

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Langscape: Language, Landscape, and Memory, the Origins of a Poetics

Mary di Michele

Concordia University

Abstract:

This essay is based on a series of prefatory remarks to a reading from my poetry at the *Mapping the Imagination: Literary Geography* conference held at the Università degli Studi di Salerno in March 2014. I selected these poems to read and comment on because they engage with the effects of landscape, language, and country on writing. These are recurring concerns in my poetry and they reflected on the mapping the imagination theme of this conference.

Keywords: landscape; language; memory; poetics.

Author contact: mary.dimichele@sympatico.ca

The landscape of a country is inscribed in literature and literature is inscribed in language; landscape and language are coeval, coterminous. The connection of language to landscape can be found in the etymology of the word, geography, from the Greek: *ge*, earth, and *graphia*, writing. Early on in my writing career, if it might be called that, it feels more like a vocation than a profession to me, I coined the word, *langscape*, a portmanteau word that brings the two fields together. It's a neologism I used at public readings of my poems from as early as 1976 in my first book, *Tree of August*, to explain something of how and why I was using Italian words in the English language text without translation, for example, *enigmatico*, a word that I used for the title of a poem about being torn between Canada and Italy in terms of desire and identity. I often placed Italian words in the lines of the English language verse I wrote and those words appeared

to me as concretions might within layers of sedimentary rock or soil, or as outcrops. Because the Italian words were not translated into English, they seemed to have the quiddity of rocks and things themselves. Forty years later, do I still use Italian words this way in my writing? An invitation to speak at Mapping the Imagination: Literary Geography, the conference held at the università degli studi di Salerno in March 2014, lead me to reconsider the effects of Italian language and landscape on my writing. Looking at my poetry over the years through this lens I have found that it has been and continues to be the source of recurring imagery in my writing.

I Mapping the Mirror

In the field of the book, there is *langscape*, a kind of language map of the imagination composed of the lexicon of a nation, a vocabulary that includes proper names for place, family, and historical figures. *Langscape* is a virtual plane that represents country and culture. If you are a writer born into a *langscape* you may take your language for granted, you may not even see literature in spatial terms, or ever question your ability to enter or to be represented there. The door is open. You recognize the place, it recognizes you.

Luminous Emergency is a poem from my sixth collection of poetry, published in 1990 by McClelland and Stewart, a major Canadian publisher. The poem, structured in ten parts, and framed by a rhetorical question, is a meditation on language, landscape, and identity. How do these things shape us? What is fixed, what is fluid in us?

They say that landscape and language,
the ampersand, are imprinted in our minds
in the same way geese
fix on the first moving sign as Mother,
the way some love takes root
like crabgrass in the strawberries,
much deeper, much hardier
than the plant that fruits.

I remember Italia of the praetutti,
of Ovid, of D'Annunzio, of Silone,
of Hemingway's soldier boy self
in A Farewell to Arms.

And what I knew from the start.

Original.

(*Luminous Emergencies* 1990, part I, Luminous Emergency: 85)

I looked for Italy, for any reference to it, in the English literature books I read as a way of connecting the two cultures that have shaped my mind and writing.

There is the literal landscape of your birth then there are the landscapes you traverse, those you inhabit or have inhabited, and those you may have entered as a stranger. Not as an explorer who names and maps a region for the 'first' time, but as a scribe of the imagination; seeking to find something of the original home in that newfound world.

My mother, brother, and I left Italy for the new world on a transatlantic ship. We landed in New York City, then took a train to Toronto. We settled there in an area of the city called South York. The names of the old world are found in the new, the York of New York City is an English place name for an American city. In this I find a useful parallel for the way I came to inscribe, or to nudge open a place in the *langscape* of English Canadian literature for my Italian experience.

II: Mapping Memory

Memories naturally mutate in time and those memories, composed in the language we call stories, when they are also translated, may feel to be not yours though they are about you. The way you come to remember an anecdote recounted in your family, and repeated over the years as if you recalled the experience rather than merely the story that has been told about you. And then there are the stories that you tell yourself and the world. Artful, their truth is greater than what happened.

