

FULL CIRCLE? RENATO AMATO'S LITERARY ANTIPODES¹

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Sommario

Il titolo stesso dell'opera di Amato The Full Circle of the Travelling Cuckoo (1967) rivela il senso di dislocazione dello scrittore migrante ma, al contempo, ne indica la capacità di riconciliarsi con il proprio difficile passato e di adattarsi alla sua patria adottiva, la Nuova Zelanda. Amato (1928-1964) ha dato un contributo significativo alla scena letteraria della Nuova Zelanda dei primi anni '60, pubblicando numerosi racconti in inglese e completando due romanzi ancora inediti. Attraverso l'analisi critica di questi manoscritti in particolare, questo articolo si propone di capire come essi riflettano le plurime identità di Amato come migrante e autore, facendo luce sulle sue esperienze come unico scrittore italiano in un ambiente letterario predominantemente anglo-celtico.

*“Possibile che a quarant'anni,
e con tutto il mondo che ho visto,
non sappia ancora che cos'è il mio paese?”
Cesare Pavese, La luna e i falò*

The only published book by Italian New Zealand writer Renato 'Michael' Amato (1928-1964) is *The Full Circle of the Travelling Cuckoo*, a collection of short stories that appeared posthumously in 1967. Amato's friend and literary executor Maurice Shadbolt – a key figure in the New Zealand literary landscape of the day – probably intended the title to suggest both Amato's sense of displacement as a migrant writer and the

¹ I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Timothy Amato for generously making his collection of his father's personal papers available to me, and to Dora Celeste Amato and Michele Amato for sharing their memories of their brother Renato. I am also grateful to Sean and Bridget Shadbolt for permission to consult personal papers in the Shadbolt collection (Turnbull Library).

extent to which he ultimately managed to make a home for himself in his adopted New Zealand and reconcile himself with his troubled past. Yet the title also raises a number of questions: Can an immigrant writer ever really come ‘full circle’ in his adopted homeland, or is he somehow always an intruder? How does he set about the process of constructing a new linguistic and cultural identity and a literary community for himself there? And how does his work bridge the two cultures that shape him? These questions are central to the work of Amato – who was, until very recently, the only published Italian-New Zealand author. Amato immigrated in 1954, and his writing expresses his deeply-held view of himself as an outsider, both in his homeland and in his adopted country. This was exacerbated by the fact that he had no connections to the small Italian immigrant community in New Zealand. While most Italians came to the country through migration chains that provided them with family support, Amato came alone (Hill)². He had to build a new life from scratch, without support from anyone. His writings therefore offer representations of both Italy and New Zealand from this perspective: one of detachment, longing, and ultimately of an attempted reconciliation.

Shadbolt called Amato “one of this country’s most interesting and fastest-developing young writers”, an author who had made a graceful transition “from language to language, culture to culture, without a mutter of complaint” (1964:252). Yet neither the assumptions behind Shadbolt’s assessment of the migrant writer’s acts of linguistic, cultural and imaginative relocation nor the complexities of Amato’s work have received the scholarly attention they deserve. One of the few scholars to have looked at Amato’s work, Gaetano Rando – a specialist in Italo-Australian writers – has commented that his stories “reveal the tragedy of a man torn between two worlds, trying to find himself in his adopted country”. Rando points to Amato’s uniqueness as an Italian writer in New

² On the history of Italian migration to New Zealand, see also Ballara (1975), Burnley (1972), Elenio (1995), and Laracy (1973).

Zealand in the 1950s and 60s. He argues that “the recurrent central themes of his narrative are similar to those found in his Italo-Australian counterparts (the memory of the past, the alienation of the present, the problematical acceptance of the new country) although it may be claimed that Amato’s narrative is qualitatively better than that of his Italo-Australian colleagues” (Rando 1991b:65, n. 21). This makes it all the more remarkable that Amato’s work has been so neglected. This article therefore seeks to provide a brief introduction to Amato’s life and work and to examine the ways in which Amato’s writing expresses anxieties of identity that both differed from and resonated with work being written by New Zealand-born authors.

Keith Sinclair argued that the 1950s, when Amato immigrated, were the period in which “the New Zealand intellect and imagination came alive” (in Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2008). It is in this context that Amato’s literary contribution to his adopted country needs to be assessed. Much of his work, in which fiction and autobiography often blur, recounts his experiences of war in Italy and as a new migrant in New Zealand, while in other writings he attempts to speak in a specifically ‘New Zealand’ literary voice. His writing captured the attention and admiration of leading New Zealand writers of the day, such as Shadbolt, Ian Cross and James K. Baxter, and he had an important influence on younger writers such as Albert Wendt³. He also reached a wider audience through his radio presentations, talks and lectures. His connections to Italian writers like Cesare Pavese and his reviews of Italian works made him a point of contact between Italian and New Zealand literary cultures. In a period in which New Zealand literature could boast of few migrant writers, Amato represented a unique voice. He died in 1964 at the age of 35, leaving behind the stories that make up the posthumously published collection *The Full Circle of the Travelling Cuckoo*, an unpublished novel

