

## The Self and the Other: Reaching out through a Bridge of Leaves

*Maria Paola Malva*

*“Chi può dire di aver mai toccato quello accanto a cui passa”.*  
*(Who can ever say to have touched that one passed close by)<sup>1</sup>*

Diana Cavallo is an Italian American woman writer of great sensitivity and exquisite capacity to render the complexity of feeling. In her novel, *A Bridge of Leaves*, she explores the power of memory to heal her characters from the state of illness and distress they experience during their quest for the discovery of their own selves and of the mode of relating to others. Her young protagonists, David and Laura, face an identity crisis, but each deals with it in a very different way. While David, in fact, succeeds in facing and easing the pain of his losses getting in touch with his past and finding his true identity through the power of memory, Laura is trapped into her own self and, incapable of dealing with the fragmentation of her own reflection in the mirror, yields to madness.

David tries to make the fragile crossing from self to others by exploring his relationships within the family, the college, the mental institution Laura is an inmate of. In this process, he realizes that the various stages of his life are associated with and recalled through memories of his childhood. In particular, he manages to relive the searing pain he felt when he lost his twin brother (truly a part of his own self), but also the deep joy of finding his roots through his grandparents, therefore managing to find his deeper self.

When he successfully tries to annihilate his sense of self in the mental ward, he realizes that without memory the only option is madness. Memory, therefore, for David as for other Italian American characters, is described as a vast rebirth, as a way to withstand losses, to turn the starkest pain into the wisest knowledge of himself and of the others.

One of the most powerful themes in this novel is doubtlessly the one of the double as a way to explore the self in order to reach out to the others, to analyze from a more detached perspective what lies at the very core of the soul. This process brings to the light all that lies too deep for tears and even for despair, at the centre of his being.

The novel starts portraying the character as he is watching his reflection in a mirror, therefore connecting the real self (what he feels he is) and its reflection (what is flimsier, not real),

When I got up and looked in the mirror, I was not in the least surprised to see my reflection, as I always do. I seemed a perfectly natural thing to be confronted by a picture of oneself that doesn't actually exist, or that exists only in relation to other things, perhaps they also assumed.<sup>2</sup>

The writer's words reveal the state of alienation and fragmentation the character experiences relating to a self just as unreal as the world around him seems to him to be. At the same time, in this moment of bitter crisis, even the mirror acquires a particular value, becoming a mentor and a mediator as David seeks his inner harmony. Initially, by looking at his reflection, he only perceives himself as physical shapes, as a sort of object set apart from the others by his physical features. "I want more than anything to impart my presence, beyond the form of it"<sup>3</sup>: with these words, David expresses the deeply-rooted fear of the emptiness within, that would totally wipe out his presence and his very essence.

Only later, exploring his own memories, does David achieve a process of reconstruction of the Self by means of a mediation between body and soul, between the psychological and physical presence. Hence, he perceives himself not only as a physical entity but as an activity, in that this is a never-ending transformation process giving rise to various different phenomena which, in their turn, deeply influence both his personality and his way of relating to others.

For David, looking at his image reflected in a looking glass is a metaphor of his need to understand his true identity. Speaking to his reflected image, after finding out about the dead twin whose life was and is strictly interwoven with his, also implies for him the exploration of his double, Italian and American, identity. In Jenijoy La Belle we find an interesting reference: "since the self ... is never fully achieved, it is necessary to look in the glass to see how one is doing in the process of constantly reinventing the self".<sup>4</sup> Thinking of the dead twin, for David, also brings into the foreground the need to accept his own ethnic dualism, going beyond the concept of a single, unitary identity, "One life divided between the two".<sup>5</sup> Also the writer and critic Werner Sollors maintains, in his work, that the characters in ethnic literature that show a deep attraction for looking glasses, water and window-panes are fully aware of their double identity.<sup>6</sup>

In his quest for a meaningful relationship with his neighbours, David sees in his friend Phil a kind of extension of himself. This relationship fascinates and scares him at the same time, because it is drawing him away from his inner world, pushing him towards an outer world unknown and terrifying for him,

