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The Moon is No Center: Pavese's Anguilla as Paradigm of Italian-American Emigrants

The dynamic nature of the normative world compels every individual human being to belong to at least one particular community linking people to shared grounds of commonality based on a religion, a cause, a history, a belief, or a code. However, lying at the very center of communal sense is narrative: the power that generates the creating and maintaining forces of the *nomos*, "a present world constituted by a system of tension between reality and vision" (Cover 9).

Throughout the world we can see the impact of narrative discourse on communities in the consequent unification, separation, and in some cases, eradication of human beings. Indeed the power of narrative substantiates a rhythm that sounds a particular beat which an individual follows. The narrative discourse that I will address stems from the migrant patterns that dynamically coexist as a result of the dynamic nature of the boundaries and parameters which seek to define cultural identification.

The world appears to express a desire for the individual person to experience the newness of a culture, but as the actual emigrant encounters the new place, he or she often begins a painful path leading only to the margin in the context of the new culture; furthermore, as the immigrant's partial assimilation occurs, he or she becomes increasingly marginalized in the native culture. Thus, complete cultural integration is entirely impossible, even in the emigrant's native homeland if he or she tries to reintegrate.

Many emigrants have left their native homelands for economic, social, political, and religious reasons, and Italians are among them. Moving across the continental geographical boundaries, Italian emigrants have translocated throughout the world: of consequence my great-grandfather from Como to Canada and my great-grandmother from Vasto to the United States. Although Italian patterns run world-wide, I wish to focus upon the crossing of Italian emigrants into the United States as they disassociate themselves with the narrative of their *Italianità*; however, they cannot wholly take part in the world maintaining narrative of the USA and consequently spawn their own world creating narrative characteristic of their emigrant community.

Italian emigration at the turn of the twentieth century constituted a diaspora which redefined the meaning of *Italianità* for the generations of Italian-Americans succeeding the emigrant. The crossing and leaving behind of the geographical and cultural boundaries of the native Italian's homeland dislocates the cultural center; a sense of cultural centrality moves with the emigrant into an Italian emigrant community, but this community is marginalized in the context of the national American culture. The early twentieth century emigrant to the United States, victimized by post-World-War-I xenophobia, was not fully assimilated, but simultaneously was alienated from both Italian and emigrant Italian culture.

The Italian diaspora, thus, is not a relocating of the native culture, but rather a fracturing of the very idea of cultural centering in which a sense of personal and cultural identity suffers. The Italian is encouraged to become a foreigner to the Italian language, the Italian heritage, and the Italian traditions; a process defined by the abandonment of the emigrant's native narrative. Though not always able to assimilate the values of the host culture, the Italian becomes not stateless, but rootless. Cesare Pavese portrays this very process of cultural decentering in *La luna e i falò*; what results is the eradication of one culture in the automatized effort of constituting another culture, as Homi Bhabha explains in his work on cultural translocation.

The cultural movement of Fanon's "occult instability" signifies the people in a fluctuating movement which they are *just giving shape to*, so that postcolonial time questions the teleological traditions of past and present, and the polarized historicist sensibility of the archaic and the modern. (Bhabha 153)

For the aging Italian-American the problem becomes only more acute. Isolated from the developments in Italian culture which mass communications have occasioned, yet not fully Americanized, the original emigrant, while living often in a marginalized situation, finds *l'italiano nuovo* inaccessible: rootless in America due to linguistic isolation, but also tragically rootless in Italy. Anguilla, the protagonist of Cesare Pavese's work, is not the exception but nearly the paradigm for the emigrants to the United States during the first third of the twentieth century. His attempt to return to Italy represents the impossibility or irreversibility of cultural dislocation having abandoned, though not fully, the narrative perpetuated in the hills of northwestern Italy.

As Anguilla's native homeland, the Lange served as his cultural center: the fixed origin and point of reference that permit the possibility of the surrounding culture. *L'italianità* of the Lange is not an abstract, but rather the systematic construction of a narrative resulting from the ordering of events and seasons of the community in a particular way: a story pieced together by a congruous connecting of the givens.

Within the small village of San Stefano Belbo, the cycles of nature serve largely as the givens which the villagers and farmers interpret; consequently, meaning is attached to the individual elements of nature, and the understanding of the parts constitute the wholeness of *Italianità* of the Lange. The cycles of nature dictate the narrative of the Lange as Anguilla recalls the mythic rhythm of his native home:

Il bello di quei tempi era che tutto si faceva a stagione, e ogni stagione aveva la sua usanza e il suo gioco, secondo i lavori e i raccolti, e la pioggia o il sereno. L'inverno si rientrava in cucina con gli zoccoli pesanti di terra, le mani scorticate e la spalla rotta dall'aratro, ma poi, voltate quelle stoppie, era finita, e cadeva la neve. Si passavano tante ore a mangiar le castagne, a vegliare, a girare le stalle, che sembrava fosse sempre domenica. Mi ricordo l'ultimo lavoro dell'inverno e il primo dopo la merla - quei mucchi neri, bagnati, di foglie e di meligacce che accendevamo e che fumavano nei campi e sapevano già di notte e di veglia, o promettevano per l'indomani il bel tempo. (Pavese 1950, 81)¹

Anguilla's descriptive passage of life of the *paese* implies the interplay of the Lange's characteristics that function structurally because of their cultural center. However, the center is fixed only presently and cannot transcend time in an unmanipulated fixedness, "that is to say," as Derrida has written, "a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences" (280).