Another level of memory and the imagination beyond conscious thought lies in the meta-language of the body, the way it remembers through 'pictures' imprinted in our minds: faces, hills, cobbled streets our feet may have wandered. You don't have a city map, but your feet remember and lead you seemingly by instinct where you have walked before. And poetry, like a memory viscerally triggered by sense perception, the smell of rosemary, the taste of a madeleine, recovers for you the village you left as a child decades ago. The following poem is from my second published collection of poems, based on the experience of returning for the first time in 1972 to the Italy I left as a child.

Benvenuto

The same chickens are scratching in the yard,
 the same light is making tracks across the hills,
 the same wind is beating its head against the stucco
 walls of the houses in the village,
 as evening settles into itself,
 the light pulling up its seat in the valley
 and tucking its legs under it.

Twenty years and my Canadian feet fed with prairie wheat

can still find their own way, can run ahead
 while my thoughts seem to resist and find
 the pomegranate, the fig and the olive
 trees of my grandmother's orchard, in the back of a house
 tucked into the pocket of a hill, leaning into it
 with the declining light. I stop under a pomegranate tree,
 a favourite retreat, under the ripening fruit,
 old dreams are pricking at the back of my mind.
 I tear one open to eat and it recognizes me
 with *benvenuto* in all its myriad, ruby eyes.

(*Stranger in You: Bread and Chocolate* 1995, Benvenuto: 6)

In the poem above, memory serves as a kind of internal map; the speaker finds her way through her grandmother's village she doesn't know she remembers; the place seems to be recorded more deeply in the body than in the mind. Because the mind is thinking in English now it's as if that causes some static or resistance, leads to a failure to believe in what her body already knows, what she knows in her bones: where to walk, which way to go.

If language is the way literature maps the imagination, it may be somewhat more like digital rather than classical cartography. Although Google Maps access the world through satellite images, they take us down to ground level where we walk; poetry, the language of poetry, works on that level, on the level of the street; you see your neighbourhood, you see your house, and you may, as I have, even see your neighbour walking his dog down the street, though you cannot stop and say hello on Google Earth. Perhaps a better analogy might be comparing poetry to the language of braille; it must be sensed, it must touch and be touched on the level of experience. But the trope of language as a kind of map is lost there, perhaps a topographic map that is layered and textured is a better analogy for the way language maps the world and the imagination through literature. As there can be no perfect translation, there can be no perfect representation of the world in maps or in language that is not the world itself.

III: Emigrants

Perhaps the central event in my life that turned me towards poetry was immigration. But I know that not all immigrants become poets! Is there some inciting incident that leads someone into writing? For some it might be the need for self-expression, for me that has always meant going through and beyond the self to find a place in the larger world, in society, in history, for some others it might be the need for containment, the need to understand life experience, as Joan Didion writes on the first page of *The White Album*, her 1979 collection of essays: 'We tell ourselves stories in order to live.' There's not one kind of reason, one kind of inciting incident that can lead to a writing life. But for some

immigrant writers it might be the loss of their native language, culture, and identity. For me I think that it was such a loss, but one that is also a gain. Immigration from Italy for a life in Canada triggered more than nostalgia for my native land, it was a loss that also produced a sense of estrangement from my birth place, from my past there.

An immigrant can become mired in nostalgia, resist changing in any way; but that is not the creative response.

Sentimental music is being sucked up
 from the stereo system in the basement
 like a sweet gaseous soda through a straw.
 He listens to an Italian tenor sing 'Mimosa'
 and savours a bittersweet banishment, a ginger
 nostalgia, Canada Dry fizzing in his glass.

(*Mimosa*, I. Prologue, from *Stranger in You*: 10)

Which is the greater pain, that of nostalgia or estrangement? I believe it to be estrangement because the grief or longing in nostalgia also offers a level of comfort, even of consolation. While we long for what's missing we still imagine that it can be found again. But if estrangement is more painful, I believe that it is also the creatively richer response for the writer.

My first name, Maria Luisa, was changed to Mary Louise by a teacher who found the Italian too difficult to pronounce. My surname was pronounced as if it were French. So I had two names, Mary at school, and Marisa (the abbreviated form of my Italian name) at home. Two languages, two kinds of experience, different and visceral (yes language is visceral too!) ways of being in the world, and it was not until I found a way to make these two languages speak to one another that I found my voice as a poet.

