Writers From Invisible Cities

By Mary di Michele

The playground in the dead of night;
old buildings/ cleared away; I assume
the black-top is the same on which/I
bled/ the first kick by an upstart boy;/
the old nun, the one who'd throw me
out, stands/ on the gateway steps,/
chiding my mother, whose bad/
englishes make mincemeat of my will
to live.

— Pier Giorgio di Cicco, "Returning to St. Dominic's (Toronto, 1957)"

When a person's language and experience is not reflected in the culture of the society in which s/he lives, her/his identity and values seem confused, transient. This is true for immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and women. I've lived most of my life in Toronto, but I was born in Italy. I immigrated to Canada with my family in 1955. I was six years old, a rather sensitive age to be uprooted. I remember that I became a very unhappy child. Toronto was a different town in the mid-fifties: smaller, stiffer, provincial. My family and I were part of a wave of post-war immigration from Italy, most of them like us, working class people from the South.

Before I learned to speak English clearly I had some rather unpleasant encounters with the citizens of my adopted country. Children can be cruel — that was a cliché even then, as well as a painful reality. When a group of boys threw stones at me and called me a D.P. as I was walking home from school one day, I didn't know what they meant. D.P., displaced person. The stones, however, communicated more than enough. A girl who lived next door informed me that she couldn't play with me anymore because her mother said I was Italian. Several other children followed suit. Adults have the power to be even crueller.

At times I found myself a victim of misunderstandings that could happen really to almost any child, but which seemed worse without the words to explain or defend myself. One incident I remember most vividly. Memory plays it back for me like a silent movie shot in black-and-white. The perspective seems odd, the point of view that of a dwarf. I was standing by the entrance to my school, waiting for the daughter of our landlord to walk me home. We lived in a flat that was the second storey of their house. A teacher, a nun dressed formally in black cloth and veil, saw me standing quietly and waiting. For some reason that I didn't understand at the time, the very sight of me sent her into a rage. She shook me violently. I saw her mouth making the shape of angry words, but for some reason I remember this as if I were a deaf-mute. The details are dramatic and entirely visual, devoid of her voice or words. This was for me, I am convinced, an entirely pre-English language memory.

I know that I wasn't able to respond to her accusations. I was a docile and timid child. Her tone, however, I must have understood. It frightened me. She probably believed me to be silent and defiant. She dragged me into her class of senior students and strapped me soundly in front of the girls, who looked up idly from their crocheting. My hands were swollen and burning for hours, my face blazing with shame. I discovered later that I had been standing in the wrong spot; the entrance to the school had been declared off-limits for students, announced over the P.A. system that morning. Unfortunately for me I had not understood the new rule and had waited as usual in a corner just inside the building to keep warm.

My family moved and I went to grade one in another school. I was placed at the back of the classroom because, I presume, I didn't know the language and presented a problem to the teacher. I spent the rest of the year, without any particular instruction, drawing with crayons pictures of bright sunshine and flowers in my notebooks. I'm not sure how I learned anything at all. Was it a secret blessing to be ignored? It was rumoured in the class that I would fail. But I passed or was passed into grade two where Marisa di Michele, pronounced Dee Mee Kehle, became Mary Dee Michelle or Dee Miss Shelley. The teacher who renamed me, "Maria, that's Mary isn't it?" for better or for worse, gave me another and invaluable gift. She took the class to the local library and for 5 cents, or half my weekly allowance, I acquired a passport into a world of reading.

Things became relatively easy after I learned to write and speak English fluently. However, I still suffered from an acute sense of otherness because my home language and culture were not reflected at all in my education, nor in my reading, nor in the American dramas of film and television I liked to watch. My intellectual language became English, but at home we spoke Italian. My thinking and feeling in more ways than one were in different tongues. I felt divided and alienated both from the general culture and myself, my home life, throughout much of my childhood and adolescence.

Luckily for me I found a way of resolving this inner conflict. I found my voice as a poet by writing about my Italian roots: my early childhood in Italy, my family and culture in Canada. [*Editor's Note: several of Mary di Michele poems are reprinted in this issue; see 'Contents' pages].* In this way I think my intellectually-acquired English language became informed by the Italian that was for me an emotional language (my formal education having been entirely in Canada), containing the intensity of family bonds and primary experience. Another poet, Pier Giorgio di Cicco, helped me com-

plete this transference of the emotional content of my Italian experience into the English language. When I first read his poems, poems about his family and their immigration, poems like "A Man Called Beppino" (later published by McClelland and Stewart in his collection *The Tough Romance*), not only did I experience the feeling of having read authentic work, but I also felt that prickle at the back of the skull that was Emily Dickinson's test for true poetry. But, perhaps more importantly for me then, I experienced a "shock of recognition." Di Cicco's writing, which reflected my own experience in many ways, seemed to give it both validity and perspective. Yes, and more, a kind of transcendence over my personal alienation and emotional exile.

