

THE CLASH BETWEEN *LA VIA VECCHIA E*

*LA VIA NUOVA*

IN

FRANCO PACI'S NOVELS

The Italian-Canadian Dialectic: *La Via Vecchia e La Via Nuova*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE <u>The Italians</u> .....	15
CHAPTER TWO <u>Black Madonna</u> .....	37
CHAPTER THREE <u>The Father</u> .....	63
CONCLUSION .....	85
AFTERWORD .....	97
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	100

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ABSTRACT

I have . . . . .  
his anxious desire to know everything,  
to think, to write everything,  
his anxious desire to be heard. 1

The most significant influx of Italian immigrants to Canada began at the end of the last century, and their number increased substantially just after the Second World War. Those immigrants were preoccupied with survival and had neither the time nor the education to document their immigrant experience. By the 1970's however, some of their children had a university education. This generation had the opportunity to cultivate their minds and the inclination to understand their parents' pasts. They have become the spokespersons of a generation of silent labourers. While many of them are now pursuing professional careers, they still remember that their fathers blasted rocks, worked in mines, hauled ties and did construction, while their mothers worked in factories. The sounds of this labour reverberate in their literature.

Franco Paci took his place in this group of writers when he produced his novels, The Italians, the first full-length book on Italian immigrant themes, Black Madonna and The Father. The author's main theme is the clash between *la via vecchia* (the old way) and *la via nuova* (the new way).

He sets up a series of tensions, including the ambivalence of the Italian-Canadian duality, the home as protection and prison, the generation schism and the language barrier as a means of illustrating his theme. He recalls the immigrant struggle and questions its price with compassion and iron-fair judgement. Using characters from the Italian immigrant *milieu*, he gives sound and structure to the mixed emotions and psychological dualities of the ethnic and the exiled. An Italian immigrant himself, Franco Paci draws from two cultures and examines the immigrant past in the context of the present. Novelist Robert Kroetsch explains the importance of writing about one's background: "In a sense, we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real."<sup>2</sup> Paci's works speak to the conflicts and resolutions repeated in countless Italian families across Canada.

NOTES TO ABSTRACT

<sup>1</sup>Mary DiMichele, "Lucia's Monologue", in Italian-Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose (1946-1983), ed. Caroline M. DiGiovanni (Oakville, New York, London: Mosaic Press, 1984) 168, 10: 1-4.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Kroetsch quoted by Joseph Pivato in "A Literature of Exile: Italian Language Writing in Canada", in Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing, ed. Joseph Pivato (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1985) 186.

A NOTE ON REFERENCES

The novels of Franco Paci referred to here are abbreviated thus:

The Italians. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1978. New York: New American (Signet), 1980: TI.

Black Madonna. Ottawa: Oberon, 1982: BM.

The Father. Ottawa: Oberon, 1984: TF.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a first-generation Italian-Canadian myself, Franco Paci's works spoke immediately and powerfully to me. I wish to thank Dr. L. Hutcheon who first introduced me to The Italians, Black Madonna and The Father. I would also like to extend a heart-felt thank you to Dr. M. Aziz for his sound advice, constant support and genuine warmth. Finally, I want to convey my respect to my supervisor, Dr. R. Hyman. I will remember him by his well-articulated maxim: "the art of writing is rewriting."

## DEDICATION

So much of my life has been wasted feeling guilty,  
feeling torn inside between my own standards and those of my  
Italian parents.  
It makes me doubt myself;  
I am constantly cross-examining my every thought, my every  
move.  
It limits me.  
Perhaps this is what they want.  
It's not what I want.  
We don't understand each other: The Atlantic Ocean is  
between us;  
Time is  
between us;  
Education is  
between us.  
But I still need to talk . . .

*Qui lascia la strada vecchia e va a quella nuova, sa quella  
que lascia ma non quella que trouva.*  
He who leaves the old road and goes to the new, knows what  
he has left but not what he will find.

*La mia dissertazione e dedicata a la mia madre.*

## INTRODUCTION

Italian immigrants have established lives in Canada since the earliest explorations of the North American continent. The story of their struggle for survival and dignity in an often unreceptive environment is only beginning to emerge in Canadian literature. The theme of survival is coupled with the tension between *la via vecchia* (the old way of life) and *la via nuova* (the new way of life). This cultural dialectic is illustrated in familial relations, predominantly in the conflicts experienced by immigrants and their first-generation Canadian offspring. These problems include the loss of the Italian language, the lack of communication, the inability to express feeling, the clash between the old value system and the new value system, and the sense of isolation and alienation experienced within the familial structure.

The Italian-Canadian story has taken a long time to emerge for both historical and sociological reasons:

In the 1890s and the first part of the 1900s, Canada permitted Italian men to enter the country mainly to provide cheap, unskilled labour for the development of natural resources in the North, and the construction of those materials. This population of workers had neither the time nor the education to produce literature.<sup>1</sup>

Their intention was to make enough money to eventually

return to their families. Further, the Canadian government then in power did not encourage immigrants from Mediterranean countries to settle.

The imported Italian labourers were isolated from the centres of culture, expected to produce goods and services but intentionally not given a place in the social structure of the nation. For those Italians who did settle in the major centres, Toronto and Montreal, in the period before World War Two, literary works were scarce.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1920's and 30's the immigrants established small-circulation Italian-language newspapers. When war was declared in Europe, however, the Canadian reaction included internment of people of German, Japanese and Italian origin. Under these circumstances, the Italian press activity diminished almost to silence. After the war years, wave upon wave of newcomers arrived from Italy.

Government policies to assist settlement were slow in coming. As is to be expected, cultural retention was not a major priority in the minds of policy-makers of that time.<sup>3</sup>

For the newly-arrived families, finding work and setting about starting a new life were the all-consuming tasks at hand in the 1950s.

This generation of workers was propelled by a work ethic which would later give their children the means to attend university and the luxury to delve into their origins, for unlike their parents, they were afforded the

time to explore their own psyches. They have become a generation of young people with the means and the drive to give voice and order to their parents' immigrant experience, which had profound reverberations in their own lives.

Italo-Canadian literature demonstrates universal themes within the context of the immigrant experience. The family is frequently the focal point of the works, and the relations within this network are often depicted as painfully strained and problematic. The writers draw from two cultural perspectives in order to unfold the prevalent theme of the psychological need for identity. Most important of all, however, are the tensions between an old way of life and a new world view, which is at the centre of Italian-Canadian writing. Franco Paci's three novels, The Italians, published in 1978, Black Madonna, published in 1982 and The Father, published in 1984, demonstrate this cultural and generational schism. Franco Paci was born in 1948 in Pesaro, a city in Marches, Italy. His family emigrated to Canada in 1952 when Franco was four years old. He grew up in Sault Ste. Marie, the setting of his novels, and was educated at the University of Toronto where he obtained his B.A., and at Carleton University where he earned his M.A. in English. Paci's novels deal with issues which affect all immigrants, but particularly Italians. The novels do not concentrate on the initial hardships of arrival, but on the way in which the two generations,

parents and offspring, adapt to a new society and a new set of social and moral values.

The Italians is set in a Northern Ontario town called Marionville, with its steel mill, its hockey rink, its Rossini Hall, and its Catholic parish church. The novel is about the Gaetano family, the parents, Giulia and Alberto, and their three children, Lorianna, Aldo and Bill. The two oldest, Lorianna and Aldo, were born in Italy and raised in Canada. Both characters are haunted by their birthplace and are torn between the values, views and even languages of the two worlds. Bill, as his anglicized name signals, is the Canadian-born child who feels alien in his Italian-speaking house. Bill chooses to become an NHL hockey player because consciously, he thinks it is the least Italian thing he can do, and subconsciously, because it is a way of gaining his father's approval and of eradicating Italian stereotypes. Alberto works at the steel mill, and provides the link between his old-world wife and his increasingly Canadianized children. He speaks both languages and mediates in conflicts between the two worlds' values. His wife, Giulia, is not vocal in the novel. She fails to adapt to Canada, feels that the family should never have left Marches and only speaks an Italian dialect. The latter point is important because it addresses the loss of the Italian language, an issue which is central to Black Madonna, where Joey and Marie have virtually lost their mother tongue and

therefore cannot adequately communicate with their mother. In all three novels the children are not the only ones who demonstrate an ignorance of the Italian language. The parents speak only a dialect or an odd mixture of dialect and broken English, a fact which underscores not only the loss of language but the degradation of language.

The cultural, psychological and emotional context of The Italians is repeated in Black Madonna. The action of the novel takes place after the death of Adamo, the father of the family. Like Alberto, Adamo had been an adaptable immigrant. Both men defined themselves through work and were never able to comprehend their sons' love of hockey. After his death, Adamo's wife, Assunta, becomes the "black madonna" of the title, a full-time mourner in a tradition which has its roots in the old country villages of Italy. Adamo, like Alberto, provided the bond between the worlds of his wife and children, and when he dies the tie is severed. Joey, the younger son, remains at home to care for his rapidly declining mother, for Adamo's death has a traumatic effect on Assunta. Joey relinquishes his dream of playing professional hockey because he is afraid of leaving the family nest. When he gives up his dream, he dies inside and begins to live only in memories. He has an unfulfilling job at the Abitibi pulp and paper mill, and so finds his only pleasure in playing amateur hockey. His sister, Marie, has already left home years before, and her antagonism towards

her mother prevents her from any reconciliation. Marie's choices in life of education, career, husband, and her break with Catholicism, are partly fueled by her desire to be as unlike her mother as possible. Marie has unresolved conflicts with her mother. She has a tremendous amount of anger and resentment toward her which are manifested in anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

The relationship between Marie and her mother is parallel to that of Stephen and Oreste in The Father. The novel centres on the Mancuso family, the parents, Maddelena and Oreste, and the sons, Stephen and Michael. Oreste, like Assunta, cocoons himself in his West End neighbourhood where he operates an Italian bread bakery, which he infuses with an Italian atmosphere, making bread by hand, personally delivering it and stopping along the way to have a glass of wine or two with his *paesanos* (members of the Italian community). Oreste's death begins when his wife chooses to modernize and expand the bakery, which necessitates a different location and the introduction of machine technology. The family is split in two, Oreste and his younger son, Michael, on one side, and Stephen and Maddelena on the other. Unlike Assunta and Giulia, Maddelena has become assimilated through the adoption of capitalistic materialism to the point where she can no longer relate to her old-world husband, and eventually and inevitably the two separate. Maddelena runs her new bakery and Oreste returns



to his old neighborhood where he opens another small bakery with a *paesano*. Oreste cannot cope with the collapse of his family and turns to alcohol. Stephen is thoroughly disgusted with his father and makes his disapprobation explicit. He attends the University of Toronto where he earns his Ph.D. in Philosophy. The more he is away from his father, the wider the gulf between them.

Just as Joey attempts to escape his family problems through his hockey fantasies, Michael escapes through his "rock" music. Like Bill in The Italians, Michael rejects education and tries to "make it big" as a musician, but he, like Bill, is disillusioned by the political and capitalistic underworld of his profession. Just as Black Madonna ends with the death of Assunta, The Italians ends with the death of Oreste. Both deaths occur within questionable circumstances and evoke strong implications. Paci insinuates that Assunta's death may have been suicidal, and that Michael may have mercifully killed his father by intentionally speeding along an ice patch while driving the drunken Oreste home one night.

In his essay entitled, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", F. G. Paci writes about his three novels, and explains their creative evolution.<sup>4</sup> In the paper, the writer reveals the strong documentary and autobiographical impulse which governs his novels, and therein, I believe, lies their strength, for the

books are drawn from a definite time and place. Although the works are markedly Italian, they can easily be applied to the Canadian immigrant experience at large, which is at the centre of our national identity. In her article entitled, "Voices of Displacement", Dr. Linda Hutcheon discusses The Italians and Black Madonna. She writes, "These are very Italian novels, but they are also about growing up, about the relationship between parents and children, and about feeling alienated."<sup>5</sup> Although the growing pains of Paci's characters are ones we all experience whether or not our parents were born or grew up in the same place as we, the fact that the parents were born and raised in a different country than their children, clearly proves a formidable obstacle in their relations and in maturation. While the children adopt the social mores associated with "progress," including liberality in sexual relationships, feminism, capitalism, and materialism, the parents either cocoon themselves from the mainstream life, or reject these values in spirit. Assunta in Black Madonna and Giulia in The Italians, for example, isolate themselves from progressive movements, while their husbands consciously reject them. Franco Paci provides both the parents' and the children's view points on the issue of progress in an attempt to examine both its positive and negative effects. Whether their parents have informedly or uniformly rejected the socially accepted morals, the children feel

that the older generation exists in a type of time vacuum. The immigrants in Paci's novels left Italy after World War Two and essentially transplanted those attitudes which characterized post-World War Two Italy. Although the majority consciously choose to maintain old-world values, their offspring view this choice as indicative of a mentality freeze, an obstinate adherence to anachronistic morals. The tension between old world/new world ethics is dramatized between parent and child in both The Italians and Black Madonna. In The Father, however, Paci's treatment of this opposition changes. The conflict is not only evident in the parent-child relationship, but is also apparent in the marital relationship. Even though Paci reveals his own doubts about progress, his strong reservations do not constitute a final, condemnatory judgement, but a rigorous defense of those who consciously choose not to progress in Canadian terms.

The theme of progress points toward a corollary concern in Paci's novels, and indeed in immigrant novels at large, that of dislocation. The Italy immigrants left behind has changed through ideological, sociological, historical and political movements. Many emigrant writers write novels of return which underline the tragic realization that "you can't go home again", and that what they have lost is not their birthplace, but their own pasts. The intensity of the sense of loss, the loss of one's past,

is evident throughout Paci's novels, as it is throughout Canadian literature. In The Journals of Susanna Moodie and Roughing it in the Bush, for example, this theme underlies the English immigration to Canada. The fact that Canada offers nothing which is definably Canadian compounds the feeling of displacement. Paci's novels are subversive, as all good literature is, for he incisively undercuts the conventional Canadian wisdom that multinationalism is our strength. Instead, he presents a tyrannical mosaic image, one that demands cultural retention and concurrently expects assimilation.

