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AMERIGO VESPUCCI

AISNA
Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani

AMERICA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

*Proceedings of the Sixteenth Biennial International Conference
Genova, November 8-11, 2001*

Edited by M. Bacigalupo and P. Castagneto



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THE MEDITERRANEAN: MEMORY AND TRADITION IN TWO ITALIAN AMERICAN WRITERS

ELISABETTA MARINO

Going through the pages of Italian American writers, such as Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Phyllis Capello and Rachel Guido deVries, a reader may easily find nostalgic references to the Mediterranean Sea, the calm, “familiar” sea from which their land of origin emerges, embraced by warm waters.¹ Sometimes it is mentally and emotionally opposed to the alien Atlantic Ocean, which the first immigrants had to cross in order to try their adventure in America, and whose roughness and dangers seemed to anticipate the difficulties in integrating and becoming part of the “American dream,” since theirs was a “different shade of white” in comparison to the WASP’s. Two autobiographical novels tightly link the personal experience of the two Italian American writers to the Mediterranean: Theresa Maggio’s *Mattanza: Love and Death in the Sea of Sicily* (2000), and Anthony Valerio’s *The Mediterranean Runs through Brooklyn* (1982). Even though the stories and the approaches adopted by Maggio and Valerio are thoroughly different, what binds the books together is the association between the Mediterranean Sea, the feminine figure, and food as primary sources of physical and spiritual life, as holders of ancestral values both authors need to recall and rely on to piece together their identity. Moreover, both writers seem to express a deep concern for the loss of such values, scattered either by the modern pressures of money-making and fast production (as in the case of Maggio’s story), or by a thorough Americanization on the part of the Italian American immigrant, which implies the sacrifice, the annihilation of his/her cultural roots.

Asked what the Mediterranean Sea represented to her, Theresa Maggio answered:

The Mediterranean is like a medicine to me; I must have a receptor on my skin cells for Mediterranean blue. The color seeps in like nicotine from a patch and makes me glow from the inside. Maybe the Mediterranean is hard-wired into my genes.²

As the title suggests, *Mattanza* is entirely focused on the ancient ritual of bluefin tuna fishing, carried out in many Mediterranean countries and, in Italy, especially in the **Sicilian island of Favignana**, where every year, around May or June, the tuna fish gather in order to spawn. While swimming, many tuna end up in the long net cage set up by the fishermen which, at the very end, has the “Chamber of Death.” There, the “mattanza,” the “slaughter” (from the Spanish “matara,” “to kill”), is eventually performed, accompanied by ceremonies and songs, whose tunes were “never meant for a mortal audience” (28), as Maggio remarks.

The ancestral values conveyed and transmitted through this ritual are unveiled from the first pages of the book when, after quoting Joseph Campbell’s *The Power of Myth* and

“the magical, wonderful accord (...) between the hunter and the hunted, as if they were locked in a mystical, timeless cycle of death, burial and resurrection,” Maggio concludes by saying “I found such a myth still alive on a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea” (xvi): Favignana. Similar passages can be found in many pages of the book. For instance, Maggio writes that “the wheel of life, death, and rebirth still spins every spring on that tiny island” adding, immediately afterwards, “for a few years I arrived with the tuna in the spring” (12). She thus establishes a deep connection between the fish and herself, both crossing the Atlantic and coming back to their roots to love, die and be born again. In her dreams, Maggio becomes a tuna, swimming with the giant fish in the “cottony silence” (218) of the Chamber of Death, then rising “slowly and unwillingly” (218) towards the mystical chants of the fishermen, towards the daylight, towards her destiny of death and resurrection.

What strikes the reader, however, is that Maggio neither lingers on her family history, nor on the description of her actual town of origin: Santa Margherita Belice, the village where her father came from, mentioned briefly in the first and fourth chapters of the book. Her efforts seem to be entirely concentrated on the recovery of roots which go back even beyond her own, beyond the history of many first generation Italian Americans, torn between their longing for a distant motherland and the urge to be assimilated into the “melting pot.” She comes back to plunge deeply into the very core of mankind, into pre-history, through a rite “essentially unchanged since the Stone Age” (12), thus overcoming all the binary oppositions such as insider vs. outsider, assimilated vs. misfit, domineering vs. dominated produced by Western history and uncovering, instead, universal ties which bind people beyond geographical, ethnic and religious differences.