³ Shadbolt’s *An Ear of the Dragon* (1971) is derived from Amato’s war experiences and its early pages follow Amato’s unpublished manuscript “My God had Feet of Clay” very closely.

entitled “Malady”, the first chapters of another novel, entitled “My God had Feet of Clay” and numerous other published and unpublished stories, poems and letters in both English and Italian. These writings have much to tell us both about the Italy Amato left behind him and the New Zealand he found, and about his own conflicted identity.

Born in Potenza in 1928 to middle-class parents, his family moved frequently during his childhood because of his father Francesco’s work as a bank manager. His mother Dora died when he was six, leaving Renato and his older sister Teresa, and his father married again and had two more children, Dora and Michele. When Italy entered World War II in 1940, Amato was 12 and living with his family in Turin. He became increasingly fascinated by the progress of the war and dismayed by what he saw as the venality and lack of pride of his compatriots, and particularly of his father, who simply longed for the war to be over. In his unpublished and incomplete autobiographical novel “My God had Feet of Clay”, he writes of how his father was “just another old man” like all the *attendisti* waiting to see which way the wind was blowing:

All those years on their shoulders had made them dry and selfish and had sapped their vitality. I knew, however, that they were wrong. Whatever one might have felt for them as human beings, they were like a dangerous pest threatening the body of national unity. It was we, the younger ones, the strong ones, who had to take over their functions and leap to the defence of ideals and principles which their tiredness and weariness made them unwilling to defend.

And when the war would be over, we would hand them again this new Italy we had preserved; the way – as the story books said – Mussolini and his Black Shirts, more than twenty years earlier, had handed the King the “victorious Italy” he had snatched away from disorder and hatred, we would – oh yes we would – hand back to all the unbelieving,

disillusioned old men a gleaming new country, an Italy we
had saved from destruction against, at times, her own will.
(Amato, “My God had Feet of Clay”)

D’Annunzian and Futurist echoes abound here, with youth and strength glorified over age and weary timidity. The mythology of virility and martial strength that fascism inculcated into the nation’s youth clearly captured the fifteen-year-old Amato’s imagination and merged with typical adolescent dreams of adventure and glory. In this, he was certainly out of synch with the majority of his countrymen and women, who by this stage were disheartened by years of war, bombardments, low rations, and other privations (Clark, 2008:348). In early 1944, in the wake of the Armistice and the formation of the Republic of Salò, with the Allies moving slowly northward, Renato ran away from home, to try to enlist in the Italian army. His father caught up with him, but after Rome fell on 4 June, he tried again, this time successfully. As the passage above demonstrates, the boy’s impulse seems to have been based on a sense of patriotism and a longing for adventure rather than on ideology⁴, but it also seems clear that nationalist propaganda and Fascist educational policies that emphasized the duty of men to fight for the patria contributed to shaping his conception of the path to manhood and his imaginative engagement with the war.

In the novel, Amato describes his youthful dream of glory and his hazy conception of the reality of war as follows:

“For country and honour”. That was what I was expected to
do: I had to go and serve the country and save its honour and

⁴ Extensive research in the Amato family archives in Italy and the Amato papers held at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington has turned up no evidence that Amato was a member of any fascist youth organizations, nor does he appear to have participated in fascist rallies and public meetings. In my interviews with them, his sister Dora and brother Michele also stated his lack of involvement in such activities.

die, perhaps, in the process. The thought of actually dying, however, was never really vivid. I had no idea of how people die on the fields of battle and I had never seen any of the casualties from the air-raids: the thought of me dying never quite included the vision of a lifeless body, my body, lying on the ground and unable to feel or respond, but went always further, to the effect it would produce on my parents, to the words they would use in the newspapers about my “heroic fall in battle”, to the resounding epitaph on my tomb-stone, to what was going to be the enormous sense of loss people who knew me would experience when I was dead. (Amato, “My God had Feet of Clay”)

In typically sardonic and self-deprecating style, Amato allows his youthful naïveté and adolescent self-obsession to speak for themselves. Once again, this passage reflects the extent to which the young man had internalized Fascism’s definition of heroic masculinity and its portrayal of war as a natural part of male existence.

