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Narrating the Homeland: The Importance of Places in Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints*

Abstract

The article aims to give an example of multicultural writers' recent interest in their respective homelands. In Nino Ricci's *Lives of the Saints* (1990), the main character, Vittorio Innocente, remembers his daily experiences back in Italy from the point-of-view of a 7-year old boy. In the process of remembering he selects certain places that have meant a lot in his identity formation. The paper focuses on the idiosyncratic nature of these particular places by analyzing the special features of the physical locations that have gained importance in the process of remembering. The work will point out the interrelatedness of time and place in the novel.

Résumé

L'article a pour but démontrer l'intérêt particulier des auteurs multiculturels à l'égard de leur pays natal à la base du roman de Nino Ricci *Lives of the Saints* (1990). Le protagoniste du roman, Vittorio Innocente, se souvient de sa vie quotidienne italienne du point de vue d'un garçon de sept ans. Pour le faire, il choisit des endroits spécifiques ayant un rôle déterminant dans la construction de son identité. L'article concentre l'attention sur la représentation de ces éléments tout en mettant en évidence des rapports temporel et spatial dans le texte.

Nino Ricci's award-winning novel *Lives of the Saints* (1990) (Governor General's Award among many others), a novel that has been translated into several languages, has already been approached and analyzed in many different ways. My intention is to focus on the importance of the various places that are depicted in the work. I would like to rely on David Staines' idea that the question raised by Northrop Frye in the "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* (1965) "Where is here?" has been replaced by "Where is there?" (27). More and more writers' interest lie in their past, in their homeland. As Jim Zucchero also notes: "If the one great question that America asks of every newcomer is 'What will you do with your future?' Canada adds to it the more difficult ones, 'What will you do with your past? How much will you abandon everything that made you what you are and join in a sea of other pasts from Somalia, Barbados and South Africa?'" (266).

In the novel we are viewing Valle del Sole, a fictional, isolated, Italian village in the Apennines through the eyes of the seven-year-old Vittorio Innocente. The novel also takes place

in the neighbouring village Rocca Secca. The map of geographical locations is really large, and provides a system of discourse in the novel. I would like to quote the author at length on this matter:

There is a Rocca Secca that exists, but I discovered that only after writing the novel. The Rocca Secca of the novel is in a different location than the actual one. I believe the actual one is in Campania [...] I could be wrong, while my novel is set in the region of Molise. My Rocca Secca is based on a town called Agnone.

Similarly, Valle del Sole apparently exists, or so I have been told by some Italians, though I have never been able to locate it on the map. My own Valle del Sole is based on my mother's village near Canale (which is actually a "frazione" of Agnone, though some miles distant from it.) Villa Canale, for some reason was nicknamed Valle del Sole. When my oldest brother visited the town in 1967, he and my cousins posted a sign at the entrance to the village that read "Bienvenu alla valle del sole." The nickname stuck in my head, and seemed right for my fictional village.

Colle di Papa is the name of an actual hill outside Villa Canale, though most of the names used in the countryside are not official ones. They were just developed through oral tradition as a means of keeping track of the landscape and of remembering where your fields were. Every hill and valley and ravine and curve of road had a name, though I'm not sure you would find them on any map. ("Request" 1).

The notion of space and place has been discussed extensively (Bachelard, Lefebvre, Soja etc.); this time I shall restrict myself to one particular differentiating factor between the two, that is space and place, using Yi-Fu-Tuan's theory, which states: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with *value*" (6). (emphasis added) The places among which our narrator keeps moving are filled with fear with no exception. The reader gets to know these two villages in a retrospective narrative where two voices are used in parallel: "the narrator as a voice, an older voice (as opposed to the narrator as character) [...]" (Dvorak 105). Here the space is both psychological and psychic that occupies the narrator's mind, and this space is filled with certain places the features of which the narrator remembers. Edward C. Casey calls our attention to the fact that often we remember features of places "which [are] always definite" (188).

The harshness of the landscape surrounding the village is emphasized right on in the second paragraph of the novel:

Valle del Sole--which was not in a valley at all, but perched on the north face of Colle di Papa about three thousand feet above the valley floor--had no culinary specialties, no holy sites, no ancient ruins; forgotten and unsung, it was one of a hundred villages just like it flung across the Italian Apennines like *scattered stones*. (7) (emphasis added)

The village is located among the rocky hillsides where people "enjoy" poverty and a traditional way of life. But it is also the "land of the marvelous, the magical, the miraculous" (Dvorak 109). Ricci he, himself has been in the village on which the novel is based but he is a second generation immigrant born in Canada; the novel is thus semi-autobiographical. Tuan empha-



sizes: “They [places] need not, of course, be personal possessions. We can try to reconstruct our past with brief visits to our old neighbourhood or the birthplace of our parents” (187).

He describes wonderfully this part of the world in his essay “Home of the Saints”, too. Ricci attributes a great importance to places; he goes as far as saying that “there is a meaning system in place” in his novel (“A Big Canvas” 12).