The Mediterranean Sea, therefore, becomes a sort of amniotic fluid, a “briny vessel of primordial juices” where “sex, death, and begetting mingle” (11). Maggio visits the caves on the shores of Levanzo, an island three miles off the north coast of Favignana and, in this “womb” of the earth, she stares at “four-thousand-year-old sepia-ink cave paintings of humans and animals: dancing man and limbless, violin-shaped women; equines, bovines, two boars, six fish, and, at the very bottom, the unmistakable diamond shape of a giant bluefin tuna” (9). Actually, as we read in another passage, the name for Canaan “the promised land” that the first Pilgrims crossing the Atlantic were trying to reproduce on the American soil, “derives from the Hebrew word for tuna” (210). Therefore, following Maggio’s hints, *Canaan* is not a *land*, a place to be “located” precisely on a map; on the contrary it seems to be connected to the idea of “mobility” of “coming back” and, for an immigrant, to feeling comfortable with “multiple roots” in the name of the common origin of all mankind, generated from the same, liquid womb.

Throughout the book, the Mediterranean Sea seems to turn into a woman, into a mother figure. Just to quote some of the most striking examples, “Mondello Bay is curled in the arms of beach and mountains” (4); one of the fishermen touches with the back of his hand “the smooth water and caress(es) it like a woman’s cheek” (25); the boat rocks

the writer “like a cradle” (147) and, in other passages of the book, she is “rocked on the breast of the sea” (215), “lull(ed) into unconsciousness” (229) waiting for the performance of the death-rebirth cathartic ritual which is the “mattanza.”

The connection between the bluefin tuna for ancient Mediterranean people and the buffalo for American plain Indians, both as “a giant animal they revered” and as “a reliable source of protein” (10), offers the writer the possibility to reflect on what the destiny of the “mattanza” might be in future. By killing buffaloes with repeating rifles, the cowboys transformed “the Indian’s sacrament into a white man’s sacrilege” (11). In the same way, modern fishing technology, aimed at maximizing the results and minimizing the expenses, together with the pressure of tourism industry are turning the “mattanza” into a sad show, whose final act seems to be the disappearance of this millenary tradition. This concern is recurrent throughout the volume. In chapter 14, “The Prey,” Maggio seems to invite a reader to establish a comparison between past and present. A paragraph in which she quotes Ernest Hemingway’s enthusiastic words on the Spanish “mattanza,” on how, through this ritual, one feels “purified and (...) able to enter unabashed into the presence of the very elder gods and they will make you welcome” (140), is immediately followed by a list of technical innovations, such as radar used to locate the schools of fish, factory ships, and huge nets similar to monsters, which could “swallow twelve jumbo jets in a single gulp” (140). The concept of modernity as sacrilege and deformity is restated towards the end of the book, when an international television troupe, after paying each member of the crew to stage a “fake mattanza” to be filmed and broadcast on television, interferes when the real ceremony is being performed:

At the first verse (of the ritual song) four helicopters appeared. Like apocalyptic beasts, first they hovered, then they circled the Chamber of Death. Cameramen leaned out the doors of two of them. The noise was deafening, that hateful whumping; the propellers were drowning out the song. The woman next to me joined me in giving them the Sicilian version of the finger: the Arm. Everyone on the vascello yelled and waved until the helicopters peeled off. (229-230)

Attilio Bolzoni reported (in *La Repubblica*, June 3, 2001), that this year the “mattanza” was cancelled: too many tourists, too large a business, too little tuna. But Maggio is not abandoning her “mission” as a writer. Recently she wrote: “I am leaving for Sicily and Naples tomorrow, and will be there for three months. My second book, *The Stone Boudoir, Travels through the Hidden Villages of Sicily* will be published in March 2002.”³

The Mediterranean Runs through Brooklyn is a series of portraits of Italian Americans emerging from the memory of the writer, while he outlines important episodes of his life from childhood to maturity. Through the writer’s remembrance, the geographical distance separating Italy from the US is annihilated and the two lands of Valerio’s life seem to overlap, so that the Mediterranean can run through Brooklyn, in the same way blood runs through his veins, molding his identity as an Italian American. His “Mediterranean” is made of mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts with large breasts, sacred matriarchal

figures who are the real pillars of the household. They support unbalanced husbands, sons, brothers, uncles looking for an identity, struggling between stereotypes (as a boy, Valerio's father "punched a classmate who made fun of his real name, Nunzio" - 21), and the burning desire to be completely accepted, embodied, for instance, by "Lucy," the blond American woman from Halifax that Valerio's father would have married if little Anthony had not been conceived with another "dark, stained" (13) Italian American.