The loss of the past is felt by both parent and child. In Black Madonna, for example, Marie is obsessed with finding the key to the *bavulo* or hope chest which her mother had carried with her from Novilara. At the end of the novel, she decides to visit Italy in order to get a better understanding of her mother's birthplace and life there. Because the past is based on memory, it is elusive, constantly changing, constantly revised, edited, and sometimes distorted. It is impossible to stranglehold the past, to exert control over it, to force it into a neat, manageable little package. In contrast to her brother, Joey, Marie has a propensity to force life into her own subjective pigeon-holes of meaning, and this is not conducive to self-awareness or awareness of others. While it is necessary to order chaos, chaos must be ordered within

a malleable shape, one which accommodates expansions and contractions. At the end of the book, the readers are not completely convinced that Marie, given her past, will be capable of doing this. Her anorexia nervosa, for example, is a manifestation of the need to control, to domineer over things. As an adolescent, she felt powerless under her mother's tyranny, especially in the area of food. As an adult, she tries to gain a sense of power by controlling her need to eat, for food has become the metacenter for all of her conflicts with her mother. She associates obesity with her past, a past which she wants to obliterate. While home for Christmas, for example, she and her mother argue over Marie's emaciation and refusal to eat the food Assunta has prepared. Marie loses control, gorges on the food and then vomits. Afterwards she thinks:

It was hard to believe she could have acted so disgustingly. Her mother always seemed to bring out the worst in her. Only a couple of days back in her old world and all the years away from home had simply evaporated (BM 104).

Marie associates her thinness with her escape from her past:

She had prevailed in mathematical theory, achieving such lucidity at times that she felt no problem was beyond her range . . . Marie Barone, silent "e", from the West End and of humble Italian parentage, had shown she could do the job in a field dominated by men.

As she climbed higher she had felt herself shedding her personal insecurities and self-doubts. They were like weighty baggage. And with them had

gone her excess weight. She had to be light, airy, to reach the heights of the logical ladder - so that she could see the world aright.

She had escaped the West End with a vengeance (BM 105).

The past is a chronic and acute problem in the relationships between the parents and children of Paci's novels. In order to reach a better understanding of people we need to know about their pasts, about their familial life, their social relations, their education, their religious persuasions and a myriad other things. For various reasons, very little is known about the pasts of Paci's characters. Giulia of The Italians and Assunta of Black Madonna, for example, are both silent about their pasts. Joey realizes the reasons why his mother is so reticent:

. . . there were too many dark pockets of memory in her life that she couldn't expose. Because she had been transplanted onto unnatural and alien ground where she could never be herself (BM 180).

In addition, many of the immigrants' past lives were ridden with poverty and other hardships they would rather forget. Nonetheless, the lack of information regarding the parents' pasts increases the distance between parents and their offspring. In a type of epiphany, Joey realizes that the parental past is reincarnated in the children, but this insight is not a complete resolution to the split between

immigrant parents and their first generation Canadian children. In his own life, Paci felt the need to come to terms with his Italian heritage. He writes:

It was a trip back to Italy, my first back in twenty years since my parents emigrated when I was four, that dramatically made me aware that I had to come to terms with my background and the tangle of emotions it had engendered.<sup>6</sup>

His novels, however, are more than cathartic attempts to come to terms with old ghosts. The characters have a life force of their own, a life which is born from their creator's deep feeling for them.

## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>Caroline M. DiGiovanni, Introduction, Italian Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose (1946-1983), ed. Caroline M. DiGiovanni (Oakville, New York, London: Mosaic Press, 1984) 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 18.

<sup>4</sup>Franco Paci, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", in Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing, ed. Joseph Pivato (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1985).

<sup>5</sup>Linda Hutcheon, "Voices of Displacement", in The Canadian Forum LXV, 750 (June, July 1985) 35.

<sup>6</sup>Franco Paci, 47.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Italians

Sons of an ancient mother

• • • •  
tired of running, of seeking,  
and in the dull cities of steel  
We let ourselves be defeated, be exiled.<sup>1</sup>

The most apparent themes in immigrant literature are those that come from the trauma of dislocation: the feeling of exile, rootlessness, homesickness, nostalgia, the experience of the outsider, the marginalized. All those elegiac laments are in The Italians - and more. The concept of exile for Italians has various complex dimensions that Paci places under creative scrutiny. The writer focuses on the problem of being both Italian and Canadian and examines this duality in terms of communication problems, linguistic deterioration and distortion, escape mechanisms, materialism and the success ethic, stereotyping, symbolism and Italian mythology. Through the members of the Gaetano family, Paci depicts a cultural schizophrenia at work, a teetering between two worlds, the ensuing split and tension between the views, values and languages of two cultures, and the resultant psychological and emotional scarring.

In his poem, "Emigrant," Romano Perticarini reflects the trauma of immigration. The shock and pain of adaptation reverberates in the tonality, the syntax and the rhythm of

the poetic diction. Similarly, the ancestral fears of famine, drought, invasions and dislocation are evident in the Italian dialect spoken by many immigrant parents, and are transmitted to their descendants. As a result, the children associate the language with the dual condition of the ethnic and the exiled. For them, the adoption of the English language and cultural assimilation become the means through which to escape a past fraught with suffering, a past which is moreover, foreign to them. Ironically, however, the rejection of the Italian language and the adherence to the English language, becomes a means of confronting and comprehending the past. This linguistic dialectic is more clearly evident in the character of Bill Gaetano.

Bill, as his anglicized name signals, is the only Canadian-born child in his family. He is almost totally anglophone, and feels alien in his own Italian-speaking house. "His father cannot understand his life goal - to become an NHL hockey player. But for Bill it is the least Italian, and the least useful thing (in his father's eyes) he could do - and therein lies, in a way, its attraction."<sup>2</sup> Bill rejects his Italian heritage and defines himself in contrast to it. He identifies himself with the public world of English as a way of escaping the emotional morass of his family. In Marionville, sports is a melting-pot for all nationalities and Bill feels ". . . at home on an ice

surface (because) . . . it seemed to make him less Italian" (TI 36). Bill's desire to transcend the immigrant's life on the margin is metaphorically conveyed through a series of fantasies. He retreats to his bedroom and envisions himself performing heroic hockey feats, but each time the sound of his parents' Italian voices reaches him from downstairs, as if from another world, and he is brought back to reality. "He thought he had escaped that world for the time being, but it always managed to intrude . . . whenever those voices came up they silenced his dreams" (TI 49). Bill knows that scoring goals and proving how indispensable he is, encapsulates what hockey is all about. In an attempt to gain his father's approval he explains that after only a year in the game he could earn more than his father had in twenty years' work at the plant. For Alberto, however, hockey is a "kid's game." He believes that a man must earn his living from his work and the education he has received at school. He feels betrayed by his son when Bill leaves school to play hockey. Babbo emigrated to Canada in order to provide for his children those opportunities denied to him, including education, and for him, Bill's rejection of education is an affront to his efforts. Moreover, Babbo defines the success or failure of his emigration in terms of the success or failure of his children. Ironically, Bill and his father have the same goals, but they have different ways to achieve them. Both men want to improve their

positions in Canada, Alberto, through hard labour, and Bill, through hockey. Bill accepts being treated as a commodity, as a "steer in a stable with the team brand etched on his hind quarters" because he believes that being a professional hockey player will eradicate disparaging Italian stereotypes and elevate him in the English world (TI 67). Bill, however, deceives himself, for when he finally realizes his dream and becomes a NHL hockey player, the news media, the fans, the managers and even his own team players perpetuate and exploit the labels of "WOP," "DP," "Garibaldi," "Mafioso," and "Pizzaline." He feels that these stereotypes are directed against his father and his achievement in the new world, and through his father to him. Bill intensifies the estrangement Babbo feels between himself and his increasingly Canadianized children. He feels thwarted in his attempts to guide his children. He senses that they are different from him and not the children he would have had had he remained in Italy, where

When some came of age they quit going to school to help out on the farms. Girls barely went beyond grammar school. There was too much to do at home to bother with words and books. Here many things were different (TI 78).

Bill's obsession with "making it" in the new world causes him to lose sight of his values. His father's industrial accident moves him to re-evaluate both his personal and professional ethics. When Bill goes to the

hospital, the medical staff and visitors recognize him as the "hockey star." This makes Aldo reflect on how his brother, a second generation Italian, has so quickly established his new status in their eyes, "but he also felt confused. What had they given up for their new role? There was a large gap where the answer should have been and even their father's life . . . couldn't bridge it" (TI 150). The sight of Alberto's mutilated body jars Bill and causes him to put his priorities into perspective. When he works at the plant at the end of the season, he experiences the hard life of sacrifices his father had made for his family.

For the Italians in Marionville, Bill symbolizes success in the new country and they give him a party in the Rossini Hall. Bill is moved by the sight of

. . . the work weary faces of the first generation Italians . . . they were honouring someone who made his living at a game played on ice. How far had they come! He had never really understood them or the country from which they had come. And he wanted his father to understand him (TI 197).

The ironic tone in Bill's words undercuts the notion of progress and underscores the duality of cultural betrayal. It is not only the children but the parents as well who relinquish old values for new ones. At the banquet Bill reflects: ". . . it was because he himself was making a violent break with his roots that they were honouring him now" (TI 197). Sometimes, however, circumstances

necessitate that immigrants give up old values. In their desire to succeed in Canada, for example, many immigrants found that their priority became making money. At some point, however, materialism and financial gain are no longer fueled by need, but by greed.<sup>3</sup>

Another important issue in the novel is that of stereotyping. In her article Dr. Linda Hutcheon writes: "The question of stereotyping in the novel is a real issue, given each culture's resentment of what seems an inevitable simplifying process."<sup>4</sup> Poet Len Gasparini addresses this theme in his poem, "Il Sangue" in which he writes: "Strangled by a spaghetti stereotype,/ an Italian is supposed to lay bricks."<sup>5</sup> In The Italians it is Bill, the most assimilated in the Canadian mainstream, who suffers most from stereotyping. Not all stereotypes, however, are created and perpetuated by the host country. Often it is the immigrants themselves who want to create an idealized self-image or who label other Canadians. Aldo's isolation, for instance, is not only the result of his immigrant status, but it is the result also of his own superiority complex which alienates him from others. He has an idealized vision of Italy and an extremely cynical one of Canada. In addition, Lorianna is forbidden to date *gli Inglesi* (the English) not only because her parents are comfortable with their "own people", but also because in some ways, they are ethnocentric.

Lorenzo distorts the Italian nationality in an appalling and frightening way. He abuses his wife, both physically and emotionally, and rationalizes that he wants to "Italianize" her, to make her the submissive, subservient, mindless wife he believes he wants. He rapes her for the first two years of their marriage and Lori is not even able to tell him how degraded she feels. As early as the first page, the readers are made aware of the vast differences between Lori and Lorenzo through the language conflict. The Italian-Canadian dialectic manifests itself in a linguistic conflict between English and Italian. When Lori first met Lorenzo "she had not condescended to speak to him in Italian; . . . she had tried to teach him English. But, much to her surprise, it turned out that he taught her better Italian" (TI 5). On their honeymoon, the drunken Lorenzo demands that his wife speak Italian, but she responds, "You're in the new country. You must learn to speak the language" (TI 16). For Lorenzo, a newly arrived immigrant, Canada is threatening, and he sees this threat personified in Lori. He tells her to "*sta' zitta, Inglese!* Shut-up, English one! I will teach you some Italian you never forget" (TI 16). And then he rapes her. For Lori, the Italian language comes to have poignantly negative associations, and like her brother Bill, she resents and rejects her mother tongue. In four months of marriage, she only visits her parents twice, and she refuses to speak

Italian with her mother. When Alberto accuses her of being an "*ingrata*" (ingrate) she responds: "I'm the one who doesn't know whether she's Italian or Canadian" (TI 25).

The search for the nature of the duality of the Italian-Canadian experience becomes an examination of the problem of exile. In both Italian literature and history the theme of exile has been prominent. In a tradition rooted in Roman times, Italians have always been leaving home, trying to return home, or like Vergil's "pius Aeneas", trying to find a new home. Both Cavalcanti and Dante died in exile away from Florence. In the "Divina Commedia" the feelings of nostalgia for home and the sense of exile set the tone. The displacement of people during two world wars is depicted in many novels on exile and alienation, including the works of Moravia and Bassani. In his novels Paci extends this tradition of exploring the state of exile. His concept of exile is not limited to the concrete idea of physical displacement or political disaffinity. The writer is more concerned with the abstract, with the psychological significance of the sense of home, and the feeling of belonging. He defines the state of exile as the absence of a sense of home.

For Aldo, exile from Italy is associated with the separation from an idyllic childhood. The Italian childhood becomes the central myth in the book. The new land then is the harsh reality of growing up, of confronting



disillusionment. When the novel opens, Aldo is in the Basilian seminary in Toronto, preparing to take his vows and become a priest. However, his religious doubts increase in line with his self-awareness. He realizes that the Church has been an escape from life, and like Lori, an escape from the body. Just as Bill feels at home on an ice surface, Aldo derives this sense of home from the Church. Since childhood, Aldo has felt apart from Canadians. His parents harboured a distrust of Canadians which filtered through to Lori and himself. "Frail from birth, he had shunned the team sports that served as a melting pot for the Italian and Canadian kids in Marionville" (TI 93). He found it difficult to establish friendships with Canadian children and the Italian ones taunted him for his want of athletic ability and for his academic precociousness. "He felt alone and unwanted outside of his home and school, and found refuge in the Church" (TI 93).

