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The fictional texts examined in this book, *Nino Ricci: Essays on His Works*, are presented chronologically in terms of publication, starting with *Lives of the Saints* and the other two novels that comprise the *Lives of the Saints* trilogy (*In A Glass House* and *Where She Has Gone*). The novels in this trilogy are examined individually and then the trilogy itself is explored as a whole. Following the essays on the *Lives of the Saints* trilogy, there are individual essays devoted to each subsequent novel that Ricci has published to the present day, respectively *Testament, The Origin of Species*, and *Sleep*. This chronological organization of the study of the novels written by Ricci gives the reader a sense of continuity involving the range of ideas and narrative techniques that encompass his work as a writer of literary fiction.

The essays in this book analyze Ricci’s novels from a variety of critical perspectives. These perspectives include concepts about literature, culture, identity, politics, and society in relation to Canada and the modern world. Each contributor examines a specific novel in its own terms or as a part of the trilogy, focusing on the prevailing themes and literary elements used by Ricci.
to construct his work of fiction. This analytical study allows the reader to enhance one’s understanding of Ricci’s particular style and vision as a writer. It also provides an understanding of his contribution to contemporary Canadian fiction and world literature.

As he tells the story of his childhood in Italy, Vittorio Innocente evokes a world in which actions and events transmit multiple and opposed meanings. Speaking of his Aunt Marta, Innocente observes that “her comments [were] like riddles or oracles that refused to give up their meaning, that slipped away as soon as you tried to grab hold of them.”1 Nino Ricci’s Lives of the Saints, underlines the precariousness of a tradition-based peasant culture in Valle de Sole. The author develops an “Italianness”—as a set of identifiable cultural qualities—which is not unitary and is constantly being reshaped by an evolving social environment.

Innocente’s various interpretations of the peasantry suggest a complex and unclosed reading of the old world. The villagers are represented as the descendants of a glorious pre-Christian civilization, as vital, fanciful, and indomitable, as technologically backward, stultifying, and narrow-minded, as the victims of regional politics, and as part of a community on the brink of radical change. The ambiguity is further supported by the narrator’s own inconsistent personal attitudes, which are constantly filtered through the consciousness of his
younger self. These attitudes are often characterized by such emotional responses as sentimentality, bitterness, empathy, disillusionment, yearning, and detachment.

Francesco Loriggio states that to “reorganize the spatiotemporal coordinates [of the past] and bring into play the notion of belonging to and being away from” is “to originate [a] discourse” about the multi-centred nature of ethnic identity. Such a discourse proclaims itself in “tensional strategies” which invoke the problematic of a diffused and evolving ethnic identity. In minority texts, the “tensional totality” of ethnicity “call[s] for paradigms that assert both stability and instability.”

Innocente’s troubled retrospective, focusing on a brief period of his life (a seven-year-old boy in an isolated mountain village along the Apennines), resonates with ambivalence and irony. The discontinuities of agrarianism and immigration underpin the destabilizing of the narrator-character’s self-image. Irony is at the core of the text’s exploration of ethnicity, encompassing many formal strategies. Irony is embedded in the narrative voice that continually oscillates between the “Remembering I” of the adult narrator and the “Remembered I” of the boyhood self. As Ricci himself has admitted: “There is a sense of distance and irony that comes precisely from the distance between the narrator and the child.” This textual ambiguity is built into the narrative structure of the novel. The “Remembering I” and the “Remembered I” manifest the multiple self of the narrator-character. The Italian-Canadian self simultaneously reconstructs and deconstructs the story of the Italian other.

The presence of long sentences serves numerous functions. Protracted sentences evoke the overflow of memories and nostalgia for a time and place that appear to be irrecoverable. They initiate an onslaught of details that reveal the multiple gradations of experience. Long sentences provide numerous motivations for a particular action, and examine the contradictory responses of young Vittorio (a.k.a. Vitto) to a specific individual or event.

The use of juxtaposition both advances conflicting images of the native country, and sets images of the old against those of the new. Juxtaposition ruptures the text’s realism: the ordinary meets the fantastic, enabling the textures of society to hover between oncoming modernity and lingering medievalism. The text relies on sociohistorical description to present a specific ethnocultural context and expose the disjunctions of agrarianism. The narrator makes reference to folklore and local myths, and uses hagiography as an ironic commentary on the lives of the characters. In moving between various modes of representation, the text problematizes the narrator-character’s position and underscores the relativity of competing cultural models. The textual fabric of the novel reveals the social construction of Innocente’s identity by pinpointing the multifarious and often contradictory elements that compose it. According to Nino Ricci: “I wanted to play with the construction of morality—of acceptable behaviour. And the values that go beyond those moral systems that society has constructed.”

Lives of the Saints covers a nine-month period, from July 1960 to March 1961, and takes place during a period of significant social and economic change in post-war Italy. The eventual push towards greater industrialization and urbanization mirrors the general trends that began in Canada as well as in the rest of the industrial world. The pressures of modernity and the declining rural economy form an important part of the narrative’s
background and are apparent in the villagers’ constant emigration. The recurrent picture of ruin and desolation, expressed through images of old, dilapidated and deserted homes and of an over-cultivated and shrinking land base, reflects southern Italy’s socioeconomic crisis. The mother’s [Cristina] revolt against the patriarchal-matrifocal arrangements of Valle del Sole and Vittorio’s accompanying dislocation are also dramatic reenactments of the clash between agrarianism and modernity.

The novel is typified by some of the distinguishing features of Italian-Canadian writing; historical references and Italian words are interwoven with pre-Christian and Catholic mythology. These various non-fictional, “extraliterary”7 modes play a critical part in the social reconstruction of the old world and have been revised to suit the text’s ironic depiction of the narrator’s childhood in Valle del Sole.