IV: Rich and Strange

My first memorable experience of poetry was reading John Keats's, "*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*." The French title of the English poem, and the muse who enthralls the knight 'speak' in another language: *And sure in language strange she said*. Seeing French in the English language poem seemed to create a depth of field effect. I liked the way the two languages rubbed against each other, each one making the other strange. The Russian Formalist, Viktor Shlovsky, theorized that defamiliarization is what operates in a work of art and makes the seeing of poets original. He described defamiliarization as essential to art in its capacity to counter the deadening effect of habit and convention on perception. Even earlier historically, the Romantic English poet, Shelley, wrote something very similar: 'and make familiar objects be as if they are not familiar...' in his essay, *A Defence of Poetry*. Before cognitive theory, Shelley understood this. What constituted a double estrangement from my native as well as adopted language opened up a protean *langscape*.

That strangeness and the music of different languages is what hooked me on poetry, a form of writing that is often as interested in the sound of words themselves as in what they may mean. When I first used a few Italian words in my English language poems, they felt like touchstones. They worked to texture differently the English *langscape*; within the English text an Italian word for me (and hopefully for English readers) had the beauty, the density, and resonance of outcrops on a geological plane.

In the field farfalla
 as even in some living poet's journal
 going from flower to flower
 not for clover but for red poppy.
 their wings silk-screened and colour
 their music of interval.

The bee is a golden earring,
 a stinger in the jewellery,
 it's la vespa for a country
 no longer mine,

but the stranger's
 in me.

(*Luminous Emergencies* 1990, part VI, Luminous Emergency: 90)

You don't need to know the Italian words: 'farfalla' and 'vespa' to understand these stanzas. Context and the descriptive language around them shows the reader what they are or mean. But the initial resistance or strangeness that the Italian words present within the English text make them seem more palpable; in an oral reading of the poem, they seem pure music.

So I found my way into poetry, and a distinctive voice, in the interstices between words, in the space between languages, that shifting and expanding plane where only literal translation, the exact replication of the word from the source to the target language, will do.

I sought more ways to bring Italian into my English writing and not potentially lose English language readers; I began to search for those words that some call 'horizon' words, that is, words that have been imported directly from Italian, and are used unchanged in English.

Storm against the glass whites out the window through which a short time ago the billboard, HYUNDAI, illuminated figures for time and temperature. Now I imagine that the pillars holding up the Gardiner are more than ever like the columns of the ruined

temple of Apollo. Snowblind, I must imagine. The cable's down
and the TV screen broadcasts snow, light-and-dark spots fever-
ishly expiring in the world where we fail

to find each other. How can there be only one English word
for the infinite
variety in the crystallization of water vapour?
Composite, yet thin, the word, snowflake,
syllables both soft and brittle. That so much beauty could

kill with barely a syllable. Barely a mono-
syllable, a half-beat led that flaccid
yet affective muscle, that conductor with the red baton.

Love which has none of its true
tempo: largo, presto, always
crescendo.

(*Luminous Emergencies* 1990, *The Many Words for Snow*: 63)

These Italian horizon words do not seem pure music so much as they are the names for movements in music that any musician certainly would recognize, they have both meaning and sound.

V: Influences from Italian Poetry

Before my sixth birthday I left the mountains of the Abruzzo for the relatively flat landscape of Toronto, I left Italian (really the Abruzzese dialect, but that's another story) for the English language. Perhaps not surprisingly the Italian poet who first influenced me drew me in with his strong sense of people and place. *Queste dure colline che han fatto il mio corpo*, (Cesare Pavese, "Incontro," *Poesie*: 25) or to translate this line into English: "These hard hills that have built my body." That is a line from Pavese's collection, *Lavorare Stanca* or *Hard Labour*. I first encountered his poetry through William Arrowsmith's translation. Pavese's collection of long lined and heavily narrative poems about ordinary people influenced the cycle of poems about family and immigration, *Bread and Chocolate*, which I wrote as a young woman. I have been told that among Italians, Pavese is not considered a major poet, he is known and respected primarily as a novelist, yet English language poets often refer to him to the surprise of Italians. But then Pavese himself translated works from English, and so the influence might be called symbiotic. It makes sense to me that he should be my first conscious influence from Italian poetry.