The culture of the Lange is necessarily subject to the arbitrarily mutating nature of the present. Therefore upon leaving the Lange behind him and crossing the geographical and cultural boundaries into America, Anguilla distances himself from the dynamic *Italianità* of the Lange present, but carries with him a permanent sense of *Italianità* of the Lange past as expressed in the following passage:

Non so se comprenderò un pezzo di terra, se mi metterò a parlare alla figlia del Cola — non credo, la mia giornata sono adesso i telefoni, le spedizioni, i selciati delle città, ma anche prima che tornassi mi succedeva tante volte uscendo da un bar, salendo su un treno,

1 "The best thing about those times was that everything was done in its season, and each season had its own customs and its own game, following the work and the crops, the rain or clear skies. In winter we came back to the kitchen, our wooden shoes clogged with mud, hands skinned and backs broken by the plow, but after we'd turned over the stubbly fields, it was over and the snow would fall. We spent so many hours eating chestnuts, sitting up late at night, walking around the stables, that it always seemed like Sunday. I remember the last of the winter's jobs and the first one after the blackbird came — those black wet heaps of leaves and cornstalks we set fire to, that smoked in the fields and already smelled of nights when we'd sit up late, or promised good weather for the next day" (Pavese 1975, 122).

rientrando la sera, di fiutare la stagione nell'aria, di ricordarmi che era il tempo di potare, di mieterne, di dare il soffato, di lavare le tinte, di spogliare le canne. (Pavese 1950, 61)²

Though he now goes through the motions of life of the *città* within the margins of America, Anguilla still moves to the rhythmical beat of the *paese*: a meter which impedes him from full integration with the host culture. His contemplating, "Non so se comprenderò un pezzo di terra, se mi metterò a parlare alla figlia del Cola," points to his native way of establishing roots with the earth and with humanity: the way of the *paese* "[che] vuol dire non essere soli, sapere che nella gente, nelle piante, nella terra c'è qualcosa di tuo, che anche quando non ci sei resta ad aspettarti" (Pavese 1950, 9). As an attempt to enter the cultural mainstream of the USA, Anguilla rejects the Lange's cultural impulses. However, he merely crosses into the margins of society never fully to be assimilated; and alienated from Italian culture external to his memory of the Lange, he automatically moves into the margins of *l'Italianità nuova*.

Caught between the cultural boundaries of America and Italy, the original Italian emigrant to America can never enter the cultural context of either, but becomes an active participant in the constituting of *l'Italianità* in America: a new center within the margins that allows Italian-American identity. Engaged automatically in the interplay around the center, the Italian emigrant's native culture fades away, leaving him or her in isolation and rootlessness:

L'America sognata e sospirata dagli emigranti, intravista come terra di opportunità e di immancabile successo, delude sempre i nuovi arrivati perché l'ideale non corrisponde mai al reale. Il sogno, per quanto veritiero sia, rimane sempre un sogno e la vita per quanto straordinaria possa essere non corrisponde mai in tutto all'idea creata dalla fantasia. Svaniti i sogni, distrutti gli ideali, ci si trova davanti a una realtà dura e sconsolante. (Iannace 475)³

Like many early Italian emigrants to America, Anguilla desires to recapture his native *Italianità* of the *paese*, but cultural arbitrariness impedes a complete reentry into what he left behind. He encounters only the impossibility of fully

2 "I don't know whether I'll buy a piece of land and start talking to Cola's daughter — I don't believe so: now often my day's made up of telephones, shipments, city pavements. But even before, while I was leaving a barroom, taking a train, getting home at night — I'd smell the season of the year in the air; I'd remember that it was time to prune the vines, to mow, to spray, to was the vats, to strip the reeds" (Pavese 1975, 92).

3 "The America dreamed of and longed for by the emigrants, foreseen as a land of opportunity and unfulfilling success, always disappoints the new arrivals because the ideal never corresponds to the actual. The dream, as truthful as it may seem, remains forever a dream; and life as extraordinary as it can be, never corresponds completely to the view created by one's fantasy. The dreams absent, the ideals destroyed, one is faced with a tough and discouraging reality" (Iannace 475; translation is mine).

integrating the culture he abandoned years ago; he goes to America with a sense of cultural centrality of the Lange, and he returns with a sense of cultural centrality, though marginalized, of the USA. Anguilla, out of step with the mythic rhythms *del paese*, returns to the quiet mountains of San Belbo, whose inhabitants follow the quiet mythic patterns of life. His words to his friend of the Lange, Nuto, portray Anguilla's inability to appropriate himself completely within the context of the Lange's *Italianità*: "Se vuoi combinare qualcosa, — dissì, — devi tenere i contatti col mondo. Non avete dei partiti che lavorano per voi, dei deputati, della gente apposta? Parlate, trovatevi. In America fanno così" (Pavese 1950, 54). Anguilla symbolizes the Italian emigrant who is suspended between two primary cultures, never completely to realize either: a vagabond with no sense of permanency within the divisions of Italian or American cultural identity.