Aldo's doubts begin when he is traumatized by the desecration of the altar in the seminary chapel. An emotionally disturbed young man, presumably under the influence of an hallucinogen, broke into the chapel, believing himself Christ, and desecrated the altar before he collapsed from an attempted suicide. The image of this bloodied man becomes indelibly impressed on Aldo's mind, impinging on him more than his favourite icons.

It came to represent all that was frightening on the outside. It held an attraction for him that he couldn't ignore. It seemed to taunt him to come out of the seminary and fight like a man (TI 93).

The figure catalyzes more than a crisis of faith; it triggers a belated crisis of adulthood. Outside the confines of the seminary, Aldo feels like a child, and in a sense, he is still a child. Aldo evades responsibility for his lack of experience by creating an idealized past in Italy and contrasting it to the "iniquitous" present in Canada. After he sees the desecration of the altar, he thinks that in the old country such a thing would never have happened, and he tells Lori that he is disillusioned with Canada: "I had thought . . . that by grasping the new country's words I would also be grasping its emotion, but what a fool I was" (TI 55). In reality, it is not Aldo's vision of Canada which begins to falter, but his self-idealized image which begins to weaken. To survive the alienation of his condition, Aldo tries to avoid coming to terms with harsh reality by creating an internal subjective reality based on what he has read in philosophy books, a reaction which is paralleled in Stephen Mancuso of The Father. This circumscribed reality, coupled with his idealized self-image as the perfect and unsullied priest, keeps him at a safe distance from the "real-life mud" (TI 169). It is Evelyn who introduces Aldo to the vicissitudes

of real life, and who invades his private reality:

He had trouble understanding or accepting the ideas of anyone less than a Thomas Aquinas or a Bertrand Russell. Books had always spoken to him, people hadn't; and books had been fixed . . . while this girl, this Evelyn was like, even with her physical disability, a frolicking spirit that would always evade the covers he put her in (TI 138).

Aldo's affinity toward Evelyn is in part based on her physical disability. The recurrence of characters with physical handicaps in the Italo-Canadian consciousness suggests that such characters are a metaphor for the immigrant's suffering in Canada. In The Father, Stephen Mancuso has a withered hand. Both mother and daughter in Black Madonna deform their bodies. In The Italians, Alberto loses an arm in an industrial accident. Aldo associates Evelyn's suffering with that of his father's in Canada. He confides in Lori: "Babbo taught me how one is bled, but she taught me how to bleed. And without bleeding for another human being you can't really know what happened on the cross" (TI 188).

It is Alberto's accident which finally puts an end to Aldo's dilemma. Earlier, Evelyn and Aldo made love, after which he felt obliged to marry her and leave the priesthood. While Babbo is in the hospital, however, Aldo promises God that he will give up Evelyn in return for his father's life. Aldo's plea-bargaining is understandable given the fact that his father is close to death. He does

not return to his vocation simply because his father is ill. After his affair with Evelyn, he is convulsed with guilt but then undergoes a kind of self-absolution in which he exorcises not only the "seminary demon" but the family ghosts as well. His identity crisis is compounded by the fact that his parents have put a great deal of pressure on him to meet their expectations and "Aldo's becoming a priest would sanction their emigration in the deepest sense" (TI 38). Through Evelyn, he progresses in discovering his mature voice and in rediscovering his vocation. His theological crisis is partly a delayed adolescent quest for independence apart from the family and familial expectations. In many ways, Aldo is still the introspective immigrant on the fringe, and Evelyn forces him to "wallow in the mud of real life," to soil his priestly hands (TI 169). Through Aldo, Paci is advocating the rights of the individual within the traditions, prejudices, preconceptions and canons of an ethnic group.

Lorianna, like her brother, must also learn to deal with the duality of her experience in an Italian home and the necessity of functioning in an English society. Lori's fragmented identity, the emotional tug-of-war between the Italian and Canadian experiences, is mirrored in countless Italo-Canadian works. This ambivalence is an integral part of the immigrant experience and is often portrayed in terms of a twin motif. In "Marta's Monologue", for instance, Mary

DiMichele writes:

Lucia, who claims that someone in the  
family,  
her twin, committed suicide, but it is not  
true,  
She has no twin.<sup>6</sup>

The poem is one of three dramatic monologues and is counterbalanced by "Lucia's Monologue." The two poems demonstrate the antithetical reactions of two sisters to the parental pressures of adhering to the "Italian" way: Lucia rebels and Marta conforms. Marta, like Lorianna, has failed to "discover a different, if mutant possibility"<sup>7</sup> for herself in life. Lorianna grows up wanting to be a nun, but she ends up marrying Lorenzo because this is what her parents expect of her. In her early married life, she is haunted by a vision of Italy seeking its revenge on her through her husband for being held in contempt, an image which underlines her failure in reconciling the two informing influences of her identity, Canada and Italy. When she later visits Aldo at the University of Toronto, she deeply regrets her self-denial of education and all that it entails, and resolves that her daughter, Angelina will attend the institute in order to maximize her autonomy. Further, Lori decides that her daughter will be Canadian but with an awareness of the Italian culture.

Language plays an important role in Lori's arrested maturation: "She wasn't even sure whether she had ever grown up in her mother's eyes since she had always had to speak

that babyish Italian to her" (TI 55). The relationship between identity and language is indicated in Lori's self-image. In his essay entitled, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist," Paci writes, "Language in itself is not real. Just as one human being in himself is not real. Language is relation."<sup>8</sup> One of the most fundamental and necessary personality reinforcements is verbal communication. We discover ourselves through communication. Lorianna is introspective and she keeps the majority of her thoughts to herself. She lives in her own self-constructed, ascetic world. She has learned her reticence from her mother whose inability to communicate represents the ultimate condition of exile.

The mother, Giulia, is a silent figure in the novel. She has never adapted to Canada, speaks only dialect, and thinks that the family should never have left Marches. Giulia is closed off from the world by all these aspects that contribute to her inability to communicate. The readers always see Giulia from the outside, either through the eyes of her husband or her children. We are never permitted inside this Italian mother. She represents the archetypal Italian mother caught in her condition as both ethnic and exiled. Her children learn to appreciate her, but never to know her better. Upon coming to Canada Giulia recognized and accepted her state of exile as an Italian woman. She talks about returning to Italy but remains

dedicated to her family. While Alberto's accident brings the three children closer to each other, Giulia is still outside this circle of understanding.

Giulia's metaphorical portrayal as a silent rock bearing all suffering, raises another important issue in the novel, the failure of language to express feelings. "Sometimes it is a conflict between languages: Italian dialect and English; sometimes, though, it is a matter of things being 'too deep for words' or even of their being unsayable—especially by the inhibited, silent mother."<sup>9</sup> The inability to articulate feeling is in part rooted in the semantic distortion of both Italian and English. Aldo explains to Lori that "they both thought in a language that was idiomatic to neither the old nor the new country, but probably to some vague area in between" (TI 55). Far too often immigrant children lose their maternal language in the first years of schooling during which they are assimilated with other students who speak English. The English which the young Italians learn at school, however, is filtered through contact with a social group often immigrant like themselves. Consequently, many of these second-generation Italians speak an imperfect English, distorted and maintaining a precarious relationship to mainstream English. Similarly, the Italian speakers speak an imperfect Italian, a dialect intermingled with regional archaisms and English words. This dual semantic distortion of both the host and

home tongues results in communication problems.

Lorianna's inability to communicate, especially in sexual matters, perpetuates her marital estrangement. Lorianna, like Marie in Black Madonna, has serious sexual problems which are conveyed predominantly through religious imagery. Like Aldo, her desire to become a nun is indicative of the sense of insecurity she feels in coping with the world outside the confines of home. For Lori, home is a safe and cloistered world which is wrapped up in its own traditions. The novel opens with Lori's marriage vows which she associates with her dream of taking religious vows: "As she had dreamed so often, Father Sarlo was the celebrant and the Virgin was Maid of Honour. Only she wasn't marrying the Church, she was marrying Lorenzo (TI 47). On her honeymoon, moments before Lorenzo rapes her, she envisions three images: she recalls vomiting on the boat that had brought her to Canada; she sees the Virgin statue smiling at Our Lady of Fatima; and she imagines Aldo as a Christlike figure in sackcloth and ashes blessing her. Throughout the sexual abuse, Lori is sustained by her recollection of the nuns' words, "If you're unwilling, you're still a virgin in spirit" (TI 48). Nevertheless, Lori feels tremendous pangs of guilt which are manifested in the Italian image of Maria Goretti. The Italian saint is indicative of Paci's incorporation of a Mediterranean subcode. Maria is the archetype of virginity in Italy.



When she was still a child she was raped and murdered by a village man whom she forgave before her death. Maria is considered a virgin because she resisted her rapist, and died in her efforts. Lorianna chastises herself for not having the strength of character to refuse her husband. Nevertheless, she still sees herself as a virgin because she spiritually resists him. This virginal image persists even after she gives birth to Angelina, and later when she becomes pregnant again. She strongly identifies with the Mother/Madonna duality and views each future pregnancy as an "immaculate conception" (TI 185).

The birth of Lori's daughter catalyzes a change in her husband's attitude toward her. At one point he tells her, "*Ti amo molto carissima. Sei la mamma dei miei bambini.* (I love you very much dear. You are the mother of my children.) You make me feel proud like I own the world. You make me feel important in the new country" (TI 185). Although he stops abusing his wife, Lorenzo is still an extremely egocentric, chauvinistic and insecure character with few redeeming qualities. His view of his wife as a reproductive machine recalls Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale in which women are regarded as walking wombs. Lorianna can provide him with the children who will perpetuate his name and his identity. His condescending, patronizing attitude is reflected in his characterization after the birth of Angelina, when he becomes "more tolerant

of Lori's quirks and idiosyncracies" (TI 92). Lori still has no voice in terms of major marital decisions. She resigns herself to marriage by rationalizing that with each birth she will gain a greater voice:

She had split in two and the odds against her had been lowered. By splitting in three, into four even, there was no telling how much of a voice she would gain (TI 101).

Sadly, Lori's value depends on her ability to reinforce her husband's weak sense of masculinity, and what is even more sad is that she accepts this. When she is breastfeeding her daughter she realizes that her husband is simply a frightened baby in a foreign land who, like her infant, needs a mother:

A sense of power welled up inside her. On shaky knees she brought the baby back to the crib, not bothering to cover herself . . . He was . . . a baby, she thought. All his abuse, all his idiocy and bad manner and disrespect and stubbornness were but the frustration of never having been able to get his way. He was a baby in the new country (TI 104).

Her unresolved sexuality partly prevents her from breaking from this man. Lorianna takes the path of least resistance, going from the obedient, passive, "good" Italian daughter to the subservient and submissive wife and mother. Both marriage and motherhood do not reflect an active choice on Lori's part, but a passive compliance. Although Lori makes some progress in coming to terms with her body, and although

her marriage does improve, she has yet to discover her own autonomous voice separate from marriage and motherhood.

Nevertheless, she does redefine her identity in terms of her status as an Italian daughter of immigrant parents. When she sees her father lying helpless in a hospital bed, she recalls his words on her wedding day. Babbo had told her that she would always be a daughter to him and Giulia and that his house would continue to remain her home. She regrets having isolated herself from her family in the first few years of marriage and grows to understand that "she was neither Canadian or Italian, but simply, a member of a family which was part of something larger that she had no right to either label or describe" (TI 173). Further, she determines that because she and Aldo were born in Italy they had a more pronounced obligation than her brother, Bill, to understand their parents. Lorianna's insight is important because it underscores the elusive nature of defining what it means to be either "Canadian" or "Italian." In many ways, the immigrant experience is as subjective as is the familial experience. However, what Lorianna neglects to articulate is the fact that she is also a member of the Canadian society, and is influenced by her time and her place. Her sense of obligation toward understanding her father indicates a growing awareness of an ancestral responsibility. Further, her attitude reflects her graduation from childhood to adulthood, for she no longer

views her father as the provider of her needs, but as someone with needs of his own.

The Italian language has complex meanings for the immigrants of Paci's novel. The mythology surrounding the maternal tongue has become part of the Italian folklore. Italian represents the Golden Age, the age of innocence before the migratory fall. Both a language of Eden and a language of exile, Italian provokes contradictory feelings of love, hate and indifference. In his novel, Paci addresses the loss of the Italian language and culture. The memory of childhood, of the past, traps the immigrant in a kind of never-never-land. He cannot go back, but he does not belong to the present either. For Giulia, Alberto and Aldo, Canada is not home. Home is the idealized past in Italy, and for Lorianna and Bill, the ancestral past is something which haunts them and makes adaptation extremely difficult. One of the dominant themes is the immigrant experience of exile. Paci accentuates the psychological feeling of dispossession, of homelessness and disconnection. All of the major characters exhibit aspects of this exile. Bill tries to escape his alienation through hockey, while Aldo and Lorianna turn to religion. Alberto tries to obliterate his sense of disconnection by working for his children and Giulia by living for her children. The inability to communicate between the family members is stressed by long silences when nobody can express his feelings, and

represents the ultimate state of exile. Giulia's refusal to learn the English language ironically works against those values she is trying to preserve. Her refusal to learn English creates a gap in communication. She and her children communicate through gestures and a schizoid mixture of Italian regional idioms and English expressions. When Alberto is injured the children do come together as a family, but their union is still incomplete because their mother remains on the margin.

One of the problems with Giulia's character is that she is an archetype, and as such she does not have a life force of her own. In Black Madonna the characters are more true to themselves. They exist for themselves alone. Paci himself confesses his biased characterization of Giulia and rectifies his error in Assunta Barone, the central and marginalized mother of Black Madonna.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup>Romano Perticarini, "Emigrant", in Italian-Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose (1946-1983), ed. Caroline M. DiGiovanni (Oakville, New York, London: Mosaic Press, 1984) 178, 2:1-9.

<sup>2</sup>Linda Hutcheon, "Voices of Displacement", in The Canadian Forum LXV, 750 (June, July 1985) 35.