But still something of me sought a link, drawing me out towards the strangeness of the words... Perhaps something in him seemed vaguely familiar, enough like me to be recognizable or, if not quite that, an embodiment of things, not fully expressed, towards which I groped. If so, he was, in a way, an extension of my self.<sup>7</sup>

David strives to find what he lost himself in the Other's speech. In this context the term Self is used with reference to the cognitive processes leading to the constant realization or awareness of a physical existence related to time, reality, cause and effect. This character has not got this awareness. He is always in two minds, hesitating, confused as he does not see himself as part of the world surrounding him, he does not feel at one with it, as he cannot share his life with its indifference, superficiality, the hostility to those who are different. Hence the juxtaposition of the Other that is an extension of the Self, with not clearly defined borders, allowing him to explore the innermost, most secret parts of his unconscious. This allows, too, a mediation among the various expressions of the Self, the unconscious and conscious one, the impulsive and the rational one beyond the limitations made necessary by the outer world.

David and Laura are shown as they are engaged in the quest for an extension of their own selves as if they needed the support of another identity because they are much too weak to face life. Their selves appear to be split in two parts, an automatic and a rational one: each of them, which can be defined as the Self and the Other, perceive the world in a different way and the two perceptions cannot easily be reconciled.

In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states that any division of the Self is fictitious as it is actually impossible to be objective towards one's own Self and one's own way of being<sup>8</sup>. The fact that man realizes how impossible it is to escape from the fetters of reality, often pushes him to invent an Other-than-Self entity who lives in the world of imagination. Regression as well, leading to dissociation appears as an attempt at surviving the pressure of the real world, taking refuge in one where the mind and self-awareness work together as units that seem to respond to two different mechanisms. While his friends and family remember David's twin as the

child he was when he died, David sees him as a grown-up like himself. This imaginary twin, actually, is nothing but a projection of David's own self, an entity allowing him to have a double identity, so that a real and an imaginary identity coexist in his soul.

An instinct, according to Sigmund Freud, can never become the object of one's awareness, only the idea representing it can become so. In the Unconscious as well, an instinct can be represented only by an idea.<sup>9</sup> By this he means that instinctive needs can only be recognized once they are presented as ideas. The deviant behaviour highlights the characteristics of the instinctive desire, revealing conflicting feelings and emotions, like the juxtapositions between the past and the present, unconscious desire and conscious knowledge, what is real and what belongs to imagination. David alternates two states which are in conflict between each other: a positive one, represented by his grandparents' memories and **their** tales and a negative one, represented by the town where he lives. Closing his eyes, he evokes the past, building an imaginary world that takes him away from the squalor of his true everyday life: "I shut my eyes, thankful that I was there for the midsummer night change to have been worked for me".<sup>10</sup> Recalling his past, rich in magic, mystical elements seen in a positive light, is proposed as an antithesis highlighting the coldness of the absolute rationality and conformism of American society, colourless and at most in a grey monotone: "The rites might have been more colourful in another era, associated as they were with magic, religion and mysticism".<sup>11</sup>

In David and Laura, Diana Cavallo creates two ambiguous characters, torn by the contrast between the old and the new, the past and the present, darkness and light. Their minds try to hit the middle way to reconcile these opposites, so as to satisfy their emotional requirements, but this does not happen according to the criteria defined in a "sane" mind, but according to an uncontrolled, often bizarre creativity that associates even the most extreme elements.

David, in particular, is a clear example of the difficulty that the characters of the Italian American writing find in establishing relationships with the outer world. In their solitude, they seem to be trapped in their inner world, refusing to open up to their neighbours because this effort arouses in them a feeling of anxiety and deep fear,

Why should loneliness assault me on this day of all days, when it seemed paradoxically at an end, when there was almost a certainty of having found what had eluded me all the years? ... I had never fully

known the sense of incompleteness that I felt in the dark unknown place I spoke of, and the longing that had burst into fire there for someone completely apart from me whom I could know with a certainty, as I sometimes knew myself.<sup>12</sup>