In Lives of the Saints, Italian identity is primarily a metaphorical and symbolic construct and only at its most basic level is it a product of historical forces. For Ricci, the rendering of peasant life and the process of immigration entails the reworking of mythological structures: “The fact that there is a mythology attached to the experience of immigration ... connects itself to the whole history of Western mythology ... That ... is very much operative in the immigrant mind ... I wanted to tie into that larger mythology.”8

The text represents Vittorio Innocente’s ambivalence in the way his consciousness simultaneously fuses with and diverges from the perspective of his younger self. Vittorio demonstrates the link to his Italianness by interpreting for the reader the meaning of what he felt and experienced as a boy in Valle del Sole. What supports this connection is a sympathetic portrayal of his mother and the arresting tableaux of the hilly landscape. The narrator is dissociated from his other self, openly debating young Vitto’s words or actions: “It tastes like shit,’ I said. I had got it out now, spit out, my resentment like something that had stuck in my throat. But an instant later my face was burning: my mother slapped me, hard, against the cheek” (71). Vittorio’s sophistication is opposed to his younger self’s naiveté. The narration underlines this detachment from the native culture. When Vitto is awakened “by a muffled shout” which “sounded like a man’s” voice (10), the implication is that, unbeknownst to him, Cristina and her male companion are making love in the barn. The text exploits this irony later as Vitto, obsessed with the idea that Cristina’s woes are the result of the evil eye incarnated in the poisonous snake, ritualistically burns a dead chicken to lift the curse placed on her. The use of irony exposes Cristina’s contradictory position, for she appears to be hemmed in by the village patriarchy and responsible for abdicating her maternal duties. This double movement strengthens the villagers’ opprobrium. The play between the omniscient voice of the narrator and the limited consciousness of his younger self leads to an ironic view of this parochial world.

The narrator’s distance from his Italian heritage is shown in the portrayal of the severe socioeconomic conditions of the Apennine region in south-central Italy. The allusions to a golden age of economic, social and cultural achievement, evident in the references to the Samnite civilization, only serve to highlight the bleakness of the present. Such deprivation has instilled in the peasantry a sense of fatalism and forced large numbers to emigrate elsewhere, resulting in the dramatic depopulation of local villages. In deromanticizing peasant culture,
and, ultimately, grim picture of immigration. The lira (a talisman of the old world) is unable to protect Vitto from misfortune and cannot provide him with any sign that will redeem his tragic journey to Canada. While he looks intently at the rolling coin, searching for “some final secret message, some magic consolation” (238), it “tilt[s] fatally towards the rails ... tumbling out to the sea” (238). The image both symbolically re-dramatizes Cristina’s burial and reiterates the passage of the old way of life.

The text’s ironic and elegiac representation of the old world is magnified by the terrible uncertainty of Vitto’s existence. In the final moments of the narrative, he remains suspended between two worlds, one that has disappeared from view but which still haunts his consciousness and another which, while it is near, is beyond his reach. Lives of the Saints portrays Vitto’s cultural dislocation in the way that it moves from Cristina’s burial to glimpses of his father and the Canadian landscape and back to the Saturnia where Vitto is recovering from his delirium.

This circular movement recapitulates the overall narrative thrust of the novel whose gaze is turned backward. In focusing on the act of crossing over, rather than on embarkation or settlement in the new world, the text calls attention to the transience and indeterminacy of the immigrant and, by implication, to cultural transformation. Unlike the ending of the story of Santa Cristina, which evokes victory over evil and human suffering, the conclusion of the novel is suffused with a sense of loss that preempts any form of redemption. It also ironically reminds us of the peasants’ amoral vision of life: evil strikes both the wicked and the righteous. This remembering of Vitto’s Italian past is characterized by unrelenting ambiguity and irony. The text’s ironic use of point of view and mythology, whether pre-Christian or Catholic, opens the cultural-ideological contradictions of the old world and signals to us the disjunctions within the consciousness and narrative of Vittorio Innocente.

Notes

3. Loriggio, 61.
4. Loriggio, 63, 60.
11. Slemon, 16.
Postcolonialism and Shifting Notions of Exile in Nino Ricci’s Fictional Trilogy

We are old, Chevalley, very old. For over twenty-five centuries we’ve been bearing the weight of superb and heterogeneous civilizations, all from outside, none made by ourselves, none that we could call our own. We’re as white as you are, Chevalley, and as the Queen of England; and yet for two thousand five hundred years we’ve been a colony. I don’t say that in complaint; it’s our fault. But even so we’re worn out and exhausted. (145)

— The Leopard, Giuseppe di Lampedusa

In this passage from Lampedusa’s classic Italian novel, the Prince tries to explain to the Chevalley (the representative of Garibaldi’s new government of a unified Italy) something of the character of Sicilians and by extension southern Italians in general. The description is useful here for two reasons: first, because it provides a capsule history of colonialism in southern Italy and its impact on the collective consciousness of southern Italians; and secondly, because it points us toward important but uncertain issues of how writing by and about Italian immigrants to Canada can contribute to debates about postcolonialism in Canadian literature. Can Canadian literature be “postcolonial” and, if so, how does ethnic minority writing figure into this discussion? One
or toward assimilation into a new country and culture. Victor and Rita’s ambivalence enables Ricci to explore questions directed not toward the past or the present but toward the future: not merely who we are but who we can become and how to relate to each other in a new environment. The ambivalence of their relationship, in many ways a metaphor for their experience of migration and assimilation, will be worked through by the choices that they make, following their own dark descent.

