

Nostos, Nostalgia and Italian Migration

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Abstract: The Italian immigrant experience in North America is discussed in relation to the concepts of *nostos* and nostalgia. The first term, normally referring to the return home from a sea voyage, is discussed comparing the foundational account of *nostos*, the *Odyssey*, with the early sojourn phase of Italian migration. By comparison, nostalgia, which can take the form either of homesickness or a longing for the past, is found in the permanent settlement phase, wherein the sense of homesickness predominates pre-World War II while that of longing for the past best defines the post-war period.

Keywords: *nostos*, nostalgia, the *Odyssey*, Italian migration, sojourners, pre-War immigration.

Contours of Italian Migration

Large-scale Italian migration to North America was a major component of the mass movement which occurred from Europe to the New World between 1880 and 1920. However, this migration stood apart from other national flows by the high proportion of newcomers who were temporary migrants rather than permanent immigrants, such as Northern Europeans, Slavs and Jews tended to be. Various observers of the Italian immigration noted the singular nature of the movement. Before World War I it was estimated that eighty per cent were working-age males, unskilled southerners, and "birds of passage."

The young men travelling to America were part of a family-based strategy to attain specific objectives in the Old World *paese* rather than individuals building new lives in the New World city or frontier. These peasant-immigrants came in order to help parents buy a viable piece of land in an economically depressed Italy, supply a sister with a dowry, or make enough money so they themselves could establish a household. The major means of securing the necessary savings was to work on the railroads expanding across the continent, linking urban centres and markets to hinterlands and resources. A single trip was rarely enough to meet their needs in the *paese*, and the birds of passage often made three to four, up to a dozen, return voyages.

However, year by year and decade by decade, it became evident to an increasing number of immigrants that the stable, propertied status they had aspired to in the *paese* was beyond their reach. Increasingly these men became disillusioned with their prospects in Italy and sought permanent jobs and futures in the mining and smelting towns along

railroad lines, or they looked for even better work on the construction sites and in the factories of growing cities. Concurrently, the chain migration of Italians through the so-called *padroni* increased, and established fellow workers gave way to family reunification.

Mature Little Italies which contained commercial, social, religious and other infrastructures emerged by the First World War across North America. They were institutionally complete and able to supply the overseas communities with goods and services meeting their needs from cradle to grave. The Great War acted as a sort of benevolent trap which, on one hand, blocked men from returning to the *paese* due to the cessation of civilian ocean passage and, on the other, enticed them into good-paying employment in industries that offered opportunities that had hitherto been closed to them as "inferior stock." After 1917 literacy tests for immigrants, in both the United States and Canada, for the first time introduced major government restrictions which effectively closed the long era of open, "free" migration that stretched back to colonial times. Increasingly, the considerable number of Italian migrants who were still undecided whether to commit to the *paese* or to America were pressured to choose. In the early 1920s a strict quota system in the United States (which especially targeted Southern Europeans) and an analogous narrow occupational test in Canada drastically cut the number of eligible Italian immigrants to insignificance. The era of trans-Atlantic mass migration came to an end, soon followed by nearly complete closure during the Great Depression.

The tide turned after World War II with Italy's rehabilitation into the sphere of Western democracies. Emigration resumed swelling into large waves bound for the States, Canada and Australia. In the Dominion, by the late 1950s, Italian immigration for the first time surpassed the British, which had historically always been foremost in volume. But this resurgence of the Italian presence was relatively brief. A theoretically fairer, universalistic policy, which gave priority to professional qualifications over family reunification, meant that Italians were supplanted by new ethnic groups by the late sixties. In any event, for the post-war Italian immigrants there was no pervasive phase of sojourning or subsequent dilemma between casting their future with the new country or with Italy. War-time destruction, as well as economic and political crises, ensured that they emigrated to stay. Keeping in mind this typology of Italian immigration we can now turn to the concept of *nostos* and the related idea of nostalgia, thus exploring the relation between migration and states of mind.

***Nostos* and Sojourning**

Nostos in its simplest terms means a homecoming or story dealing with coming home. It is derived from Greek meaning "return" and can refer to a type of short ballad contained in Homer's *Odyssey* treating the voyages and return home of heroes from the Trojan War. In popular terms, the word "*Odyssey*" itself has come to be synonymous with a series of

wanderings or long adventurous journeys. Given this, we can conceive the sojourn phase of Italian immigration as a type of *nostos*. Even though we are not dealing with Homeric heroes, but with common men, certain parallels suggest themselves between the original prototype of *nostos* and the Italian sojourners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

