

Salah Methnani's Immigrato: Portrait of a migrant as a young man

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Migration, literature and national life

The phenomenon of migration has played a fundamental role in the history of Italy and the elaboration of an Italian national identity. From Unification onward, for approximately a hundred years, Italy has been a source of extensive emigration, as evidenced today by the many offshoots of the Italian diaspora throughout the world. Toward the middle of the last century, the exodus abroad was augmented by a flow of migrants from the south toward the industrialized north. By contrast, in recent years, Italy, along with the rest of Western Europe, has become a landing place for a growing number of immigrants from various parts of the world. Hundreds of thousands of people have arrived and today continue to stream into Italy from places as varied as the Maghreb, the Balkan peninsula, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, the Pacific archipelagos, and Latin America.

The Italian nation found itself unprepared to welcome such an abundance of people, whose presence demanded the immediate creation of new juridical and physical spaces. The “immigration emergency”, as it was defined by the media, incited both heated political debates and

contentious responses within civil society. Solidarity appeared alongside rejection; welcome alongside racism; integration efforts together with marginalization; the memory of compatriots who had embarked to seek their fortune elsewhere together with the egoism of those who have lost a sense of history or have made their own “fortunes” at home. Beyond individual reactions, the settlement of the new arrivals on Italian soil and the progressive interaction between their cultures of origin and the native culture are contributing to a modification of the already varied social, political, economic, and aesthetic fabric of the nation. As the multiethnic presence of immigrants becomes more widespread and visible –in both urban and rural areas, in industries and schools, in politics as in the world of the arts– Italian cultural identity must come to terms, yet again, with the evidence of a varied and multiple migratory movement that is opening the country to a multicultural future, inscribing it in a transnational discourse that is not merely European, but global.¹

Among the authors of the new Italian multicultural discourse is a group of first-generation migrant writers –that is, writers who were born and grew up outside Italy and its linguistic traditions– who, in the last decade of the twentieth century, contributed with their works, written in Italian, to the current reconfiguration of national literary identity. The “exilic condition” (Ciccarelli and Giordano 1998: vi), which has always marked Italian life and literature, is becoming thanks to them “a principal theme of our contemporary culture, enlivened and at the same time confused by its new status as a rich country that imports and no longer exports, at least not as it did before, *foreigners*”² (vii).

The year 1990 is conventionally cited as marking the beginning of an Italian literature of migration –a term, still under discussion, meant to refer to a new production of literature that narrates the experiences of migration to Italy, and intended to open a new field of study. In the course of that year, three national publishing houses brought out autobiographical novels written by migrant authors with the collaboration of native Italian colleagues. Garzanti published *Io, venditore di elefanti* [*I Was an Elephant Salesman*], written by Pap Khouma, originally from Senegal, and Oreste Pivetta; Leonardo

¹ On Italy’s passage from being a nation of emigrants to being a nation of immigrants, see Verdicchio 1997; in particular, see pp. 152-160.

² The term used in Italian is *straniero*, which can be translated both as “foreigner” and “stranger”, always keeping both connotations.

published *Chiamatemi Ali* [Call Me Ali] by Mohamed Bouchane, an author of Moroccan descent, edited by Carla De Girolamo and Daniele Miccione; and Theoria issued *Immigrato* [Immigrant] by Salah Methnani, originally from Tunisia, in collaboration with Mario Fortunato.

Legal text and narrative con/texts

It is no coincidence that these literary texts were published in 1990, called by Khouma (1995: 116) “the year one of African legal immigration” to Italy. In February of that year, Law no. 39 was enacted, a piece of legislation (better known as the “Martelli Law” after the minister who proposed it) that regularized the position of undocumented migrants already in the country, guaranteeing their rights and finally granting them political visibility. The law was considered a sanatoria, or amnesty –a term used both by the media and by migrant writers– in that it aimed to restore social order by legitimizing an irregular situation: in this case, a lack of proper documentation.