David's isolation becomes evident when he says "(They) forced upon me a true knowledge of another existence ... the most enormous power to steal from me that solitude some men search for a lifetime and never find".<sup>13</sup> He refuses to open to the others because he sees them as intruders who want to invade his solitude, forcing him to acknowledge their presence. The despair for the loss of his inner peace, which accompanied him, emerges from his plaintive revelation of the moment when he realizes he was not alone any longer "That night is impressed in my memory as the loneliest I ever spent. It was the night the possibility of not being lonely presented itself for the first time".<sup>14</sup>

David's isolation is highlighted by the breach between the past and the present, the old and the new, by the juxtaposition between the system of values of the dominant society and the traditions of the ethnic ones. An element of unease deeply influencing these characters' personalities is the discrepancy between their concept of family and the one of individual autonomy, as Italian American women writers, being influenced by both cultures, cannot accept one without entering into a conflict with the values of the other. These women also own what Gloria Anzaldúa defines as "the mestiza consciousness"<sup>15</sup>: even if they are quite determined to reach a state of "self-actualization", in fact, they are deeply linked to family relationships and believe in the solidarity and empathy generating the intense and often problem-riddled relationships we find in their novels. In their plots, the old and the new are often interwoven in a series of dilemmas that seem only to be solved when they are able to completely accept their tradition.

The family relationships Diana Cavallo herself lives and experiences, like the other Italian American women writers are very deeply rooted. For emigrating Italian farmers, in fact, individual experience becomes a synonym of death, when they leave their home country trying to escape penury, starvation and lack of opportunities. Their hope is focused on the community and, above all, on family solidarity. As Richard Gambino writes, in his work about the dilemma of Italian Americans: "family solidarity was the basic code of such family life and defiance of it was something akin to a cardinal sin".<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, American culture at the end of last century highlighted the value of independence, prospering in isolation and having

the “*self-made man*” as its symbol. As Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino points out in her book about the condition of Italian American women writers “Born in America, they feel the need for education and the pull of self-actualization. However their heritage is Italian and deep within lie the ancestral voices demanding allegiance to the code of *omertà*”.<sup>17</sup>

The division of their self they experience to be able to keep the ties of the cultural reality of family traditions and, at the same time, to become part of the other, is made clear in the following statement, again by Mannino: “their claim to a legitimate place in American Literature involves the splitting open of themselves, as well as the breaking apart of the canon they wish to enter”.<sup>18</sup>

The writer and critic Fred Gardaphè, in his work about the evolution of Italian American narrative, points out how the immigrants’ experience, visible in the written word, is actually the extension of an ancient oral tradition deeply rooted in the depth of the narrator’s soul. He also points out that the peculiarities of the Italian American writing set it apart from other ethnic writings within the American context: “(it has) characteristics which distinguish it from other American literatures”.<sup>19</sup>

This can explain why the inner conflict deriving from a double existence emerges in the novel: in fact, one is lived in contact with tradition, while the other is rubbing shoulders with the immediacy and superficiality of a consumer’s reality. Fred Gardaphè proposes to understand how the Italian American women writers relate to the world surrounding them, examining the conflicts, the ways of being, the unease and isolation deriving from this impact as they are trying to recreate a balance allowing them to survive between two conflicting cultures.

In creating the characters in *A Bridge of Leaves* also Diana Cavallo is trying to explore the grey area of survival in the midst of a forest of contradictions surrounding them, reality and imagination, darkness and light, life and death. After seeing the condition in which the inmates of the mental home Laura finds herself in live, David wonders which the consequences may be for those who choose to live in a world riddled with indifference. For Laura, instead, the mental disease is a reaction to the pressures she undergoes from the outer world, when she distances herself from the known territory of her family environment to tread the unknown paths of the wilderness without. The situations in which she finds herself arouse her anger, inhibition and sense of inferiority, so that, eventually, depression, deeply rooted unease and pathologies lead to full blown mental disease.

Madness becomes a fight to get free from the fetters of the false values suffocating the self. It allows the character to retrieve primitive feelings and impulses offering the possibility of the rebirth of the true Self, a way out from an oppressive world through the light of memory and imagination.

