

Literature as autobiography: Rimanelli's writing between the two shores of the ocean

by Sebastiano Martelli

The theme of migration is an inevitable narrative stumbling block in Rimanelli's work, as it is for every Italo-American writer.¹ The theme was already featured in the works of his Italian period, notably in his second novel, *Peccato originale* (1954),² set in Molise in the early postwar period, the time of the last great exodus from southern Italy. It is also to the fore in *Una posizione sociale* (1959),³ where it is incarnated by the extraordinary figure of Granpa Dominick, an American who has returned to his native town, Casacalenda nel Molise. Domick drinks and plays jazz trumpet, reminiscing about his life in America and the massacre of Italian immigrants in New Orleans in 1891. The prelude to Rimanelli's choice of America as the time-space of his life is *Biglietto di terza* (1958),⁴ an original reportage on the routes of emigrants to and within North America.

Giose Rimanelli's American "exile" (1960) was the result of a complex intellectual and existential condition, and especially to his being an atypical figure, an irregular, incapable of integrating into Italian literary society, as is borne out by some reactions to his narrative works— *Tiro al piccione* (1953), *Peccato originale* (1954), *Biglietto di terza* (1958), *Una posizione sociale* (1959) and his militant critical essay *Il mestiere del furbo* (1959).⁵

¹ Cf. Sebastiano Martelli, *La scrittura dell'emigrazione*, in *Italiani e stranieri nella tradizione letteraria*, Atti del Convegno di Montepulciano (8-10 ottobre 2007), Salerno Editrice, Roma 2009, pp. 283-340.

² Cf. Sebastiano Martelli, *Il crepuscolo dell'identità. Letteratura e dibattito culturale degli anni cinquanta*, Laveglia, Salerno 1998, pp. 235-276.

³ The novel was republished as *La stanza grande*, edited by S. Martelli, Avagliano Editore, Cava de' Tirreni 1996.

⁴ On *Biglietto di terza*, cf. Luigi Fontanella, *La parola transfuga. Scrittori italiani in America*, Edizioni Cadmo, Fiesole 2003, pp. 107-120.

⁵ Cf. *Rimanelliana. Studies on Giose Rimanelli*, edited by Sebastiano Martelli, Stony Brook-New York, Forum Italicum Publishing, New York 2000, *Su/per Rimanelli*, «Misure critiche», 1987-1988, 65-67; Giambattista Faralli, *Antologia delle opere di Giose Rimanelli*, Marinelli, Isernia 1982; Raffaele Liucci, *Giose Rimanelli*, «Belfagor», 1998, 6, pp. 673-685; Sante Matteo, *Radici sporadiche. Letteratura, viaggi, migrazioni*, Cosmo Iannone Editore, Isernia 2007, pp. 125-145.

America offered him an escape route from the too narrow and ideologically controlled horizons of 1950s Italy, too risky for an irregular who had a genetic propensity to weave together existential, intellectual and artistic levels. In America, several universities threw their gates open for him, including Yale University, Sarah Lawrence College, New York University, British Columbia, Los Angeles, and, finally, Albany, where he was to remain for over twenty years. His alighting in university resulted in his construction of an alter ego, which Rimanelli nourished by grinding out “more work than half a dozen ‘contemporaries’ together.”⁶ This allowed him to put together a respectable curriculum as a professor of Italian literature, with the merit of being the first to discover and promote authors such as Tozzi and Pavese among American literary critics and the general public. If Italy for him was “una terra lunga / una terra lunnnnnnnga / da dimenticare” [“a long land / a lonnnnnnng land / to be forgotten”] (*Carmina blabla*), America was a “fiume umano inumano / umano fiume / sulla third avenue,” an “inhuman human river... on Third Avenue,” a river to be swept away by, where to immerse oneself at risk of drowning. A schism set in, which was to become a permanent and foundational hallmark of the American Rimanelli: on the one hand, the time-space of academic teaching, with its obligations, rituals, and feuds, on the other, campuses with their vast spaces, which constituted a metaphorical reverse image of the cramped and suffocating spaces in Italy he had escaped from. But the campus was also the gate to the “total” America that lay beyond, in which he immersed himself unconditionally, with the same sweeping impetuosity as the Rimanelli of the “anthill” Italy of the early postwar years. So there was a full immersion in 1960s America—a hotbed of speedy changes punctuated by major social and racial conflicts, which culminated in the student revolts—which permeates the pages of his *Tragic America* (1968), but not only. There was also the America of a “new” and “different” culture, an “on-the-road” and “underground” culture, the culture of pop art and creative writing, Kerouac, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Rosenquist, Rauscemberg, Allen Ginsberg, John Cage, and William Burroughs: a tangle of artistic experiences, a universe of aesthetic opportunities. For a man like Rimanelli, prodded on as he was by the demon of restlessness and dissatisfaction, the demon of continuous search along the wall of risk, this meant looking out onto an infinite field for experimentation.

This was a decade when Rimanelli engaged himself in a total destructuring of his knowledge and writing abilities. He soaked in American and English literature. Many of those writers he had already been familiar with since the Fifties, but now the commixtures and models went well beyond. Faulknerian monologue and realism, through the

⁶ Ugo Moretti, Prefazione a Giose Rimanelli, *Monaci d'amore medievali*, Roma, Trevi, 1967, p. 13.

mediation of Pavese, had nourished the natural inventive strength of the early Rimanelli, but now it was in Joyce's experimental fragmentation that he found suitable paths to tread. Whitman's "desire" and "poetry of discovery" had been a precious vademecum for the young Rimanelli in his search for himself and the world, but now it was the Whitmanian Henry Miller of *Tropic of Cancer*, with his total anarchic and pansexual autobiographism that supported him in his urge to dare to go further:

Give us more oceans, new oceans that will erase the past... Oceans that at once destroy and preserve, oceans one can sail out on, to new discoveries and new horizons.

