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Rosa R. Cappiello, *Oh Lucky Country*, University of Queensland Press, 1984, 236 pp. Recommended price: $14.95 cloth

Paese Fortunato was published in 1981 by the world renowned publishers Feltrinelli. It was immediately well received in Italy where it won the Premio Calabria for literary excellence.

Australia's Italian community and, in particular, the Sydney readers were anything but enthusiastic in reacting to the basically plotless novel with its disconcerting linguistic elements and depiction of migrant life. The Australian public did not have access to a translation although interest had been aroused and finally Franco Schiavoni urged that the work be made available in translation in his review of the Italian original:

> *"A work of considerable value and maturity, deserving an immediate translation . . . It is in many ways an uncomfortable text; yet it unquestionably deserves an important place in Australian letters" (1)*

A translation of the novel was imperative if Schiavoni's assertion was (and perhaps it still remains) to be tested.

The English version appeared only in late 1984, introduced and translated by Gaetano Rando. Rando worked with Cappiello on the English translation during her period as writer-in residence at Woollongong University. However, Rando should be credited with the remarkable achievement of the final product since he draws extensively from his bicultural migrant background as well as from his bilingual education. He is too modest in claiming that he has attempted to follow the original closely sometimes at the expense of "good English" (*Introduction*, p. ix). Not only is the English "good", but he has been able to retain in the translation "the linguistic marginality in terms of the perceived norms of literary expression" (*Introduction*, p. ix) which constitutes the stylistic strength of the Italian original. If the novel does not eventually attain that "important place in Australian letters", it will certainly not be through any fault of the excellent translation.

Rando has aptly rendered even the title *Paese fortunato* as *Oh Lucky Country*, quite possibly to avoid confusion with Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country*, which the author did not even know existed (2). The lack of a (definite or indefinite) article in the Italian title may be significant and this significance is transferred to the exclamatory type English title. The exclamatory title certainly conveys more adequately the intended irony that led the author to choose the Italian title. It is the irony that stems from the author's

retrospective (mis)feelings on the reasons for emigrating (that is, the change for a better life symbolised by *a* or *the* "lucky country") as well as the narrator's highly subjective, direct, first person account of her immigrant experience in urban working class, and perhaps sometimes less than working-class, Sydney:

> *"The chapter of my second year, in certain respects, was rich and full of life. The past year had been arid, unfruitful, and had made me swear and curse the day I set foot on the ship to come here." (pp. 136-137)*

In fact the novel opens with a complete negation of the reality of *a* or *the* "lucky country" (*Paese fortunato*):

> *"The sky here compensates for solitude. Blue-clouded. Cloudy blue. Intensely blue. It's not the promised land. Maybe in the distant future it'll be the last one on earth — the basis is here for the much-vaunted lucky country — but for the moment it's neither the realization of one's dreams nor the land of milk and honey. It's a kaleidoscope of dances: gigs, gavottes, minuets, boogiewoogies, twists, madisons, rhumbas, often of burps and farts which catch you full in the face at the pictures or at a party" (p. 1)*
> *["Il cielo qui è una rivalsa contro la solitudine. Azzurro nuvolato. Annuvolato azzurro. Azzurro azzurro. Non è l'America. In un lontano futuro, forse, sara l'ultima America del mondo. Ci sono le basi per il decantato lucky country. Adesso non è il sogno sognato, né il paese della cuccagna. È una infinità di danze, gighe, gavotte, minuetti, pavane, mazurke, valzer, tanghi, boogiewoogie, twist, madison, rumbe, spesso rutti e scorregge che ti arrivano in piena faccia nella sala di un cinema, a un party" (Paese fortunato,* Feltrinelli, *1981, p. 7)*

As we see from the English translation, the mention of America in the Italian original is not a reference to a real geographical location but a synonym for the "lucky country" or "promised land" of the migrant. Generally, Southern Italian dialects do not have a verb 'to emigrate (overseas)' but express the concept by saying 'to go to America' even if the real place of destination is Australia. The identification of Australia with this 'America', mythical promised land of good fortune or 'lucky country', is first and foremost autobiographical since the author migrated to Australia about fourteen years ago. The identification is all the more poignant due to the existence of a parallel myth in the Australian community of Australia as being "the lucky country".