<sup>3</sup>In Under The Ribs of Death, John Marlyn dramatizes this theme. The protagonist is a highly successful, ruthless, Canadianized Hungarian immigrant who is driven by materialist values and his overriding ambition. See John Marlyn, Under The Ribs of Death (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1964).

<sup>4</sup>Linda Hutcheon, 36.

<sup>5</sup>Len Gasparini, "Il Sangue", in Italian-Canadian Voices, 53, 5:2-3.

<sup>6</sup>Mary DiMichele, "Marta's Monologue", in Italian Canadian Voices, 159, 2:9-11.

<sup>7</sup>Mary DiMichele, "Lucia's Monologue", in Italian-Canadian Voices, 166, 1:11.

<sup>8</sup>Franco Paci, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", in Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing, ed. Joseph Pivato (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1985) 40.

<sup>9</sup>Linda Hutcheon, 35.

<sup>10</sup>Franco Paci, 53.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Black Madonna

Franco Paci's Black Madonna is the story of the Baroni, a family of Italian immigrants in Canada. The novel opens with an event that is central to the narrative structure, the day of Adamo Barone's funeral. Adamo, the father, had come to the new country all alone from an Abruzzi village before the Second World War. "He had heard of the job opportunities in Sault Ste. Marie from relatives of men who had already gone. To them, the Sault, even though a small city in Northern Ontario, was *I' America*" (BM 10). Through Adamo, and similarly through Maddelena and Oreste Mancuso in The Father and Alberto Gaetano in The Italians, Paci is celebrating the people of his own parents' generation, specifically the hard-working semi-skilled or unskilled labourers who emigrated to Canada in order to improve their lives and the lives of their children. These men and women sacrificed their own needs for those of their children and went unnoticed all their lives. Paci himself had worked with these labourers in a steel plant and had been struck by the disparity between their lives on the job and their lives at home.<sup>1</sup> While their children were enjoying the comforts of the affluent society in the sixties, they were slaving away at menial jobs and ignored by the media and literature. "Like his

biblical namesake, Adamo had been an adaptable immigrant."<sup>2</sup> He was a bricklayer who defined himself in terms of his work and more specifically, in terms of the provisions he could make for his wife and children. He had been his wife's spokesman with the English-speaking world, a world which included his son and daughter, and when he dies, the primary channel between the worlds of his wife and children is closed.

Assunta, the mother, had arrived in Canada as a mail-order bride from Novilara, a village in Marches. Her decision to emigrate is more complicated than that of her husband. Having passed the marriageable age, she did not feel able to reject what could have been her last chance to get married, and so she accepted a marriage proposal from a man about whom she knew virtually nothing and moved to a country about which she knew even less. Assunta insulates herself from *gli inglesi* (the English) by moving in a limited geographical circumference. She spends most of her time in her home in the West End neighbourhood, which is essentially a transplanted little Italy, attends Italian mass in a small parochial church, has a circumscribed social life, only interacting with other Italian neighbours, and never goes beyond short Sunday car rides to the outskirts of the Sault. Paci presents her as an enigmatic figure who stands as a symbol for a whole generation of Italian women completely alienated from Canadian society. Assunta lacks



the skills to work outside her home and her identity is firmly cemented in the home and family. She has neither the time, the energy nor the courage to undergo a process of assimilation to a new culture, and further, the social facilities apt to meet the needs of newcomers were almost non-existent in the 1950's, the time of her emigration. Assunta is discarded by her children, especially Marie, as anachronistic because she refuses to learn English and maintains both her mother tongue and the culture and traditions of the old country. Joey, her son, associates her with the image of an unrooted tree, a metaphor which underscores her persistent feeling of dislocation (BM 180). For Assunta, her coming to Canada had meant to accept a life of exile in which the roles of wife and mother give her some sense of connection, however minimal. These are roles imposed on her by circumstances, for unlike her daughter, she did not have the opportunity for education. For Assunta, her husband and her home represent buffers to the outside world. When Adamo dies and when her home is expropriated for what is called urban renewal, she loses her sense of security and cannot cope.

In his novel, Paci analyzes the immigrant parent-child relationship in terms of a double narration. He uses the flashback technique to examine the life cycle of Marie's relationship with her mother, which spans the period from her adolescence to womanhood, while Joey is left in the

present grappling with his own independence. At the opening of the book, Marie, the eldest daughter, has already left home to attend the University of Toronto. Joey still lives in his parent's house and has an unsatisfying job at the Abitibi pulp and paper mill. He had aspirations to become a professional hockey player but relinquished his dreams when his father objected because he did not want him to leave home. Marie too feels pressured to remain at home but she is made of different material than her brother. She rebels against the traditional expectations for an Italian daughter, to become a wife and a mother, and instead wants to become a "woman professor" (BM 106).

The desire to escape from the parental home is a recurrent motif throughout Paci's three novels and indeed throughout Canadian literature. The desire to escape, however, is coupled with the need to return to the parental home. Margaret Laurence, for example, uses the escape motif as the central structuring device in her novel, The Diviners, in which the protagonist, Morag Dunn, is fueled by her desire to leave her foster parents, Manawaka and her past.<sup>3</sup> The structure of the novel, however, is cyclical and Morag finds that the only way to let go of her past and to move forward is to come to terms with her past, which implies returning to Manawaka and to the "parental" home. Similarly, in Black Madonna, there is an interdependence between theme and technique. This interdependence is best

viewed through the character of Marie. Marie's major choices in life, her educational pursuits, her marriage to Richard, an English, Protestant philosophy professor, her rejection of Catholicism and even her anorexia nervosa and bulimia, are all motivated by the conscious wish to escape from her ancestral roots, to be as "un-Italian" as possible. The novel ends, however, with Marie's trip to Italy, which implies her need to come to terms with her Italian heritage.

In his essay, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist", Paci writes, "If we look at some of the tradition in Canadian literature on immigrant themes, we see that there is usually the creation of two worlds: the old and the new." Paci goes on to cite variant literary manifestations of this dialectic:

Whether one is trying to cope with the new world with an old world sensibility as Susanna Moodie does, for example, in Roughing It In The Bush, or one forsakes the old for the new values as in Under The Ribs of Death, or one tries to beat the new world at its own game as in The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz, there is a schizophrenia at work, a teetering between two worlds, and a painful amount of psychic scarring as a result.<sup>4</sup>

Although Paci confesses to having written his three novels unaware of the tradition behind him, there is evidence of all three patterns in his work. In The Father for example, Oreste Mancuso adheres to his old world sensibility, in Black Madonna, Marie rejects the old for the new values, and

in The Italians, Bill Gaetano fights Italian stereotyping by joining the new world in its own game, and quite literally, for he becomes a professional hockey player. The fact that Paci's dialectic is not consciously modelled upon past literary traditions is a significant point, for it indicates the universality of the immigrant experience. Margaret Atwood is a prominent spokesperson on Canadian literature and in her book, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, she states that "all Canadians are immigrants at heart,"<sup>5</sup> a position which is important in any study of Canadian culture.

The tension between Marie and her mother partly results from the ambivalence of the Canadian identity. When Marie does something of which Assunta disapproves, for example, leaving the Church, she is accused of becoming "Canadianized," and Marie adopts the reverse reaction in her relations with her mother. Assunta's "earthy" preoccupations, for example, her emphasis on food and family, are regarded by her daughter as too "Italian." Marie's association of her mother with the Italian culture has serious repercussions in her life, specifically in the areas of nutrition and sexuality. Both basic needs, food and sex, are repressed because Marie associates them with her mother and by implication, with being Italian, and as a result, she becomes anorectic and sexually inhibited.

Although the problems experienced between Marie and her mother have to do with the generation gap, with growing

up and with identity, Paci examines these themes within the context of a more general experience of Canadian life and culture. Assunta's refusal to adapt to the new country is not totally her own fault, for if she were to let go of her national identity, what would she replace it with that is definably Canadian? In her article entitled, "Voices of Displacement", Linda Hutcheon elaborates on this theme:

Canadians have always prided themselves on their multiculturalism, their ethnic "mosaic" that allowed the cultural diversity that the American "melting pot" did not. But the mosaic can be a tyrannical image, too: it demands that you keep your ethnic roots and become Canadian as well. In Drabek's words: "Native Canadians claim there's no pressure to assimilate, that there is no melting pot, like in the U.S. - How can they tell? It takes most of one's efforts during the first years to produce that feeling of belonging. No one can operate without it."<sup>6</sup>

Assunta is physically uprooted and Marie feels psychologically displaced. Marie isolates herself from her family and distances herself from the West End community because she feels she does not belong to either. Although she develops a tough skin, one which is perhaps too impregnable, Marie feels rejected by her family, especially by her mother and by her community, which is essentially a transplant of an Italian village. Assunta in turn, has never overcome the feeling of not belonging to the new country and despite political "assurances that difference is part of the Canadian mosaic,"<sup>7</sup> the psychological need to fit

in is basic to human nature. After her husband's death, Assunta asks her son to send her back to Italy. Joey tells his sister and she responds: "That's where she's always belonged, isn't it? Her parents probably forced her to come here and marry Dad. At any rate, she's never adapted" (BM 160).

The identity problem, the ambivalence about what it means to be Canadian or what it means to be Italian, is more graphically illustrated in The Italians. As in Black Madonna, the foci of this novel are the members of the Gaetano family, husband, wife and three children. The oldest, Lorianna, was born in Italy, raised in Canada and ends up marrying an Italian, born and raised. Lorianna's marriage catalyzes her crisis of being Canadian or being Italian. Her husband, Lorenzo, rationalizes his physical abuse by claiming that he wants to "Italianize" her, to "tame" her and make her the submissive wife he thinks he wants.

Lorenzo's convenient ethnic elasticization raises an important thematic issue concerning the Canadian-Italian duality. While the Canadian identity is problematic for the characters of Paci's novels, the Italian identity is equally so. This ambivalence is a significant motivating factor for immigrant writers such as Paci to delve into their ancestral roots. Far too often first-generation Canadians know next to nothing about their parents' homeland and heritage.

There are a number of factors which contribute to this ignorance. Paci examines many of these factors in Black Madonna where Assunta's *bavulo* or hope chest comes to symbolize the past she left behind. Ever since her childhood Marie has been trying to open her mother's *bavulo*, a chest Assunta had brought over from Italy and which contains family belongings. The chest has been passed down from mother to daughter for generations and generations and represents the maternal lineage. For Marie the chest has become part of a ritual. Over and over again she tries to find the key to open it but is never successful. For her the *bavulo* is something as mysterious as is her mother and she is curious to discover its secrets. Her failure to find the key symbolically parallels her failure to understand her mother and her mother's past. After Assunta's death, Marie makes a significant discovery: the chest is not locked as she believed and it appears as if it had been open for a long time. This fact is important in understanding their relationship.

There is a two-fold gap between mother and daughter, generational and national. Assunta left Novilara after the Second World War and imported the attitudes and values of post-war Italy. Post-war North America and Italy were radically different societies. Post-war Italy and present-day Canada are even more different, and this is exactly the clash between Assunta and Marie. Assunta lives within a

time vacuum. She is poorly educated and insulated from the outside world. She is unaware of the political, ideological and social movements which have had a significant effect on the world and which are part of Marie's education. Every parent-child relationship is affected to varying degrees by a generational gap, but the relationship between Assunta and her daughter is also affected by a national gap. Assunta is relating to Marie with a mentality which can be placed in a small rural village in post-war Italy. Realistically it is up to Marie, who is better equipped than her mother, to bridge this gulf and to try to understand Assunta.

The quest into one's parental heritage is predominant throughout Italo-Canadian writing and Paci follows in this tradition.

Marie's quest can be represented as a process of self-knowledge which is characterized by the two phases of rejection and acceptance of her mother and implicitness, or herself as well . . . It is especially through the extensive flashbacks leading us through Marie's childhood and adolescence that we acquire an understanding of the reasons for why the difficulties between the two women have arisen.<sup>8</sup>

The Barone home is not conducive to self-expression and growth and this is indicated in Marie's defensive behaviour toward her family. As early as page five, she is characterized as "rather aloof and distant, giving . . . the impression she was too good for the family" (BM 10). Marie grows up wanting a different life than that of her mother .



She wants more for herself than the prescribed roles of wife and mother, something Assunta cannot understand because these roles are the columns upon which her life is mounted. The turning point in Marie's young life is her receipt of a letter of acceptance from the University of Toronto. She tries to explain to her mother the meaning of education, but a linguistic barrier prevents her from doing so. Marie, like her brother, stopped learning Italian as a child and so her level of vocabulary is extremely limited.

She is not even able to speak her mother's dialect but a broken dialect intermingled with English colloquialisms. "There were so many things to say, such exciting possibilities to share -- and here she was unable to render them in their simplicity to her own mother" (BM 70). Marie goes on to contrast her mother to other parents who would be happy at her success, "Most people, the parents, they would be happy for this. But you . . . you . . ." (BM 71). The punctuation reflects the absence of words and Marie's ignorance of her mother tongue. Her mother's habitual response is a defensive hostility, "yeah, you become a doctor," she (says) sarcastically (BM 71). Her comment reveals her cultural and old world bias. In post-war Novilara people did not have the means to attend university and nor did they rise above their social class. Assunta cannot fathom that a child of hers could indeed become a doctor. Further, her reaction betrays her fear of

Canada, and she does not want Marie to go out into this big, foreign land. In addition, Assunta was conditioned to believe that children, and especially daughters, should remain at home until marriage. Marie is too emotionally entangled with her mother to realize the reasons behind her response. She believes her mother is against her, and does not believe in her abilities. Moreover, there is a marked discrepancy between their thoughts. While Marie thinks about academics and career, Assunta is more rooted in earthy, immediate preoccupations such as cooking, cleaning, washing and related domestic chores. Marie's series of questions disclose this chasm: "What do you know, ah, Ma? You speak to any teachers? You read the books I read? You do the things I do? You don't even know me" (BM 72). Her mother's response strikes Marie to the bone: "I don't know you? Why, carina, I wash the shit from your pants all the time" (BM 72). Assunta always manages to find something to use against her daughter, to belittle her. This degradation is a subconscious attempt to keep her dependent upon her parents, to keep her at home. Assunta tries to manipulate Marie by using her friend Rita as an exemplar of a "good" Italian daughter. Rita plans to attend the local university, live at home, marry young (preferably an Italian) and emulate the lifestyle of her parents. For Assunta, children are security, a view which is reiterated in The Italians, where Lorianna is persuaded to marry an

Italian because for ethnic minorities this is a way of securing continuity. Her daughter, Angelina, represents an addition to the Canadian family branch.