It was now the time to go beyond the mythographic fragments of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's "lost generation," to plunge in a free fall along rugged paths: William Carlos Williams' schizophrenic and imagist projections, E. E. Cummings' linguistic eversion, John Cage's combining of several expressive languages, automatic writing, nonsense, word-painting and word-sound; an omnivorous research in which the existential and artistic planes of experimentation kept intersecting, as did the deep and epochal mutations Western society was undergoing in those years. In the American observatory of someone like Rimanelli, who still carried preindustrial European civilization in his genetic code, these mutations stood out in their most paroxysmal and deflagrating aspects, namely, the disaggregation of the Ego and the Real, the hecatomb of traditional values, models and guiding principles, the clash between a radical change of the visual field and the writer's perception; all this spawned a new imaginary, an endless quest for new forms of literature, a project whose assumptions were continuously questioned. Novels such as *Bella Italia amate sponde, I giovanoni, I vecchioni, Graffiti*, and *Shortage* are emblematic examples of this. These self-standing novels were later merged in *La macchina paranoica*, then taken apart again and bent to new purposes, rewritten. A seventeenth-century narrative workshop—of which only *Graffiti* and a few other chapters have seen the light—"with a montage of *en abyme* sequences, metanarrative reflection, the vertical structure of a Gothic cathedral, surmounted by the spires and pinnacles of different genres, and finally, with the dimension of predicability, the category of infinite narration."⁷ A "paranoid," labyrinthic project, the fruit of architectures and symbologies of affective and ideological meanders, of painful cultural and existential solitudes. A friction between two different languages and cultures, splitting and overlapping in mental and expressive channels that

⁷ Alberto Granese, *Le anamorfosi di Rimanelli. Testo, pretesto e contesto del romanzo "Graffiti"*, «Misure critiche», 1988, 61, pp. 214-215; Id., *Tra i manoscritti di Rimanelli: nella «Macchina Paranoica» l'origine di «Detroit Blues»*, in *Rimanelliana*, cit., pp. 165-180.

amplify the writer's dispersion and isolation. Rimanelli is writing in Italian with the structure of the English language in mind. He is translating the grammar, rhythm and energy of the English language into the archaic and rhetorical modulations of Italian. The result is a macerated *koiné*, the outcome of a Sisyphean effort. It is to this *koiné* that Rimanelli wants to entrust his isolation, his dispersion, his being uprooted, and his cultural, existential and linguistico-anthropological laceration. Rimanelli's broken syntax, the repetitions and fragmentation of his monologue, and, more frequently, his superimposition of inner and actual dialogue, his surges of linguistic anarchism, the gaps and syncopated rhythm of his writing, his adoption of sectorial languages and the scraps of multimedia communication and show society, his prolonged metaphorical and symbolical divarication, materialize his imaginary and his alienation, estrangement and frustration in the 1960s and 70s, as well as a more universal condition of contemporary Western man. However, Rimanelli never seeks or even hints at this expansion of meaning, while irony, puns, and "global" anarchy corrode the last possible residues of literature as a value and a means of aesthetical, social and ideological communication.

By now Rimanelli has joined an American *koiné* and opted for the English language, a new camp of Agramante. This is borne out, among a wealth of dispersed materials, by his novel *Benedetta in Guysterland* and the poems in *Alien*, written between 1964 and 1970, where he finds new ways to express his sense of estrangement from his roots and especially from his original tongue, notably through his use of so-called "exilic language," as Anthony Burgess acutely observed.⁸ Rimanelli thus espoused a metalinguistic experimentalism striving to push the boundaries of disciplinary and artistic statutes. In these years he made many paintings and a collection of visual poems for children entitled *Poems Make Pictures-Pictures Make Poems*, published in America with the collaboration of Paul Pimsleur and illustrations by Ronny Solbert. He also engaged in a rich musical production: blues, spirituals, songs and arias. This dispersion was occasionally reunited on the raft of writing. Rimanelli's writing is an archaeology of existence and of the journey to be continued. His writing constantly grasps and loses life, as it grasps and loses the time and history he has traversed in his harsh journey, with the increasing danger of definitively losing his way and plunge into nothingness. Hence the need for a break, a pause to "auscultate himself"⁹ and recompose the fragments of his dispersed identity. He finds poetry to be a more ductile and immediate medium, one allowing him to cope with

⁸ Anthony Burgess, *Postfazione*, in Giose Rimanelli, *Alien Cantica. An American Journey (1964-1993)*, edited and translated by Luigi Bonaffini, Peter Lang, New York 1995, pp. 144-149.

⁹ Luigi Fontanella, *La poesia di Giose Rimanelli: un "maudit" tra gioco e autodistruzione*, «Misure critiche», cit., p. 47.

his old forgotten autobiographic and lyrical urges, “to donate himself to literature as a means to escape life or protect himself from it.”¹⁰ The poems collected in *Carmina blabla* and *Monaci d’amore medievali* (both published in Italy in 1967) are a counterpoint to this “confessional” itinerary, where places and images emerge: New York, Detroit, Washington, Palm Beach, New Haven, Vancouver, as well as Molise; Bettina, the American wife who took the place of his Italian one, as well as his father, with his ancient bitterness—a figure Rimanelli repeatedly goes back to in his writing—in an alternation of rejection/symbolic killing and re-evocation/rediscovery, the same specular opposition we find when he describes the homeland he fled from as “una terra lunnnnnnnga / da dimenticare”, but also “una terra lunnnnnnnga / da ricordare” (a lonnnnnnng country / to be forgotten, a lonnnnnnng country / to be remembered). Along this itinerary of the mind and of places, what was divided can possibly be put together again. Words, the new ones and the rediscovered ones, can constitute a thread of Ariadne to connect the past and the present, the mass media imaginary of his American son David, who is four years old and plays at monsters and the masked Batman in their New Haven villa, with the errant medieval monks, masked men themselves, who were the protagonists of a different game played by a teenage Rimanelli in a cold attic during the long days in his home town in Molise. Through all that chaos and “barbaric seething,” with its brutal, painful lacerations, these “doctor monks” managed not to founder. They built themselves a raft of words woven into “very beautiful and sincere” love poems, “alternately bohemian and ironic, sinful and parodistic.” Rimanelli translated and rewrote these poems to mend the broken bond between his past and his present, ironically warning that Fratello Giose, “who died for real,” is a “painfully resurrected Lazarus.”