And it is the power of imagination that allows Diana Cavallo to give a universal dimension to the experiences of each character. In this way, they put an end to their limiting ethnic condition, to acquire a freedom allowing her to highlight the deepest state of their selves and show their creativity. By joining the real and the imaginary world, the writer aims at conveying a message of urgency, revealing her state as a woman balancing between two different cultures, risking losing herself in an uneasy oblivion because she feels she does not belong to either. In this alternation between silence and statement, memory and the present she witnesses a story that is the inevitable inheritance of another one, but also a very tangible reality revealing the unease of an ethnic minority within such a deeply conformist society as the American one. Her story becomes one, the polyphonic choir of just one music sheet whose unifying factor is her being a woman on the edge of an identity crisis, neither Italian nor American.

In Laura, and in some way in David too, Diana Cavallo projects her being as a hybrid feminine figure, telling about her memories and personal experiences giving them the colours of her mind, revealing the conflicts within herself. In this process, she continues to stress the importance of memory within the context of the tradition she belongs to, even if, at times, in spite of herself. Remembering, in a society that seems to gobble up every single morsel of people's lives and of their past, is the only way to preserve one's own sanity, to nurture one's identity. It is the only way, the necessary, urgent one to find a balance in the present.

Through memory, Cavallo's characters (a clear projection, as we said, of the writer's self) explore their own souls and inner Selves, as well as the surrounding world. Her "memory" is at the same time familiar and unknown, embracing the collective past of the people her family belonged to as well as the darker parts of a more recent past emerging by contact with a living experience. The shift from past to present and the ensuing "dépaiement", have the function, though, to join somehow the Old World and the New.

Memories have got a double role, the one to create oblivion and the one to arouse, in any given moment, the past, particularly one's childhood. In this latter case, they surface in the sea of the mind as if the narrating I were in quest of itself. In this quest, through imagination and memory the writer

revisits the places of the past as if she were part of them herself, as if they fully belonged to her.

Her awareness of the essential function of reminiscing and remembering carries the writer to remote space and time dimensions, allowing her to predict and plan the future. America is a young nation, looking forward all the time, obsessed with wasting precious minutes and hours, while the Old World has seen the sand of time pass numberless times through the hourglass and can sit, and wait, lost in remembrance.

With *A Bridge of Leaves* Diana Cavallo makes a brave, and mostly successful attempt, at breaking down the wall of indifference too often surrounding people, closeting them in a claustrophobic reality. In this way she tries to ease the difficult transition of those who come from a different world and feel the past lives of their forefathers weighing like stones on their young, innocent shoulders.



Note

- <sup>1</sup> Pavese Cesare, 1953, *Dialoghi con Leucò*, Einaudi, Torino: 36.
- <sup>2</sup> Cavallo Diana, 1997, *A Bridge of Leaves*, Toronto: Guernica Editions: 3.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*: 3.
- <sup>4</sup> La Belle Jenijoy, 1990, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, Cornell University Press, Reprint edition: 17.
- <sup>5</sup> Cavallo Diana, *op. cit.*: 84.
- <sup>6</sup> Sollors Werner, 1986, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press: 249.
- <sup>7</sup> Cavallo Diana, *op. cit.*: 65.
- <sup>8</sup> Cfr. De Beauvoir Simone, 2002, *Il secondo sesso*, traduzione di Roberto Canini e Mario Andreose, prefazione di Renate Siebert, Il Saggiatore, Milano: 726.
- <sup>9</sup> Cfr. Freud Sigmund, 1983, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, in Feder Lilian, *Madness in Literature*, Princeton University Press: 18.
- <sup>10</sup> Cavallo Diana, *op. cit.*: 37.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*: 38.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*: 67.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*: 68.
- <sup>15</sup> Anzaldúa Gloria, 1987, *La consciencia de la mestiza: Toward a New Consciousness*, in *Borderlands La Frontiera: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Press, San Francisco: 77-91.
- <sup>16</sup> Gambino Richard, 1974, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of Italian Americans*, Doubleday, New York: 150-151.
- <sup>17</sup> Mannino, Mary Ann Vigilante, 2003, *Breaking Open: Reflection on Italian American Women's Writing*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, IN: 5.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*: 6.
- <sup>19</sup> Gardaphè Fred, 1996, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* (Introduction to), Duke University Press, Durham: 11.