The novel is relevant to all migrants everywhere since it deals on a universal level with migration as the search for the mythical land of

good fortune and the migrants' consequent disappointment and disillusionment when faced with the new reality. The highly subjective account of the narrator's experience, full of negative aspects and views, succeeds in giving full expression and vent to the disappointment and rage of the author-migrant when she is faced with the discrepancy between the emigrant's dream and the immigrant's encounter with the new reality. The novel succeeds in this purpose not merely through the presentation of the negative aspects of (migrant) life in Sydney but, more importantly, it succeeds through the manner in which these aspects are presented: the cumulative effect of its numerous, recurring situations, the repeated crude language, the constant non-euphemistic and "explicit references to the elemental activities of people" (to use the euphemism of the *Introduction*, pp vi-vii). Even if not offended, no reader could ignore or feel comfortable with the accumulation of aural, visual and olfactory offending images correlated by a stylistically powerfully precise explicit (and in the extreme, equally offending) crude language. The distress and the discomfort created by the narrator's language and images is not diminished by her consideration of those successful migrants who are supposed to "have made it" in the new "lucky country":

> *"The atrophied breath of the ethnic communities was wafted to me on the wind. As a new member I adamantly refused to have anything to do with it. I spat on it since, rather than being a cohesive basis for race or tradition, it served as a pretext for the creation of separate, mutually inimical little universes. I would not, must not, sacrifice my individuality.*
>
> *During the day we sunbaked on the balcony. From there I could take in the view of narrow streets and the houses, the filthy little yards, the washing hanging on the umbrella of the clothes-hoist. Through an open blind you could see what sort of life they led. Like the sound of a muted struggle filtered through the screens . . . People who'd come long ago knowing absolutely nothing. Primitive people who wanted the bare essentials: a hearty appetite, good health, a steady income. I wanted more than a full belly." (p. 4)*

It is no wonder then that the original Italian novel "was greeted with cries of horror and vilification by some of the more affluent sections of Sydney's Italian community" (*Introduction*, pp. v-vi). Undoubtedly from the author-narrator's point of view, their whole success story is reduced to "the spit, belch, stench, farts, faeces, urine, menses and sperm which pepper . . . her work". (3)

The novel does express a judgement — even if a visceral, partial and subjective one — on the migrant condition and, ultimately, on Australian society. There will only be a few glimpses of mainstream Australian society in the novel which is otherwise full of "lesbians, expectant mothers, delirious old women, dole bludgers, drug addicts, sluts, misfits, divorcees" (p. 2). Perhaps the only exception is the narrator's, and her friend Sofia's, encounter with the wealthy grazier from Tilba Tilba who tries to go to bed with the two women who allegedly only wanted a meal and a chat so they "could penetrate the Australian soul" (p. 102). The novel's judgement on Australia is "filtered through the screens" of the migrant condition and predicaments. Throughout the novel the measure for the achievements of the successful migrants and ethnic communities is the degree to which they have accepted (not to say assimilated) the values of the host society. Cappiello's novel becomes, therefore, an uncomfortable book not only for the Italian community but also for other ethnic communities and Australian society as a whole. Ultimately it is the degree to which the novel relates to Australian society as a whole that will determine the place it deserves in Australian letters. The excellent translation by Rando will make the novel accessible to a wider public and help Cappiello to rid herself of the "ethnic" label "which is equivalent to second-class citizenship, second-class art" (4). Except for rare cultural referents (*Introduction*, p. x) it is difficult to tell that the Engish version is a translation and the Italian original could well be mistaken for a translation of the English version instead.

It could not be avoided that the novel was originally written in Italian as the author claims that she lacks confidence to write in English. (5) It would be interesting to see how she would speak in English with a migrant's voice and if she could transform her lack of confidence and her professed lack of competence in English literary style into stylistic strengths in such a work just as she succeeded in the Italian original, in turning "a lack of competence in the traditional literary register of Standard Italian into what may be seen as stylistic strength in the text" (*Introduction*, p. ix). The language difficulty is not insurmountable if we consider one previous attempt by Iris Milutinovic in *Talk English Carn't Ya* (Hyland House, Melbourne, 1978) where the Australian author claims to narrate the story of Boris' life (her Yugoslav born husband) in his own words. It would certainly be desirable that we hear again from Rosa Cappiello and, after reading *Oh Lucky Country*, to anxiously expect a sequel which will develop the central themes and views of the present novel. Rosa Cappiello acknowledged the need for this in her interview with *The Bulletin*:

"I must confess to having experienced a huge disappointment and a blind rage which pushed me to look into the negative aspects of a society which I despised so intensely and considered beyond forgiveness. Now, instead, it is me who feels uncertain and grateful toward this society so contradictory and stimulating — a whole society still to be written about." (6)

FOOTNOTES

(1) *The Age Monthly Review*, October 1982
(2) *The Bulletin*, February 21, 1984, p. 59
(3) *ibid.*, p. 58
(4) *ibid.*, p. 59
(5) *ibid.*
(6) *ibid.*