The young protagonist’s ignorance of the realities of war is matched by his conviction that war is the glorious and noble enterprise portrayed by fascist propaganda. Fascist primary school textbooks quoted Mussolini proclaiming “libro e moschetto, fascista perfetto” and the Regime’s educational policy tried to convince boys of Amato’s generation to share il Duce’s belief that “war is to man what motherhood is to woman” (in Clark, 2008:330). The incomplete novel’s description of the young man’s thirst for warlike adventure and his attempts to realize his sexual desires with a number of women he encounters links the two as aspects of the same adolescent urge to define and demonstrate his virility. As Barbara Spackman has written, “virility is not simply one of many fascist qualities”, rather “the cults of youth, of duty, of sacrifice and heroic virtues, of strength and stamina, of obedience and authority, and of physical strength and sexual potency that characterize fascism are all

inflections of that master term, virility” (1996:xii). Almost all of these terms are themes of Amato’s novel, but interestingly missing from the list are obedience and authority. While not willing to obey his father’s injunction to stay at home, in 1944, the young man was hard pressed to find anyone willing to lead him.

“My God had Feet of Clay” describes how Amato was turned away by a recruitment officer who guessed his age, and how, determined not to go home this time, he decided to try to push through the allied lines and reach his beloved grandmother in Potenza. While the novel ends with his arrival near the Arno, Amato later described to Shadbolt (who included a fictionalized version of the story in his *An Ear of the Dragon*) how he made his way, mostly on foot, through war-ravaged landscapes, witnessing at first hand the death and destruction the war was causing. At the Arno, he was captured by the Germans. He was offered the choice of joining a work camp or the Brigade nere. He chose the latter, finding himself working as an ammunition carrier in a war he had not anticipated and in which he did not believe – one fought against his fellow Italians.

He travelled with the fascist brigade as ammunition carrier, and while he did not fight himself, he was present with the group as they retreated from the partisans, losing men every day, and was shot by a sniper, whose bullet he “carried ... in his body to the end of his life” (Shadbolt, 1967:9). Yet one of the great and traumatic ironies of his life was that he survived the war because of the same people who had shot at him. As the Allies drew ever closer, the man Amato called his ‘general’ sent him as a spy to join a Communist partisan group, the 43rd Garibaldi Brigade. Given the way the war was going, Amato afterwards came to believe that the general actually sent him to the partisans to save the sixteen-year-old boy from the fate that awaited the other members of the brigade. They were caught and executed in July 1945 by the same partisan group that Amato had joined. Amato was haunted by these wartime experiences for the rest of his life, and they form the basis of several of his short stories. In one of them,

“Only a Matter of Grammar” (1967), he wrote of the experience of watching in silence as his former comrades were shot: “I never spoke of it and I never spoke of Italy too much, when they told me about the beauty of its works of art and the kindness of its people... It has been as if the essence of Italy for me had lain hidden in that odd interval of time” (31). Shadbolt recounts how just as Amato could never forgive himself, neither could he forgive the country where he had struggled and failed to make sense of what he now saw as incomprehensible hatreds, and where he had watched with disgust as switching sides became a question of simply exchanging the pronouns ‘us’ and ‘them’.

A large part of this disgust is directed toward himself. Amato describes the process by which he himself changed sides in “Only a Matter of Grammar”:

I must have wanted it so much because, as we were walking, I remember – the thing I haven’t wanted to remember all this time – I thought, ‘Yes, we’ve won; *we’ve* won.’

And so, while Uti and the others were being walked towards the lake, I decided that Uti and the others were *they* and that La Mazza and the ‘Count’ and Bidonista and Geppo and the other ‘others’ were *we*. You see, it was so easy: only a matter of grammar. (Amato, 1967:36)

Amato spares his younger self nothing in this indictment of the facility with which many of his compatriots changed sides at the end of the war. In the introduction to Amato’s collection of short stories, Shadbolt wrote that for Amato, the war never really ended: “it was to last, like the bullet in his body, for the rest of his life” (1967:10). Shadbolt goes on to suggest that it was at this point that the dream of escaping from a country he could never forgive was born.

After the end of the war, Amato studied Law for a period in Turin, where he became involved in literary circles⁵. As a result, he met Cesare Pavese, who read some of his stories and offered him encouragement. Pavese asked him why the stories he was writing were so bloody, but Amato did not feel able to tell him about his experiences in the war. In a talk on Cesare Pavese written for Radio New Zealand in the early 1960s, Amato describes his encounters with Pavese and provides a number of interesting insights into his views on the relationship between a writer's life and work. He also describes his own literary tastes in 1950, just after Pavese's death: "I had read Godwin and Tom Paine, I had read James Joyce and the modern Americans, from Steinbeck to Anderson, to Hemingway and Dos Passos and Scott-Fitzgerald and the up-and-coming Tennessee Williams of *The Glass Menagerie*, but I barely knew that Pavese was a writer worthy of consideration" ("Pavese and Me":1). He names Moravia, Vittorini, Malaparte, Pratolini as "the first names one thought of when it came to mentioning Italian writers". He also describes being with Pavese's niece, with whom he was friends, at the writer's home shortly after his death, while Elsa Morante and Natalia Ginzburg were in the next room "going through [Pavese's] papers like seagulls scavenging in a refuse tip with beautifully winged swoops, to prepare the posthumous publication of his diary" ("Pavese and Me":1). Amato describes how Pavese's niece told him that the author had committed suicide because the American actress Constance Dowling had left him, but that he did not believe that that was the main reason: "I see his suicide as the result of a long-drawn process which culminated in a total loss of faith in all the accepted values of mankind: morals, love, patriotism, and a hopelessness without end." He writes of this hopelessness pervading