The promulgation of the long-awaited amnesty, together with the social tumult provoked by the murder of Jerry Essan Masslo,³ a young South African immigrant killed several months previously in Villa Literno, a small town near Naples in the region of Campania, prompted, according to many, “the emergence of an immigrant writing/literature in Italy” (Gnisci 1998: 33). In the months that followed these two events, Methnani, Bouchane, and Khouma offered in their literary works their own interpretations of the sociopolitical, legal, and narrative body of the nation, a body that they, like the Italian legislators –albeit from different perspectives– perceived as suffering.⁴ Asserting the right to speak with their own voices, to tell their own story with their own linguistic inflections, and to narrate in the first person the history in which they participate, these authors rewrote the narratives, legal and otherwise, that the nation had created and imposed on them. Writing about their own

³ The event of Masslo's murder is taken up in literature in Methnani's *Immigrato* and in *Villa Literno*, one of Ben Jelloun's Italian stories, included in the volume *Dove lo stato non c'è* [translated as *State of Absence*], and it is remembered by Moussa Ba in the final note of *La promessa di Hamadi*.

⁴ On the ambiguity of the Martelli *sanatoria* in Italy's national discourse, see Parati 1997: 119.

experience as migrants in Italy through the filter of their literary imaginations, Methnani, Khouma, Bouchane, and many other migrant authors after them have seized the reins of the national discourse on immigration and thus transformed themselves from singular narrative objects into plural narrating subjects.⁵ They do not, however, attempt to replace the host nation's monologue with another of their own, which would prove equally sterile and partial. On the contrary, they strive to establish a dialogue with this society in which they play an increasingly integral part, a dialogue that serves to reevaluate and expand not only the dominant cultural binary oppositions, but also the ideologies that suggest them.

Through their works, these migrant writers offer the possibility of a dialogue that expresses the experience of plurality and opens the road to reciprocal knowledge, tolerance, and peaceful cohabitation. Saidou Moussa Ba, who authored with P. Alessandro Micheletti the two novels *La promessa di Hamadi* [Hamadi's Promise] (1991) and *La memoria di A.* [The Memory of A.] (1995a), states:

In the 1980s we immigrants were all identified as "Moroccans" and the press called us "vu' cumprà". The desire to write was born because we were essentially unknown. What to do to make ourselves known? If the immigrant becomes aware of himself, he can represent himself so that the other, whom the Italian has heard discussed only in generic terms, can define himself. In their books, immigrants want to represent themselves and also the "other": we are like this, but you are like this too; and a discussion with Italians was born, a possibility of dialogue in which these books are the means of exchange.

(1995b: 104-105)

Writing thus becomes an act of exchange and presents itself as a "site of encounter" (Colace 1995: 87). The artistic collaboration among migrant writers and native coauthors symbolizes the essence of this social encounter in a nascent form. The encounter is not, however, always idyllic: like social relations, artistic relations are at times extremely positive, while in other cases they prove problematic and conflictive.⁶ In its diverse manifestations, the artistic encounter nevertheless requires,

⁵ On plurality in migrant Italian literature see Di Maio 2009.

⁶ This is the case, for example, for Nassera Chohra, the author of Algerian extraction of the novel *Volevo diventare bianca* [I wanted to become white], who complains of the pressure exerted by her editor Alessandra Atti di Sarro during the writing of the book (see Parati 1997: 122-123).

and often produces, reciprocal understanding. Miccione, with whom De Girolamo edited the draft of Bouchane's *Chiamatemi Ali*, reports:

It was not always an easy task; at times Mohamed became so upset at the memory of the most difficult moments of his experience that we had to work in fits and starts. [...] This happened primarily while speaking of the first period, the time of clandestinity, a dramatic and difficult period. At the beginning, I'll be honest, our worlds, our cultures, as different as they are, caused some misunderstanding. Gradually, though, we came to know each other better, and today we tease each other and that's it.