We can start with the first of the Homeric songs, the *Iliad*, which, like the *Odyssey*, covers a period of a decade, and concerns the preparations and execution of the war in Ilium. Here, like in the sojourn story, young men from the various hometowns of the Mediterranean gather together to undertake a dangerous sea voyage to engage in a "campaign." While in Homer it is a military venture that motivates the action, in the Italian sojourn story we have an economic "campagna", but in both instances an organized course of action is taken in order to attain a specific goal. Prayers and sacrifices, offered to the deity for a safe victory and precautions against going off-course, both literally and spiritually, must be taken. In both cases, the counsel of experienced veterans is indispensable. The various Greek contingents on the Trojan plain regroup as tribes and clans just as the sojourners band together in America according to *paese* and region for mutual support and morale. The Greek warriors live in primitive camps between the sea and Troy's walls, labouring and fighting under stern commanders for many years; the sojourners live out of old railroad cars in isolated construction sites under the heel of a *padrone* for multiple seasons. Both are animated by a stoic sense of self-sacrifice to a collective cause of which the main wellspring is honour. In both the Homeric epics and the sojourn story the code of honour is not only a matter between men, but implicates women. In the former we have the despoiled royal virtue of Helen that must be avenged by taking Troy; in the latter the common virtue of wives, sisters and fiancées must be upheld through social and economic respectability. Finally, casualties occur in both stories: the brutally mangled and dead on the bloody battlefield; the loss of limbs and sometimes life blasting through rock and laying steel for the railroads. But eventually the campaigns come to end and the successful wanderers voyage back home to waiting loved ones: the Achaeans as victors with treasure; the sojourners as "americani" with watches and dollars in newly-tailored suits.

While the *Odyssey* is the enduring model on which later stories of *nostos* are based, it remains a singular epic of the return home in which great endurance and craftiness are required in order to surmount extraordinary trials. Over a period of ten years plying the seas, Odysseus must overcome imprisonment by one-eyed Cyclops, the attack of savage cannibals, descent into the Underworld at the Ocean's edge, and other fantastic trials before reaching his home in Ithaca. Nonetheless, a number of elements are present in the epic poem which are mirrored in the Italian sojourn experience. The migrants, too, must face various challenges returning home to the *paese*, challenges which, while mundane, are likewise tests of character.

One such theme is the loss of treasure. As Odysseus and his fleet plow the western seas they encounter fierce storms that shipwreck them on foreign, sometimes hostile, lands. As a consequence, after a series of disasters the hero finds himself bereft of his ships, his men, and his rich spoils of war. Only the intervention of Zeus saves the hero from destruction, allowing him to return safely home with a treasure that will allow him to reclaim family and crown. So, too, are the sojourners in constant danger of being parted from their hard-earned savings. In the port cities of New York and Naples various swindlers, hotel-runners and charlatans were ready to prey on the more credulous of the migrants. More commonly, being cheated out of wages by an unscrupulous *padrone*, trusting a crooked immigrant-banker, or succumbing to the temptations of gambling, alcohol, or prostitutes were all ways in which savings could quickly be exhausted and goals derailed.

A second theme linking Odysseus and the Italian sojourners is that of being seduced by women who delay or prevent the return home. Odysseus spends a year carousing with the bewitching nymph Circe and, upon continuing his voyage, is confronted off Sicily by the hypnotic call of the Sirens, whom he wisely resists. Passing the treacherous straits between Scylla and Charybdis a violent storm lands him on the island of the sea-goddess Calypso who falls in love and wishes to marry him, thus detaining the hero for seven more years in a sort of wedlock. When Odysseus next finds himself swept to yet another shore he is assisted by an admiring young princess, but this time finally refuses any entrapment which would further delay his return home. The sojourners, too, could be tempted by foreign women. In most instances this took the form of consorting with ladies of easy virtue. Such fleeting affairs were silently tolerated by village norms since male sexual prowess was seen as affirming masculinity. But sometimes men fell in love, married, and were forever lost to their families back home. Such cases of desertion insulted the code of family honour and brought shame on the whole family. Just as Penelope waited in Ithaca, wondering about the fate of Odysseus who had been missing for many years, so too did the wives and fiancées of sojourners worry that their menfolk might be lost to them. It took only one or two instances of desertion to circulate in the village (just as one or two examples of workplace death or debilitating injury) for people to dwell on the worst that could befall their loved ones in "America."

But worries of faithlessness could also work the other way around. Odysseus has been absent for two decades and over the years doubts about his safe return increase among his wife and household. Penelope is courted by numerous suitors who park themselves in the royal palace insisting she choose a husband among them. It is understandable if Odysseus for his part doubts the full faithfulness of his wife. And it is understandable if the sojourners at times wondered about the fidelity of their women left alone. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, while separated by millennia, in both cases the taboo against female sexual relations outside marriage was a powerful guarantor that the returning

voyager would find his woman, and hence home, intact.