⁵ A precise timeframe for this period of Amato's life is not easy to establish. The biographical information provided here is gleaned from interviews with family members and from Amato's papers in the Turnbull Library and in the private collections of Tim Amato and Dora Celeste Amato (many of which are undated), as well as from Shadbolt's accounts of Amato's recollections of his life in Italy.

Pavese's work, as though he and his characters "were incapable of ... rebuilding myths of any kind, once the myths which had been believed in had been destroyed: one can call the myth love for a woman or love for mankind or love for a political creed" ("Pavese and Me":4). Amato's focus on the difficulty and necessity of having a myth to believe in is particularly interesting in the context of his own attempts to rebuild myths for himself after the myth of Fascism had been revealed to him in all its hollowness.

After dropping out of university, in early 1949 Amato left Turin for Rome, where he remained for several months, working in a number of menial jobs, as an actor in photographic comic-strips and as an extra. His sister Dora Celeste Amato says that he appeared as an extra in Pietro Germi's 1950 film *Il cammino della speranza*, while Shadbolt reports that he helped on the script of a neorealist film, perhaps the same one (Shadbolt, 1964:251). He also befriended a number of writers, including Giosé Rimanelli, whom he saw achieve international success. He wrote stories, some of which were published, but increasingly he felt adrift and ill-at-ease in Italy. He had to complete his military service, and did so in Brescia, in the north. He worked for a time at the International Refugee Organization and began to think of moving to an English-speaking country. His father's bank offered him a position, which he took up for a while, but his difficult relationship with his father and his impatience with the hierarchies and conventions of office life left him frustrated. He saw Italian society as constricting and insincere, and was disgusted by the hypocrisy of those who had changed sides effortlessly and carried on as before, and he began to imagine a new life for himself on the other side of the world. Pietro Mandrillo, who wrote the obituary that appeared in *Il Mattino* (the main newspaper of Naples), described Amato's decision to move to New Zealand as "non...priva di una giovanile componente romantica, come nelle trasposizioni dei Kangaroo di D.H. Lawrence, dell'Erewhon di Samuel Butler o nelle peregrinazioni polinesiane di Van

Gogh” (Mandrillo, 1964:3). Amato had found a new myth for himself. Indeed, he later spoke of how he had imagined New Zealand as a country “without wants, without problems, without fears, without restrictions, without the rigid social structure of the old world” (in Shadbolt, 1967:12). As a young country, still in the process of being constructed, New Zealand seemed to offer Amato the chance to play a part in building something⁶.

He arrived in Auckland, New Zealand in May 1954, at the beginning of a long, cold winter. The illusions he cherished about finding a fresh, new, democratic paradise untainted by provincialism were quickly dashed. He found work easily, but was shocked by the prejudice he encountered, and by the fact that, despite speaking fluent English, his accent marked him as a foreigner and vulnerable to the sneers of people with far less intelligence and education. New Zealand in the 1950s was a country caught between its colonial roots and its ambitions for a new identity, its pride in its pioneering origins and the ‘cultural cringe’ that still saw New Zealanders look to England as ‘Home.’ As Michael King put it, the obverse of mid-century New Zealand’s anglophilia was “a fear and dislike of cultures that were not British” that was “at times xenophobic” (2003:367). In his well-known and polemic essay on the philistinism and small-mindedness of 1950s New Zealand, Bill Pearson wrote that “[t]here is no place in normal New Zealand society for the man who is different...It is not only difference suggesting social superiority the New Zealander fears, it is any variation from the norm” (2005:59). What is more, “a foreign tongue sets the New Zealander’s nerves on edge, he feels the speaker is deliberately taunting his incomprehension” (2005:80). This was the country to which Amato had immigrated, and it

⁶ Shadbolt claimed that Amato chose New Zealand rather than any other place because a relative was able to help him to emigrate there (1967:12), but Amato’s writings suggest that it was also, at least in part, because the country represented a ‘blank canvas’ onto which he was able to project his dreams of a fresh start in a bold, pioneers’ society.

offered a cold reception to the idealistic and very ‘different’ young Italian. Tired of jokes about his name, he changed it to Michael and used Renato again only many years later when he began publishing in English, as though his mastery of the language gave him the confidence to proclaim his Italian identity (Shadbolt, 1964:13).