(Colace 1995: 87)

Sociology and literature

Although the collaborative aspect of the early production of Italian migration literature aroused enthusiasm in many of its authors, this aspect contributed significantly, together with the autobiographical theme, to encouraging an exclusive reading of these literary texts as sociological accounts of the Italian immigrant phenomenon, an approach that denied them any artistic validity. In this respect, the opinion of Mario Fortunato, the coauthor with Methnani of *Immigrato*, one of this new literature's first and most interesting novels, is symptomatic of the skepticism that still frequently marks such texts' critical reception. In an interview published a few years after the publication of *Immigrato*, Fortunato maintains, in fact, that the stories narrated by immigrants are for the most part

pre-literary experiences that have sociological value. They are messages in a bottle that arrive from an underground reality still in formation. It will take other generations, a deeper assimilation of the language, of its narrative styles. And from that point on we may have significant surprises, because it's not out of the question that Italian, opening itself to new elaborations, may emerge richer, more eccentric. Or poorer.

(Polveroni 1995: 6)

Fortunato's position contributes to the relegation of migrant literature to the margins of the national literary canon.⁷ Once again, a parallel between a social act and an act of writing presents itself: just as there is

⁷ Later Fortunato reconsidered this position by virtually appropriating exclusive authorship of the written text –clearly, a problematic appropriation. See his Introduction to the 2006 Bompiani publication of *Immigrato*.

resistance to accepting immigrants as an integral part of Italian society and to considering them subjects, not objects, of the national political discourse, there is disagreement about granting literary status to their narrative texts and considering them part of the canon. Reading their works, as too many still do, as mere social testimony pushes them if not exactly outside, at least to the margins of literary discourse and the national aesthetic, which in reality they are helping to broaden, renew, and redefine.

To fully appreciate the historical, social, and anthropological value of the works of Italian migrant writers, they must first be read as works of literature produced by an Italian society caught in a sudden process of transformation and expansion toward other worlds. In 1905, one of the first modern migrant writers, Joseph Conrad, asserted: “Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena” (1949: 17). Reconsidering Conrad’s words in the twenty-first century, at a time when the phenomenon of mass migration increasingly shapes the lives of people around the world, we can conclude that to remain unaware of the art of migrant writers, in Italy or elsewhere, would mean refusing to understand how national histories are evolving, societies are changing, and literary traditions are being transformed.

The fact, therefore, that the narrative works of Methnani, Kouma, and Bouchane, like those of their successors, have significant sociological value does not imply that they are not primarily works of literature. When examined closely, the language of sociology often intersects with that of literature and, in particular, with that of literary criticism. Concepts like identity, migration, multiculturalism, and ethnicity belong as much to sociological discourse as to literary discourse, especially at this historical juncture, when national borders and often disciplinary borders are becoming increasingly fluid and the stranger is increasingly a first-order figure both as a narrated object—whether understood as a mythical figure or a cultural stereotype—and as a narrating subject. In a study on the role of the stranger in literature, Remo Ceserani explains:

Before becoming a literary theme, the condition of the stranger is an existential condition, a role assumed in particular circumstances by one who visits a country and a human community different from the one to which he or she

belongs, and who establishes relations with the members of that community and confronts social institutions, political and juridical structures, cultural customs and habits that are different from his or her own.

(1998: 7)

Methnani makes the existential condition of the stranger the theme, perspective, and sustaining metaphor of his text *Immigrato*. On the inside flap of the cover of the first edition, the book, which has chiefly been treated as an autobiography, is described as a “violent, moving, ferocious account bearing witness to the universe of immigration”. In reality, to fully grasp the powerful sociological, political, and moral testimony of the text, it should be recognized as a novel and, more precisely, as a conscious *Bildungsroman*. Only if read as such does the text reveal the powerful symbolic charge of its complex sociological component and its intrinsic symbolic function, which render it a profound reflection on the modern condition and the epistemological function of art.