The desperation of the Italian immigrant results largely from the violence imposed on the migrant by the world maintaining narrative, the dominating cultural center, encouraging the eradication of the native *l'Italianità*. From the center, American culture attacks the immigrant so as to erode his or her identity, and bring it—sometimes by force and violence—into the mainstream by attempting to eliminate *l'Italianità* altogether: names are changed by intentional misspellings or mispronunciations, native history is ignored, and traditions are discouraged. As one early twentieth-century-Italian-American, growing up in the margin of American culture, recalls:

During this period [1900s], the Italian language was completely ignored. In fact, throughout my whole elementary school career, I do not recall one mention of Italy or the Italian language or what famous Italians had done in the world with the possible exception of Columbus, who was pretty popular in America. We soon got the idea that Italian meant something inferior, and a barrier was erected between children of Italian origin and their parents. This was the accepted process of Americanization. We were becoming Americans by learning how to be ashamed of our parents. (Covello and D'Agostino 43)

Conscious of the cultural center from which Pavese's protagonist has removed himself to live in America, he the Italian-American, already aware of his rootlessness within the new center, gains a personal sense of marginality by refusing to succumb to the complete abolition of his *Italianità*: ultimately leading to a rejection of the center's cultural fundamentals.

Anguilla, as the paradigm of the Italian-American emigrant, has a desire to retain the part of his *Italianità* that draws him to the mythic sense of belonging. Anguilla's cultural sentiments find expression in the following passage in which he reflects on his decision not to father a child in America:

Ho pensato sovente che razza di figli sarebbero potuti uscire da noi due — da quei suoi fianchi lisci e duri, da quel ventre biondo nutrito di latte e di sugo d'arancia, e da me, dal

mio sangue spesso. Venivamo tutti e due da chi sa dove, e l'unico modo per sapere chi fossimo, che cosa avessimo veramente nel sangue, era questo. Sarebbe bella, pensavo, se mio figlio somigliasse a mio padre, a mio nonno, e così mi vedessi finalmente chi sono. Rosanne me l'avrebbe anche fatto un figlio — se accettavo di andare sulla costa. Ma io mi tenni, non volli — con quella mamma e con me sarebbe stato un altro bastardo — un ragazzotto americano. (Pavese 1950, 86-87)⁴

To sustain their *Italianità*, early Italian-Americans had to remember the fundamental characteristics of their cultural identity against the rushing tide of Americanization embodied in the narrative of the melting pot that sought to submerge and dissolve the immigrant in society's mainstream current. Remembering was essentially to *re-member*: giving membership to the bits and pieces to a particular arrangement that constitutes their narrative of *Italianità* in America. Thus, the Italian-American community begins to emerge within the "borderlines of the nation-space" (Bhabha 145) as a "double narrative movement" as Bhabha explains:

The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference: their claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation's people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical "objects" of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*; the people are also the "subjects" of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process. (145)

Although he never visited America, Cesare Pavese certainly understood the problem of cultural dislocation for the emigrant: illegitimacy and rootlessness. My great-grandmother Rosa di Vincenzo Bertini, now ninety-eight years of age, still speaks of never having been fully assimilated with the center of American culture since she has arrived. She has struggled to maintain her *Italianità* that has resulted in a subsequent fragmentation of her native cultural center within the boundaries of Vasto on the Adriatic coast of Italy. Her cultural dislocation finds

4 "I've often wondered what breed of children would have come from the two of us — from her smooth, hard flanks, from that white belly nourished on milk and orange juice, and from me, with my thick blood. We'd both come from God knows where, and that would have been the only way to know what we really had in our blood. It would have been something. I thought, if my son were like my father or my grandfather, and I could then see finally who I was. Rosanne would have been willing to give me a son, if I'd agreed to go to the Coast. But I held back. I didn't want to — with that mother and with me he'd have been another bastard — an American boy" (Pavese 1975, 132-33)

expression in her own words, "Non speaka de ingles good e non parl'italian good no more," which suggest a gradual lapse into the nothingness and vacuity of *her* narrative and indicate only the partial adoption of the narrative dominant in the host culture. Gadamer points with particular clarity to the migrant's inability of complete disassociation with the native culture:

If, by entering foreign language-worlds, we overcome the prejudices and limitations of our previous experience of the world, this does not mean that we leave and negate our own world. Like travelers we return home with new experiences. Even if we emigrate and never return, we still can never wholly forget. (448)

Brigham Young University

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