Odysseus enters his homeland as a stranger and seeks little by little to reestablish trust and intimacy with his father, son, and wife. There are a number of awkward scenes and tests before the family's cohesiveness is reestablished. This also could be detected in the lives of sojourners who had been away for an extended interval. The deprivations of wives without husbands and children without fathers, although a degree of protection would be provided by trusted kinsmen, were acutely felt and it took delicate time for relationships to be made whole. The *Odyssey* ends on a note of harmony and optimism. Odysseus rekindles family relationships and re-consummates his marriage. The strife that has beset his kingdom during his absence and culminates in the slaughter of the feuding suitors is finally brought to an end, and with divine intervention peace is restored once again. The sojourn story is likewise one of successful return. The "americani" are greeted in the *paese* like local heroes. They are living testimony that common men can venture forth with little or nothing and return home with cash, knowledge of the wider world, and optimism. Their status in the village increases, they are accorded greater respect, and young bachelors are allowed to marry across class lines. The "americani" propagate a culture of emigration, spurring others to voyage overseas and emulate their success. But this successful *nostos* lacks closure, and over time begins to tarnish as economic crises eat into the gains of migration. As a consequence, the sojourner becomes an immigrant and *nostos* gives way to nostalgia.

Nostalgia and Immigration

The term nostalgia entered modern usage in the late seventeenth century as a result of a Swiss doctor's attempt to catalogue the symptoms associated with homesick expatriates—emigrants, soldiers and students—who pined for the homes they had left behind. The term combines the Greek *nostos* (return) with *algos*, pain, to denote a person's suffering for a return home. Similarly, the French spoke of *maladie du pays*, and the English of country disease to refer to the ills experienced by rural emigrants settling in cities undergoing industrialization. In all ages, however, it was natural for people to feel the pain of being separated from their homeland. We see Odysseus exhibiting much the same signs of homesickness as those documented by early modern doctors. In particular, while living with Calypso on the island of Ogygia, even though the sea-goddess is more beautiful than Penelope and offers him immortality if he stays, Odysseus cannot give up his desire of returning home. He will not eat, he is listless and brooding, he is grief-stricken and weeps, he longs painfully for Ithaca and pines for his wife. What was unique in the modern period was that such natural human reactions to separation from home were converted into pathology and fitted into a medical model. Later in the nineteenth century, however, nostalgia took on a more benign connotation indicating a longing for the past (whether personal or historical) and, of course, this could include

yearning for one's homeland if one were displaced. In this sense of nostalgia, in contrast with the first which was synonymous with "nosomania," the idea was softened to include tones of romanticism, reflection, and possible recuperation. Having noted this, we can here consider the Italian immigrant experience in relation to the concept of nostalgia.

I have already argued that the sojourn story was one of successful homecoming and indicated that the anthropological strengths of their society—strong personal bonds, a stoic sense of hard work and sacrifice, and trust in female chastity—made life in North America tolerable and, at least initially, profitable. Nostalgia during the first phase of migration, if it existed, was muted. Sojourners were temporarily away as part of a family strategy to fulfill goals of betterment and they looked forward to their triumphant return to the *paese*, not backward regretting their decision to migrate. During the sojourn-immigrant nexus when hope in America started to outweigh what was possible in Italy, the newcomer approached his settlement also with optimism and he was too green to harbour feelings of regret. We must look then to the solid immigrant phase of migration to speak meaningfully of nostalgia.

In the Italian immigrant experience we can note two main and opposing forces impinging on the emotions and minds of people. The first was the cohesive centripetal influence of Little Italy wherein familial, social, cultural and religious institutions took root and through which traditional forms could be maintained. The "colonia" allowed immigrants to transplant Old World ways and values by which people could consider themselves Italians in North America. The second force acting on the immigrants was the outside pull of mainstream society that sought to break up the Italian community in its midst and assimilate the newcomers as completely as possible into Anglo-American structures and standards. The interface of these two forces involved a clash of cultures and values which centred not on the immigrants themselves but, through the school system and the settlement house movement, on their children. Loyalty to family was challenged by individualism, Catholic practice by secularism, the producer ethic by consumerism. Fathers and mothers expected the public schools to foster children who were "ben educati": obedient to parents, respectful of authority, and proud of their roots. Instead they often found themselves at odds with their children and confronted with shattered families and communities. While the extent of the split between generations varied from one family to another and from one Little Italy to another, the tragedy of alienation was commonly played out across North America. And it is here, at that juncture where Old-World ways and values were challenged and threatened, that nostalgia began to awaken in the emotions and psyche of immigrants.

