descriptions of how life was organised in almost every barrack in the camp, instead of informing the reader of the procedure authorities followed to evaluate the internee’s potential threat to Canada’s security? Also, were all the Canadian officers so kind and humane, such perfect gentlemen to the internees? Various meanings can be found in the images Duliani adopts in the portrayal of the life of Italian internees in the camp.

In the context of the Italian immigrant experience per se in Canada, the unsettling episode of the internment as portrayed by Duliani can be considered as a powerful existential metaphor of the conditions Italian immigrants had to face with respect to their sense of isolation and enclosure within the limits of their own communities, as well as vis-a-vis the surrounding Canadian society. The line along which the history of Italian immigration to Canada evolves is suddenly interrupted by a circle, by the enclosure in which the Italian internees found themselves; significantly, the same shape, a red circle adorns the back of their blue prison garbs. After this interruption the line of the immigrant’s life would resume again, but in that moment of internment the circle is now part of the immigrant’s psyche, enclosing his view of the environment around him; the circle of fear of an unknown surrounding, the circle of linguistic and social isolation. As the late Susan Iannucci maintained comparing Duliani’s work to Susanna Moodie’s Roughing It in the Bush (1852) – a pioneer account of the author’s difficult adaptation from England to Canada – Duliani finds himself like Moodie in the middle of the wilderness, in a prison. Moodie wrote metaphorically about the “prison-house” entombed in the forest, and early Italian-Canadian literature finds its similarities in early Canadian literature, both narrating about the experience of early immigrants and, in Duliani’s case, about the sense of enclosure the Italian immigrant experienced in the numerous Little Italies he settled in. The first Italian immigrants had already endured the life of their crowded communities and of the boarding-houses, where men were forced to live in abysmal conditions without the comfort of their wives and families. What Duliani portrays in his account recalls those days, and one really questions if the life in those first immigrants’ dwellings was much dissimilar from the one described. Perhaps the most charming moments in the description of internment are those that let the camaraderie of the immigrants come alive through the barred windows and the wired fence of imprisonment, with the sharing of common anxieties, the sense of solidarity, and the shared desire to be re-united one day with their families. This all-male reality inevitably presents to us images similar to the reality of the early Italian soujourners in Canada.

In this sense, several observations could be made about the title of Duliani’s personal account, Città senza donne, which reflects a disappointing tendency on the part of the author to reduce the problems the imprisonment
had caused to the impact it had on the internees' family life. The two terms 
città e donne contrast with each other: if the latter gives a sense of warmth
and fullfilled life missing in the camp, how could we really have a city with¬
out women? If we can surmise that in Duliani's view the term città was used
to indicate how civilized life in the internment camp was, that same word has
on today's reader a rather different effect, expressing the irony of a form of
social organization based less on civility and more on conflict and constric¬
tion. What is important to notice is that the absence of women, peculiar to the
life of this camp community, had already been endured by early immi¬
grants, who re-live the sense of exposure and danger felt outside the protective family
circle, finding themselves in an enclosure that contains but also isolates them,
separating them from the rest of society. In the internees' case, this creates an
inner turmoil and restlessness which contrasts with the static, routine life in
the camp. Senza donne literally means without the presence of a woman to
comfort them, but also without their children, their ordinary everyday life and
serenity: all things that had already been endured by many of the Italian work¬
ers in Canada.

It is interesting to observe how in the introduction to the book, “Per
intenderci e per comprenderci” (11-17), after explaining the nature of his
“racconto [...] vissuto” (14) and expressing his reaction to the psychological
distress the separation from their families had on these men – as well as giv¬
ing a positive evaluation of the way they had been treated and a clear justifica¬
tion of the internment – Duliani uses the metaphor of the traveller who has to
pass customs, to represent the situation he found himself in. The traveller who
is trying to just go along his straight path is stopped in the customs office to
disclose what he has in his mind, interrupting the line of an on-going move¬
ment. There are also several direct references to the immigrant experience,
showing how that experience permeates not only the actual life in the camp,
but more interestingly and intrinsically, the imagery that is present in the
portrayal of it, and those images can be either painful or entertaining. If in the
foreword to the Italian edition Duliani declares his intention to complete a
book on the “problem” as he defines it, of the “Italiani d’America” (24), later
he refers to the camp dormitory as the hold of a gigantic immigrant ship,
where loud discussions and card games are mingled with moments of angst
and sorrow (44). Italian prisoners are able to mold the harsh aspect of the
camp by tending vegetable gardens and creating “quattro o cinque terreni di
boccie” (47), as they had done in their Little Italies. So similar is the inter¬
ee's ordeal to that of the immigrant's that there are many moments that seem
to be a reminder of the immigrant condition and of how each internee had
experienced similar deprivations before: the initial disorientation after arriv¬
ing at the camp; the adapting to a novel unsettling reality, where anguish is
contained by the distracting new world condition; the uncertainty of their
future and need to *arrangiarsi*; the suffering of their women, left alone to wait for them, and worries about their wives' and daughters' moral integrity; the clearing of the forest previously begun by Italian labour along the railroad lines and the profits the Canadian National Railway made on the internment; the charity to people who got ill, but also selfishness of others; the function of the camp hospital similar to that of the pharmacy in the home village, where people met to have a chat and get information; the comforting role of music and popular songs such as "non ti scordar di me" (198); the creation of their own newspaper; the sad psychological effects of depression and the inability of some to adapt to the new environment; the importance of food on the Italian character and the obsession of not having enough to eat; the hope that living in a new world, old class distinctions would be overcome, as in the camp where everyone was wearing the same blue prison garb with the red circle on the back.

Duliani's book is so controversial that it is difficult to express an opinion without taking into consideration its many flaws and overtly partisan view. But there still is something in it that makes it worth reading, apart from the factual description of the internment. Under that plain and easy-to-read surface lies the inner turmoil of this varied humanity, the profoundly intimate conflict of men that only rarely we are able to observe so closely. Through the barred windows of Duliani's description and the imagery of migration it evokes, we can try to understand how these men really were and peek into their lives as immigrants, seeing how hard it was to be an Italian in the New World in those times.

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**NOTE**


**WORKS CITED**


———. *Città senza donne*. Montreale, Canada: D'Errico, 1946.