Marie grows up resenting her mother's attempts to keep her a dependent child. Her subsequent anorexia nervosa is the direct result of her anger at her mother for making her fat as a child. In her quest for an identity, Marie finds an obstacle in the overpowering figure of her mother. During her childhood, Assunta appears as a tyrant who has imprisoned Marie on two levels, a physical one, represented by her obesity, and a psychological one, represented by the Italian environment she abhors.<sup>9</sup> During Marie's maturation, Assunta turns into a ghost who haunts her mind. As soon as she moves to Toronto, Marie begins to undergo a process of metamorphosis which is intended to efface anything which links her to her past and in particular to her mother. The first step toward her new identity is to get rid of her fatness, imposed on her by Assunta, and this implies the rejection of food. "Since her first year at university she had stopped eating Italian food altogether. Later it (sic) wasn't only Italian food, but anything having to do with her mother's dishes" (BM 100). The rejection of food symbolizes the rejection of the mother who has always been associated with eating. From this process of metamorphosis Marie comes out completely changed. She is a new person with no links to her Italian origins: "She had shed her odious cocoon,

looked bone-thin and gloriously herself" (BM 97). The break is not only suggested by her physical appearance but also in the fact that she chooses a different kind of life than that of her mother . She decides to be a "woman professor," and not the traditional wife and mother she was expected to become according to Assunta's canons (BM 106). Even her choice in majors, Mathematics, represents a break from her past. Marie is attracted to the rational world of numbers for the same reason she becomes anorectic. Both anorexia and Mathematics give her a sense of control, but this sense is illusory. Marie is attracted to the step by step, systematic problem-solving technique of Mathematics. She masters Mathematical Logistics and feels immensely gratified for being able to exert control over some aspect of her life. This discipline represents the antithesis of her roots, which she associates with emotions and irrationalities. For Marie, sexuality is something too irrational, too primitive, too Italian. In puberty, young adulthood and in her marriage, she is ashamed by the needs of her body and attempts to suppress them. Her love-making with Richard is characterized by her attempt to manipulate the process. She can never abandon herself or lose control. Her unresolved conflicts with sexuality are further indicated in her secret masturbation and she feels tremendous guilt in having to feel "wet" all the time. Her anorexia nervosa is symptomatic of her sexual repression.

Although Marie associates anorexia nervosa with independence in terms of freedom from her mother, her illness actually betrays a crippling psychological dependence upon her mother. By starving herself to the point where she looks like a child, Marie can continue to indulge in childish behaviour. She carries around the psychological baggage of her childhood, specifically her problematic relationship with her mother, as a way of excusing her adult errors and as a way of avoiding responsibility. Although consciously Marie is careful to present an image of independence (she moves away from home, attends university, pursues a career, gets married and has a child), subconsciously, she arrests her maturation through anorexia nervosa and bulimia. This emotional tug-of-war has a devastating effect on her studies. Her malnutrition causes her to lose focus and the ability to concentrate. She realizes that she needs to keep a clear head in her studies but continues in her anorectic pattern. Marie completes her Masters Degree but does not proceed to the Ph.D. as she intended. She blames her pregnancy for this failure, but again she is evading responsibility.

Although Marie equates emaciation with maternal liberation, her mother is still a "phantom of her psyche."<sup>10</sup> At the very moment Marie is completely sure to have disentangled herself from Assunta, her mother begins to appear to her in the form of hallucinations. Assunta first

appears to her daughter in the scene in which Marie is subject to a swoon. During this swoon she hallucinates. In her hallucination, Marie sees her mother's Christmas table. She is attracted towards it as if towards a magnet and from it she derives an inexplicable pleasure. The scene has a highly sexual import with far-reaching implications. The passage has an explicit Freudian tonality. The food on the dinner table is described in sexual language. The bread is ". . . soft on the surface but firm underneath." The turkey is "slippery with oil." Marie feels along its contours, her hand inches toward the leg and her fingers bring it to her mouth. Her body shivers and archs. She could've screamed with pleasure (BM 113). Marie's hallucination has a dual meaning. On a conscious level, Marie has refused everything connected with her origins, and the food symbolizes Italian culture, but in the unconscious, the food represents her mother and therefore her own nature as well, for Assunta is a part of her. The vision represents that part of Assunta which she wishes to suppress, her sexuality. In this moment, her subconscious gains advantage over her and she is forced to give vent to her sensuality. Later, Marie actually feels her mother's presence:

At that moment Marie felt the unmistakable presence of her mother's dark thin figure in the room . . . (Marie) got up and looked at herself in the mirror. Her face was old and ravaged. It was as if her mother were staring back at her (BM 116-7).

This image of Assunta as a phantom of her daughter's psyche is a metaphorical representation of Marie's unresolved conflict with her mother. For years Marie has been trying to efface any marks which could reveal her Italian origins, and in so doing she has broken away more and more from her family and especially from her mother, who is the personification of all that she despises in the Italian culture. From her metamorphosis she turns out completely different from the adolescent Marie, but paradoxically, she also turns out to look exactly like her thin, severe mother. After her mother's death she appears to Joey as Assunta's ghost. This apparitional metaphor is instrumental in conveying the point that it is not Assunta who haunts her daughter's mind, but Marie's failure to come to terms with her mother and with herself which torments her. Assunta's post-mortem appearance in Marie demonstrates, on a figurative level, Marie's subconscious identification with her mother.

"Identification," according to Freud, "is a substitute for a lost human relationship or indeed one that was urgently needed and unobtainable."<sup>11</sup> Throughout her childhood and particularly in her adolescence, Marie finds her mother cold, alien, unapproachable and impregnable. As a result she feels very much alone with her problems and preoccupations. Mother and daughter cannot discuss the issues which characterize adolescence. They never

successfully discuss, for instance, education, career choices, relationships, sex and marriage. When Marie begins menstruation, it is her teacher who informs her about the reproductive process and not her mother. Marie's adolescence is a poignant portrait of alienation, and she subconsciously compensates for this sense of apartness and isolation by growing like her mother, as if this were a way of possessing the needed person within herself. Many of Marie's patterns of behaviour are a subconscious attempt to fill the void her mother left. Her bulimic bingeing during which she chooses food she subconsciously associates with her mother, Italian crusty bread, cheese, grapes and wine, is indicative of the dialectical confusion which rips her apart. In moments of weakness when she cannot deny her needs any longer, Marie binges, but then she vomits, purges herself of all that she has eaten. This anorectic - bulimic pattern is a psychological manifestation of her rejection - acceptance of her mother and of herself as well. The anorexia represents her fixation on her dependent years, on her childhood and adolescence, for anorexia is in part a refusal to provide for one's basic needs. Subconsciously, Marie wants to remain a little girl because she has yet to accept the fact that her mother was ill-equipped to understand and fulfill her daughter's needs, and because she is afraid of assuming responsibility for herself. During her anorectic phases she chooses "perfect" foods, salads and



yogurt primarily. Her choice demonstrates her marginal role in her own life, for it is easy to remain "perfect", to avoid making mistakes when she lives a peripheral life.

Marie's dependency is further indicated in her marriage to Richard. She allows her husband to dictate to her what she can and cannot cope with. After she receives her Masters degree she agrees to become pregnant despite the fact that her pregnancy is untimely. She and Richard are newly married. He is still a Ph.D. student with little money. She has just embarked on the Ph.D. program and moreover, she is not psychologically or emotionally prepared for the physiological changes in her body. She interprets her increase in appetite while pregnant as a lack of control. Her passivity in major decisions which affect her entire life, like her anorexia nervosa, is a way of evading independence.

Marie's psychological profile is the most apprehensible in the novel because she is the most vocal and articulate of her family. Her brother has a strong distrust of words and keeps his emotions and conflicts inside. After his father dies, Joey is held solely responsible for his mother who is deeply affected by her husband's death. Assunta is the black madonna of the novel. The title of the novel refers to the figure of an Italian woman who wears all black clothing in memory of someone who has died in her family. The first instance of how deeply certain customs

are rooted in the first generation of Italians in Canada, is suggested by the scene in which Assunta and the other "black madonnas" of the neighbourhood are keeping vigil by the bedside of the dead Adamo. Such a custom is perpetuated in most parts of Italy. For the Italian immigrants in Canada, customs are a way of uniting them. It is understandable that to Marie such a custom appears as a "masquerade", which implies the lack of any inner, significant value, because her socialization and education differ from her mother's. To understand Assunta's behaviour would mean to understand a culture alien to Marie. At the same time, however, the ancient ritual that to Marie does not represent anything else but another example of her mother's primitiveness, actually demonstrates how strong is the hold of her cultural traditions even when uprooted from their land.

Joey does not know how to deal with his mother's transformation after Adamo's death. She sits day and night on the sofa, watching television, looking through old Grand Hotel magazines and only ventures outside to attend mass every morning or to pick *cicoria* (dandelions) along the railroad tracks. Before Adamo's death, Assunta's whole world was her home and the West End neighbourhood, and now, after his death, her world shrinks to the television room. Assunta has always been afraid of *le Canadese* and after her husband's death, she is even more frightened.

Joey is greatly disturbed when one evening he sees

that his mother has cut off all her hair. When she refuses to explain her reasons behind this action, out of sheer frustration and fear, Joey slaps her. This sends her into a trance-like state and she sings an old immigrant's song, about fear, disorientation and displacement. Later she tells Joey in a childlike voice that she wants to go back to Italy: ". . . your father, he sent for me when I was young. Now you can send me back when I am old" (BM 170).

Joey takes her to two psychiatrists because he fears for her sanity. Assunta, however, does not trust strangers peering into her private life and the session proves futile. Joey is advised to take her to see Father Sarlo, the parish priest. He visits the priest alone and confides in him his fear that his mother is going insane. Joey gains new insights into his mother through the priest. Father Sarlo tells him that Assunta lights a candle for Adamo every day, news which surprises Joey because his parents were never demonstrative. Father Sarlo explains to Joey that in the villages in Italy where his parents grew up, love was based on reciprocal need. They needed each other to survive, to labour on farms and to produce children who would work. Even if husbands and wives hardly spoke to each other, they still loved each other. "Love was . . . like bread. You need bread to live! Then from your need you come to love your food. You needed a partner. Then you needed children. It was simply the fulfillment of these needs" (BM 156).

Joey tells Father Sarlo that Assunta cut off all her hair and the priest is not surprised. He explains that in Italy when a husband died the widow had to accept certain rules which were imposed on her by society, and though they were anachronistic in the new country, the old people could not easily break with them. For Assunta the mourning rituals provide a sense of security, a link with her past, a defined reaction, and in the midst of total chaos, this is exactly what she needs. Her whole world is collapsing around her. Her husband has died, her neighbourhood is deteriorating, her home may be expropriated and she feels alienated from her children.

Joey asks Father Sarlo to speak with his mother because he cannot speak to her in Italian. Joey's failure to learn the language angers the priest and he chastises first-generation Canadian-Italians for losing their mother tongue, for rejecting their culture and for turning away from their families by relocating and losing contact.

When Joey informs his mother that he has sold their home to the city authorities for fear of expropriation, she falls into a state of total despair. Seeing his mother overwrought with pain he tries to reach her:

He felt himself choking with the need to tell her how much she meant to him. How much he had hidden his love for her and Adamo in a stupid reticence that couldn't be excused by any difference in language or culture (BM 170).

Joey's conclusion is significant in light of the communication problem. Some feelings are too deep for words and they need to be communicated in different ways. The language Assunta speaks and hears is not vocal. It is composed of small gestures: watching television together, sharing a meal, picking *cicoria* or attending mass together.

Assunta's life ends in a train accident in which her body is severed in two by an oncoming train, a clear physical representation of her Italian-Canadian split. After her death Joey ". . . had the sickening thought that in dying she had forever shut the door on herself and thrown away the key" (BM 174). The key motif recurs in Marie's reaction to her mother's death. She goes to the hope chest and finds that it is not locked and probably hasn't been locked for a long time. Marie delves into her mother's secret world. The chest contains different layers, from more recent to older things. She passes from one layer to the other and feels as if she is going deeper and deeper into the past. Symbolically, she is retracing her maternal lineage. She finds a black mourning dress which fits her exactly so that now Marie becomes the black madonna. She is not only mourning the death of her mother, but she is also mourning the death of their parent-child relationship. In other words, Marie is letting go of her childhood, a past fraught with conflict with her mother. In her attire she sets up an altar in front of a mirror. The altar is made

with what she has found at the bottom of the chest, two candles and a three-fold shrine. On one side of the shrine there is the picture of a young Italian saint named S. Maria Goretti. The identification of Marie and the saint is obvious. Maria Goretti is an Italian saint who represents the spirit of forgiveness. On the opposite side is a photograph of an old peasant woman, significantly named Assunta Goretti, and in the middle is a photograph of a casket underneath an altar in a church and the body of Maria Goretti resting inside. Maria Goretti died when she was a child, and in this mystical scene she comes to represent the death of Marie's childhood. Before she can forgive her mother for not being the kind of parent she wanted, Marie has to let go of her past. Marie sets up the shrine in front of the mirror in which she sees her own reflection. She falls into a trance-like state during which she journeys into her mind in front of the looking glass. The mirror represents a shield between Maria and her mother, a mirror she has to go through and which leads her to the figure of her mother which is transposed on her own reflection. This pictorial intermingling of mother and daughter represents Marie's acceptance of Assunta as a part of herself. Marie feels at peace with the memory of her mother, and in the end she decides to visit Italy as a last homage to a woman who had left her own country and was never happy in the new country.