Immigrato as a Bildungsroman

The novel narrates in the first person the fortunes of Salah, a twenty-seven-year-old Tunisian, the son of separated parents, who, after obtaining a degree in foreign languages (English and Russian), decides to embark on a journey to the country of his dreams: Italy. Sailing from Tunis in October 1989, Salah lands in Trapani, in Sicily, and from there, in the course of a few months, travels up through the country by train from south to north. Every stage of the journey, which Salah describes in a journal kept throughout the trip, corresponds to a chapter of the narrative, which opens and concludes in a circular fashion with the protagonist on Tunisian soil. In the first chapter, set in Tunis, Salah, remembering his childhood years and his first travels with his father, recounts the birth of his desire to know Italy and his resolution to leave after his studies; in the last part of the novel, set in Kairouan, the journey to Italy has already taken place.

Salah's migration is at once a geographical and interior exploration. He observes: “With lucidity, I thought that traveling up through Italy corresponded, in my personal geography, to a descent into the south of myself” (Methnani 1997: 40). The voyage soon reveals itself as a quest, a search for identity and ultimate truths, which, at the beginning of the story, the as yet inexperienced Salah believes to be attainable only after

emancipation from familial and social pressures. In the West, the young Tunisian believes, “there wasn’t just work, there was also freedom. In Tunisia, there was less and less of that, in the last years of Bourguiba” (12). The desire for self-definition appears already in the moment of departure, when Salah, wondering about the nature of the journey, doubts his own identity as a traveler: “‘Am I leaving as a North African emigrant or as just another young man who wants to see the world?’ That day, I didn’t know how to answer” (*ibid.*).

The protagonist’s *Bildung* is articulated around the dynamic and complex relationship between these two parameters: that of the cultured and curious young man leaving his native country to investigate other realities and that of the Maghrebi emigrant who leaves his own land, seduced by the opportunities that the North seems to offer. Salah’s point of view, the central consciousness of the text, continually oscillates between these two perspectives, favoring first one and then the other. As soon as he reaches Mazara del Vallo, the first stage of his “Mediterranean passage” (Portelli 1999), he reflects, “I had the impression [...] that everywhere in the world young people couldn’t wait to cut the cord, to forget and cut off their own roots” (Methnani 1997: 15). However, after spending only a few days in the city, searching for work and lodging, Salah finds himself forced to abandon his romantic fantasies of being a vagabond student as well as his privileged existence as a middle-class Tunisian, for which Jabar, the first Maghrebi immigrant he meets, immediately mocks him (“Hey, little girl, how much money did Daddy give you today?”, 21). With his class advantages erased, his little money gone, without a visa, the young stranger has no choice but to move and act in the world –more often than not an underworld– of immigrants. Hence the first revelation arrives, the first growth phase, the first encounter (or rather clash) between Salah and the new world:

After such a short time, I’m forced to see myself no longer as a young college graduate abroad. Already I’m no longer a young man who wants to travel and learn. No: all of a sudden, I discover that I’m in every way a North African immigrant, without a job, without a home, illegal. A twenty-seven-year-old come in search of something confused: the myth of the West, of well-being, of a sort of freedom. All words that are already starting to break up in my mind.

(24)

Language and writing

For the Italy of Salah's imagination, built on the fiction of literature, TV, history books, and other people's stories, is substituted the real and problematic Italy of immigration. The memory of the sugary refrains of Italian films ("You will live as long as I live", 9) gives way to the harshness of "closed sounds, that arrive [...] like a wall" (13) and "a strange language made up of verbs in the infinitive" (37). Salah's migration is also a linguistic one. In the course of traveling through the country, of translating the various realities he encounters, the young man soon realizes that his knowledge of standard Italian is an obstacle rather than an advantage, because it disorients those who hear it, frequently causing distrust, especially among the established authorities who, symbolically, experience the foreigner as a potential invader and a threat to the existing order. Salah therefore begins to speak the language of immigrants, or rather the simplified, racist language of the "thousand lire" and "vu' cumprà", invented by Italians to address immigrants while constructing for them a flat and marginalized identity.