But the “dark inclination to self-destruction, this wish to self-inflict pain at all costs, this lurking unease”¹¹—which constituted one of the peculiar traits of Rimanelli’s personality, and now seemed forgotten—was actually destined to resurface in the mid Seventies. At this time, following new sentimental lacerations and the foundering of this great maceration of writing he had devoted himself to for fifteen years, he again entertained “a wish and great need for death.” It was a trip to Molise—in the writer’s mind possibly imagined as the last—that offered him an emergency exit, almost a means to get even with America, which had offered him an emergency exit in its own turn when he had fled Italy. This trip was not a mere new immersion in the space-time of the roots of an almost erased civilization, whose fragments Rimanelli obstinately looked for to recompose it in his memory or rediscover it in signs, landscapes, or new

¹⁰ Luigi Reina, *La poesia di Giose Rimanelli*, in Id., *Percorsi di poesia*, Alfredo Guida Editore, Napoli 1993, p. 90.

¹¹ L. Fontanella, *La poesia di Giose Rimanelli*, cit., pp. 253-254.

faces. Molise was a place where he could start anew, rejoin the lost strands of his life, launch a new challenge to himself and the world. It is from here, from the last smoldering embers of the culture of the province, under the siege of the ice age of consumerism and State handouts, that the resuscitation and rediscovery of Rimanelli the writer began. In 1977, Editrice Marinelli published *Graffiti*, a chapter of *La macchina paranoica*. In 1979, *Molise Molise*, a miscellany of memoirs, came out for the same publishing house, and in 1986 *il tempo nascosto tra le righe*, an anthology of scattered unpublished short stories that exemplify much of the writer's artistic journey.¹² In 1989, *Arcano* came out, a collection of poems written between 1970 and 1988. In 1990, Rimanelli published a book of poems in dialect, *Moliseide*. With their carefully thought out musical rhythm and their mixing of languages (Italian, English and dialect), these poems constructed a new time-space merging a variety of existential and cultural experiences, memories, languages, and voices of distant worlds represented, reinvented and melted together into a new *koiné*. In 1992, the publisher Peter Lang issued a trilingual edition of all of Rimanelli's dialect works (*Moliseide. Songs and Ballads in the Molisan Dialect*, republished in 1998 by Legas, New York, as *Moliseide and Other Poems*).

In the Nineties there was a true rediscovery of the writer, both in Italy and in North America. It began with the publishing house Einaudi's reissuing of his most important novel, *Tiro al piccione*.¹³ This was a turning point, as it put back into circulation in Italy a writer that had suffered a true cancellation from the Italian literary scene. For many this was a true discovery, as we can tell from the comments of critics, both militant and academic, following the republication of the novel.¹⁴ The last decade partly made up for the oblivion Rimanelli had suffered. He found publishing outlets both in Italy and in North America for his strongly expansive coeval production: *From G. to G.: 101 Sonnets* (Peter Lang, 1996); *Sonetti per Joseph* (Caramanica, 1998); *Jazzymood* (Gradiva, 2000). In the same period he also published important prose works, in English as well as Italian: *Benedetta in Guysterland* (Guernica, 1993), which in 1994 received the American Book Award, and *Detroit Blues* (Soleil, 1997),¹⁵ a reinvention and rewriting of one of the chapters of the *Macchina paranoica*. In 1997, the Canadian house Guernica published *Accademia*, a

¹² On *Graffiti* and *Il tempo nascosto tra le righe*, cf. Sheryl Lynn Postman, *Crossing the Acheron. A Study of Nine Novels by Giose Rimanelli*, Legas, New York 2000, pp. 107-125, 147-167.

¹³ Giose Rimanelli, *Tiro al piccione*, Introduction by Sebastiano Martelli, Einaudi, Torino 1991.

¹⁴ cf. Sebastiano Martelli, *Un "irregolare" nella letteratura degli anni cinquanta*, in *Rimanelliana*, cit., pp. 9-36.

¹⁵ On *Detroit Blues*, see. L. Fontanella, *La parola transfuga*, cit., pp. 133-146; see also S. L. Postman, *Crossing the Acheron*, cit., pp. 129-145; A. Granese, *Tra i manoscritti di Rimanelli*, cit., pp. 165-180.

novel where the author draws a half ironic, half grotesque portrait of the academic world he had lived in for about thirty years.¹⁶ In this period he also published several works in Italy. In 1996, the publishing house Avagliano reissued the novel *Una posizione sociale*, with the title *La stanza grande*. In 2000, two significant new works came out: *Discorso con l'altro* and *Familia*.¹⁷ The former, co-written with Enrico Cestari—a fellow soldier in the time of the Social Republic of Salò—is a dialogue between two memories separated by the ocean and forty years of silence, but both indelibly marked by the traumatic experience of the civil war, on which this text opens glimpses that also shed new light on *Tiro al piccione*. *Familia* is the last milestone of an important strand in Rimanelli's production, one we could define as “critical narrative,” running from *Molise Molise* to *Dirige me Domine, Deus meus* through a significant stratification of scattered contributions published by various Italian and North American houses. In these writings, autobiographic memory intersects essay writing and narrative reinvention, an approach that is well suited to the Rimanellian amalgam of literature and life, which inevitably also includes his scholarly facet, his having made himself and having been a professor in American universities for about thirty years. Rimanelli gives the following definition of this peculiar and invasive autobiographism:

I define as “fascination of self-representation” the direct or indirect autobiography that is perceivable in almost all my writings, something that—even in genetic terms—coincides with ethnicity and ethnography, since autobiography functions somewhat like the ethnographer who sounds what is hidden and latent in languages, in cultures that on first contact appear opaque, even off-putting, but eventually reveal the splendor of their character: their discourse, their dynamics.¹⁸