The description of Victor and Rita’s incest is full of contradictions and paradoxes. Rita comes to Victor’s apartment and they examine their past relationship and current feelings toward each other, their sense of possessiveness, abandonment and belonging. In a moment of genuine reconciliation Rita asks to be held and their embrace unleashes in both of them a deep sense of the need for the warmth of human contact that each has lacked for so long: “I held her. There was a moment then that was like falling into a kind of human darkness, like the two of us opening a door in a dream and stepping out; and then we were kissing. There seemed no decision in this, just a giving-in to the darkness, to the falling” (Where 70). Their embrace and kiss, both awkward and tender, is emblematic of their yearning for a sense of acceptance and their hopefulness for fulfillment in their new surroundings. There is a clear sense in this scene that their passions, once released by their embrace, have a force of their own that will not be denied.

Victor describes their incestuous encounter in language that suggests a mental state of confusion and disorientation:

> We were still falling. There seemed no distance between us now, just this awful relinquishing as if everything were unfolding at once unreal and yet inevitable, having nothing to do with us and yet what our lives had always been moving toward ... and then I was ... doing things and being inside of the doing of them and yet seeing them as if their reality were merely a mirroring of something already lived through, that had already long ago been done and atoned for. (Where 70-1)

The “awful relinquishing” that describes Victor’s emotional response to his experience with his half-sister also serves as an apt description of his sensibility toward his own experience of immigration. Because the episode is related by Victor, the first person narrator, we lack the benefit of insight into Rita’s impressions of their encounter. But what is striking from this description is the sense that their communion was inevitable, pre-destined and that, in a sense, they are repeating history. The suggestion that these events are “a mirroring of something already lived through” clearly invokes the memory of their mother Cristina’s catastrophic transgression — her act of adultery. Victor and Rita’s transgression is described in terms that render it simultaneously knowingly wrong and perfectly right:

> There was something almost ruthless in us then, hopeless, the instantaneous mutual admission of wrong and its flouting. There would be this one time, we seemed to say, when the world would split open and every unspeakable hope, every desire, every fear would be permitted. (Where 71)

The language of this passage recalls Bhabha’s description of the split subject in a colonial setting. Furthermore, the conflation and inseparability of hopes and
fears here is the sort of paradox that is illumined by Bhabha’s description of colonial hybridity. He notes that:

Hybridity is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures ... in a dialectical play of ‘recognition’ ... Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority — its rules of recognition. (113)

Viewed in this light, Victor and Rita’s incest seems not right or wrong but both, not an act of fate or will but both; it seems as necessary as it is inevitable, the acknowledgement of their hopes and fears for each other and for themselves.

As much as the incest between Victor and Rita reflects Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, it also gestures toward ways in which immigrant colonial subjectivity resists containment. Smaro Kamboureli has suggested that “[d]iaspora, and the cultural difference that it entails, cannot be studied in terms of Us and Them, in terms of sovereign and minority subjects; it must be examined within the web of complexities that inform ethnic subjectivity and its representations” (43-44). In the case of Ricci’s trilogy, the “complexities that inform ethnic subjectivity” arise not only across national, cultural and linguistic borders (Italian and Canadian) but within the scope of Italian-Canadian-ness as the hybrid cultural ground in which these characters develop. What becomes clear is that for Victor and Rita (and for others of their generation) the struggle to create an identity is as much a struggle against the “Us” of their ancestral cultural heritage as it is a struggle against the “Them” of the Canadian culture into which they have been transplanted. Their disavowal is as much a symbol of resistance to their own cultural heritage as it is an expression of their desire to create a new home for themselves in their Canadian surroundings.

In the aftermath of the incident Victor’s reactions are scrutinized more extensively than Rita’s. The day after the encounter he wanders out in the streets of Little Italy and stumbles upon a street procession — the passion play. It is Good Friday, the day of atonement for Christians, and Victor is swept away by memories of Easters passed as a child in Italy. Suddenly the full impact of his actions is felt and he is filled with remorse:

I was a child again in a small village church in Italy ... what had I wanted then, what would the boy that I was have seen in the man I’d become? My head was filled with a rush of images, my whole past seeming to tumble through me like something to be taken away, that there was no going back to; and then I was crying.

My god, I thought, my god what have I done? (Where 84-5)

But Rita seems better equipped to deal with the fallout from their affair. When they finally broach the subject and Victor confesses that he doesn’t know what to do, she counters simply: “There’s nothing to do ... I don’t want you to think it’s your fault ... I’m not a kid. We both did what we wanted. We could look at it that way ... Except that it was a mistake” (Where 113-114). Rita’s comment that they chose this course is crucial. Just as, in her view, they have chosen this course of action, so too they can choose not to disclose its occurrence to anyone — an
is more thrilling than recognizing one’s own world in a book, one’s own self-portrait in an invented story.” The struggle of the immigrant, at the heart of the contemporary Canadian literary scene, (and at the centre of the Canadian literary canon), is an effective metaphor for the struggle that Canadians undertake in creating, and recreating themselves as a society, a process still very much in flux. The challenge now is to recognize the invented stories of Canada’s immigrants and ethnic minorities as integral to the self-portrait of Canadian national identity and central to the study of postcolonialism in Canada.

Notes

1. I use the term “cultural identity” here to refer to what I conceive of as a sort of psychic space, a mental framework that combines the intellectual and emotional orientation to events and encompasses both conscious and unconscious influences and motivations.