For almost a year Amato worked as a labourer helping to build the isolated township of Murupara in the wilds of the central North Island between the Kaingaroa Forest and Te Urewera National Park. There he had to endure the taunts and maltreatment of the camp supervisor, a man whose experiences of the war in Italy had left him with an enduring hatred of those he called ‘wops.’ In a short story Amato published in the literary journal *Mate* in 1961, later included in *The Full Circle of the Travelling Cuckoo*, “The Last of the Titans”, he described how he disappointed his companions’ stereotypical expectations of an Italian. They saw him as “a funny bird, refusing to tell [them] what the Italian words were for this, that and the other thing, and never talking of women and never laughing and never singing a song” (69-70). The story details the shock of arrival in a rough and sometimes boorish pioneering society, with delusions of imperial grandeur. He describes the exhaustion of the new immigrant, which is not so much physical, but:

more like the continued effect of an unexpected shock [...]. Everything, before he came, seemed to have had a meaning which, here, did not apply. From ‘freedom’, which now encompassed a peculiar licence to booze-up and brawl and curse to hell everybody and everything within a limited mental reach, to ‘Christian love’ and ‘standards of living’ and ‘the best in the world’. (69)

Many contemporary New Zealand writers commented on precisely the combination of crassness, puritanism and the refusal of difference that

Amato describes as typical of New Zealand in the 1950s⁷. As one of very few immigrant writers, however, Amato provides a unique perspective on these currents within the society. He underlines how others perceived him as an outsider, and how he himself felt cut off from those he encountered.

Yet he also found an explanation for what he suffered in what he called an enduring legend, one that was fostered by New Zealanders: “the legend of men who are giants and roam the countryside and master nature; the legend of lands that flow with milk and honey. And it was good to feel that he himself, by doing that, by swearing and sweating and smelling and going, might just make it and get into the legend” (72). Despite the touch of irony in his description of these all-mastering beings, there is also a glimpse of the dream that brought Amato to New Zealand. But it is also a reflection of what Jock Phillips (1987) described as “the male stereotype of the hard-living frontier man” (268) that persisted into the 1960s, despite the fact that most New Zealand men of the period had little or no experience of battling it out in the wilds. As Phillips puts it, “In 1960 not less than in 1920, men thought of the New Zealand male as a giant of the backblocks – strong, resilient and modest [...] The only change was a reduced effort in presenting the Kiwi male as a gentleman, and rather more public tolerance of the informal male culture” (1987:268). These were the years of the “six o’clock swill”, which saw exclusively male pubs filled with clients drinking as much as they could before the doors were closed and the bar was hosed down for the following day, and where the dominant notion of manliness involved “drinking, fighting and rucking” (272). Phillips points out that this stereotype of the mighty frontiersman was largely a myth, particularly by the 1960s, but one that remained a powerful force in the New Zealand imaginary. Despite his distaste for the boorishness of the average New Zealand male, aspects of the frontiersman myth clearly continued to resonate with Amato, even as

⁷ See for example Chapman (1973:58-59).

he began to look for a way out of the life of hard labour that Murupara represented.

Having survived the experience of Murupara, Amato found his way into a series of other jobs, from freezing worker to waiter to travelling linen salesman, in an upwardly mobile progression that brought him back to precisely the type of 'white collar' existence he had spurned in Italy, and ultimately led to him resuming his university studies and completing a Bachelor of Arts. An unpublished short story he wrote in Italian during this period describes some of his experiences while travelling, but most telling is the attempt at a poem he wrote in English in the margin: "Loneliness is the only companion / Friendly to stand by / Wherever you are" (in Shadbolt, 1967:14) Another short story, entitled "The New, New..." and published in the posthumous collection, paints a picture of his literal and spiritual solitude: "It had given him a sudden feeling of isolation and loneliness, a confirmation of the fact that he and *them* would never have anything in common, to see on the day the far side of the moon had been photographed that the morning paper headlines were more interested in RED TAPE SLASHED FOR MERCY FLIGHT" (73). Again and again the short stories provide descriptions of the intolerance and prejudice he encountered, but also of his own distaste for the uncultivated and ignorant aspects of the society in which he found himself, and of the self-disgust he felt each time he stood back and watched, rather than intervening.

For four years Amato did not touch a book, much less pick up a pen to write. But in 1958, in Wellington, he met a young Scots-English woman named Sheena McAdam who was studying at Victoria University and working part time as a waitress. One of the subjects she was studying was Italian, and she too was interested in literature, having published poems in a literary magazine and made friends with a number of New Zealand writers. Three weeks after they met they were married, and Amato enrolled as a student at Victoria. He began writing again, winning a prize for his first published story, a translation of one he had originally written

in Italian, and in 1960 was president of the Victoria University Literary Society. These were the years in which, as W.H. Oliver writes, “New Zealand acquired a cultural infrastructure” and the writing of fiction became a cottage industry, with “professional writers, at least in aspiration” (1992:541, 548). Keith Sinclair, in a talk given at the University of Auckland in 1963, described the changes in the intellectual life of the nation by saying that “a new phase of pioneering has begun: the labours of intellectual and artistic frontiersmen” (2005:113-14). This, then, was the new myth to which Amato devoted the final years of his life.