Thus, autobiography is not merely a way to retrieve and represent fragments of one's life experience, of one's memory, but also a cultural-anthropological excavation in reality/ies as related to the Ego that has experienced them. All this was recreated in the workshop of an omnivorous

¹⁶ On *Benedetta in Guysterland* and *Accademia*, see: Romana Capekhabekovic, *Texts Within the Text: Hermeneutica of the “Fluid” Novel «Benedetta in Guysterland» for the Jabberwocky Reader*, in *Rimanelliana*, cit., pp. 199-221; Anthony Julian Tamburri, «*Benedetta in Guysterland*»: Postmodernism [Pre] Visited, *ibid.*, pp. 223-240; Fred L. Gardaphè, *Giose “The Trickster” Rimanelli’s Great Italian American Parody*, *ibid.*, pp. 241-253; Id., *Achademic Archetypes*, “Fra Noi”, Chicago, 5 febbraio 1998; Anthony Julia Tamburri, *A Semiotics of Ethnicity*. In *(Re)cognition of the Italian/American Writer*, Suny Press, Albany 1998; L. Fontanella, *La parola transfuga*, cit., pp. 158-167; *Rimanelli americano*, edited by Anthony Verna, «Rivista di studi italiani», 2001, 1.; S. Matteo, *Radici sporadiche*, cit., pp. 147-156; 161-186.

¹⁷ Giose Rimanelli, *Discorso con l'altro*, Mursia, Milano 2000; Id., *Familia. Memoria dell'emigrazione*, Isernia, Cosmo Iannone Editore, 2000.

¹⁸ G. Rimanelli, *Familia*, cit., p. 89.

writer who incessantly commingled his experiences with the cultural and linguistic shards of his memory. His best pages are those where Giose achieves a balanced fusion of these disparate materials by regulating the conduits they are fed through:

Spatial and temporal memory of the narrated events dig deep into the past of the main characters, to be reactivated in the present. Thus, a genetic and ideological bond is established between what was once and what is today, the present: a merging of voices and cravings, which, in the very instant they arise, create interconnected autobiographical channels granting this author reasons for reflection on himself and self-analysis, self-judgment and, finally, self-definition.

Obviously, every possible—but nevertheless pertinent—allusion to history and culture, literary criticism and poetry, comes through in a fabric like this, establishing a veiled dialogue with the world of the dead and that of the living through glimpses of childhood in the old days, adolescent steps, and a fertile expansion of the vigilant mind which creates in the here and now, trustful, always waiting for the kiss, the assent of the vivid and gentle illusion of someday managing to gain a certain, true grasp on a wisp of the arcane: the masterpiece that endures through the vigil.¹⁹

In *Dirige me Domine e Familia*, the tangle of Rimanelli's family memories opens up to include a reassembly of significant autobiographical fragments, voices, figures, landscapes, events, and lacerations like those of the long-lasting times of emigration. The shadow of illness and death makes its entry. The author's writing dialogues with it, prolonging the thread of life. It is a polymorphic writing—short story, diary, essay, poetry, theater, music—which ones again binds life and artistic creativity at its threshold in an inextricable knot.

In the Nineties, Rimanelli's writing encounters the shadows of illness and death, those of his parents. These shadows also extend to his own inevitable rendezvous. Like the knight in Bergman's *Seventh Seal*, Rimanelli dialogues with death, as it is the only way to cope with the sense of the end and prolong the thread of life.

Dirige me Domine absorbs some very significant pieces of this last period on which illness and death have placed their stamp. An intermittent memory sets in: fragments of life, figures, landscapes, situations, words, recovered from the submerged world of Rimanelli's origins. The characteristics of this memory are reflected in the form of his writing, which is made up of intermittent fragments of short stories, essays, poetry in Italian and dialect, music—yes, of music, too, which always played a central role in Rimanelli's life, “my closest partner.”

¹⁹ Giose Rimanelli, *Letteratura come autobiografia*, «Frontiere», 2002, 6, pp. 16-17.

The title of the book, *Dirige me Domine, Deus meus*,²⁰ a quote from Psalm V, which begins the Catholic funerary rite, compellingly describes the central segment around which the whole text is built, namely, Rimanelli's father's death. The *incipit* is set in the Molisan landscape, with a view of the cemetery of Roccamandolfi from a house in the upper part of town. A detour immediately takes us to America: "I think of my father, who died recently at Detroit, Michigan, far from Casacalenda, Molise: our town."

The whole book is built around this image-event, a true epiphany of writing: his father's death, America, Casacalenda and Molise, the recovery of paternity and a sense of family, long-lasting silence, the faraway death of the emigrant, outside of his community horizon, away from his town of origin. Significant photograms of his life flash by: his family, his friends, or other people who had not only come into his life but also materialized in his writing. Among them was Giovanni Cerri, a dialect poet from Casacalenda, his teacher and friend. Giose had helped him to publish the only collection of his poems that came out during his lifetime, *I guàie* (Rebellato, 1959), in answer to a touching and discreet invitation (*U mmìte*) from the old poet, who felt the sunset of his life approaching: «So' tant'anne, u tiémpe astrégne: / aspett'i cumpagne / chi vracce tése / e l'acqu'appese. / E chiù pàssene i iuórne / e chiù u sanghe z'assécche / dent'a vócce du core».

Other photograms flash by, weaving together the memory of origins, emigration, distance and return home, reality and literature: Eddie Lang, the jazz musician whose parents had left Molise at the end of the nineteenth century for the United States, where he had died at a very young age, having already made jazz history and become a jazz legend. Rimanelli's writing constantly zooms in and out, following the author's reminiscing and footsteps as he wanders among the wreckage of emigration and time, from the cemetery of Monteroduni, in search for the tombs of Eddie Lang's ancestors, to the cemetery of Casacalenda to place a rose on the tomb of the poet Giovanni Cerri, or to track the lost tomb of Grandpa Dominick, the old "mad" umbrella maker, a returned emigrant, the main character of *Una posizione sociale*.