In Valerio's book, the figure of "the mother" becomes an icon: the writer's uncles live "within five blocks of their mother. Each day they make a pilgrimage to her" (39). It is not by chance that the first chapter of the book is devoted to the author's mother, described as a "dutiful woman" (11), as "the first to awaken" (12) every day, as somebody completely absorbed into her "role" (her personal name is never revealed), as her "motto" seems to imply: "our individual life and differences matter little when compared to our duties" (11). After her husband's falling on his head and his subsequent retaining only a small portion of his consciousness, "she breathes life into him, creates a semblance of a life for him. She points him to where he must go; after breakfast she directs him to his office in the basement; at twelve o'clock she signals him to come up for lunch by giving him three buzzes, at one o'clock she directs him downstairs again" (22), thus giving him a new life, thus performing again her generative role as a woman. Valerio's mother can cook, "she would make pizza for the whole world" (47) for the sake of her husband, and she herself *becomes* ritual food, when her daughter is born:

I stopped crying when my sister was born long enough to watch my mother breast-feed her. The feeding was ceremonious; the bedroom was quiet as a church; neither my father nor I spoke. My mother sat in a chair at the entrance to her bedroom and gazed down the hallway, through the kitchen and into the parlor. (...) My mother's breasts were free. (29)

Later on in the same chapter devoted to Valerio's sister, the reader gathers that, growing up, the girl "inherit[s] [her] mother's breasts" (29) and that, when her own child is born (not by chance another *female*, a daughter), when she herself turns into the icon of a mother, she is begged by Valerio to breast-feed the baby, thus performing again and again the same ritual. The writer seems to push the discourse even further by unveiling a possible connection between the stream of milk flowing from his sister's generous breasts, the same blood running through their veins and his desire to take their mother back from the dead, to keep the family together, by sexually joining to his sister, who has replaced their mother in her matriarchal role: "I would like [my sister] to touch me now for I need her, the same blood runs through our veins, we must share the same view of the world. When her daughter was born, I begged her to breast-feed the child. Then I begged her to be the child's godfather" (30).

The perception of the Mediterranean as identified with feminine figures, especially with the mother, seems to be confirmed by the double mention of the actual Mediterranean Sea *only* in the very chapter dedicated to Valerio's mother. At first the writer informs

the reader that his mother “travels in order to gather all the tablecloths of the world” (13), and by so writing he strengthens the link between femininity and food (in another passage of the book, Valerio points out that the tablecloths had been inherited by his sister, after the matriarch’s death). Then, while her husband swims in the blue, clear Mediterranean, “she goes off in search of distant relatives, who may have an old ring, an ashtray, anything” (13). For her, the Mediterranean is not the pleasure of bathing in beautiful waters but the “duty” of a quest for her and her family’s roots, for traditional values she wants to preserve and transmit, for ancestral ties she does not want to sever. The second mention of the Mediterranean Sea underlines the clash between the American way of life, the tall buildings, the traffic, the chaos of New York City and a possible life in Italy, which both the mother and the writer seem to desire:

When my mother and I speak over the phone and a train passes, I ask, “Is a train passing?” We long for silence, for the elegance of a villa overlooking the Mediterranean. I think my mother enjoys her traveling. She has a refinement that is not obvious to the family, and this causes her pain. I’d stand on my toes at her kitchen window and look down at the reflections of the buildings on the wet street. (18)

As in Maggio’s *Mattanza*, in Valerio’s book one has the feeling that times are changing and that, one day, the Mediterranean will stop its flow through Brooklyn, thus signifying the fracture between Italian Americans and their land of origin, expressed through the death of the matriarch and the extinction of her creative, generative power often manifested through food. Towards the end of the memoir, we read that Nana Angelina has cancer and she is doomed to die: the writer’s question then is “After she dies, who will make the caponata?” (89). On one of the last Christmas Eves, when Valerio’s family is gathered around the table, set as usual, we notice that the table is divided according to the generation: “whoever ate fish was first generation. The second generation on down ate turkey. And then some of our cousins are marrying Irish and these also ate turkey. Soon, we will all be eating turkey” (81). In Valerio’s narrative, however, the power of memory proves to be stronger and the story ends with the writer’s will to remember his mother, his father, his roots, through other Italian American families that he will meet in his life, through the friends of his family’s and the friends of his family’s friends, all different from one another but, at the same time, all similar, like the waves of the Mediterranean Sea.