Amato’s editorials in the Victoria Literary Society journal, *Experiment*, reveal a distinctly non-New Zealand disposition to caustic (if perhaps justified) critique of writing he considered conventional or banal. In one such editorial, he writes:

I am convinced that, just now, University is no more, perhaps, than a trade school one attends in the quest of a trade certificate. Of the thousands of students on the rolls, only a handful had any ‘literary’ contributions to submit; a few dozen more attempted the short-cut to self-expression which is so often mis-named ‘Poetry’. (Amato, 1963:1)

Yet on the same page he praises Samoan New Zealand writer Albert Wendt as “an accomplished writer” with “a definite capacity to shape and control his material”. He was one of the first people to admire Wendt’s work, awarding him first prize in the Literary Society’s awards. Wendt remembers Amato fondly for his passion for literature and describes how he and other writers like John Parkyn and Norman Bilborough were close friends with him: “we looked up to him and what he was writing” (Wendt, n.d.)⁸.

⁸ On Amato’s influence on younger writers, see also Shadbolt (1964:251).

As Amato became more confident in writing in English, he abandoned Italian altogether⁹. But at the same time, Italy itself began to appear in his stories, interspersed with others clearly set in New Zealand. According to Mandrillo, “[p]ure estrinsecando la sua vocazione di scrittore in inglese, l’Italia rimaneva in [Amato] come esperienza di vita o forse come una madre lontana che si ama in proporzione inversa alla distanza che ci divide da lei, ma sempre con affetto illuminato dalla ragione”. Mandrillo also writes of the “punta di nostalgia” that was evident in some of Amato’s discussions of Italy and Italian culture for New Zealand radio and television (1964:3). In the story “Window-watching” Amato recalls the sick friend he failed to say goodbye to before he left, identifying himself with the invalid, even as he contemplates the physical and temporal distances that separate them: “We are both inside, in two rooms twelve thousand miles apart, looking out for the hills and valleys we would like to have again, for our youth that is irreparably gone” (66).

Amato’s work “often re-elaborated his life experiences”, as Franco Manai writes (2004:366). Yet the autobiographical focus of much of Amato’s work is more than just the typical introspection of a relatively young writer. In his obituary of Amato, Shadbolt describes how Amato reproached him for shying away from certain autobiographical themes in the *New Zealander*’s own work (1964:252). In his talk on Pavese, Amato wrote:

If a man becomes a writer, instead of a bank clerk or a grocer or a street-sweeper, he cannot help appearing, at a certain point, completely and utterly bare, defenceless. The only thing one has to do, after all, to know a writer is to read the books he wrote. And if he does not write travel or detective

⁹ In a letter to his family of 12 January 1962, he writes “di sera faccio anche il correttore di bozze sul quotidiano del mattino [*The Dominion*] di Wellington”, so his English was obviously of an excellent standard by this stage (1962).

stories, he will soon appear, perhaps to his own surprise, in a sort of X-ray plate of himself, with all his cancers and all his tumours, with all his bone structure open to view. (“Pavese and Me”:4)

Amato goes on to criticise a certain brand of European and particularly Italian literary criticism in which the biography of a writer is considered completely extraneous to his or her works, and in which such probing is considered “a lack of good manners”. Instead, he argues, “I think that one understands better a writer’s works if one keeps in mind, within limits, what sort of man the writer himself was” (“Pavese and Me”:4). Given the autobiographical focus of much of Amato’s work, once again, his account of Pavese suggests useful ways of reading it.

Amato’s correspondence with the many editors to whom he submitted his work also provides interesting insights into his conception of literature and of himself as a writer. In a letter to R.M. Dudding, the editor of the literary journal *Mate*, dated 15 May, 1963, Amato reveals that he had sent a novel entitled “It is Suddenly Night” (in reference to Quasimodo’s poem “Ed è subito sera” and later re-titled “Malady”) to the journal under the pseudonym of Michael Eyet – clearly a play on the derogatory description of Italians as ‘Eyeties’. In the letter he writes: “I used the pen-name because someone who knew me as ‘Renato Amato’ had said that my style, my way of looking at things, and the ‘peculiarities’ of my English would be recognizable a hundred miles away” (letter to Dudding). Dudding expresses doubts about the novel (particularly regarding its explicit sexual content), but describes it as “publishable”. While this was hardly a ringing endorsement, Amato was delighted by his comments on the text, which made no mention of peculiarities of style or any kind of ‘foreignness’ of the writing. That in itself was a source of pride for Amato. It is particularly interesting to analyze Amato’s attempts throughout this novel to ‘pass’ as a New Zealander, in contrast with his incomplete “My God

had Feet of Clay”, in which he writes of his war-time experiences and finds a stronger and more convincing voice.