For Rimanelli, his father's death thus becomes a sort of roadmap whereby he traces his way back through his life, his memory, and the places and times of his real and literary existence. And so the fragments of memory and of the literary and anthropological imaginary of his roots intersect with those of his American experience: his life there, the landscape, and poetry, such as those of the two "mad and adorable" poets Blake and Hopkins.

During his trip to Detroit from Albany, where he had received the news of his father's death, a new chapter in his relationship with his father's

²⁰ Id., *Dirige me Domine, Deus meus*, Edizioni Enne, Campobasso 1996.

figure had begun. As long as his father had lived, Rimanelli's relationship with him had been marked by a long-lasting and inextinguishable "rancor." Rimanelli's father is featured several times in his writings. He is the looming shadow that is the ultimate reason for the escape of Marco, the protagonist of *Tiro al piccione*. In *Peccato originale* he is Nicola Vietri, a *padre padrone*, a tyrannical father. Rimanelli makes him die as he is preparing to leave for America with the whole family. Now his father is there, in his coffin, in front of his son, who is about to read his "eulogy." For the first time, Rimanelli feels that he can speak freely to him, that he can finally converse affectionately with him, something that had never happened before. Yet his father had been the only member of his family who had read his books, and thus discovered how his son had reincarnated him, how he had represented him in his novels. Giose now realizes that it was his father who had been the strong link in his family history and his roots. So many things become clear now, so many obscure corners are illuminated. Now he can finally entrust to writing this rediscovered relationship with his father, just as he had entrusted to writing the great and long rancor that had put its mark on his life until then.

Literary imagery rescues him in his first search for new words for his father, in the form of a poem by William Blake: "Father, father, where are you going? / Oh do not walk so fast." In the wake of these verses, Giose tries to address his own poetic "eulogy" to his father: «Oh padre, padre / andato di là. / O occhi che videro!». But these are not the right words. Somehow these verses cannot reach his father, cannot placate his shadow, which keeps returning to his side during his American nights, while Rimanelli's wide-open eyes sail through "the ancestral emptiness of traveling, of escapes, of returns home, of quarrels, of reconciliations, forgiveness dinners and the music of the olive branch." Giose is thus left with an "insuppressible woe."

Actually there is something else going on here: it is emigration, the major laceration that put its stamp on his father's and his family's lives. To die an emigrant is like dying twice, a multiplied death of sorts, because you die "far away from your cradle," from the community that is your habitat, where the roots of your life are, the community that should naturally accompany you even on your last journey. The emigrant who dies far away from his country is denied that world and that opportunity. So, to sort through his grief for the loss of his emigrated father, Rimanelli must include the laceration of emigration that marked his life within the circle of his objectification.

In the song *Cala sole* by Giovanni Cerri, the shadows of emigrants return to town after sunset to look for and relive all that they lost to emigration. They are like ghosts, shadows of dead people who have not found their pacification, that bridge between life and death that only the processing of

grief by one's family and townspeople can guarantee: «Ma quanne cal' a u sole na Defese / se sent'u passe vuostre pu paese»²¹.

Thus, the grief for his father that Rimanelli is striving to process must also take account of that laceration. One night he finds different words in his mind and hands, and realizes that they are able to pierce through the shroud that envelops his father's shadow. They are words of his native dialect, his and his father's, the dialect of Casacalenda. With them he can finally untie the knot. They are the right words whereby to address his father to tell him what he had never managed to tell him while his father was alive. They are the right words to placate his shadow, to close the circle of the processing of grief, to build that bridge between life and death for the grief of those who stay behind and the memory of those who have begun their last journey: «Pàtreme, / ù pàtre mije ze n'è jùte, / ze n'è jute errét' à pòrte / errét' à porte ze n'è jùte/ [...] Pàtreme, / ù pàtre mije ze n'è jùte, – cuant'è móre, cuànte ràje – / e à ditte “Zitte, me ne vaje?”...».

In the second part of the book, Rimanelli somehow makes explicit and clarifies how he came to process his grief for his father in this way. To perform this cultural objectification—for which he once more relies on his omnivorous and sensitive writing style—Rimanelli assembles scholarly, folkloric, literary and musical materials. His roadmap is an extraordinary book, *Morte e pianto rituale* (Death and Ritual Mourning) by Ernesto De Martino, a compelling journey that traces the culture of death from the Jewish to the Greek and Roman worlds, from pagan to Christian rites, to then assess its persistence, reshaping and differences in the peasant culture of southern Italy. De Martino investigates the centrality of death in folklore. The loss of a family member causes a “crisis of presence,” which calls for the processing of grief through weeping, through the funerary lamentation, and for a set of rituals that can help to overcome the crisis, accept the event, and construct an absence-presence of the deceased. Through its long history, peasant culture incorporated both the pagan and the Christian civilization. Hired mourners and the lamentation over the corpse, individual and group rituals including weeping, words, prayers, song and music, become part of a controlled circuit that halts dispersion on the “brink of extreme danger.”²²

Under the guidance of De Martino, Rimanelli goes into a synthetic but effective excursus through high literature, from the Bible to the Greeks, from ancient Christian literature to Jacopone da Todi, to finally come to the southern Italian and Molisan folkloric heritage. But there is more. In his direct investigation of the permanence of peasant culture in the 1940s and

²¹ Cf. S. Martelli, *Rappresentazioni letterarie dell'emigrazione molisana tra Ottocento e Novecento*, in Antonio Pinelli (ed.), *L'emigrazione molisana: il caso Roccamandolfi*, Cosmo Iannone Editore, Isernia 2004, pp. 123-124.

²² Ernesto De Martino, *Morte e pianto rituale*, Torino, Boringhieri, 1978.

1950s, De Martino finds that emigration itself is perceived as the “critical equivalent of death,” to such an extent that departure rituals closely resemble those performed at a funeral.