And he continues to be an influence; it is evident to me even in a very recent poem with ostensibly little beyond a title in Italian and its allusion to Dante. The poem is a glosa, a Spanish form popularized by P.K. Page in Canada:

La Vita Vecchia

The night's smell of horses
 is another way.
 Let me tell you again what I think.
 The night writes the vita of duckweed
 and lodges it in the blue codex below the ground.

Tim Lilburn, "This"

She has stopped at this spot before on the land
 that owns her. Car left by the side of the road, engine running,
 she moves in the glow of headlights, orange yellow
 like that gibbous moon overhead. She stumbles on the gravel.
 That gargling sound is a creek, some ragged shadows, bushes,
 rustle with wind, while, perfectly oblong, the baled hay
 lies wrapped in silence in the open field. Starlit, moonlit,
 in another dimension called time she is a girl in the house
 she dreamed of leaving for the emerald city, now she prays
 the night's smell of horses
 is another way

to trade in new dreams for old. To return. To take back her name.
 When she drove through town she saw only strangers.
 She knew no one, no one knew her, though once upon a time
 she was born in the county. Was bused to school
 with the Browns, the Joneses, the Mitchells, and in her final year,
 crowned queen of the prom, and proclaimed, oh so pretty in pink,
 they all said it, her girlfriends, her boyfriend. Where
 are they to be found today? Still haunting the bar on the outskirts
 of town where the underage could always sneak a drink?
Let me tell you again what I think

about her coming back or trying to: it's too little, too late,
 she should give up on it, that's what everybody says, but now
 that her father's dead and the farm is sold, she wants something
 that's gone. She heads back towards the car, making

her way through a pasture, with nettles and thistles thrashing
 her legs, every step a flagellation, exacting penitence.
 She is the seed fallen on rocky ground. She is the prodigal
 who stayed away and will have no share in the harvest.
 That's the truth, find it in the good book, all you'll ever need.
The night writes the vita of duckweed.

La Vita Nuova is just some poor guy's story
 about first love, best love, that she read in college. But this
 flat land, these sad plots, with their rough hewn tablets,
 the commandments of the father scorched on,
 these once fertile fields, all she knew, all she'll truly know
 of herself is grit blowing into her eyes, the topsoil, unbound.
 But— she is still her father's daughter. She belongs here
 and like Jesus in some movie she pulls a thumping, thorn-crowned
 heart out of her chest, without making a sound,
 and lodges it in the blue codex below the ground.

(Bicycle Thieves: 22-3)

This poem may be read on one level as symbolic, the move from country to city paralleling the migration from the old world to the new. It is impossible to go back to yesterday, to echo Lewis Carroll's Alice, you were a different person then.

VI: Linguistic Emigration or Etymology, The Gift of the Dictionary

Words are like topographical maps as they trace more than the surface of meaning. Each word is like an archaeological site, its roots and old meanings like cities buried beneath contemporary usage. So another way of finding connections in English with my Italian heritage was through etymology. *La Benvenuta* is a kind of travelogue poem; it comes out of a journey I made to Duino, a pilgrimage to sources, to poetic influences, in a place where languages and cultures merge; in the Italian village where the great German poet, Rilke, composed, *The Duino Elegies*.

Cemetery from koimeterion, the Greek for sleeping chamber, from koiman, to put to sleep, related to the Latin, cunae, cradle.

*There are cities built on cities in each word. There are sites
 archaeological in each mote, in each compound,
 in the suffix as in the pre
 fix. Re*

*pose, I sleep, you sleep, she, we all
 in time slip into that under*

world.

*You slept, I slept, together we did
not sleep ever.*

(*Debriefing the Rose*, from “*La Benvenuta*”: 38)

The word ‘cemetery’ traversed centuries from Greek and Latin, the languages of two ancient empires, to be current again in modern English.