2. It is a cliché to say that Canada is a nation that was built largely by immigrants. With the exception of aboriginal writing, all Canadian writing is immigrant writing and “ethnic” writing, whether it emerges out of the dominant majority culture or from a minority ethnic group. The history of immigrant writing in Canada is well documented; writing by immigrants and about the experience of immigration covers every period of writing in Canada and springs from a vast array of cultures. Critical response to immigrant writing has been a hallmark of the Canadian critical tradition as evidenced by the work of Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, John Moss and more recently writers like Enoch Padolsky, Sneja Gunew and Smaro Kamboureli.
3. Many of the most popular Canadian novels of the twentieth century, by writers like Mordecai Richler, F.P. Grove, Laura Salverson and John Marlyn, examine, from various ethnic perspectives, the experience of immigration and settlement in Canada and the assimilation that follows. Writing that deals with the experience of migration continues to be a prominent feature of the contemporary Canadian literary scene, as evidenced most recently by works from Rabindranath Maharaj, Yann Martel, Wayson Choy, Fred Wah, and others.

4. Ricci has, at times, expressed his frustration with the problems that arise from writing about the experience of immigration. See “Laying to rest ‘this whole immigrant thing’,” Globe and Mail 13 Sept. 1997, C10. The article addresses some of the difficulties that accompany being labeled as an ethnic writer and highlights the problem of minority ethnic identity as a strategy for containment. Notwithstanding these factors, Amanda Mullen notes that Ricci’s fiction has been instrumental in marking the contribution of Italian immigrants to Canadian nation building; she writes: “In using his fiction to recreate the suffering of Italian immigrants, Ricci adds their stories to Canada’s national narrative and thereby recovers a lost history and claims a place in the nation for Canadians of Italian origin” (40). (See her essay “Neither Here nor There” in Canadian Ethnic Studies, Summer 2004.)

5. Two important critical works that focus on issues of diasporic writing in Canada in relation to matters of multiculturalism, the politics of representations of ethnic identity, and postcolonial concerns such as hybridity, are Smaro Kamboureli’s Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada (2000) and Barbara Godard’s essay “Notes from the Cultural Field: Canadian Literature from Identity to Hybridity” (2000).

6. The reading of Ricci’s trilogy I offer here is an optimistic interpretation of what is, admittedly, at times a rather dark tale. Ricci’s novels are complex; they invite and support many interpretations. I approach his texts here with a particular focus on issues of memory, authority and the past, and find narrative turns and details of characterization that support my reading; however, I recognize that Ricci’s novels also problematize a range of other issues such as family relations, patriarchy and male power. The strained relations between Victor and Rita reflect other problematic relationships between Victor and his father, between Rita and Mario, between Victor and John. Each of these relations can support readings that highlight distinct social and moral issues, such as shame and betrayal.

Works Cited


The Novelist As Anthropologist: An Essay on the Fictional Work of Nino Ricci

Thou shalt not sit
With statisticians nor commit
A social science
—W.H. Auden

REVIEWS AND DISCUSSIONS of Nino Ricci’s trilogy commonly focus on two themes. One theme is the inner conflict and psychological anxiety of the protagonist, Vittorio Innocente. The other is the accuracy of Ricci’s “thick description” of the supporting characters and settings. Beginning with Lives of the Saints, the “customs and narrow ways” of the Italian village of Valle del Sole are meticulously disclosed. Its “rural, superstitious, clan­nish, pagan” inhabitants are genuinely depicted and sensitively rendered “with a tenderness that avoids sentimentality.” Ricci, we are told, “has created a real place, has populated it with real people.” Ricci himself described Lives of the Saints as “written in a high realist style” and added that it “relies on a detailed representation of the world of the story for its effect.” The world that is represented in the first novel is defined by one commentator as “an inbred little community” wherein “peasant Catholicism” melds “with pagan­ism.” It is this second theme, the delineation of the collective social context rather
than the complex individual psychological states, that most concerns us here.

Cultural anthropology can initially be painted as an inquisitive eye looking at human attitudes and actions both from without and from within the social community. Objective observers examine societies from the outside in an attempt to create a science of culture corresponding to the theories and methods of natural science. In the alternative, subjective interpreters argue that genuine understanding (verstehen) must give strong recognition to the meaning of thought and behaviour as experienced and understood by the people under study. The first is commonly called an “etic” approach; the second, “emic.”

Nino Ricci’s method is congenial to the emic and particularistic strain in anthropology that seeks to reconstruct cultural history accurately without yielding to the temptation to employ a more ambitious comparative or evolutionary framework that would facilitate the development of general laws of cultural development. In *Lives of the Saints*, the mores and folkways of Valle del Sole are recollected from the childhood memories of Vittorio, then living through his seventh year. The sequel, *In a Glass House*, shifts the setting: first, to an immigrant Italian farming community in south-western Ontario; next, to a suburban university in Toronto; and then to an African boarding school. The stops along the way are mediated through Vittorio’s increasingly mature gaze. Despite radical shifts of place and circumstance, and notwithstanding the personal growth and development of his main character, Vittorio Innocente, Ricci’s admirers say that the writer’s powers of observation are abidingly keen and that his precise representations of community life remain accurate and evocative. Even in the third novel, *Where She Has Gone*, the increasingly intense psychological dimensions of the story, emanating from the violation of the antediluvian taboo of incest, do not detract from the persistent attention to cultural detail as Vittorio, now a young man, returns to his birthplace, a reluctantly modernizing Valle del Sole. There, he encounters half-remembered characters from his childhood, including his former playmate Fabrizio with whom he shared the original venial sin of smoking cigarettes. Fabrizio has worked in Roman restaurants, but has chosen to pass his life under the clear Apennine sky. Self-consciously choosing the security of a government job and the vocation of tending his “Garden of Eden,” Fabrizio is happy to deliver mail and content to be a missionary gardener caring for his small, uncorrupted parcel of local land. Seeking reassurance from Fabrizio, Vittorio finds dissonance instead: “Every contradiction of how I remembered things was like having a part of me torn away.”