*Bibliography*

- Anzaldúa, Gloria, 1987, *La consciencia de la mestiza: Toward a New Consciousness*, in *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Press, San Francisco;
- Bona, Maria Jo and Gilbert, Sandra, 1999, *Claiming a Tradition: Italian American Women Writers*, Southern Illinois University Press, Chicago;
- Candeloro, D., Gardaphè, L. F. e Giordano, P., 1986, *Italian Ethnics: Their Languages, Literature and Lives*, The Italian American Historical Association, Staten Island, New York;
- Cavallo, Diana, 1997, *A Bridge of Leaves*, Guernica Editions, Toronto;
- Chodorow, Nancy J., *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, 1978, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA;
- Chodorow Nancy, 1980, "Gender Relation and Difference in Psychoanalytic Perspective" in *The Future of Difference*, eds. Hester Heinstejn and Alice Jardine, G.K. Hall, Boston;
- De Beauvoir, Simone, 2002, *Il secondo sesso*, traduzione di Roberto Canini e Mario Andreose, prefazione di Renate Siebert, Il Saggiatore, Milano;
- De Lauretis, Teresa, 1987, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN;
- De Lauretis, Teresa, 1986, "Feminist Studies/Critical Studies: Issues, Terms and Contexts," in *Feminist Studies Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis, 1-19, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN;
- Feder, Lilian, 1983, *Madness in Literature*, Princeton University Press;
- Freud, Sigmund, 1966, *The Standard Edition of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Hogarth Press, London;
- Freud, Sigmund, 1938, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, The Modern Library: The Random House, Inc, New York;
- Gambino, Richard, 1974, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of Italian Americans*, Doubleday, New York;
- Gardaphè, Fred, 1996, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*, (Introduction to) Duke University Press, Durham;
- Gardaphè Fred, 1996, *Tradition and the Italian/American Writer*, Guernica Editions, Toronto;
- Gardaphè, Fred, 1995, *The Italian/American Writer: An Essay and An Annotated Checklist*, Spencertown, Forkroads Press, New York;
- La Belle, Jenijoy, 1990, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, Cornell University Press, Reprint edition;
- Mannino Vigilante, Mary Ann, 2003, *Breaking Open: Reflection on Italian American Women's Writing*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, IN;

- Mulas, Francesco, (Winter 1985), "A MELUS Interview: Jerre Mangione," in *MELUS: The Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 12.4;
- Mulas, Francesco, 1994, "The Ethnic Language of Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*," in *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana*, Eds. Anthony J. Tamburri, Paolo Giordano, Fred Gardaphè, (307-315), Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, IN;
- Mulas, Francesco, 1995, *Studies on Italian-American Literature*, Center for Migration Studies, Staten Island, NY;
- Mulas, Francesco, 2002, *Critical Essays on John Fante's Novels*, Magnum-Edizioni, Sassari;
- Mulas, Francesco, 2005, "Henry Molise's Cultural Growth in John Fante's *The Brotherhood of the Grapes*," in *Greece and Italy: Ancient Roots & New Beginnings*, Eds. M. Aste, S. L. Postman and M. Pierson, (56) Bordighera Inc., Boca Raton, FL;
- Pavese, Cesare, 1953, *Dialoghi con Leucò*, Einaudi, Torino;
- Sollors, Werner, 1986, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York;
- Unali, Lina, 1982, "Cultural and Linguistic Hybridization in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*," presented at the Biennial International Conference of the EAAS, Paris, April;
- Unali, Lina, 1990, "Jerre Mangione's *Mount Allegro* and the Euro-American Common Denominators," in *The Future of American Modernism: Ethnic Writing Between the Wars*, ed. W. Boelhower, Amsterdam Press, Amsterdam, VU;
- Unali Lina, 1994, "Silence of the Ethnic Cradle: The Noise of America, the Control of the Noise," in *RSA: Rivista di studi anglo-americani*, 10 (359-465), Supernova.