Language, an instrument and metaphor of power and Italian national pride, turns out to be a privileged means of knowledge for Salah in the course of the narrative. On one hand he adopts the everyday slang of immigration, which allows him to camouflage himself and familiarize himself with his surroundings, and, on the other hand, begins to keep a journal that will accompany him throughout the entire journey. Although, with an attitude somewhere between unreliable and immature, the narrator declares that in the journal he notes only the "most banal events, the more insignificant details" (49), he immediately amends this claim, explaining his journal's important epistemological function: "In this way, time, people, gestures won't pass by entirely uselessly. In a few months I'll be able to open my notebook and ask a page, 'Do you remember that time when....' [...] The notebook, in silence, will answer: it will show names and profiles and ultimately bodies" (*ibid.*).

The journal becomes the place where memory, which "at a certain point, grows muddled, fades" (*ibid.*), is preserved intact. Connecting names and places, crossing geographical, temporal, and linguistic borders, it constitutes the most intimate face of the experience of migration, which, as Gnisci explains, "is a primordial quality of human

destiny [...] that gives rise to humanity as such and allows it to produce imagination and discourse” (1998: 20). Writing, therefore, offering itself as a possibility of both external analysis and introspection, proves to be a fundamental instrument for achieving an identity, in that it serves as a privileged site of encounter between the intimacy of the “I” and the communal experience of the world. While writing, Salah yearns for the truth, which, however, appears mobile, unreachable, “like the line of the horizon: it moves as you advance” (Methnani 1997: 50). But the act of writing, which makes possible the narration of the journey toward the unknown, remains a tangible presence, a comfort in solitude: “I myself”, says the young protagonist, “will be my traveling companion” (*ibid.*).

Italian dreams

While encountering a gallery of characters and projections of himself, Salah continues to travel, write, and follow the horizon. As he proceeds, his student’s dream increasingly reveals itself as an immigrant’s nightmare. The host country is almost never hospitable. However he tries to integrate himself into the new environment, he is unfailingly pushed to the margins of official Italian society, which sees him only –when it sees him at all– as another illegal immigrant in search of a fortune, without rights and with nothing to offer. Compelled to face a new and problematic identity, Salah appears to find a way out only in the pseudo-restorative dimension of dreams. But not even the pleasure and sense of revenge provided by the dream world manage to last long:

In the dream, I denounce the cashier of the bar on via Gioberti who didn’t want to let me sit at a table. There are police officers and judges who, at the beginning, look at me with a certain benevolence. I explain my reasons, but my words are confused. All of a sudden, I can’t speak Italian. A judge has an envelope in his hand on which is written “No smoking”. Large sheets of paper emerge from the envelope. I read: “Undocumented. Presumption. Insolence”. The police then start to manhandle me. I feel their hands touch me everywhere: they push me, they jerk me.

(54)

Nightmare and reality mix in Salah’s journey-testimonial in the world of Italian illegal immigration. Wandering from city to city, Salah follows the alternative maps of the country marked out by immigrants, Tunisian and otherwise, waiting for an imminent “probable amnesty” (20) –an

absent presence that sustains the narrative and establishes its historical dimension— that “will allow many to emerge from the tunnel of illegality” (87). Salah learns to familiarize himself with “an authentic second-level topography, [...] a type of underground circuit in broad daylight, with its own rules and its own well-defined borders” (56). He sleeps in stations, on trains stopped for the night, in abandoned farmhouses, in squalid and dilapidated boarding houses for immigrants. He eats in homeless shelters and soup kitchens. He does a few odd jobs here and there, when he can, for little pay and always under the table. And he continues to write in his notebook to survive, although at times writing seems only “a mild analgesic” (117). Wherever he goes, Salah must come to terms with prejudice, abuses, violence, and the racism not only of Italians but also, unexpectedly, of those who, despite finding themselves in a foreign country like him, look down on him because of his color (“Nigerians and Senegalese [...] stare at me because, I think, for them I’m not black. I sense that I’m the object of a novel form of racism”, 38).