The reality of “high realism” is a negotiated reality. A traditional community is not necessarily a static community. In Valle del Sole at the time of Vittorio’s birth, automobiles may be unreliable, but they do exist. So, the emic (subjective) understanding of the community depends upon an awareness of differences in subjective perceptions between women and men, old and young, to say nothing of particular personalities. The emic anthropologist and the novelist thus share an interest in the unique, richly textured, more-or-less distorted, psychologically repressed, or simply false apprehensions and memories of individuals. The more scientific interrogators of meaning, on the other hand, shun the singular and unreliable and search always for verifiable patterns. Setting aside the personal, mental and spiritual aspects
of the novels, even Ricci’s critics acknowledge his skill in describing generalities. “Superstitions, politics, hard work and dreams of America that pervade the village,” says one, “are rendered with an almost anthropological rigor.” A major element in all three books is the author’s capacity to give imaginary life to cultural environments that are both true to his characters and accessible to readers lacking personal knowledge of rural Italy, Leamington, York University, and Nigeria.

The Task at Hand

In this essay, first, I wanted to consider whether Ricci’s novels conformed to the findings of social scientists who study life in traditional Italian villages, the cultural dislocations of immigrants in new societies, and the adjustment problems encountered by those who attempt to go home again. Second, I wanted to discover if the writer’s work contributed any insights that might be useful to social scientists researching these and related questions. In short, was Ricci’s self-professed “high realism” realistic? Undergraduate textbooks now commonly connect forms of literary criticism to social science. Literary critics including Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Umberto Eco are frequently cited by anthropologists, and anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Claude Levi-Strauss are often shoehorned into discussions of literature. The lines are blurred, for example, in Italo Calvino’s “claim that he finds Northrop Frye’s anthropological criticism more convincing than structuralism ... and his belief in the epistemological importance of literature.”

What Is Anthropology?

Classically, anthropology “sets for itself the general problem of the evolution of mankind.” Currently, its “goal” is identified as “the comparative study of human societies ... to describe, analyse, and explain ... how groups have adapted to their environments and given meaning to their lives.” The discipline is divided into two main areas, physical (or biological) and cultural (or social) anthropology. Physical anthropologists investigate biological evolution and topics ranging from palaeontology and population genetics to evolutionary psychology and forensic anthropology. At their most ambitious, writes English teacher David Hawkes, physical anthropologists suggest “that competition for Stone Age sexual favours continues to dictate our behaviour, despite the enormous historical and cultural distance which separates the post-modern from the Pleistocene, leaving ‘middle-brow’ readers awash with claims about the discovery of the ‘rape module’ or the ‘aggression gene.’” Physical anthropologists suffer a lack of consensus as to the parameters of their subject matter. What, unambiguously, is a human being? Do we mark our origins in terms of physiological characteristics such as brain size (intellect), vocal chords (speech), or the use of technology (an opposable thumb)? Ought the locus of inquiry to be at the level of genetics, individual organisms or the species itself? What is the precise structure of our “family tree”? Is there an uncontested line that separates Homo sapiens sapiens from our primate kin? Cultural anthropologists study cultural evolution, whatever the much-debated and much-debased term “culture” may be said
What Is Literature?

“Ontological” issues are often at stake in debates about whether or not literature is necessarily restricted to imaginative or fictional writing. Some scholars, for example, still worry about whether *The Holy Bible* or Machiavelli’s *The Prince* count as literature. As Terry Eagleton points out, “nineteenth-century English literature usually includes Lamb (but not Bentham), Macauley (but not Marx), Mill (but not Darwin or Herbert Spencer).”

According to Eagleton, literature is defined according to socially determined and historically variable structures of belief. Those unhappy with such blatant socio-economic determinism may invoke aesthetic standards. Others, focusing on the writer as artist, take literature to be the product of a distinctive kind of activity which, whether its product be reckoned superior or inferior, at least has a *prima facie* claim to be called “art.” It exists in “its concreteness.” It is “faithful only to itself.”

Peter McHugh, for one, contends above all that literature must be treated “independently of its history, context, or social circumstance.” One of the primary, legitimate tasks of art and, hence, of literature is the act of representation.

As has been mentioned above, the fictional trilogy by Nino Ricci examined in this essay, utilizes the various techniques of “realism,” a traditional form of literary representation. The writer reproduces in a detailed fashion diverse settings in the old country and the new world and provides descriptions of the physical appearance and mannerisms of the many characters in the trilogy. This adherence to literary realism has been confirmed...
by the writer himself and by literary critics who have highlighted the importance of the use of extensive detail in the trilogy to build plot, characterization, and theme.

Tradition and Modernization

What we call literature is as old as what we call civilization. Indeed, among the earliest bits of evidence for civilization are the myths and legends of antiquity. The social sciences are rather recent additions to the humanist’s tool-kit. They were fashioned as a part of that modernizing process itself, and took some time to gain respectability as a legitimate form of knowledge. Their invention was part of the same process as the main social theme in the Innocente novels, the transition from traditional to modern society. The broad social landscapes painted by many early social scientists, for example, had much more in common with romantic poetry than with contemporary displays of statistical virtuosity as in, for example, the aptly named technique of multiple regression analysis. There was a preoccupation with the life of the city and the country, with tradition and progress, and with the loss of community and the triumph of market society.

Much nineteenth-century social science fell squarely in the radical tradition that began with William Blake’s condemnation of the “dark, satanic mills” of industrialism. It viewed the factory system of industrial capitalism as an historically unprecedented, wicked and tyrannical exploitation of mind and body (and even Adam Smith considered the modern corporation a fundamental perversion of economic organization). By casting an eye back to simpler societies, untainted and un tarnished, anthropologists furnished social reformers with the kind of contrast they needed to facilitate a moral censure of the proletarian misery and bourgeois decadence of life around them.