Italians did not come to America to melt with other nationalities or to take advantage of its democracy; they were foremost economic migrants with the expectation that they would have the freedom to maintain their cultural integrity. As this gave way to the realization that everything around them was changing in unexpected directions, the

feelings of regret and loss began to depress the spirits of many. Nostalgia, the pain experienced longing for the homeland, was now part of their immigrant experience. Chronologically this was probably most salient through the decade between the mid-1920s and mid-thirties. These were the years when the Mussolini regime was lauded by many leading political, economic and cultural leaders in the West. It was thought that the new regime was finally bringing stability, efficiency and pride back to a country that had suffered years of chaos. After 1929 the Italian government was seen as dealing successfully with the Great Depression while the liberal democracies seemed to be floundering. The new-found status of Italy on the world stage, combined with the daily discrimination faced by Italian immigrants, further spurred feelings of nostalgia. For many this overflowed into the second type of nostalgia: a romantic longing for the restoration of Italy's greatness—signaled by a gloriously announced new era which was given shape and scope by the regime's colonial ventures in the Mediterranean and Africa. The widespread sympathy for Fascist Italy shown in the Little Italies, the public support of fraternal organizations like the Sons of Italy and Italian language newspapers, and immigrant participation in Casa d'Italia activities run by Rome were all fuelled by the dual, interwoven senses of nostalgia.

After the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the critics of Mussolini, who had warned of the regime's authoritarian and adventurist tendencies, came to the fore and mainstream opinion took a decidedly anti-fascist turn. Anti-Italian prejudices and discrimination reverted back to earlier levels, then peaked during World War II, culminating in the designation of Italian immigrants as enemy aliens and the internment (without *habeas corpus*) of those suspected of supporting fascism. In the hot climate of hostilities, nostalgia tended to wither or die altogether. Harsh realities made longing for Italy and *italianità* seem like an expensive luxury. For some, nostalgia was pushed underground; for others it was stamped out entirely. There was no toleration for hyphenated identities, and many responded by giving in to the pressure of assimilation. Young men enlisted in the Allied cause in numbers surpassing the Italian proportion of the population, businessmen Anglicized their names, and as an ethnic group Italians had one of the highest inter-marriage rates. By the end of the war, the Italian sense of identity in North America was not only ebbing, but in danger of being reduced to insignificance.

What saved *italianità* in the New World was Italy's quick re-integration among the Western democracies, highlighted by her membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization established in 1949 against the expansion of Communism. The resumption of immigration which had been suspended in the late twenties revived the struggling Little Italies across North America, adding as well new ones to emergent post-war cities. Though the new immigrants faced their share of prejudice, the severity of the nativist reaction was both less intense and of shorter duration. The general post-war prosperity provided the ground for mainstream tolerance. By the late 1960s cultural pluralism had come to replace assimilation as the public and societal response to

ethnic diversity. And in Canada, at least, Italians played a pivotal role in opening up the common social and cultural space, first facilitating acceptance of multiculturalism, then stimulating its valorization as a highly desirable good. The Italian identity was allowed the liberty to follow its own course and define, or redefine, itself in its new setting.

Further to this, rapid improvements in communication increasingly shortened the space between homeland and New Land. Widespread affluence and the ease of air travel rendered nostalgic, painful longing for Italy less likely. A large part of Italian-North Americans could return home as visitors to reconnect with family and the *paese*, assuaging whatever yearning stirred them. A series of innovations in electronic communications reinforced linkage across the Atlantic, making person-to-person dialogue an easy daily occurrence. In short, under such favourable conditions, nostalgia as homesickness could make but a faint appearance in the psyche of post-war immigrants. Instead, the benign nostalgia of recovering an idealized past came to the fore and could be seen in two ways.

First, it was operative among immigrants who wished to re-live memories of their childhood or youth, and among the descendants of immigrants who wished to witness for themselves the memories passed down by parents and grandparents. Generations of writers would be among those moved by this nostalgia of recovery, at times leading to personal and cultural rediscovery. Second, and less immediate, the romantic recovery of the past took the form of vicariously experiencing the great civilizational epochs of Italy's history. Mass tourism to the centres of the Renaissance and the Roman Empire fulfilled the nostalgic recovery of a past which, unlike the fascist or mediaeval eras, was agreed to by all to be an acceptable reference point of identity. Moreover, this type of nostalgia, given the effects of European integration and globalization, could be dissociated from ethnic origin. Anyone from anywhere who is culturally and historically aware of the accomplishments of the country can be stirred with romantic nostalgia for Italy and experience the satisfaction of returning there, both physically and spiritually.

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