During his journey, Salah comes in contact with another face of Italy, unfamiliar to most people, which the nation is careful not to speak of in guidebooks or on television; it is the Italy of the marginalized, of illegal immigrants, smugglers, street vendors, addicts, drug dealers, and prostitutes—who are the only immigrant women to appear in the novel, a fact that testifies to their position of extreme marginalization. Analogously, Salah comes in contact with another face of himself, with his own unconscious. The experience of the hitherto unknown world of immigration leads him to explore the *terrae incognitae* of his own mind and psyche. Within several weeks, in the both real and symbolic cityscape of Rome—a city more familiar to him than any other, “marvelous but unknowable” (50)— Salah has his first and only homosexual experience, which inevitably compels him to reflect:

It’s as though, all of a sudden, a window has opened onto a part of me that until now was totally unknown. [...] I’m stunned. I observe myself as though, any moment, I will find myself inhabited by a second identity, one much more elusive, oblique. At times, I call myself by name, to ascertain whether I’m really myself.

(67)

Despite striving to understand, the young stranger finds it as difficult to recognize himself as to recognize the environment that surrounds him.

Estrangement is not only a narrative technique employed by Salah; it is also a psychological condition that accompanies, and refracts, cognitive experience: “I look at everything and everyone as if there were a glass screen between me and the outside. [...] I’m simultaneously inside and outside the scene” (57). If in Rome Salah seeks to react to “this sense of possession, of duplicity” (67), in Florence, the minimum point of the migratory parabola, the estrangement is total and seems to become a pathological condition similar to schizophrenia, a mental disorder not uncommon among migrants, especially at the beginning of a stay in the new country (Caldas Brito 1997: 13), because, as Tahar Ben Jelloun explains, “migration is a breaking, a laceration of the essential memory’s references, it’s a brutal change in existence” (1997: x). Thus Salah confesses,

I feel a great, perfect void that sets me free. I look around as though it were the first day of my life. Now it’s my whole body that has become an immense eye that notices everything. [...] I don’t hear a single sound. Reality is a film that runs smoothly. [...] I feel great so far outside the world.

(Methnani 1997: 73-74)

Florence, the cradle of the Renaissance and Western humanism, destination of artists and intellectuals, is observed by the protagonist/narrator with detachment and experienced by him exclusively in its alternative geography: not a monument, museum, or artistic site is mentioned. Salah’s Florence is exclusively a theater of dealers, addicts, prostitutes, people on the margins, both immigrants and native Italians. At this point on the journey, for the cultured Salah the famous city is only another *terra incognita*. Feeling wholly out of place during a meeting of the foreign students’ association, he decides to try sniffing *ghabra* –heroin– in an attempt to become a dealer, in the hope that entering the subterranean world of illegal immigration and delinquency can help him find an identity of some sort. “After all”, a disillusioned Salah argues, “only drugs seem to bring together people like me” (72). Once again, it is the need for connection that pushes him to act, that urges him to conform to others in order to hold back his own solitude. In Salah’s eyes, the world is increasingly characterized by clandestinity and illegality. For a few moments, he believes he has found a role to play in it: “I’m an addict now. An undocumented addict. Finally I have an identity. That tells me how to behave, in what voice to speak, what to feel. Everyone I meet seems like me. No differences, no exclusion” (78).

However, even this role is an illusion, partial and temporary, that is soon dismantled before his eyes when three young North African prostitutes, to whom he offers himself as a customer and traveling companion, reject him, explaining that they “feel compassion for me because they say I’m a student who shouldn’t waste his money going with whores” (80). Through their gaze, his abandoned identity turns itself forcefully against him.

Alternative belongings

Later, reappraising his days in Florence from the distance of memory, Salah reflects on the risk he ran by wanting to dissociate from an integral part of himself. If after the experience with *ghabra*, writing becomes a source of unbearable torment and “the letters of every word come unglued, float in the air, vanish” (77), by taking up his tale again, Salah reacquires a steady narrative voice. It is one step further toward the completion of *Bildung*:

I reviewed in succession my days in the city. I saw a self that, little by little, was turning into everything I have always hated and feared. I saw myself transformed into a drug dealer. Into an individual without hope. Sliding down that slope was so easy, so immediate. No one would have been at fault: not Naser, not Florence, and not even Italy. Only my elementary need to have an identity, a face to show, a role. Only my desire to fill with something the great emptiness inside me.