If such progressives entertained naïve ideas of noble savages, sturdy peasants and idyllic pre-industrial life, the “high realism” in Ricci’s trilogy appears to be the flip side of the anthropological coin. Unsentimental and non-judgmental, the writer’s simple recording of Vittorio’s failure to find happiness in the big city of Toronto and the return of a young man such as Fabrizio to tend his garden in the old village combine to provide ample “data” to support the suggestion that the promise of an upscale urban lifestyle may be hollow.

The trilogy does not embrace the visceral myth of barbarian virtue. Although many students of literature recoiled from the late nineteenth-century triumph of science, and some took up the spiritual exaltation of the “stupefied peasant.” The writer of the trilogy seems to reflect the orientation of social scientists. These social scientists brought the tools of the academic trade to the study of their contemporaries as they struggled through the transition from tradition to modernity. Most sociologists and anthropologists who are concerned with problems of transition do their “field work” in remote and romantic locations, such as the rain forests of South America, the deserts of southern Africa, the idyllic islands of Melanesia, and so on. Some, however, work on the close fringes of modernity. One of these is Edward Banfield, a controversial scholar whose book, The Moral Basis of a Backward Society, contains a very ugly account of bucolic Italian peasants in the late 1950s, at precisely the time when the fictional Vittorio was growing up in Valle del Sole.
world of Valle del Sole yet implicated in the amorality of postmodernity, Vittorio is not silenced by the predicament of seeking to define his moral code but by his ambivalence in choosing among the structures of moral codes themselves. Vittorio is conflicted between a morality based on ahistorical verities, such as they are embedded in the religious language of sin, and what has lately been called “situation ethics.” Ricci shows how, in a remarkably short period of time, not only Vittorio Innocente but most of the main characters in his novels are compelled to adapt to changing circumstances. Even though he alludes to and most often describes material circumstances, the writer does not clearly provide explanations of the relationship between those ecological, economic, reproductive and technological circumstances that anthropology seeks to generate in its study of social reality. The writer gives us data, within an imagined world, to which anthropological theory could be usefully applied. In the fictional trilogy, the language game of the fiction writer is not yet identical to the language game of the social scientist. In contemporary society, it is impossible for an artist or a social scientist to claim to express an unassailable truth about any aspect of the human condition. As Vittorio notes, “Language seems sometimes such a crude tool to have devised, obscuring as much as it reveals, as if we are not much further along than those half-humans of a million years ago with their fires and their bits of chipped stone; though maybe like them all we strive for in the end is simply to find our own way to hold back for a time the encroaching dark.”

Notes

8. The emic strain in cultural anthropology includes a legion of cultural idealists, symbolic interactionists, phenomenologists, ethnmethodologists, and sundry eclectics and obscurantists. A singular example was Franz Boas (1858-1942) of whom Marvin Harris said: “it is obvious from the research strategy [that Boas] followed throughout his career that he was perfectly content to continue his particularistic studies in complete independence of their nomothetic payoff.” *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: Crowell, 1968), p. 262. From the mind of Boas grew the more ambitious Margaret Mead.
9. Ricci, *Where She Has Gone*, p. 199. Fabrizio did not go to America nor take university classes, but he is, however briefly, among the more sympathetic characters in the trilogy. The “path not taken” by Vittorio may lead to genuine grace.


11. Regarding disciplinary boundaries, I empathize with Kurt Vonnegut, former anthropologist and novelist: “I visited the Anthropology Department of the University of Chicago a few months ago. Dr. Sol Tax was the only faculty member from my time who was still teaching there. I asked him if he knew what had become of my own classmates ... Many of them, ... he said, were practising what he called ‘urban anthropology,’ which sounded an awful lot like sociology to me. (We used to look down on the sociologists. I couldn’t imagine why and can’t imagine why.) If I had stayed with anthropology as a career, I would now be doing, probably, what I am doing, which is writing about acculturated primitive people (like myself) in Skyscraper National Park.” *Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage for the 1980s* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1991), p. 126.


16. Fed up with postmodernists and various species of subjectivists, Craig B. Stanford joins other “biological anthropologists” who say that “in an era in which the concept of culture has been so widely appropriated by groups all over the intellectual and political spectrum” and in which “attempts by anthropologists to define culture have devolved from a lively, genuinely intellectual debate into a petty squabble over whose thinking is in fashion and whose is outmoded ... it may be a good idea [to] ditch the word altogether.” See “The Cultured Ape?” *The Sciences* (May/June, 2000), p. 43.


Subjectivity, Ideology, and Culture in the Fictional Trilogy of Nino Ricci

Fictional texts, as theoreticians of literary representation have asserted, are infused with sets of beliefs and ways of organizing reality that do not simply stem from the particular subjectivity of the writer. Assumptions about what constitutes social reality and what is considered to be normative behaviour may be rethought and even refuted by a given writer either deliberately in the process of presenting or as a consequence of articulating a particular view. However, readings of social reality are at some level shaped by the social context in which the writer is located. Although the writer is not a mechanical reproducer of an existing social order, whose development is usually historical and its contents tend to be contradictory and multifaceted, he or she still cannot avoid, even if he or she wishes to do so, the external influences that form perception and affect the imagination. The writer hopes to deploy elements of literary form as a means to probe the layers of contemporary reality and through that literary form construct a sense of reality not obviously evident to everyone, if it is evident at all. Literary texts are not material reality per se but representations of reality. Yet, by investigating the nature
and meanings of given social realities, fictional texts and their writers participate in helping to shape not only how internal and external phenomena are perceived. Equally important, the writers and their work at some level help to build if not legitimize the social framework that holds psychological and social phenomena in place. Parameters and boundaries are redrawn or discarded, resulting in the affirmation or the contesting of established social structures.

