

LEONARDO BUONOMO

An Unpublished Poem by Pasquale Verdicchio

Not surprisingly for an author who has long felt an affinity for the figure of the nomad, Pasquale Verdicchio is hard to pin down in terms of national identity, cultural allegiance, literary style, and primary area of interest. A reasonably close approximation of his multifaceted self and work would be to call him an Italian-born, North American poet, essayist and academic, as well as a cultural and environmental activist. Born in Naples, Verdicchio emigrated to Canada with his family when he was a teenager. In the 1980s he moved to the United States, settling in Southern California where he has taught Italian literature, environmental literature, cultural studies, writing and film at the University of California, San Diego, since 1986 (he is retiring this year). Although Southern California has long been his home, Verdicchio has always maintained very close ties with Canada (especially the city of Vancouver where his extended family is based) and Italy, where he has visited and lived for lengthy periods of time.

One of the founders of the Association of Italian Canadian Writers, Verdicchio published his first poetry collection, the aptly titled *Moving Landscape*, in 1985. His subsequent collections include *A Critical Geography*, *Nomadic Trajectory*, *The Posthumous Poet: A Suite for Pier Paolo Pasolini*, *Approaches to Absence*, *The House Is Past*, and *This Nothing's Place*. His essays have provided a provocative stand on issues ranging from the Italian diaspora (*Bound by Distance*), to the representation of Italians and Italian Americans in American popular culture (*Devils in Paradise*), and Italian photographic culture (*Looters, Photographers, and Thieves*). Intimately related to both his poetry and critical writing is also Verdicchio's work as a translator, which has given him the opportunity to explore in depth and create an English voice for such Italian poets as Antonio Porta, Giorgio Caproni, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alda Merini, and Andrea Zanzotto (whom Verdicchio has acknowledged as a major influence on his own poetry). In

addition, he has translated, annotated, and written an introduction for a new edition of Antonio Gramsci's seminal *The Southern Question*.

What, in addition to his composite background, has made Verdicchio's literary persona and production difficult to categorize is his consistent and deliberate avoidance of the nostalgic mode as well as the absence of easily recognizable "ethnic" tropes and signs in his poetry. At the same time, however, having chosen English as his vehicle of expression (it could just as easily have been his mother tongue), Verdicchio has repeatedly challenged its syntactical rules and expanded its vocabulary by cross-pollinating it, as it were, with Italian sounds and forms. To rephrase freely a famous passage from a letter Henry James wrote to his brother William (213), one might say that Verdicchio writes in such a way that it would be impossible for an outsider to say whether he is an Italian writing about North America (and the experience of being an Italian there) or a North American writing about Italy (and the experience of being a North American in Italy).

If there is a constant in Verdicchio's poetry, it is the idea and sense of movement, not so much from one place to another, as between places. As Antonio D'Alfonso has noted, the titles of Verdicchio's poetry collections are telling – *Moving Landscape, A Critical Geography, Nomadic Trajectory, Approaches to Absence, This Nothing's Place* – in that they speak to his fascination for "drifting, shuffling, relocation" (14). Indeed, in his early verse (as, for example, in "Branta canadensis," from *Nomadic Trajectory*), even when distant echoes of the experience of moving to a different country resonate in his lines, they are rarefied and surprisingly unencumbered by sentiment.

Unwilling to identify definitively with one of the geographical and cultural spaces that have shaped him, Verdicchio has often sung the condition of estrangement, not only through his choice of themes and diction, but also at the formal level, especially in the first part of his production. This experimental phase, marked by pronounced fragmentation, ellipsis, unorthodox placing of lines and words on the page (as if to turn the reader into a fellow roamer), culminated with the 1994 collection *Approaches to Absence*. Since then, Verdicchio appears to have moved towards a more personal, at times even confessional tone, as can be seen in the unpublished poem "Sense of Support" (presented below), in which a desire for contact

and knowledge assumes a plaintive note. This shift was already noticeable in his latest published volume to date, *This Nothing's Place* (the evocative title is derived from Canadian writer and painter Emily Carr's 1941 book *Klee Wick*). As I have noted elsewhere, after "exploring for many years the resources of language (or *languages*, given his enrichment of English with Italian words and syntax), Verdicchio arrived at a place where he could work simply, blending together everything he had learned" (177).

To some extent, vicissitudes of life forced his hand. Nowhere is this more evident than in the poignant section he devoted to his then recently deceased father. There, in addition to revisiting his relationship with his father (a kinship which, in maturity, could be read indelibly on his own face) as well as with his own place of birth, the poet tells of the paradoxical predicament in which he found himself when he discovered that, due to bureaucratic entanglements, he had temporarily lost his Italian citizenship. That made him, for all intents and purposes, a foreigner in his native country, but one with a quintessentially Italian name that belied his status. As Kenneth Scambray has pointed out, Verdicchio's "confusing and bizarre quest to reclaim his Italian citizenship [...] is an appropriate metaphor for the uncertainty and instability that defines the modern immigrant experience" (122).

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PASQUALE VERDICCHIO

Sense of support

Hold my hand
I have waited for you
to learn to grasp
the sense of support.
Walk ahead
I have waited for you
to guide me toward
a more direct manner
to know the world.
Let me look
in your eyes
I have waited for
your gaze to keep
memory from fading.
I have waited
and waited,
learned patience,
learned that dreams
can reveal
what language
can only hint at,
and in your broken syntax
I hear my own story told.