Having trodden this path, the writer can finally produce himself in his own “dirge,” and finally process his grief for the loss of his father and, at the same time, mark out the time-space of a necessary presence-absence. The book actually combines words and music, reviving an avant-garde experiment Rimanelli had already attempted in the 1950s, in *Una posizione sociale*, the first novel in Italy to come out with a record attached (of jazz music). This time Rimanelli offers a compilation of medieval and modern funeral music (Palestrina, and Gluck, Wagner, Bizet, respectively), and Negro romances, ballads, spirituals and blues, which he combines with the southern, and especially Molisan folk heritage (the *Bufù* of Casacalenda). From this assemblage arises *Medley died (Pàtreme)*, where the most striking commixture is that of black music and the Casacalenda dialect, which is also a meeting of Giose's and his father's worlds, the time of Molise and the time of America. Now Rimanelli can close the circle. With this song, he has finally untied the knot, processed his grief for his father, and pacified his ghost and a lifetime of rancor (incomprehension, rebellion). Loss and grief thus become a new opportunity for a dialogue, for communication, for life to go on. In the end, Giose has earned the right to ironically ask himself: “From Paradise, where he certainly has gone, how can my father not smile on me now?”

In *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, John Fante narrates his taking leave from his father, the emigrant concentrating in his figure the life experience and imaginary of emigration, especially first-generation emigration.

The padre returned to the sacristy as the undertakers opened the casket and my mother led the mourners past the body. She raised her veil and kissed her husband on the forehead. Then she laced her white rosary around his stiffened fingers. Virgil led her away as she cried softly. One by one we passed the bier and stared down at Papa, the children startled, horrified, fascinated, the others weeping silently.²³

In Fante's choice of the Italian term *padre* in an otherwise fully English linguistic context, “the signified and the signifier take on a ritual fixity, they are univocal in an absolute, solemn and sacral way.” The son thus

²³ John Fante, *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1977, pp. 174-175; in Francesco Durante's Italian translation in J. Fante, *Romanzi e racconti*, edited by F. Durante, Milano, Mondadori, 2003, p. 1303: «Il padre ritornò in sacrestia mentre gli addetti delle pompe funebri aprivano la bara, e mia madre guidò la fila dei congiunti a fianco della salma. Sollevò il velo e baciò il marito sulla fronte. Quindi gli allacciò il rosario bianco alle dita irrigidite. Virgil la portò via mentre piangeva piano. A uno a uno sfilammo accanto alla bara guardando papà, i bambini erano stupefatti, terrorizzati, affascinati, gli altri piangevano in silenzio».

pays homage to the father and draws up a roadmap for his symbolical return to the home town, where everything started. But the term *padre* is also the “ashen residue of the ‘natural’ language, the *other* language, which reciprocates, which takes the place of the ashes of the parent: ashes to ashes. And that single ancient sign emerges [...] in the midst of a now totally changed linguistic universe, being entrusted to the host language. It is an isolated and final sign: a goodbye.”²⁴

In *Dirige me Domine*, Rimanelli also celebrates his taking leave from his father, but employing different linguistic and literary devices. In front of the coffin he tries to read his father’s eulogy, as if to achieve that dialogue that had never been possible during his father’s lifetime. He finally entrusts to writing this rediscovered relationship with his father, just as he had entrusted to writing the obstinate, long-lasting rancor that had put its stamp on his life until then. His educated literary imagination assists him in this first quest for new words, but they are not the right ones. They do not seem to be able to reach his father, to pacify his ghost. To work through his grief, he needs to include into the picture the laceration of emigration, which had put his stamp on his father’s and family’s life. He needs to find the right words, the words that can guide him on one last symbolic return home. Only with words from his mother tongue can the writer-son placate his father’s ghost, close the circle of the processing of grief, and build that bridge between life and death for the grief of those who stay behind and the memory of those who have begun their last journey:

I believe a comparison between these two funerary eulogies provides an adequate representation of the different facets of Italian-American literature, and, at the same time, the different literary and linguistic trends dealing with the theme of emigration. Fante’s use of the word *padre* in an English text reflects the transition that occurred in “foundational”²⁵ Italo-American literature in the 1930s, when it switched to the English language, bringing into it only fragments of the mother tongue and scraps of its original cultural-anthropological substratum. Rimanelli, instead, a later-generation immigrant writer who was educated in Italy—like Joseph Tusiani—and had even known a first important season as a writer in Italy, can bring into play a stratified patchwork that is at once educated and popular, literary and musical, anthropologically Italian and European but seamlessly merged with the American element. He thus brings together two worlds and two time periods, those of his roots and those of his American life, and thus achieves true intercultural writing.

²⁴ Martino Marazzi, «Azzorrait»: *microspie della lingua italiana in emigrazione*, in *Milano da leggere*, Atti della quarta edizione del Convegno letterario ADI-SD, edited by Barbara Peroni, Milano 2007, p. 115.

²⁵ Cf. Martino Marazzi, *Misteri di Little Italy. Storie e testi della letteratura italoamericana*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2001, pp. 17-66.

A few years later, Giose made a trip to Windsor, in Canada, to close another circle of his life and once again translate into writing another important autobiographical segment, this time regarding his mother. The figure of his mother—from the one dressed in her mourning clothes for a son believed to be dead, in *Tiro al piccione*, to the psychoanalytical literary creation of *Una posizione sociale*—is reincarnated throughout Rimanelli's early narrative production, as well as in several pages of his later production, and not he must necessarily give a last narrative representation of her as she nears the end of her life.

His mother lives in an elderly home in Windsor, Canada, the town she had left in 1913 to follow their father, who wanted to go back to Italy (she was to return to North America with her husband and friends in the second postwar period).

"What about my mother?"

She laid stretched out on her table, all dressed in black, with a black silk shirt, needle-embroidered, and her left hand in a cast and supported by a splint.

"Signora. Your son is here!"