VII: Found in Translation

Completely educated in English, but living in a family where my mother only spoke Italian, or rather the Abruzzese dialect, there was a disconnect between emotion, the language of my first experiences, expressed in and through the Italian tongue (that is English’s more concrete, non-Latinate word for language) and the English language of my Canadian life and studies.

That my tongue has been un-
Mothered. That my tongue has thickened
with English consonants and diphthongs,
mustard and horseradish. That burning.
That burdened.

While on my lips Italian feels
more free, like wind in the trees
when the window’s sealed shut
and you’re trapped inside a solitary
game of Scrabble.

No—English is not so cosy!
It’s hypothermic. It’s haunted
by ghost letters & gnostic,

(*Luminous Emergencies* 1990, *Luminous Emergency*, part X: 94)

My university education too was in English language and literature, but my personal reading of Italian poetry lead me to discover something of what I had lost and bring these two hemispheres of my affective and intellectual life together. I remember the first time I read a poem by Pasolini in William Weaver’s translation. The book, Lind’s *Twentieth Century Italian Poetry*, was subtitled ‘a bilingual anthology,’ so the original Italian text was beside the English translation, and that opened the poem completely for me.

Reading Pasolini's poem, *Apennine*, excited and moved me. I recognized the mountains: "Theatre of hilltops, drunken, lime-sown/silent..." and the people he described in that poem and other poems like *Le ceneri di Gramsci*. Here are a few stanzas from *The Ashes of Gramsci* that I translated into English for myself:

It's not May's, no this air's impure
and belongs in a stranger's garden
in dim light made dimmer still or austere

as in brightening the sky will also sometimes darken,
blind us with its shiny snail's trail on the ochre roofs,
on those terraces which, in an immense semicircle, span

out and veil the river Tiber, its curves,
and block the view, the blue of Latium's mountains.
Inside the walls, find mortal peace, destinies to disturb

because like May life is playing at being autumn
and for us, it's the end of an era, of the naïve
struggle to make everything right under the sun.

hey, you, young man, when did you believe
that to stumble was as good as to walk—
in that Italian May, when you were really alive

Pasolini's poetry inspired me and a few years ago I returned to it. There's a myth that I find resonant, the story of Antaeus who found his strength as long as he could touch earth. Italy is my earth, I return to it and always find creative renewal there.

In reading and researching Pasolini's writing, I became interested in his early poetry written in dialect, and the way that he chose and responded to the language and landscape of his mother's ancestral home in Friuli. I made a pilgrimage to Casarsa in 2009 and afterwards wrote a book, a series of poems, about Pasolini, his life as a young poet. The pink house of this prose poem is his mother's family home in Casarsa; it is now a museum and I visited it during my stay. Home again in Montreal it came back to me in a very vivid dream and the poem seemed to write itself:

The Pink House 1942

The house was painted pink and stood on a street leading from the railway station to the main square, one of two main streets. This square was the village's centre, if a village of eight houses can be said to have a centre. The village was called Casarsa della Delizia. Someone in the distant past and during a surely more prosperous

time must have named it that, imagining the place to be a Garden of Eden. The land was flat and the soil was rich. The mountains in the distance to the north and east were the blue gates of this paradise. Rivers made the land fertile. The farmers grew grapes, and row on row of their golden green and trellised vines studded the landscape. They made grappa here, that distilled and potent essence of the grape. It was the only business, and may have given the place the “delicious” part of its name. Casarsa was an ancient village and had survived many invasions, including the Turks who had burnt down all the original houses. Some thought that the fascists were the modern Turks; others were fascists themselves. Most of those who resisted took to the hills and joined the partisans. Those who stayed, if they resisted, resisted like water, when the Nazis stormed through them, they flowed around them.

(*The Flower of Youth* 2011, *The Pink House* 1942: 22)

This brief prose poem renders the langscape through description of the countryside along with its history of settlement and colonization. Even the name of the place is layered with meaning and history.

