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LOST IN ASTORIA: HISTORY, SELF AND ITALIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN ROBERT VISCUSI'S *ASTORIA*

Human attitude toward personal and collective past has always been ambiguous. As David Lowenthal exposes in his monumental *The Past is a Foreign Country*, feelings concerning the past are divided between an almost filial dependence or divine veneration, and a sense of unbearable burden, of a haunting existence in a ghost-like form. On one hand, past seems a safe shield of coherence, completely understandable because completely immutable (62). Notwithstanding its often-recognized connection with the present, past is seen as purged from the chaos of today. On the other hand, yesterday may represent a threat to the affirmation of the individual self, a persistent stain in everyday action, condemning human beings to the role of passive spectators in front of the great deeds of ancestors. As a consequence, the image of the bright, paradisiacal 'old times' often opposes the gloomy representation of an illness-like past, affecting human creativity and one's own self-reliance. More specifically, this idea of a *damnosa hereditas* (71) is persistently pictured by Italian American writers, directors, and artists, who have often described the heavy weight of their heritage and all the anxieties brought along with this burden. Among these intellectuals, American writer, poet and critic of Italian descent Robert Viscusi has analyzed in details his personal experience of the Italian American mythologized past in his semi-autobiographical, semi-critical novel *Astoria*. Viscusi's quest for his own self comes with the traumatic epiphany experienced by his alter-ego character, whose words take the place of, complete, and overlap with those of the real author. A personal tourist trip turns into an in-depth investigation of history, memory, and myth, in search of a definition for a present Italian American identity.

In the novel, Robert Viscusi— both the real author and his fictional counterpart— is invited to Paris to give some university lectures. During this two-week trip, Viscusi has the chance to go and visit the French capital for the first time in his life. Surrounded by a snowy Paris, the author wanders through the streets of the city, trying to follow his guide book suggested tours, finally coming across the grandiose building of *Les Invalides*, where he finds himself in front of the tomb of Napoléon Bonaparte. The sight disturbs him: instead of the sumptuous elegance typical of the Parisian *grandeur*, he is struck by the tacky construction erecting at the centre of the room, completely out of place among the refined beauties of the capital. This disquieting view shocks him and triggers a process of association of images, memories, and stories connecting the tomb to moments of Viscusi's life and his Italian American background.

The professor links this traumatic experience to the Stendhal Syndrome. In her groundbreaking book, *La sindrome di Stendhal (The Stendhal Syndrome)*, Graziella Magherini describes this psychosomatic disorder as the moment when an environment overloaded with history and art provokes the surfacing of a bewildering concoction of what is familiar and what is completely unknown, a condition conceptualized by Sigmund Freud in his essay *Das Unheimliche* as the uncanny (Magherini, 158). In particular, the individual unconsciously assigns the object, the monument, or the art work with the repressed memories which are surfacing again. As suggested by some recent studies in the field of neuroscience, the brain is constantly mapping the world around us and it is therefore modified by every interaction with objects the individual experiences (Damasio 65). More specifically:

Our memories of certain objects are governed by our past knowledge of comparable objects or of situations similar to the one we are experiencing. Our memories are prejudiced, in the full sense of the term, by our past history and beliefs. (140)

What happens within Viscusi's mind is a stubborn penetration of past, in both its autobiographical and collective form, inside his present, a displacing experience which in any case he manages to handle and to

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take advantage of. Looking at the tomb he sees “the people who made Napoléon what he was” and, instead of finding himself, he discovers “an indistinct, milling crowd, not really like a single person at all, more like a collection of friends and relatives in the lobby of a funeral parlor” (15). Thus, the author/character’s journey becomes “the node or the nerve-ending of what I knew to be a vast movement of people,” a chaotic multitude of presences pressing his present identity. This involuntary mechanism of association between personal elements and historical ones is transposed into the parallel process of connection between things past and things present. As Viscusi himself states, this experience is

one instance of how the past presents itself persistent in *l’Astoria* as the most commonly understood text of the future, the act of travel as the adventure of reading what has long since been prepared, including in its preparation your sense that all of it has been prepared for you. (93)

But what is then *l’Astoria*? Astoria is both a neighborhood of Queens, New York, where the author spent most of his childhood, and the condition of historical loss and past tyranny experienced by Americans of Italian descent. The term Astoria comes as a substitute to the more clinical Stendhal Syndrome, while maintaining its meaning of “historical disease” (20). What differentiates this illness of the self from other pathologies is the very characteristic of being an *a-history*, a condition of “absence of history” (21). Unlike other psychic disorders, Astoria cannot be cured simply by talking or remembering, because “its roots are not to be found in your personal history.” Therefore, the first meaning connected to the privative alpha refers to the presence of historical events like “very large objects” affecting and weighing upon the individual, pressing him/her, leaving evident imprints in his/her personality but never really revealing themselves. They are sunk into the unconscious, often invisible, but always determining our actions. The prefix, thus, expresses the paradoxical absence of what has been present in the past, already recognized by Paul Ricoeur in his idea of a duality between what-no-longer-is and what-has-already-been (2004, 9).