She did not recognize me.

We very slowly helped her to get back on her feet. We walked to the large window looking out onto the cut tree and sat at the round table. The nurse brought a soup bowl. I tried to feed her, but she said no, noo, you, youuuu. Then I knew she knew who I was. She wanted *me* to eat the soup. I stroked her sparrow head. She just barely smiled, and I said Ma, Ma...

Once again it is the words of literary prose that allow Rimanelli to close the other circle of his life:

It was Sunday, 5 November 1995. I tried to write one last sonnet to G.B. on my mother's arm cast, partly to amuse her. I entitled it *Return*:

*My mother dies at Windsor, in Ontario
In a house, left to herself, in the shade.
I hug her, I stroke her, she doesn't resent it:
She knows she is alone in her sanctuary.*

*Here, in one way or another, each of us plays solitaire,
like playing with the darkness
that slowly invades the window panes, and frees
the chandelier of any oil residue.*

*In my country, clinging to the walls,
my mother lived through a reluctant exile.
Now we are here, in hers: hard*

*to break with regret, the assistance
of the unknown woman, the head to the blinds...*

Glory? It walks under the peristylum!

But a distance emerges, too. The new generations of postwar immigrants have become estranged from their family origins:

He left on October 13, 1996. From Roseville, Minnesota, where Ciliegia and I were living at the time, we drove back on the long road we had already traveled on several times before. Our neighbors, the usual people, other people, so many people, for my mother at the Funeral Home of the Calcaterra Firm. And it was like a party, with the usual chattering, the women seated, demure, chatting closely head to head, the men standing, arms folded, an air of wisdom like face powder on their hair.

In a small side room, where coffee was on the table, Gino's daughter, Cynthia, wept silently in her handkerchief. Her young husband sat next to her in silence, smoking. I approached with coffee and offered it to her. Cynthia shook her head. I offered it to him, her husband, who shook his head.

"Did you love Grandma?"

She nodded.

"You are the only one who's crying. Is that why you are crying?"

Her young husband smiled, and she noticed it. She then said, looking in his eyes, not in mine: "I'm crying just to cry. Do you care?" I realized then that I had stumbled on another kind of death. Humiliated and rather tired, I returned to the mortuary room. Now the priest was telling the story of our family, as he knew it, all roses and thorns, as is the due of the just, the chosen, the beautiful, the strong, the merciful...

In the end, what?

God gives, God takes.

So be it.²⁶

Rimanelli entitled "Ritorno" (Return Home) this chapter of *Familia* dedicated to his mother, as if to metaphorically and symbolically fixate one of the central segments of "emigration as destiny," an impossible return that can only be achieved through writing, because only writing can reconstruct and weave back together the strands of memory and assign a meaning to all that has transpired.

Rimanelli's last two oeuvres, one a book of poems (*Gioco d'amore Amore del gioco*), the other a novel (*Il viaggio*)²⁷ are a final testimony of a writing style that has burned all bridges linking it with his early production. Intolerant of the constraints of literary genres and linguistic boundaries, Rimanelli ventures out on open, phantasmal, lunar ground, and at the same

²⁶ G. Rimanelli, *Familia*, cit., pp. 135-138.

²⁷ G. Rimanelli, *Gioco d'amore Amore del gioco. Poesia provenzale e moderna in dialetto molisano e lingua*, Isernia, Cosmo Iannone Editore, 2002; Id., *Il viaggio. Un paese chiamato Molise*, ibid., 2003.

time one characterized by high cultural concentration. What emerges is a fragmented present, weighed down by a solitude that only the signs of the written word can fill up with sounds and images drawing on a continuous, avid, inextricable flow of memory and images. In *Gioco d'amore Amore del gioco*, dialect is placed "in the middle of a game of interlinguistic refractions, which considerably extend its semantic and expressive scope,"²⁸ a palimpsest of cross-translations of poetry in different languages, Latin (Horace, Catullus), troubadour French (Jaufrè Rudel), English (William Butler Yeats, Blake), Spanish (Neruda, Octavio Paz), French (Eluard), and German (Celan), or translations of other translations, "randage," as Rimanelli calls them: Chinese poets, Petronius translated by Ben Johnson, Achmatova from English. In these translations, dialect faces the challenge of perilous semantic and expressive expansions, well beyond its traditional anthropological, lexical, phonetic, syntactic and musical stratifications. From language of a forgotten time dialect thus becomes a language of the present, invaded by the worn-out and inert words of the everyday, which the poet contrasts with his journey into this phantasmal territory, where he fills up the deafening silence of his solitude and the plasticized void of the present with his load of memory and images. This is a highly experimental endeavor, where Rimanelli is striving to recover the primordial roots of poetic language. The result is a literary and linguistic *koiné* with no geographical boundaries, from West to East, a *koiné* that dialect combines with the deep urges and circular memory of the poetic Ego.

Rimanelli's last published work, *Il viaggio*, once again shows how deep a mark 1960s and 1970s experimentalism—that of the first twenty years of his American full immersion—made on Rimanelli's writing, and thus stands as a watershed with respect to his first season as an Italian writer. His original plan for the novel was to feature a sort of last journey to the fatherland, the last Thule, where Marco Laudato—the main character of *Tiro al piccione*, a unique character who reappears in various reincarnations throughout Rimanelli's narrative—finally untangles the knots of his life, which he has lived in several continents—real, metaphorical, and literary.