Black Madonna is the story of what happens when the cocoon-like world and the buffer of the Italian West End neighbourhood dissolve around Assunta Barone, the Italian widow who hasn't adapted at all to Canada. The conflict of culture and values is examined within the family, between the parents and their children. The greatest discrepancies between *la via vecchia* and *la via nuova* are illustrated in the relationship between Marie and her mother. Marie feels ashamed of her mother and is repulsed by her adherence to "primitive" cultural values. Assunta, on the other hand, feels betrayed and rejected by a daughter who has become a stranger to her family, who lives a "Canadian" way of life which is completely foreign to her Italian background. Mother and daughter do not speak the same language, both literally and metaphorically. Their estranged relationship is mirrored in Paci's third novel, The Father, in the relationship between Oreste Mancuso and his son, Stephen.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup>Franco Paci, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", in Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing, ed. Joseph Pivato (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1985) 53.

<sup>2</sup>Linda Hutcheon, "Voices of Displacement", in The Canadian Forum LSV, 750 (June, July 1985) 35.

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Laurence, The Diviners (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam Limited, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Franco Paci, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", in Contrasts. 40.

<sup>5</sup>Margaret Atwood, Afterword, The Journals of Susanna Moodie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970) 62.

<sup>6</sup>Linda Hutcheon, 34.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Roberta Sciff-Zamaro, "Black Madonna: A Search for the Great Mother", in Contrasts. 80.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 90.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Freud quoted by Harry Guntrip, Psychoanalytic Theory, Therapy, and the Self (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973) 10.



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Father

In The Father, Franco Paci pursues the representation of the old world/new world view dichotomy. The novel centres on the Mancuso family, Maddelena and her husband, Oreste, and their sons, Stephen and Michael. The polarized value systems are not only apparent between parent and child, but are also evidenced between husband and wife. Maddelena becomes assimilated within the Canadian mainstream primarily through the adoption of capitalistic and "progressive" values. Oreste, however, remains not only on the margin of the new society, but on the margin of his own family because he rejects the values adopted by his wife. The deterioration of the West End neighbourhood mirrors the disintegration of the family. While the small family bakery becomes a highly modernized successful business, the family becomes a poignant failure. Through the Mancusos, Paci questions not only the price of immigration, but the price of progress.

In many of the remote villages in the Italian hills it has been a custom to treat the departure of an emigrant in the same way as a death in the community. The funeral rites are performed for both the emigrant and the departed, for both cease to be part of the village.<sup>1</sup>

In his novel, Franco Paci gives dramatic rendering to this

tradition through the characterization of Oreste Mancuso as the lost son of his home village in Abruzzi. His slow spiritual death in the new society culminates in his physical death. The characterization of the immigrant as the lost son of his home village recurs often in the writing of Italian-Canadian immigrants. For example, in Pier Giorgio DiCicco's The Tough Romance, an anthology of poems, this image of the lost soul becomes a presence which seems to haunt much of the verse. Many of the poems are addressed to the dead. DiCicco's "The Man Called Beppino", for instance, is a poem devoted to his dead father:

The man who lost his barbershop during  
the war,/loves great white roses at the  
back of a house beside/a highway. The  
roses dream with him,/of being  
understood in clear english, or of a  
large/Italian sun.<sup>2</sup>

Like Oreste, Beppino dies physically in North America; however, he had died spiritually when he had to leave Arezzo. Beppino's spiritual disaffinity with the New World is analogous to that of Oreste . Both men are affected by the deterioration of small, personally-run businesses.

The predominance of the funeral motif throughout Italo-Canadian writing suggests it is a metaphorical correspondence to the state of the immigrant's soul. Throughout his three novels, Paci uses the West End neighbourhood as an objective correlative for the spirit of the past. The spirit of the Italian *milieu* is conveyed

through the author's selectivity of detail and embodied in such traditions as the Rossini and Marconi halls, the Catholic parochial churches, the wine-making, the small social gatherings and the family meals. For both Oreste Mancuso and Assunta Barone the West End community provides the strong sense of identity they need in order to survive the disruptive effect of immigration. As stated earlier, Black Madonna principally concerns itself with what happens when the cocoon-like world and the buffer of the neighbourhood dissolve around Assunta. "In The Father, Oreste Mancuso can be said to take a further step than Assunta. He can survive outside the life of his home, but not outside the life of his neighbourhood.<sup>3</sup>

The metaphor of *il sangue* (blood) is of seminal importance in understanding this simple, honest immigrant father. The image arises in Chapter Three which marks the first flashback in a sequence of memories. Oreste and his eldest son, Stefano, are in Echo Bay fishing. The scene underpins the intimacy between father and son and evokes Oreste's strong sense of family. In an affectionate moment between father and son, Oreste whispers "*Sangue di mio sangue*" (blood of my blood) (TF 23). The phrase follows his narration of an Italian legend, which is important in terms of the relationship between father and son. The legend is called "*Marcellino, pan e vino*" (bread and wine), but Oreste significantly calls it "*Stefanino, pan e vino*". The legend

tells of an orphan infant "who was left on the doorstep of a monastery in Italy." The monks take him in and call him Marcellino because "he was found on the feast of St. Marcellinus." As the child grows he begins to ask who his real father is and where he came from. When he becomes mischievous, the monks tell him about "a bogeyman in the attic of the monastery - a big man with long hair and covered with the blood of the little boys he had eaten." When Marcellino is seven, he sneaks up to the attic to see this bogeyman. In a far corner he sees "bloodied feet nailed to a piece of wood." The body is stripped and the hands are stretched out on the cross. He sees "the horrible face - the long hair bloodied with thorns and the terrible look in his eyes" and runs away scared, mistaking him for the bogeyman. A few days later he returns to the attic and begins talking to the man. He begins to feel sorry for him because he looked in so much pain. He looked "thin and hungry" as if he were starving. Marcellino begins leaving him bread and wine and each time he comes back the food is gone. One day, the monks follow him up to the attic and witness him speaking to the statue. They are humoured by Marcellino's vivid imagination. But then they see a "blinding light" and hear "a strange voice" asking Marcellino if he wants "to go to a great place where he will see his real father." When the light disappears they find him "dead at the foot of the statue with a saintly smile on

his face." All the bread and wine are gone. "From then on they always called him *Marcellino, pan e vino*" (TF 21-23). In Catholicism, *vino*, or wine, is the transubstantiated blood of Christ and in The Father Paci manipulates this symbol to represent familial lineage, paternal sacrifice and suffering. The tale is part of the Italian folklore. Later the story haunts Stephen and catalyzes his feelings of guilt for having rejected his own "flesh and blood," his own father. On a symbolic level, Stephen becomes an orphan for he divorces himself from his family. Oreste's last words to his sons before he dies illumine his profound belief in *la famiglia* (the family) and he reminds them of the legend. (TF 115). On Stephen's initiative, he and his brother stop speaking to each other as a result of an argument concerning their father. Oreste attempts to effect a reconciliation in his heart-felt advice:

I want you two not to fight any more. I want you to always stick together, no matter what . . . Because you need each other . . . Alone, you're . . . not complete. Just like your mother and me (TF 123).

In a symbolic gesture, he then raises Stephen's hand and intones "*Marcellino*" and completes his statement, "*e vino*" while raising Michael's hand (TF 124). Oreste's wish for his sons' reconciliation, however, is never fulfilled and after he dies Stephen laments his behavior toward his father:

He had been no *Marcellino*, innocent and loving, looking for a long-lost father. His father had always been beside him, smelling of fresh bread . . . if he had looked, he thought, he might have reached over and touched him - reached over and brought himself back to life (TF 130).

Paci's image of *il sangue* is poetically paralleled in a poem with the same title by Len Gasparini. In the apostrophic poem, *il sangue* is both a metonymy of the person referring to his identity and a metaphor for the Italian people. The first three stanzas of the poem are particularly relevant to The Father and read as follows:

The blood that moves through your  
language moves through mine  
The heart that gives utterance  
is our alone

Come away from the cancer of neon  
with its running sores of money  
The city's iron skyline  
bends before the structure of a poem

Our people work in the Tuscan fields,  
Where . . . .  
. . . the *fragrance* of the breaking earth  
rustles like the body of a woman  
reaching out to you in sleep<sup>4</sup>

Thematically, the poem is similar to the novel for it speaks to the correlative themes of the duplicity of language and cultural survival. Both Paci and Gasparini draw a causative relationship between the loss of language, both literal and spiritual, and cultural deterioration. Although neither Paci nor Gasparini explicitly states as much, they clearly imply that to abandon the language of your forefathers is to begin to die. The poem illustrates the clash of the old

language of life and the new language of death. The moribund tone echoes Stephen's sense of death in failing to reach out to his father. Stephen, like Marie in Black Madonna, commits a symbolic suicide in rejecting his father, for as he comes to learn, his parent is a part of himself. Gasparini employs the organic symbol of the imagistic heart that pumps out one language, an image which corresponds to Oreste's emphasis on family unity. Oreste tells his sons that "things are passed on", that his father never died but lives through him, and that he in turn will never leave his sons (TF 155). Gasparini's image of the shared blood and shared heart, however, is bipolar with both positive and negative connotations, for one heart shared by many bodies implies a greater death threat and a greater responsibility. After Oreste's car accident, Michael says to his brother, "Daddy's gone, Steff. We killed him", and Stephen acquiesces (TF 136).

The metaphorical association of the *pan e vino* with Stephen and Michael alludes to the body and blood of Christ. Just as Christ died for the sins of his children, in a sense, Oreste dies as a result of the sins of his sons, in particular Stephen. Oreste is traumatized by his son's disassociation from him, his disrespect and disapproval of his father. Oreste often recalls his own father with nostalgia and pride. He defines himself in many ways in terms of his feelings for his father, and his feelings about

being a father. The title of the novel is appropriate for it summarizes one of the major themes: the loss of the paternal position and its devastating effect on the father. Oreste's sense of loss is underpinned by his painful reaction to his wife's criticism. When Oreste makes his resistance to the expansion and modernization of the bakery evident, she tells him:

. . . think of the boys . They're both here learning what it means to work . . . What kind of example are you? If you won't be a husband at least you can try to be a father (TF 91).

Maddelena's outburst not only strikes an emotional chord in her husband, but it illumines one of the major discrepancies between husband and wife, their opposing attitudes towards progress. Oreste's spiritual rejection of technological and material progress is mirrored in "Il Sangue." In the second stanza Gasparini derives his strength from a Baudelaireian intertext. Traditionally, the city with its artificial lights is obviously evil and the implication prefigures the opposition between rural Italy and urban North America where the night life seems to be generated by a non-European attachment to money. The line, "Come away from the cancer of neon" represents a historic borrowing of a Dantesque moral vision: the presence of death is implicit here in this allusion to the modern inferno of the neon city. The association of cancer and neon is a metonymic representation of all that is unhealthy and artificial. In Dante, money is



the root of all evil, and the city, where money circulates, is the space of sin and death.

The emotional tenor of the third stanza evoked by the simile of the earth compared to the woman's body is in line with Oreste's emotional nature. Although, unlike Stephen, he cannot use sophisticated language to express his distrust of technological progress, mechanization and materialism, he can effectively use an emotional language to convey the ensuing dehumanization process. His view is expressed in his response to Stephen's remonstrance of his father for accepting wine from his customers while delivering bread from the first "Mancuso's and Sons." Oreste explains:

Where I come from . . . the most important people next to your family are your *amici*, your friends in the community. Without them there is no reason to bake bread. I couldn't make bread just for strangers. You gotta care about what you do, Stefano . . . We all know each other here. We are friends. We help each other out. Binelli the grocer sells food. Spadoni at the hardware store sells hardware. Bumbacco sells clothes . . . I bake bread for them. They know what they're getting all the time (TF 60).

In "Il Sangue", the comparison of the earth to a woman's body conveys the sense of human connectedness in the agrarian form of craftsmanship and is counterposed to the sense of dehumanization and detachment endemic in industrialization.

The Father is different than The Italians or Black Madonna in that it is not only a dramatic rendering of the clash between *la via vecchia* and *la via nuova* as demonstrated in the relationship between parent and child. The split is also evident in the relationships between husband and wife. Maddelena's attitude is antithetical to that of her husband'. She adopts capitalistic values and believes in machine technology, mass production and profit. Further, she does not see the opposition between Oreste and herself in terms of an Italian-Canadian dichotomy, but interprets the tension in terms of an Italian regional difference. Maddelena is responsible for the expansion of the small bread bakery. She fights her husband to move out of the West End neighbourhood and to establish a new, more modern bakery. Her frustration at her husband's resistance is indicated when she confides in Stephen:

Your father's against any improvement.  
 Always he wants to keep the bakery small.  
 He has no ambition, just like all the  
 southern Italians. They're so backward,  
 they're impossible. He still thinks he  
 lives in his town in the Abruzzi . . .  
 He only wants to bake his own bread . . .  
 that small mind . . . (TI 85).

In a similar vein, Stephen summarizes the major difference between himself and Michael when he tells his former colleague, John De Marco, "We reflect the mezzogiorno . . . Michael's southern Italy and I'm the north" (TF 143). Both Maddelena's and Stephen's notes on regional diversity are

instrumental in conveying the many complex factors which form the clash between the old way of life and the new world view. The tension is not only the result of divergent Canadian and European values. It is equally the result of Italian regional differences, and, moreover, it is the result of antithetical spiritual values.

There is, among immigrants, a typology of regional identities. These regional diversities often lead to stereotyping within the Italian community itself. Paci is fair in his treatment of stereotyping and its relation to the Italian identity. He depicts domestic scenes which uncover the fact that Italians are not always the victims of ethnic simplification; they are also the perpetrators of internal ethnic reductionism. In a dispute over the making of wine, for example, Oreste protests to his wife, "You're not Italian if you don't drink wine," to which Maddelena responds, "Just give the *Abbruzzesi* their oil, red peppers and wine and they think they're Italian" (TF 66).