Ideology then is not simply a factor in the construction of a literary work. (Ideology can be generally defined as a system of beliefs that not only guides human action but also organizes what is perceived to be real, acceptable, common sense or even natural.) Rather it is more accurate to state that, without ideology, without some linkage to past and present beliefs, a literary work could not be referential. Thus, for a work that is attempting to be referential, to be representational, it somehow needs to connect itself to an identifiable social reality. In general, literary and social theorists would assert that all literary work, whether it is non-referential, self-referential, or referential, issues from some identifiable social context, evolved through time and space. The literary imagination can creatively reorganize elements of human experience and even invent elements never before experienced. Such an imagination cannot transcend in absolute terms, even if it wished to do so, the time and space of which it was a part and from which it obtained selectively the materials to do its work. It is very difficult to prove that human actions exist apart from the physical and social conditions that circumscribe them and that limit human potentiality. It is an insurmountable task to argue convincingly that human actions stand outside the external conditions that they are meant to respond to and even change. Since the human imagination is strongly grounded in a social terrain, its reference points are not just aesthetic but also ideological.

This is not to reduce literary activity to a mechanistic reproduction of specifically designated social realities, realities ranging from the mainstream to the marginal. Literary form can transform established perceptions of reality, presenting the reader with sometimes radically different ways of envisioning the world. The literary imagination, by probing the deepest realms of a given situation, can expose layers of complexity often hidden from view, suggesting the illusory nature of any given experience. Literary form and the literary imagination have their own vitality and a sort of independence from external forces. Sometimes the emotional, psychological, and aesthetic power of a particular narrative style can in itself be much more critical to a literary work than its actual message or even social content. But this observation does not exclude the notion that within a given literary form itself are imbedded ideologically based assumptions of what constitutes human experience and human reality.

Social and literary theorists have rejected an essentialist view of human existence, asserting that social reality and social and cultural identities are socially constructed. But, in asserting this constructionist point of view, they have not denied the political usage that essentialism can be put to, evoking difference and marginality in a dominant culture or among competing cultural and social groups. Such social theorists also have not repudiated the legitimacy of authentic, lived-in experience, occurring at different levels of consciousness, whether it is non-rational, non-cognitive, or intuitive; neither have they denied the emotional and psychological
and hears the man telling him this is how the “the problem is solved” (234).

These boys, however, want to “make him pay” (234) and pay he does. Although, in his moment of reckoning, irony abounds: When he feels sure that “he will do the thing that will land a bullet in his brain,” he realizes that “[h]e has never felt more awake” (235).

Notes

1. The title exists with heartfelt apologies to Francisco Goya.
3. Page numbers for all quotations from Ricci’s *Sleep* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2015) are in parentheses following the quotation.

(Interview with Nino Ricci was completed before the publication of his latest novel, *Sleep*, 2015.)

**Marino Tuzi**

What are some of the recurrent themes in your fiction?

**Nino Ricci**: It is hard to speak of themes without seeming reductive. I generally start with characters, not themes, though certainly recurrent theme-like entities or motifs have indeed grown out of the characters I’ve tended to work with. They are the usual Big Themes, I think: life, death, home, family, what it means to be human. There are a few subsets within these that are a bit more specific—my obsession with Catholicism, for instance, which led one critic to label me as a kind of Canadian Graham Greene, though I am certainly not Catholic in my life and really regard Catholicism less as a theme, per se, than as a particularly tempting corpse to dig my vulture claws into. I have also been very interested in the whole issue of displacement, something that comes out of my immigrant background but that is
really a basic aspect of being human in our time, and one that goes back to many recurring motifs — the journey; the search for home, for a lost paradise — that have been central to the Western tradition.

M.T.: How would you describe your work stylistically and formally? What literary tradition/s are they part of?

N.R.: My formative training in literature was in the English literary tradition — Beowulf to Virginia Woolf, as they say — and that training has stayed with me at a deep level. That tradition is certainly not one to scoff at, and I feel very fortunate to have been exposed to it. At either end of this exposure, however, are a mongrel host of other influences — all the nameless books I read as a child, for instance, and which were really what awakened the force of imagination in me, and then the eclectic assortment of world literature I have come to in one way or another, including through a year I spent studying at the University of Florence. Stylistically and formally — in the architecture of my sentences, for instance, in my use of language, in my reliance on certain conventions of literary realism — I still look back to the English tradition as the important one. But in the matter of tone, I am not so certain. Maybe one of the major influences on tone in my writing was not literature at all but the films of Federico Fellini. There is something in the pathos of Fellini’s worldview, in the mix of irony and tragedy, in the willingness to include the whole range of human experience, that is very appealing to me, and that I have also found in writers like Svevo and Calvino. Perhaps this is an area in which my Italian roots have been determining ones.

M.T.: What do you believe are the important contributions of a writer in modern society?

N.R.: I used to make very lofty claims for writers, but now I am more ambivalent. The lofty claims ran something like this: that literature was the true repository of human knowledge, what was most likely to survive over time and what best captured all the nuances and complexities of human experience. We looked to writers, I thought, more than to any other source, to give meaning to our existence. But maybe this was just self-aggrandizement. Most writers are utterly forgotten, and probably don’t do much for the furtherment of the race. Then it is an open question whether the race is indeed furthering itself, or if we are on some sort of evolutionary dead end that writers, by giving us a false sense of our importance in the grand scheme of things, have merely helped to obscure from us. Maybe it is true that the important literature, today as in the past, is the literature that reminds us how small we are, and how little we know, and that we will come to dust.