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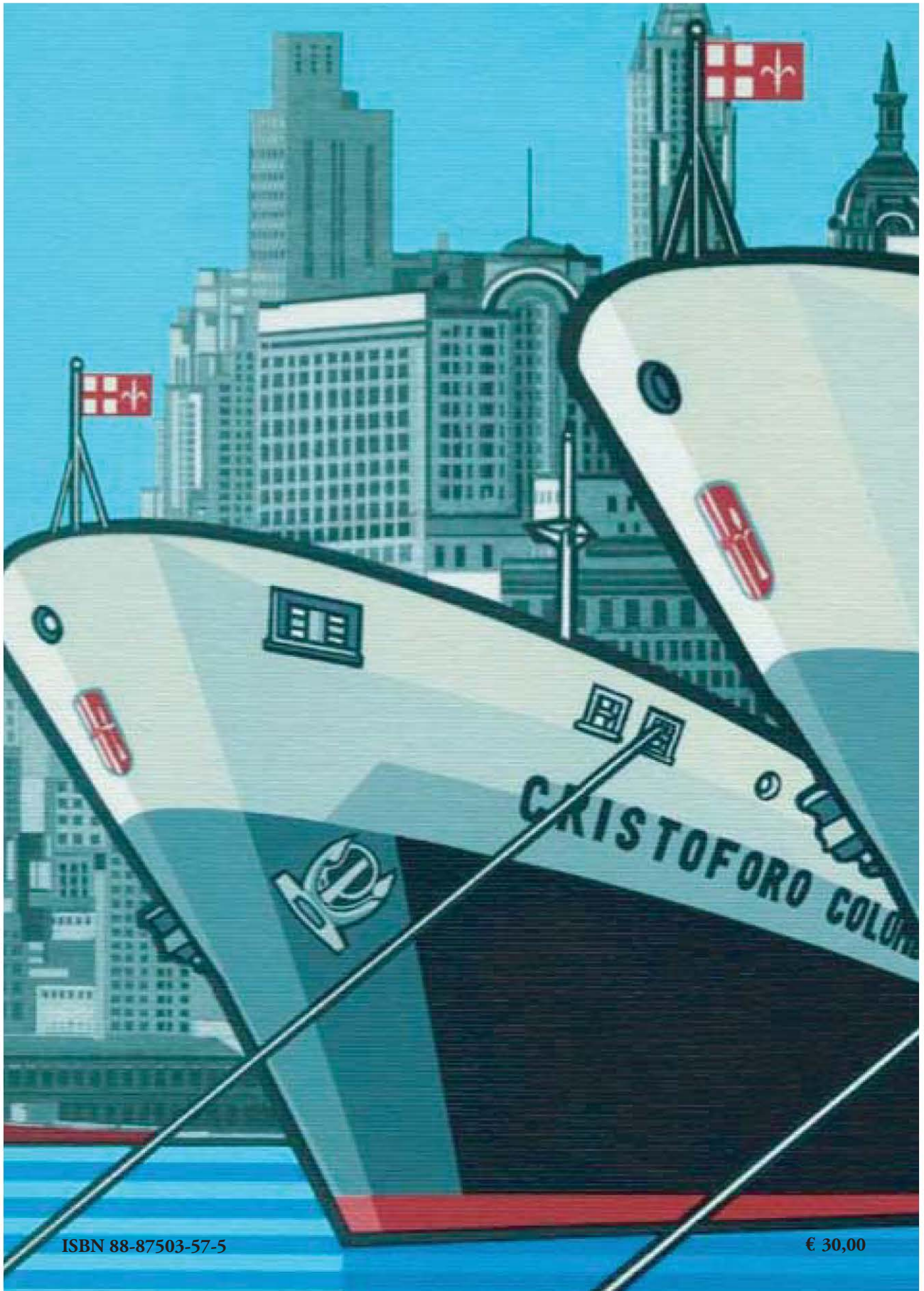
NOTES

1. Compare, for instance, with “Mediterranean,” a poem by Maria Maziotti Gillan (unpublished).
2. Personal correspondence (November 6, 2001).
3. Personal correspondence (November 8, 2001).

WORKSHOP TWO

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