“Malady” is set in New Zealand, mainly in Wellington, and tells the story of a middle-aged art dealer who falls in love with a young but cynical and emotionally scarred waitress who was abused by her father. The girl becomes pregnant to another man and the art dealer, who is unable to have a healthy relationship with a woman because of his own traumatic past sexual experiences, persuades her to come and live with him and offers to marry her. At the end of the novel, however, the girl has a car crash, loses her baby and leaves him. Amato cites Nabokov’s *Lolita* in the novel, and described his intention to reveal the perversion behind an act that society might view as worthy (i.e. that of marrying a pregnant girl) in a lesson given at the Wellington Women Writers’ School in April 1963. One of the few people to have read the novel, Mandrillo praises it for its representation of “la società neozelandese coi suoi complessi di solitudine, di frattura fra città e campagna, di paesaggio incombente sull’uomo, di sessualità puritanamente negata ma non risolta” (1964:3). The novel expresses a male chauvinist attitude towards women and sexuality, but this seems to be at least partly a result of Amato’s effort to express his perception of Kiwi masculinity, in what he saw as its lack of sophistication, sexual repression and general boorishness.

In the context of Afro-American studies, Elaine K. Ginsberg defines “passing” as “a performance in which one presents oneself as what one is not, a performance commonly imagined along the axis of race, class, gender or sexuality”(1996:219). In “Malady”, Amato engages in a similar performance, assuming an “anglo” identity as Michael Eyet, who in turn creates an “anglo” New Zealand male protagonist. Yet Amato assumes an alternative ethnicity not to “shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities”, as Ginsberg articulates the most common motivation for passing (3), but to assert his ability to ‘pass’ as a native speaker and as an ‘authentic’ New Zealand writer. In so

doing, he re-assumes the privileges of class and education that he had taken for granted or dismissed as the middle-class son of a bank manager back in Italy. But, as Judith Butler has written, “what is ‘performed’ works to conceal, if not disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, unperformable” (1993:234). Amato’s part-joking, part-serious performance of an assumed Anglo-New Zealand literary identity shows him laying claim to a place at the table with any Anglo-New Zealand writer. Yet ironically, this claim to ‘whiteness’ also depends upon the erasure of his white, middle-class, ‘northern’ Italian identity, in all its political and social complexity – an unperformable identity in a country where ‘Italian’ was automatically taken to mean ‘working class’, ‘southern’ and ‘uneducated’¹⁰.

In the manuscript of a talk entitled “The Art of Writing”, probably written for Radio New Zealand, Amato provides some information about what he hoped the novel might be. He uses the plot of “Malady” (“the situation of a man wanting to marry a girl who is expecting someone else’s child”) as an example of the type of ‘content’ on which an author might base a novel, drawing a distinction between a “scribbler” and a true writer. Amato describes how:

A scribbler, a craftsman, would make something out of it: with little depth, with little honesty, he would build up some romantic nonsense or some trashy, unmemorable piece of sensationalism. A writer would convey his personal interpretation of the human condition; might perhaps try to inform people that the moral laws by which they live are false and shallow, because the motives behind the man’s gestures are not what everybody thinks they ought to be. (“The Art of Writing”:4)

¹⁰ On the importance of discourses of “whiteness” in the Australasian context see, for example, Pugliese (2002) and Ravenscroft (2007).

This hints at Amato's aims in writing the novel, although he ends the talk by firmly placing himself in the despised category of "scribblers" as he describes the "enormous capacity for hard work" that is one of the essential qualities of the writer: "scribbling, the kind of writing I do, is, I find, the most exhausting hobby I have ever had" ("The Art of Writing":7).

In the same letter to Dudding mentioned above, Amato jokes that he will publish "It is Suddenly Night" once he has "written a 'best-seller' on an Italian emigrant's gratitude for the magnificent generosity and Christian spirit of this great little country". He also describes his wish to write another novel entitled "The White Negro" – "i.e. me" – about his experiences as a migrant in New Zealand. In an aside, the main character of "Malady" draws a parallel between Maori and 'continentals', who are similarly "unreliable". At the same time, and despite what these comments might suggest, the experience of writing in a language not his own seems to have freed Amato to move more fluidly between his two cultures. By the time he wrote the letter to Dudding, he had begun teaching Italian at Victoria University. He was also an active reviewer for the *NZ Listener* and for Radio New Zealand, and his reviews of the work of Italian authors such as Pavese helped bring them to the attention of the New Zealand reading public. By 1960 he was president of the university's lively literary society. Throughout the 1950s, New Zealand universities had provided something of a haven for the country's writers, who often struggled to survive in an anti-intellectual and conservative culture. Amato seems to have found just such a haven at Victoria, and thrived on the fierce arguments and heated debates of the literary society. Above all, he was finally able to devote himself to writing, and began to build a reputation for himself. He became close friends with many other Wellington writers, many of whom are remembered today as the key voices of a new generation of writers that reflected a rapidly changing and