But I need to stress that there is another reason why this project morphed into something wholly different than planned. It is because otherwise it would have necessarily involved a return to a style of writing and a narrative form close to the writer's first period. This, as I said above, would not have been possible, and this last work clearly bears it out. Not only is there an evident overabundant superimposition of narration and essay achieved by combining a narrative text with footnotes; this superimposition

²⁸ L. Bonaffini, *Introduzione to Gioco d'amore Amore del gioco*, cit., p. 19.

also penetrates the narrative fabric, continuously disarticulating it by staggering and segmenting the narrative time and the plot, and combing an oneiric dimension and fantastic projection with memory and current events, invention with reality. Rimanelli merges current events—the Twin Towers attack, Iraq, everyday horrors—with his autobiographical present, the passing of the days of his life, in which ghosts, obsessions and black holes of his past reemerge: his childhood in his town in Molise, the seminar with its masked violence, his impatience, his rebelliousness, his “escape from home,” like Pavese, the lacerating experience of the civil war, his return, his search for an existential identity were writing provided a sheet-anchor and a path to a *vita nova*, a new life, the turning point of his exile-emigration to North America, his construction of a safety exit entrusted to a meeting of languages and cultures, his lost and found country of origin, in an inevitable alternation of love and rejection.

A magmatic whole of present and past seen and imagined as a hypnagogic cave, a time-space of the Ego, an observatory from which to look out onto the world, and a coalescing point of urges resurfacing by various paths from the writer’s childhood, amplified by segments of lived life and of memory, all the way down to his awareness of the present and his last crepuscule. All this is entrusted to a Protean writing style, an Ego that is constantly fragmented and recomposed, a patchwork of times, places and characters riding a train that seems to be about to run off the tracks at every chapter, but does not due to a stubborn inner force, that native, almost animal strength of Rimanelli’s literary creativity.

Regarding the complex structure of this last novel, Luigi Fontanella, an observant and acute critic of the “American” Rimanelli, writes: “On the one hand [there is] a hypnagogic propensity to an uninterrupted inner flow on the part of the narrating voice(s)—obviously all belonging to a single *auctor*—on the other Rimanelli’s indomitable will to clarify, gloss, inform.” A writer in a hypnagogic state superimposed on a essay writer, a historian, “who intends to clarify the very magma that he himself is pouring onto the page in a semi-oneiric state.” The result is a Joycean “background ‘rumble,’ dark and funereal [...] (a constant low drone of sorts running through the whole novel), deriving from the hypnagogic state of the narrating voice; a half-asleep state that is at once passive and active, or, more precisely, a state of seeming ataraxia while retaining total awareness of surrounding reality.”²⁹ An estrangement from reality and, at the same time, a going in and out of reality, but always to return within himself, in that amoebic space where the narrating Ego ruminates reality and splits it into a thousand strands he then cocoons in. Thus emerges the founding peculiarity of this stage in Rimanelli’s narrative writing: its

²⁹ L. Fontanella, *Viaggiare il viaggiare: su Il viaggio di Giose Rimanelli*, «Forum Italicum», 2004, 38/1, pp. 229-234.

“*autoreferential* and *autogenerative*” nature, its “*narratological circularity*,” whereby the author at once retraces his life and his writing, all that he has experienced and all he dreamed of experiencing, the blend of reality and invention constantly to the fore in writing itself.

The multilinguism Rimanelli had already liberally employed in his poetry underpins this elaborate narratological architecture and accentuates its strong intertextuality. The boundaries of standard Italian are constantly stretched to incorporate English expressions or parts of conversations in English, along with Molisan dialect expressions. In Rimanelli's extraordinary writing workshop—which is unparalleled in the narrative of the second part of the twentieth century in its abundance and peculiarity of accumulation and maceration—his developing of a narration of “the traveling of travel,” his “'passive' recording of his own narration (*his narrability*) directly through the words of others, words that reverberate in his own sleeping-delirious-dying voice,”³⁰ although continually threatening to skid off track, towards a solipsistic, narcissistic, self-serving and artificial accumulation, manages to convey some considerations to us, formal and linguistic structural curvatures that may allow the modern novel to narrate the frayed lived, spoken and imagined reality of our time, and at the same time give new meaning to a memory of one's roots in an epochal transition confronting us with an upheaval in the relations between peoples and civilizations.

In these years, Rimanelli managed to remain dry-eyed even when looking at his own crepuscule, and find the right words to keep spinning the thread of life, like Bergman's knight in the *Seventh Seal*, with a consistent idea of literature. In *Familia*—one of Rimanelli's most appealing works in the last fifteen years—we find as a *exergue* a very significant passage that significantly epitomizes the autobiographical facet of his writing:

This kaleidoscope I am looking at in the meantime is that now almost empty cask of wine that slowly rolls down the narrow staircase of life. Because now this life is ebbing, I count its remaining drops trying to come up with one last paradigm of the *where*, *how*, and *when* of what I have drunk to finally rest my head on the stone and sleep. But I remember that nowhere in the world was I ever really able to sleep for more than a few hours, after which I put my book back into my backpack and resumed my journey.³¹

In December 1998, Rimanelli was featured as an actor in three theaters in Molise in a recital of his text *L'Arcangelo e il ragazzo*, directed by Pierluigi Giorgio. This extraordinary performance—fortunately recorded on video—tangibly suggested the originality and vitality of a writer who,

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 232-233.

³¹ G. Rimanelli, *Familia*, cit., p. 7.

through his passion, freedom and suffering, had managed to bring and bind together two worlds, two languages and two cultures in his intellectual *tranche de vie*. In the last scene, Giose and his alter ego draw up one last balance, which is inevitably at the crossroads between life and writing:

Giose — Are you tired of life, Giose?

I — Awfully so.

Giose — I've been following you for a long time, you know?

I — Are you Giose? The beggar who sleeps behind the embarcadero?

Giose — I have slept behind the embarcadero, as well as elsewhere, but I'm not a beggar ... I travel, see, my suitcase?

(*music: theme of Lares*)

I — What is in it?

Giose — (*opens the suitcase*) Look!

Io — But it's empty.

Giose — Yes, but once it was full to bursting. I eventually had to throw everything away.

I — But if it's empty, what's the use of it?

Giose — It will fill up again: life goes on...³²

In this last lap of his journey, Rimanelli goes on filling up his suitcase with other stories, words and images to nourish his writing, which in over sixty years erected a significant bridge between the two shores of the Ocean.

³² The text of the recital is in *Familia*, cit., pp. 143-183.