VIII: The Montreal Book of the Dead

The Montreal Book of the Dead is the title of a poem that I chose as the overall title for a small chapbook recently published by Vallum, a Montreal literary publisher. (It is now part of a book called *Bicycle Thieves*, published in April 2017.) The title is grounded in place, as are the poems, but it’s a shifting and migratory sense of place as the speaker in another poem in the collection, “The Mountain After Klein,” illustrates. She laments in it that what she knows of Montreal from its representations through imaginative works of art, principally the poetry of A.M. Klein and the films of Denys Arcand, is inadequate, limited:

I knew the mountain as a dark stage
 for the shining white cross in celluloid, with the reel
 moon by its side, hovering, ageless,
 in the cobalt air of Arcand’s Jésus of Montréal.
 I did not truly know it at all,
 settling for the patina of the movie poster.

(*Bicycle Thieves* 2017, from *The Mountain After Klein*: 5)

Ironically, the poem is in part a pastiche and homage to the modernist Montreal poet A.M. Klein, referencing his poem, *The Mountain*. The following is from the fifth stanza of the poem:

This November day, lazing
 in amazing sunshine, thinking about “The Mountain,”
 and throw gravel against the bronze tits of Justice,
 as I sit in Place Norman Bethune, by the sandblasted
 figure of a man who spat on injustice.
 He stands alone and unadorned, still striving forward
 for the good of mankind. Such gravitas –
 except that someone has put dark glasses on him.

(*Bicycle Thieves* 2017, from *The Mountain After Klein*: 6)

The poet identifies with the Bethune statue (situated in a square near the university); in a sense both have been imported or transposed to Montreal from Ontario, via China for Bethune, and via Italy then Toronto for the speaker.

I close the chapbook collection (and my forthcoming book) with a poem called *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled* (originally published in *La freccia e il cerchio*) where the speaker is caught in the no man’s land of a deserted station between the Canadian and American border.

Somewhere I Have Never Travelled

I arrived at the Canada-US border.
 Flags fluttered though there was no wind.
 Mine was the sole vehicle at the crossing.

I pulled up to a booth. Nobody
 was there. I got out of my car
 to peer behind the wicket: darkness

except for the blinking light of a phone.
 I had my Canadian passport ready
 declaring my Italian birth. The photo

didn’t look like me. It felt strange to be
 neither here nor there, neither coming
 nor going. I arrived at the US-Canada border,

flags the only things moving.
 The sun was low but I cast no shadow.

(*Bicycle Thieves* 2017: 79)

There are no maps without borders. Borders are a kind of liminal space between countries, cultures, languages; they must be crossed. In this poem, as in a Kafkaesque dream, the poet is stopped, caught in between Canada and the U.S.A. She has a passport but even that seems questionable. The picture doesn't look like her. Her Canadian citizenship is qualified, compromised by her birth in another country.

The place of poetry is the imagination, a hub for border crossings of all kinds. Though the speaker is caught between countries, she resides in the *langscape* of the poem, in poetry that maps not only where we walk and live but who we are and the languages we speak and dream in.

Notes

¹ I first formally used this term in an essay published in 1991: 'Notes towards Reconstructing Orpheus: The Language of Desire.' The same neologism was used by Gaile MacGregor (1985) *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Langscape* but was not known to me.

Works Cited

- Didion, Joan (1979) *The White Album*. United States: Simon & Schuster.
- di Michele, M. (1976) *Tree of August*. Toronto: Three Tress Press
- di Michele, M. (1990) *Luminous Emergencies*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- di Michele, M. (1991) 'Notes towards Reconstructing Orpheus: The Language of Desire.' *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 43, pp. 14-22.
- di Michele, Mary (1998) *Debriefing the Rose*. Toronto: House of Anansi.
- di Michele, M. (1995) *Stranger in You, Poems Selected and New*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- di Michele, M. (2011) *The Flower of Youth: Pier Paolo Pasolini Poems*. Toronto: ECW.
- di Michele, M. (2014) *The Montreal Book of the Dead*. Montreal: Vallum.
- di Michele, M. (2017) *Bicycle Thieves*. Toronto: ECW.
- Lind, L.R. ed. (1974) *Twentieth Century Italian Poetry*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- MacGregor, G. (1985) *The Wacousta Syndrome: Explorations in the Canadian Langscape*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Pavese, C. (1974) *Poesie*. Torino: Einaudi Editore.