M.T.: How do you compare the Saints trilogy to your subsequent work in terms of style and vision?

N.R.: I see quite a bit of continuity between my Lives of the Saints trilogy and my subsequent work, namely Testament and The Origin of Species, which I have just finished. In the end all of these books go back, as I say, to the matter of the big questions. The importance of home and family figures as largely in Testament, for instance, as it does in the Lives trilogy, as does the issue of faith. My most recent work, The
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say, and I think that is the case in the writing I most admire. I suppose we respond to the particular in literature because we live in the particular, and need to feel rooted in some sort of credible world in order for a piece of fiction to work. That world might be quite different from ours; the important thing is that the author makes us believe in it. But part of that belief, I think, has to come from a leap we make at some point, from the gut sense that that different world has become our own, because the author has teased out the merely particular and time-bound and somehow connected these to a larger commonality.

M.T.: Which philosophical influences have shaped your fiction and why have they done so?

N.R.: I have had many philosophical influences in my life, and in the early drafts of a novel I always work very hard to weave them into the text, then spend most of the revision process threading them out. Writers, when they write, have to be bigger, I think, than their own particular philosophical influences; they have to act as if they know nothing for certain, as if all comers have a fair shot at coming out on top. That is the only way to stay true, I think, to what is most important in a novel, the characters themselves and their particular stories. In the context of fiction, a character’s deeply held philosophical beliefs are much more important than an author’s, I think, and they should have every chance to flourish or fail without the author putting his or her two cents in all the time.

M.T.: As an adult, which writers have influenced your work and why?
N.R.: I always cite Shakespeare as a major influence, even though I don’t see his plays very often anymore and certainly don’t sit down with a copy of Troilus and Cressida when I’m looking for some casual reading. And yet still he has a hold on me, from all those university courses where I was forced to read him. The language, the breadth of vision, the breadth of character—all these things. Then as a role model, I find him very appealing. He was not particularly innovative with regard to drama: his general method was to take what was out there and make it much better, the way the Japanese did with cars. In the process, of course, he challenged convention, but always somehow from within convention, which is the sort of subversion I feel most comfortable with as a writer. He was also not averse to playing to the pit, and had the singular talent of having been, despite his literary greatness, very popular and successful.

Among more contemporary writers I would cite Alice Munro, Doris Lessing, Vladimir Nabokov, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Pynchon, among others, for a grab bag of reasons, some for their nuances of language, others for their playfulness and ambition.

What I most look for in a writer is a combination of a kind of catholic view of the human condition combined with the particularity of evoking those nuances of feeling and experience that only literature seems able to get at.

M.T.: How does ethnicity fit into your fiction both in terms of human experience and the nature of the modern world?

N.R.: Ethnicity is one of those words that makes me want to run in the other direction. What does it mean? It almost invariably has a belittling tone. Things are ethnic only by contrast, and the implication is always that ethnic cultures are being contrasted to some realer, truer culture they are merely sideshows to. Alternately, ethnicity is raised up as a banner of specialness, which leads to all sorts of fascistic excesses. I suppose the way in which ethnicity has played into my own work is that I have somehow felt it my job to take apart these notions of ethnicity, and to avoid falling into the trap of them. I am more interested in complexity than ethnicity—the particularities of cultural differences, yes, but only as nuances within a range of other formative and connective forces.

M.T.: When you write, how do you deal with the process of creating fiction and in engaging ideas?

N.R.: This is a rather big question, not entirely answerable. In simplest terms, I start with some sort of idea for a story that has come to me from one source or another—usually it springs from a character or a particular situation or dilemma that seems suggestive—and then I write the story out and hope it works. If the idea is good, more ideas come. As for engaging Ideas in the capital letter sense: I always have lots of those, as I’ve indicated, and usually I have to throttle them. If the basic idea of the novel is sound—that is, if I have started with strong characters and a strong narrative—then the Idea will grow out of it on its own.
M.T.: What is the role of the novel today, given the massive dominance of visual imagery, especially through television and film?

N.R.: Well, the novel has died many deaths, and still struggles on. In strict percentages, surely a greater proportion of the human race is reading literature today than was ever the case in the past, given how recent widespread literacy is. So there is hope. I think it is also true that people have an insatiable need for narrative, that this is something that is hard-wired into them, and that the novel perhaps remains the primary source for complex narrative. You could certainly make the argument that film, as far as narrative is concerned—and narrative is central to it, as it is to most popular entertainments—tends to be highly derivative and reductive, and that if the novel died, film might go with it.

The novel and indeed most forms of literature have always been more meditative than direct, and it is true that it is hard to compete with the onslaught of much more visceral stimuli. But the brain is a complex place, and will always eventually crave complex enjoyments. So maybe the role of the novel is to be the guardian of the complex, of the view of reality that sees it in its fullness rather than reduces it to its most sensational elements.

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Contributors

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Lise Hogan has specialized in modern Italian literature and she has published essays on various aspects of this literature. She is especially interested in how Italian culture is expressed in Italian Canadian writing. She has incorporated her knowledge of literary and cultural theory in her analysis of minority literary texts.

Marino Tuzi is the editor of and contributor to this collection of essays. He has published essays in books and journals on a variety of subjects on literature and culture. His book, *The Power of Allegiances* (published by Guernica Editions), examines the fiction of selected Italian-Canadian writers within the context of the immigrant experience and minority writing in Canada and abroad. Tuzi has also co-edited two books of essays (published by Guernica Editions) related to culture, identity, and society in Canada. He has taught special topics courses in the areas of Canadian Literature and Canadian Studies at Seneca College and York University.

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