From now on, I shall concentrate on the significant places one by one as they occur in the novel. In his magic narrative where Catholicism, myth, superstition, and folklore live side by side the first incident that really gives a thrust to the following ones happens in a *stable*. This is where Vittorio’s mother, Cristina, commits adultery with a mysterious man and gets pregnant at the time when her husband, Mario, left for America. She is bitten by a snake in the stable. Snakes have specific meanings in this part of the world where pagan beliefs play as important a role as Christianity. Zuchereo remarks, “the stable, traditional scene of nativity becomes the symbol of adultery” (259). Cristina is bitten by a green snake that does not necessarily bring misfortune but still is a bad omen. The stable becomes a place to be worried about both for Vittorio and his mother. Casey suggests:

Memory of place implaces us and thus empowers us: gives us the space to be precisely because we have been in so many memorable places, enjoyed intimacy in them, know such intimacy in them, known such *pain* there as well. (215) (emphasis added)

In Michel Foucault’s terminology the stable would be an example of “crisis heterotopias”: “[these] are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live in a state of crisis [...]” (24). For Cristina the stable is a place for joy but the consequences of that joy result in pain for her and for her son, too. Vittorio and his father find her in the stable at another time, when she is bleeding in her early pregnancy. After each case she is taken to hospital in the nearby village Rocca Secca. First she is driven there because her ankle starts to swell; the snake poisoned her. She is cured but the swelling in her womb becomes more and more visible later on when she is an expectant mother. The sinful woman is taken care of at a place that one cannot forget; it is depressing both physically and emotionally.

The hospital in Rocca Secca was on the outskirts of town, a high-walled medieval building that had been an orphanage before the second war. We entered through massive front doors into a large reception room filled with whispers and moans, people everywhere, leaning against walls, sitting on the floor, shuffling around the room like ghosts—hard-featured peasants, mainly some dressed awkwardly in Sunday suits but many still in their dirty working clothes, nursing bandaged limbs or internal ailments that showed themselves in their low moans and pale skin. (22)

The description continues; we get a real sense of the place from different perceptions through which we acquire a real feeling of the hospital as a self-contained world in itself. Cristina’s father is also taken to hospital with a fractured hip. By the time this happens the reader has become fully familiar with the physical features of the building and the mental space the patients exist in.

According to Zucchero *In Lives of the Saints* “an unmistakable sense of the character of the place and the mindset of its inhabitants” can be observed (255). (emphasis added) This truly holds true for the very house where Vittorio, his mother and grandfather live. Ricci remembers that he had an obsession for drawing houses when he was a child, he “had a notion of houseiness” (“Publishers” 1). In the Innocentes’ dwelling the closed doors between the rooms separate the members of the family. It is an alien place; it is basically only the kitchen where they meet on which either heavy silence falls or is loud from the sharp quarreling between Cristina and her father who cannot forgive her for her pregnancy. Sunshine seems to avoid this place, and it does not invite too many visitors either; occasionally two women appear out of curiosity, whose appearance only add to the already existing stark ambiance inside. The tense atmosphere filters through the walls. The fireplace seems to be important because there Cristina could burn the letters that her husband sends her from Canada from time to time. Ironically enough, the fireplace is most often associated with warmth and intimacy. This is how Vittorio feels when he moves to his own room, which “had no history” (38) since nobody lived there for a long time .

My new mattress had replaced an old straw one, a remnant of my mother’s childhood, bug-infested and smelling of mould, on a crooked wooden frame that held up planks of splintered wood for support in lieu of springs; but the frame was too big for the mattress and stuck out a foot on either side of it, making my sheets and blankets to stick out like wings. (37)

A warm interpersonal relationship exists between Vittorio and his mother but in kind of a hidden manner. Vittorio and his grandfather are also somewhat close but in their own private way. One is not supposed to show intimate feelings here. The house has a significant role to play in our identity formation as Gaston Bachelard points it out in details. This is where day-dreaming starts that we take with us to other places. (3-7)

Vittorio spends much of his time at *school*. In contrast with the house it is described more as a lived place generating different kinds of feelings in him. He has multiple affiliations with this educational and religious institution. He likes *la maestra* basically for the way she teaches religion and the way she applies *Lives of the Saints* in her classes. But he, together with his fellow classmates, is afraid of Father Nick, who checks upon the students’ knowledge of the Catechism, and who does not spare the rod if he thinks that is the best for the youngsters. When it becomes known for everybody in the school that Vittorio’s mother was with child whose father was unknown he found himself in the centre of unimaginable cruelty coming from the other kids. Having been made fun of and badly beaten up at school by the other children *la maestra* allows him to stay there, so he did not have to leave together with the others. He helps her sweep the floor and she reads to him from *Lives of the Saints*. These occasions raise profound emotions in him; the school is no longer a place to be afraid of but also a sacred hide-out, an intimate place.

