

Italian Canadiana

VOLUME 39.1 / SPRING 2025

Italian Canadiana

Italian Canadiana is the peer-reviewed journal of the Frank Iacobucci Centre for Italian Canadian Studies (University of Toronto). It publishes scholarly research articles and reviews in English, French, and Italian devoted to research on all aspects of the lives, history, art, and literature of Italians and their descendants in Canada and the rest of North America (Mexico, the USA) both in recent as well as in earlier periods.

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Italian Canadiana
c/o Iter Press
J. P. Robarts Research Library University of Toronto
130 St. George St.
Toronto, ON M5S 1A5 Canada
1-800-331-3219
Editorial: italcan@itercanada.ca
Subscriptions: client@erudit.org

Published biannually.

Articles should be submitted via the journal's web site at <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/italiancan>.

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Iter Press
NEW YORK | TORONTO

ISSN 2564-2340

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Mazzucchelli, Chiara.

Bastimenti d'inchiostro: La Grande emigrazione nella letteratura siciliana (1876-1924).

Palermo: Kalós, 2024. Pp. 151. ISBN 979-12-80198-93-8 (paperback) €20.00.

As Salvatore Ferlita observes in his preface to Chiara Mazzucchelli's consummately researched and thoroughly documented work on the great emigration of Sicilian literature (destined mostly to the United States) in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, Sicily witnessed a veritable odyssey, an unprecedented exodus of quasi-Biblical proportions that would unalterably change the island's economic, social, and cultural landscape. But what was the tragic prequel to this exodus? What human and historical conditions led to this migratory phenomenon? And how did the Italian literary imagination, more specifically, the Sicilian literary elites, treat this massive demographic earthquake?

Mazzucchelli's historical and critical treatment of such questions, with particularly detailed attention to the last query, is lucidly and persuasively articulated in this engaging and multidisciplinary narrative that, supported by a substantive and useful array of footnotes and bibliography, provides a persuasive and full account of the phenomenon. By virtue of its systemic probing into the literature, history, anthropology, and sociology of the time, the study goes a long way into filling a hitherto aggrieved lacuna, thus shedding new light not only on this Sicilian anomalous migratory event but also, and significantly, on the effects this mass emigration had on the nascent Italian post-unification process as well as on the *vexata quaestio* of the so-called *questione meridionale*, the bitterly persistent social and economic fracture between the north and the south of Italy.

The study starts with a brief but well-sustained introduction meant to articulate concisely the succession of questions, motifs, and themes that will define the nature of the five chapters that follow it (each, except for the first, focusing on the four Sicilian writers who treated that mass emigration from the island: Giovanni Verga, Maria Messina, Luigi Capuana, and Luigi Pirandello). Noting that some fourteen million Italians left Italy to cross the Atlantic in the period under study, Mazzucchelli intends to illustrate, among other significant issues, the vital importance of the Sicilian literary production on emigration from the island vis-à-vis the astounding relative silence (what she labels "la grande omissione," the title of the first chapter) on the part of major Italian writers. Thus, while it is true that prominent exponents of the Italian

literary milieu—canonical writers and celebrated poets such as Edmondo De Amicis and Giovanni Pascoli—broached (albeit only on the surface and ever so lightly) this alarming emigration question at a time when the process of Italian unification and national identity was at stake, they did not seem to want to delve deeply and seriously into the root causes of this societal and existential crisis, an ominous reluctance due to, Mazzucchelli deftly proposes, the fear of perhaps finding themselves unwittingly investigating what could easily have turned out to be one of the causes in the very dismantling of the whole project of the budding Italian unification.

In her meticulous and, as mentioned, scrupulously researched narrative, Mazzucchelli leaves no stone unturned in order to provide the reader with a highly erudite and critically grounded text that is a hauntingly realistic and efficacious rendering of the plight of Sicilian emigrants in their search for survival. And this she is able to do both from within and outside of the imaginative literature at hand. Backed by the interdisciplinarity of her research and the literature produced not just by the Italian and Sicilian authors mentioned but also by some of the well-known and lesser-known Italian-American writers of the early decades of the twentieth century such as, perhaps the most important, John Fante, Mazzucchelli is able to frame a clearer picture of the Sicilian immigrant to the United States. It is an image that, while seemingly pretty well in line with what transpires from the pages penned by the mentioned Italian and Sicilian writers of the period—in so far as the usual and essential topographical structures of migrant literature are concerned: displacement, loss, survival, identity, nostalgia, triumph, and so forth—does nonetheless deviate in ways that in their researched realism are significant for a more proper understanding of this human and existential drama.