Literary analysis of Italian-Canadian writing often betrays ethnocentricity, cultural biases and discrimination. Ethnic generalizations surface in literary criticism on Paci's works. In his essay on Paci's novels, for example, Giovanni Bonnanno writes, "Like thousands of other Italians who were brought up with two cultures, Paci learnt the emotional language at home and the non-emotional one at school."<sup>5</sup> What Bonnanno is doing is equating the Italian

language with emotions and the English language with reason. While his intent is to pay tribute to his ethnicity by suggesting that Italians value emotions, he is also reinforcing the stereotype that Italians are a passionate and impetuous group. He is similarly doing a disservice to those who speak English for he implies that they are incapable of feeling. Finally, while it is true that we first learn emotional patterns at home and use language as a vehicle of expression, no single language is more intrinsically emotional than another, as Bonnanno's statement seems to suggest.

In "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist", Paci explains the genesis and the growth of Oreste Mancuso:

In each successive draft Oreste took on more and more layers of flesh and blood. He virtually wrote himself into the book. He achieved an importance I had never envisaged. I didn't know how much I cared about him until I finished writing.<sup>6</sup>

Oreste is the only fully developed father character in Paci's novels. Black Madonna opens with the funeral of Adamo Barone and, although the readers obtain some sense of his character through the flashback sequence, Adamo still remains more an image than an individual. Similarly, in The Italians, Alberto Gaetano is more a *stereotype* of the self-sacrificing immigrant father than a "flesh and blood" personality. Oreste, however, "(rises) above the ideas and images that at one time," as Paci himself admits, "tended to

suffocate the life of his characters"<sup>7</sup> Oreste and Maddelena had emigrated to Canada in 1950. Oreste works for Giuseppe, an Italian baker in the West End. Oreste buys the business from his friend when he retires and continues to run it as the old man had. Oreste believes in an old-fashioned form of craftsmanship, as did his father before him. With urban renewal, however, the old neighbourhood begins to deteriorate and with it the bakery. Supermarkets and fully-automated bakeries begin to spring up and Maddelena wants to compete by expanding and modernizing "Mancuso's and Sons." After much conflict, the family moves out of the West End and Maddelena transforms Mancuso's into "one of the most modern bakeries in Northern Ontario" (TF 86). Oreste, however, never reconciles himself to the change: ". . . Oreste couldn't be convinced. He kept harping on the past, saying how he had broken the trust of old Giuseppe, bemoaning the loss of the old form of craftsmanship" (TF 88). He begins to feel ". . . like a fish out of water, gasping in the bright light of day," a simile which emphasizes his slow spiritual death (TF 116).

His values have no place in the progressive business. The bread becomes a central image in underpinning his belief system. The bread symbolizes integrity, pride in work and work as a reflection of self. When Stephen is a child, he makes his first loaf of bread and, following a tradition rooted in the old country, he puts his initials on top of

the loaf. This tradition reflects the pride his father instills in his work. He explains to his son: "We keep the first loaf to remind us of the care we put into it. So that every one after will have the same care" (TF 41). The bread then symbolizes the sense of personal connectedness with work, and when the bakery is modernized, Oreste loses this sense. He tells his closest friend, Amelio: "I don't even touch the dough anymore. Do you know what I have to do? Put my hand on the rolls when they are on the belt. So I won't forget the way it feels" (TF 88). Oreste recalls his own father who was forced to sell his bakery because of the war. "When my father stopped working he went to the *piazza* everyday and sat in the sun waiting to die" (TF 121). While Adamo Barone and Alberto Gaetano define themselves in terms of the provisions they can make for their family through their work, Oreste Mancuso defines himself in terms of his actual work. Unlike Alberto and Adamo, Oreste cannot accept the remoteness of his work, the sense of detachment, and the sense of being a mere cog in machinery. He ends up separating from his wife and establishing another bakery with his friend, Amelio, which is significantly and sadly called "West End Bakery." Oreste cannot deal with his family's disintegration and he turns more and more to alcohol. He becomes emaciated, a mere shadow of his former self.

The symbol of the bread is often juxtaposed to the

image of the black bread, a term which was coined during the Second World War. During the war, Oreste worked as a baker and was instructed to make cheaper, less substantial bread. Although he acquiesced by necessity, he was angered by the deterioration of quality, a reaction which is similarly evidenced in a scene which takes place in the modernized "Mancuso's and Sons":

Oreste grabbed a fresh loaf in front of the delivery drivers when they complained they couldn't put any more orders in. Crushing it into a third of its size, he gave a scornful laugh and said: "This is what you do with black bread to make more room in the truck" (TF 89).

Like Alberto Gaetano in The Italians, Oreste does not expect his sons to follow in his trade, but he does try to instill in them pride in work. When Stephen is at university, his father tells him, "You're so different from me, Stefano. You make your own bread, okay? Don't let it be black bread though" (TF 115). The black bread stands as a symbol of the price of progress.

One of the richest bread images is the bread book which Oreste gives Stephen just before he dies. The giving of bread gifts was a family tradition which ended when the family broke up. Oreste, however, continues the tradition when he offers the bread book to Stephen during their last Christmas together. When Michael and Stephen were boys they had to eat the bread to get at the gift inside. Stephen

still harbours negative feelings toward his father. He sees his father as anachronistic and backward because he does not accept "progressive" values. He is ashamed of Oreste because he is an alcoholic and refuses to understand the reasons behind his alcoholism. In a symbolic gesture, he declines his father's suggestion that he eat the bread gift. Eventually the gift becomes "as hard as stone," an obvious suggestion of Stephen's feelings toward Oreste (TF 127). Later, his friend John De Marco significantly refers to the bread gift as "the book of (Stephen's) background" (TF 126).

When Michael visits his brother, the book catalyzes a confrontation between them that throws light on some of the major causes of their estrangement. When Michael sees the book, he is outraged that his brother never ate the bread for he associates this omission with Stephen's rejection and disapproval of Oreste. In anger, he snaps the book in two and money comes flying out. When Stephen looks closely at the book, he discovers still more dollar bills in tinfoil and a note from his father. The note reads as follows: ". . . when you were a boy you stopped going fishing with me and then you stopped helping me at the bakery . . . Do well in school. Make good bread" (TF 166). The note reflects the profound effect Stephen's rejection of his father had on Oreste. Michael explains that the money ". . . is what (Oreste) managed to save for (Stephen) from the new bakery . . ." (TF 166). Unlike his brother, Michael felt close to



his father and he understood his lament over the loss of the original "Mancuso's and Sons" and of the West End community. Michael feels that his mother and brother stopped caring about Oreste and he resents their apathy. The rift between the two brothers began when one night the two went looking for their father and found him drunk in a field. Stephen suggested that the family admit him to a detoxication centre and Michael strongly objected. Michael believes in the old value of "taking care of one's own," and he interprets Stephen's suggestion as disloyalty and indifference. Since this incident the brothers become distant from each other. In an attempt to reconcile, Stephen gives his brother the money. Although he does not explicitly say as much, his gesture betrays his feeling that Michael deserves the offering more than he. Moreover, in a kind of epiphanic moment, "he understood with clarity how much one man's life, no matter how different, could influence another by the strength of his spirit alone" (TF 166).

Stephen's realization is important in terms of the clash between the old value system and the new world view. His girlfriend, Anna, elaborates on this theme. Anna, too, is an immigrant who feels alienated from her old-world mother, but after some time on her own she comes to realize that "no matter how different I am from her world, it's amazing how as individuals we are so alike" (TF 171). Similarly, no matter how much Stephen believes he is so

different from his father, in the deepest sense they are really very much alike. When he becomes a professor he is disillusioned with his profession for the same reason Oreste felt estranged from the new bakery. When his mother inquires about his work he responds: "It's not at all what I thought . . . I merely pass on someone else's ideas to the students" (TF 14). Later, he says, "I want to bake my own bread" (TF 131). Both men need to produce something of their own, something which reflects who they are, what they believe in and what they live by. The readers are able to see a growth in Stephen when they recall his earlier words to his father, "Man does not live by bread alone" (TF 117). Now Stephen sees that this is really the only way man can live.

Michael grows up understanding his father's values but the family problems cause him to lose sight of those values, at least for a time. As an adolescent he escapes the emotional morass of the family through his music. After his father dies, however, he uses music as a way of coming to terms with Oreste. After the funeral, Michael has a nervous breakdown, and while in the hospital he tells Stephens, "From now on, I'm gonna do what I want to do. No more barriers. No more playing it safe. I'll play the kind of music that'll shake them all up. For my dad" (TF 136). Michael, like Bill in The Italians, goes through a process of disillusionment with his profession because he feels he

cannot play music the way he wants to, but must conform to the trends and demands of the public. Through Michael, Paci is again addressing the issue of integrity, of honesty. Michael has learned this value through his father but he does not act upon it at once. Just as Bill is able to play his own style of hockey after he resolves his ambivalent feelings toward his father, Michael is able to live according to his own standards only after resolving his love/hate relationship with Oreste. On one level, he feels that his father has disappointed him and he tells Stephen, "I'm not going to give in, to be beaten, like dad" (TF 124). On another level, Stephen strongly empathizes with his father and understands his alcoholism. It is in the bread book scene that the readers begin to understand Michael on a deeper level. During this scene he confesses to his brother the circumstances of the car accident when Oreste was killed:

I've never told anyone this . . . but when the car was going up the hill something came over me . . . I was so tired of seeing dad drunk . . . dying slowly . . . and when I saw the patch of ice I gunned the motor . . . and - I don't know if it was me or the ice that swerved the Buick into the other car . . . I don't know (TF 161).

Oreste's final words to his son were "It's all right, Michael. It's all right. I won't leave you" (TF 169). Oreste's words echo his earlier statement, "My father, he lives inside me . . . He still lives. He didn't die" (TF

115). And just as Oreste kept his father alive by practising his form of craftsmanship, by upholding his values, Michael learns to keep Oreste alive by remaining honest with himself, by composing and playing his own brand of music.

Paci is still certain in The Father that the clash between *la via vecchia* and *la via nuova* is endemic to the immigrant experience. Oreste Mancuso is relegated to a historical void for his old-world values have no place in the new society or in his own home. Paci here explores the self-sacrifice of the immigrants and the notion of progress with a depth and skepticism not afforded by his earlier novels. Oreste's spiritual death begins when he loses the first "Mancuso's and Sons." The small bakery was an embodiment of his old-world values. In world literature there are examples of writers who have tried to transform the values of their native culture into their new literary language. Joyce, Kafka, Conrad and Nabokov come to mind. Similarly, Franco Paci makes this model work in Canada in order to deal with the danger of death and oblivion. In The Father Oreste Mancuso dies, but he leaves a spiritual legacy to his sons and they grow to accept the values he lived for. The final scene of the novel is of Stephen in the "West End Bakery", making three loaves of bread and "on top of the loaves he formed the initials of his father, his mother and his brother - Oreste, Maddelena and Michael.

That was his family" (TF 193).

## NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup>Alexandre L. Amprimoz and Sante A. Viselli, "Death Between Two Cultures: Italian-Canadian Poetry", in Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing, ed. Joseph Pivato (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1985) 103.

<sup>2</sup>Pier Giorgio DiCicco, "The Man Called Beppino", in The Tough Romance (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979) 11.

<sup>3</sup>Franco Paci, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", in Contrasts. 50.

<sup>4</sup>Len Gasparini, "Il Sangue", in Italian-Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose (1946-1983), ed. Caroline M. DiGiovanni (Oakville, New York, London: Mosaic Press, 1984) 53, 1-14.

<sup>5</sup>Bonnano, Giovanni, "An Analysis of Franco Paci's Novels," in Canada: The Verbal Creation/la creazione verbale, ed. Alfredo Rizzardi (Montreal: Piovon editore, 1985) 169.

<sup>6</sup>Franco Paci, 55.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 36.

## CONCLUSION

Mary DiMichele is a prolific and incisive Italian-Canadian writer of both prose and poetry. Her triptych of dramatic monologues which include, "Mimosa, "Marta's Monologue", and "Lucia's Monologue", articulates the emotional experiences of the members in an Italian family in the aftermath of emigration and adaptation. DiMichele's poems offer an intense and telescopic synopsis of the predominant issues Franco Paci addresses in his three novels.

The matrix of the collection is the three-dimensional narration given by two sisters and an objective third person. "Mimosa" is in the third person narration and describes Vito, an old Italian immigrant, his lament for the loss of his family as he once knew them and his disillusionment with Canada for which he traded "Mimosa." "Mimosa", a well-known Italian song, stands as a paradigm of Italy and its emotional and psychological resonance resonates throughout the monologue. The elegy opens with the image of Vito, "a tired, sad man" who is "rocking in his brighton rocker" in his backyard, listening to an Italian tenor sing "Mimosa", and reminiscing on his work-weary life, a life lived not for himself, but for his two daughters, Marta and Lucia.<sup>1</sup>

The imagistic language echoes Hemingway and his

tight, economical, intense, and simple diction. DiMichele milks each word to its fullest capacity. In the first sentence, for example, the words, "Sunday afternoon", "rocker", "backyard", "house" and "roof" represent the tension which characterizes the Italian family.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the words connote close family ties, suggesting the home as an oasis and a sense of rootedness, but on the other hand, they evoke the sense of circumscription, marginalism, isolation and the home as prison. The tension between the family as protection and the family as prison emerges in Paci's novels. Like Vito, the Italian immigrants have sacrificed so much for their children that they in turn feel bound by them. The home has sheltered them from the hardships their parents experienced but it has also isolated them from the mainstream. When Lorianna marries she goes from a cocoon to a spider's web. She feels trapped in her marriage and accurately assesses one of the contributing factors which led her to blindly accept a marriage proposal from a man she knew virtually nothing about as her parents' failure to equip her with the ability to deal with the outside world, to establish independence, critical and sound judgement and the strength to make decisions which are best for herself. Her brother, Aldo, feels the same way, except that his insecurity and fear of the outside world manifests itself in a different way: like an oyster, he crawls from his home to the shell of of the seminary. After he resolves



what he calls "a crisis of faith", but which is really a crisis of adulthood, a realization that he lacks experience, he confides in Lori, "You have to wallow in real-life mud to get to the pearls" (TI 169).