(83)

In Padua, Salah tries to reacquire his identity as a student, which he has temporarily set aside. He begins to go to the cinema again, joins the foreigners’ association and, selling products door to door, meets Giovanna, an Italian university student with whom he quickly makes friends and becomes infatuated. His relationship with this young woman allows Salah to feel accepted for the first time by Italian society. The message is implicit but clear: even in the highly efficient town of Padua, social integration occurs only through individual interaction, rather than through institutional policies. Salah displays an iron determination to knock at literal and metaphorical doors, and at this stage he can count on the sympathy of those who open their doors. Such integration, in Methnani’s Italy, appears to succeed only thanks to what Verdicchio (1997: 158) calls “human relations pure and simple”, and certainly not

through an efficacious state-organized politics, which, to paraphrase Ben Jelloun (1991), in immigration matters continues to be largely absent, in both the south and the north. In the Paduan pages of *Immigrato*, the amnesty, discussed during the Association's meetings (see Methnani 1997: 86-87), remains an uncertain hope.

Having recovered the parts of himself he had believed lost and reacquired faith in himself, Salah learns to be more tolerant and open with himself and others, without distinction between Italians and foreigners. During the last stages of the journey, he develops a sense of solidarity with those who, like him, struggle to find a place, or at least a direction, within themselves and in the world. On top of his estrangement, therefore, is superimposed a panoramic vision, the desire to embrace everything with a single glance. But in Salah's eyes, the Italian world is still an incomprehensible text, a labyrinth without exit:

I buy a map of the city and begin studying it. Strange: spread out on the map, Turin seems more incomprehensible. The lines of the streets, instead of unraveling into a possible reading, become tangled, twist themselves into a spider web, an arabesque without pattern or form. I throw the map in a trash can.

(102)

At other times, his surroundings seem recognizable. However, at the end of the journey, Salah knows well that to understand does not necessarily mean to belong. This knowledge makes exclusion even more bitter. In the elegant city of Milan at Christmastime, there is room neither for him nor for those like him. When he reaches the extreme north of Italy, the image of the *bel paese* dissolves completely for Salah, who, at the end of his "strange wandering" (109), realizes that Italy, like every other place in the world, is simultaneously West and East, North and South, racism and solidarity. Doubt and uncertainty give way to a singular awareness, first suggested by the evocation of Ramadan and then expressed in the rhetorical question that the newly astute narrator asks himself at the end of the journey:

I'm sick of meetings and talking. [...] And of our rights. And of our duties. Rather, to be precise, I'm fed up with all the immigrants of the world. It may not be a nice thought, but I'd like to return to spending time with anyone, regardless of skin color or the sound of a person's dialect. At certain moments I feel like a collector of other people's stories. Which, moreover, are always the same. I ask myself: [...] whose side should I be on? On that of the Tunisians

who sell drugs or that of the police who most often behave like thugs? Italians are racist? Aren't I racist too? I don't know how to answer. I don't know anything. The truth continues to move with me. Always a step away, farther and farther. I look around. I ask myself: go further north or retrace, at least in part, the opposite path?

(122-123)

The return

Having concluded the journey through Italy, Salah arrives at a turning point. The route demands a change of course and circles back on itself, like the structure of the narrative. To answer his own existential questions, Salah understands that he must return to his origins and recover his roots. Only the search for the past will be able to bestow significance upon the present, putting the experience of migration in context, and with luck will project him toward a more conscious and therefore more propitious future. Salah thus resolves to return to Tunisia, to close the circumference of his path. The return to his homeland is inevitably a return to his father, disowned in a courtroom during Salah's childhood, in a first symbolic act of rebellion. Nevertheless, as he explains at the beginning of the narrative, the father-antagonist was also his first *alter ego*, his first traveling companion. When his father picks him up at school to drive him to his city house for the weekend, the child experiences "the illusion of making a very long journey. A journey to a country that was foreign, even a little exotic" (8). During these car trips, the father instills in the young Salah a regard for culture and a passion for foreign languages, especially for Italian, and so awakens his curiosity and desire for contact with different traditions ("You have to get an education, study, learn to be in the world'. Then suddenly he murmured a few words in other languages", *ibid.*). His father gives him, in short, his first identity, that of a student and pilgrim, which will always remain the most precious to Salah –who, despite his childhood difficulty in counting to ten in Italian ("I said 'diaci'. I really couldn't manage to pronounce that 'e'", *ibid.*), as an adult speaks the language fluently ("I could pronounce with ease and fluency the number ten [*dieci*]", 132).