Yet, notwithstanding the parallelisms one may find between the imaginative literature at hand and what lies outside of that realm (that is, in this work's pages), what strikes the reader in Mazzucchelli's study is the attempted veracity on the part of the author, in contrast to the often-romanticized literary renditions, of this migratory drama—a veracity that smacks of partial certification, grounded on researched documentation, of the imagined or fantasized reality of the professional writer. It is only a partial certification simply because any fictional narrative can never in a full sense become a tool, an organ, of truth. Perhaps writing might have served in this guise through some of the early Italian immigrant writers themselves, a sort of *naïf* literature in which autobiography and life experience reigned, with narratives void of much rhetorical artifice. Were these early Italian immigrants writing outside

of the sacrosanct temple of legitimate literature? Such would, of course, no longer be the case in North American Italian “diasporic” literature in which, even when some of those quintessential migratory *topoi* are rehashed, they are duly and rigorously treated, as they should be, *ad arte*. As Mazzucchelli convincingly argues when discussing Verga, and even more so with Capuana and Pirandello, the literary medium has to deal with its self-created evils, with its particular brand of self-imposed obligations. These Sicilian authors’ literary veracity vis-à-vis the great Sicilian exodus of the period needs to be functional, useful, and respondent to their bourgeois capitalist interests. As wealthy landowners (both Verga and Capuana) and sulphur mine merchants (as in the case of Pirandello’s own family, as well as his wife’s), their inauspicious stance towards the Sicilian mass migration, beyond the trauma and perils of the act itself, is also motivated to a considerable degree by the ensuing lack of *manodopera*, of the cheap and slavish labour needed to make such capitalist ventures operative and profitable, thus perpetuating the economic and social status quo of the island.

While the writings of Verga, Capuana, and Pirandello on the Sicilian great emigration also has to be functional to their literary, pedagogical, editorial, and existential aspirations and amplifications (as are those of De Amicis and Pascoli), Messina provides a more down-to-earth and self-representational aspect of the Sicilian migratory phenomenon. She is able to mirror herself in a very human manner in the despair of the dolorous mothers, the orphan-like children, and the abandoned wives clothed in black, all longing and pining for the return of their loved ones, alone and melancholy in that distant America. But Mazzucchelli’s searching eye on these authors’ pages, again supported by the available historical and sociological writing on the subject, is also able to extract further plausible causes for the Sicilian exodus such as, for instance, mass emigration being a peaceful and resigned form of social revolt, a manifestation of enduring distrust towards local, regional, and national governments intent on preserving social and economic structures so as not to ignite discontent among the capitalist classes. Another interesting but fruitful digression is the degree of the varied forms of misogyny expressed by the examined authors towards their female colleagues, another example (for this reader) of a similar elitist presumptuousness they would have likely exercised towards the labourers in their midst, if not overtly in their writing. One page (73) that particularly impressed this reader, and which speaks eloquently to Mazzucchelli’s critical acumen and aesthetic sensibility in both reading and writing, is the one comparing Maria Messina’s nonna Lidda

having to let go of the only *raison d'être* left in her waning existence—her beloved grandson, still a child, leaving for America—with chapter 34 of Alessandro Manzoni's *Promessi sposi*. The desolate but dignified nonna Lidda will die of grief soon after, another of emigration's deadly stabs for those who remain. Mazzucchelli's own intense lyricism in recounting both narratives is no less penetrating.

Finely crafted with considerable critical skill and sophistication, Chiara Mazzucchelli's *Bastimenti d'inchiostro* is an instructive and engaging read on a crucial topic of mass emigration that needed to be revisited in its multidisciplinary, transcultural, and comparative context. It is a truly important contribution to a full and proper understanding of the manner in which the great emigration from Sicily was envisioned and fashioned by the Sicilian literary elite during the Italian post-unification period and the early decades of the twentieth century.

GABRIEL NICCOLI

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