

Nino Famà. *La stanza segreta*. Caltanissetta: Salvatore Sciascia, 2004. Pp. 192. ISBN 88-8241-185-0. Euro 15

When we approach works written in Italian in Canada, our initial perception of these efforts is somewhat affected by the reading experience of writings inspired by nostalgia or regret, often with a strong autobiographical connotation, that voice the innermost search for peace, meaning and reconciliation, if not truth, of those who experienced migration's displacement and dislocation. The disruption of immigration was so intense that, even after many years of rationalizing and reflecting over the positive as well as negative results of being an immigrant, those innermost feelings continue to search for an outlet.

In the variety and dissimilarity of literary results of the Italian literature of migration to Canada, the novel by Nino Famà comes as a valuable addition to the production of Italian writers in this land. A scholar who has been living in Canada for more than 40 years, is fluent in several languages and author of many academic studies, Famà has recently dedicated himself to writing creative works in his mother tongue inspired by his Sicilian home village. What makes his novel, *La stanza segreta*, particularly significant in the context of Italian literary writing in Canada is a narrative that goes beyond the limits of ethnic autobiography or literature of the immigrant experience to address themes and motifs common to Italian-Canadian literature as a whole, by employing sound narrative techniques that resonate with more than one literary tradition and enrich the local literary production in the Italian language with new atmospheres and quality.

The novel is centred on the character of a young, second-generation Italian-Canadian man, Nicky Nicoterra, who continues to be in a state of depression and desolation after the death of his grandfather, an Italian immigrant who had been his only personal harbour after his parents' separation many years earlier. Nicky wanders around in a state of confusion and disorientation. Neither his analyst nor his friends seem to be able to reach him at his inner core, wrapped, as he has himself, in layers of protective indifference and seemingly-careless detachment. Conversely, those layers do not allow him to get closer to his father or his girlfriend, focused as he is on his inner life and quest for peace. His social life revolves around work, university, friends, sex, and some drinks and drugs, without any passion or drive.

In his search for direction, Nicky starts transcribing the written and oral accounts his grandfather has left him and discovers the small history of his paternal family over several generations, from the Italian Unification to the post-World War II period, when his grandfather left for North America. His family's story brings images of an isolated village in the mountains, of the life of its community and its barren poverty and struggle for survival. After his father's sudden death, Nicky is convinced to take a trip to the land of his grandfather, but the experience is quite disappointing: nothing is left of the world described by his grandfather, and very little can still be traced. Emigration has erased his ancestors' human experience and their imprint from their original land. For Nicky, this is too much to bear.

There are several *topoi* in the novel that relate it to Italian-Canadian literature,

such as the contraposition of the Old World and the New, and their respective value systems, as in the case of family unity and the role of women. Other common themes are the relationships among generations, the death of family members as rites of passage, the discovery of one's roots and the return journey to the land of the fathers. Mostly, the younger generations' quest for meaning and unity and the desire to overcome inner struggles or oppositions in their life is what connects this novel to the production of many younger Italian-Canadian writers.

Of course, common themes and motifs do not necessarily mean similarity of style and narrative techniques, or literary outcomes, and this is where *La stanza segreta* can be considered a commendable addition to Italian literature in Canada. What truly distinguishes this work is its smooth narration, fluency of language and sagacious variety of narrative techniques, which confer on the fundamental nature of each time period and place, moment and experience a distinguishing light, texture and shade.

In its overall structure, the novel follows a circular movement, so common in many Italian-Canadian narratives, following Nicky's journey from his troubled inner-self to the world of his ancestors—so distant in time and place and experience—and back. Nicky's experiences are narrated in the first person at the beginning and end of the novel, which allows for an effective layering of intimate and social dynamics. Between these two parts set in the present, the transcription of the *Tolomesi* villagers' story by Nicky is inserted as the adaptation of his grandfather's storytelling. This meta-linguistic artifice of recording and re-elaborating the grandfather's narration in the grandson's own words allows the author to overcome inevitable hurdles originating from a linguistically realistic rendition of the elder's story so that metaphorically the narration lets the voices of the young and the elderly overlap and, in the end, blend into one consciousness. The voice of the grandfather becomes the voice of the grandchild and vice versa, in a rare moment of empathy and communion.

One could argue that this artifice might contribute to the uniformity of these two main voices; instead, variation in the overall narration is achieved through different stylistic contrapositions and juxtapositions. As an example, the story of the *Tolomesi* is written following a traditionally structured chronological order within a unity of space, while experiences and events affecting Nicky's intimate life are more fragmented and disparate, with a more open-ended structure. Nature and soil are among the main characters in the *re-construction* of *Toloma*, in a cyclical life dominated by the struggle for survival of an entire community. Instead, Nicky's effort to accept his existence is entirely his own and his wandering brings him to the ruins of a world which both in Canada and Italy has no future. Also, the magic realism used in the description of *Toloma's* tale, with legends and popular beliefs, is inevitably absent from Nicky's life, and simple Old World hope is replaced by unbearable New World anguish.

*La stanza segreta* is definitely a book that not only deserves to be read, but also demands attention as a noteworthy addition to both Italian-Canadian literature and Italian literature outside of Italy.

MONICA STELLIN  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*