Lorianna's and Aldo's insecurity is in part a residual effect of their parents' fear of Canada. Giulia is haunted by the feeling that everything she and her husband built for their family will be taken away from them, a dread which reaches superstitious proportions: ". . . she acted as if the security they had achieved in the new country wasn't quite legitimate, that any day they'd lose everything . . . His wife simply distrusted fate . . ." (TI 75). This fear is evident in Alberto as well, who does not feel secure unless he is working, and when he is not working, he needs to build things. The building motif runs throughout Paci's books: Adamo builds houses, and Joey and Alberto do carpentry. At the end of Black Madonna, Joey builds a tower in the backyard of his family home to commemorate his father and mother. Similarly, in "Mimosa", Vito needs to constantly build things (the roof of his house, the small shack used for storing seeds and tools) and like Paci's characters, this need is a subconscious projection of the profound sense of insecurity experienced when living on foreign ground. This feeling of insecurity also contributes to the parents' reluctance and in some cases inability to let their children go. The preoccupation with building and with children

reflects the universal fear of mortality, but this fear is intensified by a regional theme, the fear of being buried beneath foreign ground. In Black Madonna for example, Assunta wants to return to Italy and die there. Joey characterizes his father's life and death in Canada as a vicious circle, beginning and ending as an imported labourer:

. . . his father had often talked of a pension. Now it seemed he had finally got it . . . You were put in a box with a memento of your services . . . You would lie there soaking in the dark, and your flesh would tan to the colour of your bones, and then the box would rot and you'd be pieces of stone that held up the earth for others to walk on. You start as a working man and you are forever a working man (BM 21).

Joey's thoughts recall the pictorial illustration to *Margaret Atwood*'s poem, "Alternate Thoughts From Underground", in which the narrator's figure lies buried beneath porous foreign ground which has literally and metaphorically sucked up her labour.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the town, which was built by immigrants such as herself, is in the background, points to their isolation from the mainstream of life. Similarly, Adamo is buried beneath the ground where Italians hauled ties, blasted rocks, mined, built roads, and developed new industries, and even in death he continues to labour.

The immigrants in Paci's novels stoically accept the fact that even their own children do not fully appreciate the sacrifices they have made for them. Further, it is

often work which creates a distance between parent and child. Ironically, Vito's job "accounted for a distance he didn't bargain for / the estrangement like a border crossing / between himself and his children."<sup>4</sup> The border symbol appears again in Black Madonna, in the International Bridge which divides Sault Ste. Marie and the United States, the mosaic and the melting pot, an image which mirrors the dividing line between immigrants and their increasingly Canadianized children.

The immigrants are preoccupied with the all-consuming task of financial security. They are driven by the fear of failing in the new world. Their goals become increasingly materialistic as they graduate from survival to success. Paci depicts material success however, as double-edged, a dualism which emerges in countless novels about "making it" in the new world, including Henry Kreisel's novel, The Rich Man where Tassigny's painting, "L'Entrepreneur" represents the grotesque moral deformity of man when he elevates materialism to the platform of idolatry.<sup>5</sup>

Paci's double-edged themes which undercut prevalent illusions, are paralleled in DiMichele's poetry, but in a more concentrated and powerful way. In "Lucia's Monologue" for instance, the poet exposes the dichotomous work ethic adopted by immigrant parents. Their sacrifices are both altruistic and self-serving. In the introductory stanza, Lucia's acknowledgement of her parents' sacrifices for her

is undercut by an emotional cross-current: her resentment in having to become a sacrificial lamb as it were, in having to lay down her life for the lost lives of her parents. Lucia's crippling sense of guilt is mirrored in The Italians, particularly in Aldo whose crisis in the seminary is intensified by his parents' projection of their own needs onto their son: "It was Aldo's success that would sanction their immigration in the deepest sense" (TI 85). In Black Madonna, Assunta's imposition of her own values onto Marie results in part from her own error in living vicariously through her children. The Father is in some ways the story of a psychological abortion, the death of "Mancuso and Sons", a dream which never reached its fruition.

The clashes between parent and child are aggravated by the inability to talk to each other, a theme which has imagistic correspondences in borders, screens, barriers, walls and mediators. In "Lucia's Monologue," the concepts of verbal mediation and filtration are reiterated in order to emphasize the absence of direct communication: "Most of the time I can't even talk to my father. / I talk to my mother and she tells him what she thinks / he can stand to hear."<sup>6</sup> In Black Madonna, Adamo was the mediator between his wife and children. Similarly, in The Italians Alberto is the liaison, and in The Father there is no mediator, just unresolved conflicts which obstruct communication. In all

three books the families interact in an increasingly minimal way, usually via the television. After Alberto's accident, Lorianna struggles to get through the verbal screen:

Like (Alberto), she stared at the blank, dark screen. She knew well it was a device to avoid looking at each other in embarrassing moments. The box was like a third person, now silent, that they could use as a buffer for their feelings. They spoke to each other by way of the set, by way of, in fact, an interpreter (TI 182-3).

In "Marta's Monologue," the narrator discloses the ensuing confusion in the absence of direct communication and analyzes her sister's psychological displacement of this confusion: "She demanded some clarity of purpose in her life, / she wanted to act with a vengeance, / not because she was mad at anything / but to clear up the confusion."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Michael Mancuso of The Italians displaces his love-hate relationship with his father into his music and his brother, Stephen, transfers his need to find order amidst the counter-currents of familial misunderstandings to his pursuit of a Ph.D. in Philosophy. Ironically however, philosophy is founded upon the principle that there are no absolute answers, and in the end, what gives Stephen some sense of order, a sense of things being "right", is the simple task of making bread in his father's bakery.

An equally important dimension in the communication problem is the failure of language to express feelings. Clearly, there is a conflict between languages: Italian

dialect and English, but there is also an internal problem in language itself, a linguistic inadequacy Alberto articulates as some things being "too deep for words" (TI 30). Aldo shows the opposite side of the language coin when he articulates: "Their (family's) shyness of words, of language, in delicate situations seemed always to damn up their feelings, to make them more formidable . . ." (TI 142). The failure to express emotions then, is often the result of a desire to escape those feelings, perhaps because they are too powerful, or too painful. In "Mimosa", DiMichele employs the simile of the "poorly cut key" to represent the failure to express feelings: . . . "(Vito) can talk to his children in the language / in which they dream, but he keeps that tongue / in his pocket like a poorly cut key to a summer residence."<sup>8</sup>

The escape symbolism is incremental. It is not only used to represent the desire to evade feelings, but also the desire to escape from the parental home with all its tyrannical associations. Joey's hockey dreams for example, not only represent his need to escape the morass of mediocrity. His fantasies also signal his desire to escape from the emotional morass of his family. Similarly, Marie's hallucination during which she visualizes her mother's Christmas meal, represents her wish to free herself from her control. Bill escapes his familial conflicts on the ice. Aldo turns to the seminary. Stephen seeks

refuge in books, while Michael escapes through music. Psychologically, the wish to escape reaches its highest pitch when conflicts begin to surface. Paci's characters demonstrate a fight/flight mechanism, and the resolution of their conflicts, like all resolutions, is characterized by both progressive and regressive steps.

In his essay, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist," Paci provides a synopsis of the predominant themes in his works:

. . . the self-sacrifice of the first-generation immigrant parents, the painful clash between *la via vecchia* (the old way) and *la via nuova* (the new way), the simple life of immigrant Italians as opposed to the glamorized criminal life depicted in the U.S. media and literature, the loss of the old language by the second generation, the emotional barriers between generations, the hard-working lives of the parents, the strength of family ties, and the indomitable spirit of the people in uprooting themselves and starting all over in a foreign culture.<sup>9</sup>

Though the characters in his novels are nominally different, their emotional, psychological and ethnic context is the same.

Paci's reconstruction of the Italian-Canadian experience is an attempt to overcome the barriers of time, space and culture which split the most fundamental of human relationships, that of parent and child. Similarly, in The Lion's Mouth, Caterina Edwards, daughter of an English father and Italian mother, employs a parallel narrative in which she contrasts Bianca's adolescence in Canada with her cousin, Marco's life in Italy, in an attempt to reconcile

the two worlds and reach an understanding of both cultures. Like Paci, she tries to do this through literature. The novel ends with the words:

With me, it is always stories. And in the end it is all I can offer you - your story, I recreate your infancy, your childhood, trying to understand . . . I look out through your eyes . . . I make the story, the book.<sup>10</sup>

Edwards assumes a literary posture. She speaks through Bianca, an Italian-Canadian immigrant and fictitious author of The Lion's Mouth. The narrator mentally dialogues with her Venetian cousin, Marco, a personification of Italy. The entire book is an attempt to reach him, but what she finally reaches, in fact, is the realization that her novel, written in English, cannot be read by a man who only speaks Italian. Similarly, in her short story, "Island of the Nightingales",<sup>11</sup> Edwards makes use of the two-nation setting. The characters go back and forth between North America and Italy. Unlike Bianca and Marco, they speak both languages, and therein lies the key to understanding both cultures. Edwards' fictitious situation is entirely realistic. Canadians of Italian descent are becoming a transatlantic middle-class with the possibilities of learning both languages and of appreciating both cultures.

Until a few years ago, ethnic minority groups within Canada were simply subjects of interpretation in academic research and literary creations. These minorities, however,



are beginning to challenge the idea that a Canadian with an Italian, Slavic, Greek or other name is somehow incapable of interpreting the reality in which he or she lives. The Jews, a once voiceless people, have succeeded in giving sound and structure to their particular experiences. Names like Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen and Mordechai Richler have become points of reference in Canadian literature.

Filippo Salvatore, a prominent Italian-Canadian writer, refers to minorities in Canada as "the third solitude."<sup>12</sup> He suggests, however, that an important part of the Canadian culture is now being supplied by third cultures. He cites the community of Italian-Canadians who have been making literary contributions over the past decade. The arrival on the scene of a new generation of intellectuals was marked by the publication of Roman Candles, an anthology edited by Pier Giorgio DiCicco in Toronto in 1978.<sup>13</sup> Italian-Canadian writers are beginning to interpret themselves and the rest of the country. From a cultural point of view, immigrant literature is important, for it challenges the reductive concept that the official spokespersons in Canada have to be either French or English speaking. Immigrant literature also shakes preconceived notions and old analytical limits.

In his article entitled, "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue", Robert Kroetsch asserts that the immigrant perspective found in Italian-Canadian and other ethnic

writing has made us aware of our literary ties with the rest of the world.<sup>14</sup> Ethnic writing has an internationalist nature for it deals with influences from outside national borders and language barriers, seeks ties with other countries and cultures, and focuses on similarities as well as differences. Future scholarship should look to ethnic writing as a way of taking Canadian writing into an international context of comparative study and exchange.

## NOTES TO CONCLUSION

<sup>1</sup>Mary DiMichele, "Mimosa", in Italian-Canadian Voices: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose (1946-1983), ed. Caroline M. DiGiovanni (Oakville, New York, London: Mosaic Press, 1984) 157, 1: 1-3, 2: 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 1: 2-4.

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Atwood, "Thoughts from Underground", in The Journals of Susanna Moodie, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970) 57.

<sup>4</sup>Mary DiMichele, 158, 5: 9-11.

<sup>5</sup>Henry Kreisel, The Rich Man, ed. Malcolm Ross (Canada: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1961).

<sup>6</sup>Mary DiMichele, "Lucia's Monologue", in Italian-Canadian Voices. 166, 2: 1-3.

<sup>7</sup>Mary DiMichele, "Maria's Monologue", in Italian-Canadian Voices. 159, 8: 7-10.

<sup>8</sup>Mary DiMichele, "Mimosa", in Italian-Canadian Voices. 157, 4:3-5.

<sup>9</sup>Franco Paci, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", in Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing, ed. Joseph Pivato (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1985) 48.

<sup>10</sup>Caterina Edwards, The Lion's Mouth (Edmonton: Ne West Press, 1982) 204.

<sup>11</sup>Caterina Edwards, "Island of the Nightingales", in More Stories from Western Canada, ed. R. Wiebe and A. Van Herk (Toronto: MacMillan, 1980) 91.

<sup>12</sup>Filippo Salvatore, "Escaping the Third Solitude", in Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing, ed. Joseph Pivato (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1985) 199.

<sup>13</sup>Caroline M. DiGiovanni, Introduction, in Italian-Canadian Voices, 19.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Kroetsch, "Beyond Nationalism: A. Prologue", in Mosaic XIV, 2 (1981).

## AFTERWORD

In his conclusion to "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", Paci writes:

What matters more than the fact that a novelist is a Canadian or an immigrant is that he has created a good book that adds something to life . . . That maybe twenty and fifty years down the road some person in a small town will pick it up in the local library and experience a moment of revelation. Because the part of the soul that was ripped out to write the book will still be warm, will still be breathing.<sup>1</sup>

In my thesis I tried to convey those "moments of revelation" which arose in reading and studying Paci's works. If I could say one thing to Franco Paci, I would say, "the part of your soul that was ripped out" to write your books is still warm, still breathing. I felt it transplanted in my own body, pumping out blood and I was surprised to discover that the blood was not all Canadian. It was Italian too.

## NOTES TO AFTERWORD

<sup>1</sup>Franco Paci, "Tasks of the Canadian Novelist Writing on Immigrant Themes", in Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing, ed, Joseph Pivato (Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1985) 59.

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