There is a French philosophical term, originating in the writing of Jean-Paul Sartre, "*l'imaginaire.*" "*L'imaginaire*" as I understand it, is cultural reality, that is the world or society as it is represented in a novel or play or photograph or TV program or painting (any imaginative construct) — what we understand *life* to be through our arts. What Canada's recent immigrant writers are doing is expanding the tradition of "survival" to include a tradition of "the journey."

The multicultural debate gives me a bit of a headache; it is such a loaded debate. Yet I know that if you write exclusively about the lives of immigrants, you keep yourself marginal to Canadian culture. In a similar way, women who confine themselves to a content which is predominantly and traditionally feminine find themselves in a female ghetto.

Why is it a ghetto when we refer to women's writing? Although it seems a natural enough term to refer to the situation of ethnic writers, it seems extreme when referring to 52% of the population. It is not extreme. Invited to a reception for the Prime Minister of Bermuda at Queen's Park, I felt literally lost among the extraterrestrials looming above me in gray flannel. The few other females present were primarily aides in the Premier's office. My presence seemed unnatural, as if I had stumbled into the men's washroom by mistake, as exclusively gender-determined as that.

In some cultures women are required to wear the veil; in our culture there are some who call themselves *REAL WOMEN* and require that we wear the apron. This may seem like a digression, but it is not. If art imitates life, it is as true that life imitates art. Which brings me back to the idea of "*l'imaginaire*," and the social and psychological role of culture, to define us as it reflects us, to examine our lives, to give us perspective, to illuminate our existence, to create that map, that psychic landscape by which we can find our way and not be lost to ourselves or to each other.

What is a ghetto? Webster's defines it, in its secondary sense, as it has come to mean, as a quarter of a city in which members of a minority group live, especially because of social, legal, or economic pressure. To ghettoize, the verb,

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means to *isolate in*. To a writer it means to deny dialogue with what is defined by power or hierarchy as the culture of a society, defined by power and not by composition. A ghetto is not entirely bad — after all, it is also a community, a support group, and when it functions as such it sometimes produces enough strong voices that the larger culture hears them. Sometimes it is a sympathetic and liberal larger culture who will protect and declare its existence and its vitality — like Dr. Seuss' elephant in *Horton Hears a Who*. Under more rigid conditions the ethnic writer, the female writer, is judged to be marginal. How? By according interest in their writing purely in sociological rather than literary terms. Or political ones, when multiculturalism exists as an official policy and bureaucracy but does not participate in mainstream culture.

Women writers are working in or against a tradition of literature that is historically primarily male in content, in experience. Literary women weaned on words find to their surprise that they have been identifying as human a tradition of literature written by men, a tradition that unconsciously excludes large areas of human experience and sensibility because they are not known to men or perceived by them. The first time I encountered a description of giving birth in literature was in Doris Lessing's novel, *A Proper Marriage*. Georgia O'Keeffe painted, with originality and daring, female shapes, from an American landscape, not contained in the Western European tradition. A more mundane example, one exposing both the sexism and racism only implicit in the depiction of reality and values in TV shows, is a program like *All in the Family*. Before Archie Bunker, as far as television was concerned, all families and neighbourhoods were like *Father Knows Best*: all white and Anglo, and patriarchal at that.

Thank god *"l'imaginaire"* is changing. Thank god that the lives of the new settlers to a society, the oppressed or repressed, the residents of our invisible cities, are gaining some representation in media and the arts. How else not to have their lives diminished? How else to transcend our differences and discover what is truly universal?

At a conference of Italian-Canadian writers last fall I saw a production of a play by the Montreal writer, Marco Micone. *Gens du Silence*, translated as *Voiceless People*, portrays with compassion the narrowed and often materialistic lives of displaced people:

> *An immigrant worker is less than a worker. An immigrant father is less than a father. An immigrant husband is less than a husband. My house had to be big to contain all my dreams. It had to be beautiful like Anna on our wedding day. It had to be warm like Nancy when she was still Annunziata.*

Recognizing the people in the play, I was moved to tears. The theatre that night allowed me that recognition. I was given a kind of catharsis.

So why should you be interested? He's not your father! After a reading I gave in Halifax, a young student told me that he couldn't relate to my poem about giving birth, that I should write about a more *universal* experience. Is the problem a lack of negative capability, a failure to see how we are related? Are we more ready to pronounce or denounce things as foreign because they are not immediately recognizable as our own? Marco Micone, who is a male, calls himself, and *is*, a feminist playwright. He observed and pointed out to the audience in the library at the Italian Cultural Centre in Vancouver that all the photographs on display were taken by men. Is it because Italian-Canadian women can not see that their photos were not included, perhaps not submitted for the show? Or is it because they are not seen? Because they are overlooked in their culture, to quote Cesare Pavese, as nobodies, "*ombre a nessuno.*"