Another hide-out are the *pastures* on the mountainside where Vittorio meets his friend, Fabrizio, in secret. The hypocrite villagers do not allow their children to be friends with Vittorio because of his mother’s disgrace. These people are supposedly strong believers of mores, morals and propriety. The hillsides where Fabrizio grazes his father’s goats and sheep trans-



form into pastoral scenes for their friendship and a lurking hole for them to smoke cigarettes. Later, however, this is the very spot where Fabrizio's schoolmates torture him in a most painful and obscene way. Fabrizio catches sight of them and it is him, who saves Vittorio for which Fabrizio's father punishes him by sending him away from the village.

Vittorio regularly visits the strange *church* that has no organs with his grandfather even when her mother refuses to go with them. Seats are reserved there for them in the first pew because of the grandfather's position as ex-mayor of the village. In the dwellers' view, they should also carry the burden of Cristina's shame, therefore church going is layered with different meanings for them. They try to leave after mass as soon as possible and with quick steps in order not to meet the disapproving looks on people's faces. Thus the church is not only a comforting spiritual place for them but one of frustration as well.

For the grandfather the place to escape to is Di Lucci's *bar* situated in the centre of the village.

Antonio Di Lucci's bar stood at the point where the big S cut by via San Giusppe widened into the village square, tucked back against the embankment that the church and the school sat on. (92)

This spot is the gathering place for the inhabitants but it is not always crowded, therefore it can serve as a peaceful location for the grandfather to ponder upon his life and the world in general.

The *market place* in Rocca Secca where Vittorio is taken by his mother on his birthday, is full of life, happy crowds bustle about while cracking jokes. In comparison Valle del Sole is a rather miserable and desolate place indeed. But Vittorio cannot fully enjoy his trip because he overhears a surreptitious conversation between his mother and a man that involves references to his mother's ignominious affair. Unfortunately, this place is again one that would fill his heart with topophobia.

Places both in Valle de Sole and Rocca Secca become internalized and heighten people's awareness of something that is better to flee from. People started to move to the New World decades earlier; in Vittorio's family it was his great-grandfather, who sought for fortune in America. The early settlers left these places behind for financial reasons.

America. How many dreams and fears and contradictions were tied up in that single word, a word which conjured up a world, like a name uttered at the dawn of creation, even while it broke another, the one on village and home and family. (160)

Cristina, however, decides to find the "Sun Parlour" in Canada for other reasons. She is a very proud, strong and defiant woman, the Italian Hester Prynne; so when she gets a letter from her husband that he is waiting for her despite the fact that someone informed him about her pregnancy she accepts his offer. Vittorio thinks, "The inevitable happened – someone had poured some poison in my father's ears" (152). The day before their departure some people gathered in their house which had always been ignored by the villagers. Cristina is irritable and irritated at the same time, she cannot control her emotions at all. She shouts and blames them for their "stupid rules and superstitions" adding that they could not "hang" her and wish

her “dead”. She claims to know how to make a “choice” and what “freedom” means wishing that God wiped that *town* off the face of the earth. (184) (emphasis added) They leave Valle del Sole because it is guided and controlled by fake beliefs that penetrate its places, and there is no place to hide.

The second and much shorter part of the novel starts in Chapter XXVI when Vittorio together with his mother board the *ship* going to Halifax. According to Foucault: “The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations without boats, *dreams dry up*, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates” (27) (emphasis added) The ship is a transit place for them, a bridge between the old and the new worlds between the past and the future; a place for dreaming indeed. They have an individualized travel experience. Because Cristina expects a child they can have their own cabin, they don’t have to be part of larger crowds of people. Their *cabin* despite or because of its very small size immediately becomes a shared place for them; here they appreciate and enjoy their cozy isolation. When they are on the different *decks* that are communal places, Cristina feels free and liberated not imprisoned any more, she makes friends very easily. Some people are invited to the captain’s room, which is a luxurious place by contrast of other parts of the ship. There Cristina is released from constraints she has lived together with; she becomes an emancipated woman.

But the joy is broken because Cristina delivers the baby before time. She gives birth to her baby in the course of a violent storm. The mother dies because of the extreme conditions and excessive bleeding. Vittorio falls into a shock but, he together with his new-born sister, is met by his father on the other side of the ocean. What awaits him there is discussed in the second (*In A Glass House*, 1994) and third (*Where She Has Gone*, 1997) parts of the trilogy.

According to Edward Relph:

They [places] are important sources of individual and communal identity, and are often profound centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties. Indeed our relationship with places are just as necessary, varied, and perhaps sometimes just as *unpleasant*, as our relationship with other people. (141) (emphasis added)

Lives of the Saints, a place-dominated narrative, certainly demonstrates that places we live in and are surrounded by are very important in our identity formation. Vittorio Innocente (by implication an innocent and would-be victorious young man) remembers his childhood in spatial terms: the two important villages, the valleys, the stable, the house in which he was brought up, the school, the pastures, the market place, the hospital, the church, the bar etc. He meanders among ranges of experiences and feelings: topophilia and topophobia. Vittorio Innocente can as an adult provide us with a clear sense of the places where he basically experienced fear and suffered from the pressures in his life as a child. Various locations had idiosyncratic meanings for him that had stayed with him even to his adulthood. His way of remembering is a process where places, be it private or public, play a crucial, if not the most important role.

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