So while before, in Salah's childhood years, Italian is a barrier to communication between father and son (the latter of whom sees in the foreign language primarily a proof of the "severe, inaccessible authority, that inspired fear" of his father, 126), in Kairouan it presents an

opportunity to come together. The roles are reversed: the father remains mostly silent as the son tells his story, except to wish him goodnight in Italian (127). The Italian language, therefore, turns out to be a means of solidarity, of exchange, of connection between the past and the present, between the generation of the fathers, who do not leave the home country, and that of the sons, who leave it behind; Italian, for Salah as for his father, proves to be a site of memory and, therefore, of identity construction.

The written narrative as well, then, can be produced in Italian. At the end of his migratory experience, Salah, by now an experienced narrator and translator, organizes the events and elements of his story by taking care to situate the time of experience –that of the journey in Italy, written in the present tense, which constitutes the eight central chapters of the narration– within the broader dimension of memory –to which is entrusted the narration, in the past tense, of the days in Tunisia, which open and close the account. The artistic *Bildung* is complete: the journal of the undocumented North African student is amplified in space and time until it becomes the novel of the artist Salah, behind whom can be glimpsed his creator, the writer Salah Methnani. In the end, both the protagonist and his author, telling their story of migration, offer a reflection on the modern human condition and the condition of the contemporary artist –on one hand linked to the traditions of a particular land and people and, on the other hand, ever more inclined to participate in the world as a whole, to cross its national, linguistic, and cultural borders, in search of answers and ultimate truths. But the truth, Salah concludes, is only partial: “For a moment, I told myself that even truth, now, seemed right here, within reach. I had only to stretch out a finger to touch it. It wasn’t exactly the whole truth, but it was something” (131).

Of that “something” Salah is finally aware, that “every return is in reality a new step forward, and that indeed there is never a return” (129). The knowledge of the self, as well as of what is different from the self, is enriched and changes. Thus, feeling “half a foreigner” (128) while traveling on the bus toward Tunis, from which he will then depart again for Italy, Salah writes on the last page of the journal, in Italian, “the word ‘ciao’”. And he confesses: “I thought the journey was beginning now” (132). In the “positive note” (Matteo 1995: 79) of that greeting, at a time of encounter and leave-taking, lies the knowledge that only acceptance of the past can give strength in the present and significance to the future, a future becoming increasingly intercultural, because as Edward Said

observes, “no one today is purely *one* thing” and “survival”, therefore, is more than ever a matter of “the connections between things” (1994: 336). The world, Said continues, has changed “in ways that have surprised, and often alarmed, metropolitan Europeans and Americans, who now confront large non-white immigrant populations in their midst, and face an impressive roster of newly empowered voices asking for their narratives to be heard”. To refuse to hear such voices “is to miss what is essential about the world in the past century” (xx).

Building on Said's comment, we can argue that to ignore or push to the margins of the literary canon the voices of Methnani and other immigrant writers would mean losing the essence of the Italy of recent years, obscuring its history, and failing to recognize the latest developments in the elaboration of its national identity. In fact, with their art, Italy's migrant writers not only perceptively narrate the world of immigration from within, but also turn it into a metaphor for a society that, in a difficult moment of transition, seeks to stabilize a new order and create new rules. In this work, the world of immigration comes even to symbolize a broader world that, alongside injustice and abuses, allows solidarity, the desire to communicate, and the joy of survival to flourish.

Translated from Italian by Allison Van Deventer

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