maturing society. Amato's role in this important moment for New Zealand literary history has been underestimated. His 'outsider' status and his thoughtful analyses of his conflicting feelings about his identity as an Italian, as a 'new New Zealander' and as a writer resonated with writers whose work was in turn often concentrated on "the trials of an isolated individual in a hostile, puritanical society" – a theme which "mirrored the actual struggle of many New Zealand fiction writers to make a living and achieve acceptance" (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2007).

In a keynote address to the Australasian Centre for Italian Studies conference in Auckland in 2009, the novelist Witi Ihimaera drew an interesting parallel between Amato's experience as a European migrant writer and the experience of Maori and Pacific writers in New Zealand, all of whom had to 'translate' themselves into English in order to find an audience in a country whose primary external literary influences were British and American¹¹. For Ihimaera, Amato's "life and literary accomplishment reflect the similar difficulties and accomplishments of Maori and Pacific Island writers who were also trying to obtain traction in New Zealand at that time – and in the end all of us had to do it, in English" (Ihimaera, 2009). Ihimaera described his dismay at Amato's erasure of his Italian identity through his choice of using the name Michael rather than Renato, and compared it to the way he himself went by Will or Bill rather than his Maori name for many years, and the way his family was renamed Smiler by missionaries who thought it sounded like Ihimaera. The writer went on to underline the similarities between Amato's situation and his own, arguing that: "New Zealand was very successful in turning Renato Amato into a New Zealand writer" and that this was something calling for both praise and anger. He stated:

¹¹ Ihimaera was the first Maori writer to publish a collection of short stories (*Pounamu Pounamu*, 1972) and a novel (*Tangi*, 1973).

One has the sense that Amato was never able to escape the New Zealand asylum and to create a greater sense of the Italian pulse in our literature. One wants for some utterance which would mark him out as a writer of Italian descent. One wants the kind of migrant story which McEldowney and the Establishment would have found distasteful because of its being polemic. Instead, there is an erasure of the specificities of one's past and an overwriting of all those characteristics of the New Zealand story – a failure, I think, just as I failed when I tried to write the Maori story within the then dominant and overriding “Landfall” story construct during the 1970s. Fortunately for me I lived longer, through the years of Maori sovereignty – the 1970s, the Land March, the protests – and, as a consequence, I found my own tino rangatiratanga unfettered by the constraints of The New Zealand Way. Would Amato have similarly been able to find a pathway through New Zealand literature that would have allowed his voice to be more distinctive? I like to think so.

Ihimaera points to Shadbolt's *An Ear of the Dragon*, a “blatant reconstruction” of Amato's life story, as offering a poignant suggestion of what might have been, when it suggests that the writer Pietro (the Amato character) had turned back to the Italian side of his identity towards the end of his life. Some of the documents in the Shadbolt collection at the Alexander Turnbull Library suggest that this may have been more than literary wishful thinking on Shadbolt's part. In particular, the unfinished novel, “My God had Feet of Clay”, on which Shadbolt based much of the early part of his own novel, has a strength and authenticity of voice that is sometimes missing in the works in which Amato tries to ‘pass’ as a New Zealand writer and follow the oppressive rules of what Ihimaera calls “How to Write if You Want to Write in New Zealand”. A reading of all of Amato's work challenges Ihimaera's interesting assessment of Amato's “failure” and points to his full range and ability as a writer.

The arc of Amato’s brief but eventful life spanned oceans and cultures, class and nationality, war and peacetime. Ultimately, the ‘full circle’ that Shadbolt traced for his departed friend was perhaps more longed-for than real. In one of his last stories, “A Walk in the Shadows”, Amato ends with the words “I am so short of time” and indeed, he was not given enough time to fully develop his talents as a writer or to draw together the conflicting elements of his authorial voice. Yet his work suggests the productive, stimulating and sometimes provocative ways in which he did bring his native and adopted cultures together, in his own writing and in his discussions of the work of others. Amato’s writings challenge established categories of New Zealand and Italian literature, and offer a glimpse of neglected aspects of the two countries’ histories. Despite his tragically short life and the limited number of his works, Amato’s life and writings have an undeniable importance within New Zealand literature. They also have something significant to add to the history of two of the major traumas of twentieth-century Italy: the experience of fascism and the Second World War; and the exodus of millions of Italians who emigrated to the four corners of the globe.

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