The second meaning concealed within the word Astoria is again linked to the concept of absence, referring this time to the historical void left by the experience of migration. The first Italian immigrants, Viscusi claims, had to spend all their energies and time in the making of the so-called American Dream. Thus, they had neither the skills nor the means to document their condition; they were not able, in other words, to fix them in stone. Moreover, members of the following generations (of which Viscusi himself is part), despite being wealthier and more well-educated, found that they were almost completely cut off from the original meanings of their grandparents’ traditions, both because many of their relatives were already dead or too old to provide truthful oral testimony, and because of the insurmountable obstacle represented by the Italian language (22). As a consequence, the migration experience “is a wonderful story, rich in feelings, but it explains very little (...) It doesn’t, in short, and it never did, answer most of the questions I was forever putting to my patient elders” (23). The result is a “vast blank space,” a disorienting absence of documented history (22).

This leads to the third meaning, born within the opposition between *l’Astoria* and *la storia*¹, the latter being not what is written in newspapers, but what lies within the historical event, the absolute teaching you can receive from the voice of history (36). The idea of *l’Astoria* implies the concept of myth in both its connotations—as *mythos*, a tale, a story, and, negatively, as what is unreal, falsely believed, what is not-history, a-history (Detienne 63-65). In this case, Astoria falls into the concept of cultural memory, defined by Jan Assman as “a form of collective memory, in the sense that it is shared by a number of people and that it conveys to these people a collective, that is, cultural, identity” (110). Cultural memory is always embodied by symbols, objectified into monuments and artifacts, stored in archives and museums. In other words, it is institutionalized. Memory as institution, as suggested by Paul Ricoeur, circumscribes each action of the individual within a signified system of rules and norms imposed by the institution itself (61). As such, cultural memory is opposed on the one hand to inner memory, which I prefer to call autobiographical memory, and

¹ *l’Astoria* and *la storia* can be translated respectively as ‘ahistory’ and ‘history.’ However, the English translation loses the linguistic pun implied by the author. By shifting the apostrophe of ‘l’Astoria’ rightly after the first letter of the word Astoria, the ‘a’ becomes part of the Italian feminine article ‘la.’ In this way, a new expression is created, namely *la storia*, which represents the semantic opposite of the original term ‘l’Astoria,’ which means exactly a-history or, again, l’A-storia.



on the other to communicative memory, which involves memories from the recent past (Assmann 109, 113). While communicative memory consists of all those recollections orally shared by contemporaries and thus involving stories from no more than three generations, cultural memory's "temporal horizon" goes back to the origins of things, is written in books, petrified in monuments, celebrated in feasts. In cultural memory history fades into myth and the two are no longer distinguishable. In the ghostly, vanishing boundary between myth and history lies l'Astoria.

L'Astoria is a non-time, a past forever frozen, and a common Italian American condition grounded on the overwhelming force of removal and memory loss. Also, L'Astoria is "the form history takes forever the minutes it ends" (Viscusi 38). In other words, it is all that remains of history after it is interiorized and it represents a scar "written in you with a burning stick (...) some wire you will be hanging on forever" (30,31). This internalization and personalization of historical events, accompanied by the already mentioned absence of real documented stories from the first generations of immigrants, causes a shift from history to myth. This slide towards a mythical conception of the past has been analyzed by several scholars working in the field of Memory Studies. Maurice Halbwachs has been the first to introduce the idea that any memory, even the most intimate, is in a way framed by social conventions and recollections (53). Memories are social and always shaped by institutionalized, collective memories. Thus, memory does not only represent the grounding foundation of individual identity, but it also allows the integration of the single person into a group, to which he/she is connected by means of shared recollections (Assmann 113).

Communities need collective, institutionalized memories to build their own identities. This is all the more true if the group in question has experienced a process of eradication from its land of origin and has to face the assimilating force of the new society it has entered. In this case,

the role of external symbols becomes even more important, because groups which, of course, do not 'have' a memory tend to 'make' themselves one by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions. (Assmann 112)

Uprooted and disoriented in the New World, Italian immigrants felt the need to create a system of values and symbols to grasp at when facing American society and its assimilating force. Halbwachs has inferred that the earlier Christian community, not at all integrated in the Jewish society, had to "concentrate all its forces upon the immediate past and upon those places that were imbued with its memories" (202). Likewise, Italian immigrants, for the most part illiterates and far from owning a strong historical knowledge of their Italian past and culture, made use of their only available source of identity—their most recent memories of Italy and of the migration experience itself, as Viscusi states in the following passage:

All we knew, it appeared, was what was remembered. A random catalogue of attitudes and proverbs that grew new force and power as one clasped to them more tightly in the face of the strange things one was learning in New York. (153)

But to create a concrete system of recollections on which to establish a cultural memory, the group needs to start a process of reification of those memories, which have to be concretely embodied by places, personalities, rituals, and then turned into monuments, artifacts, and feasts (Halbwachs 200). This necessity hastened the creation of a tangle system of myths, which enhanced memories, exaggerating and sanctifying events, filling the voids left by the "absence of history" in the Italian immigration experience (Viscusi 21). What happened was a premature slide from what Assmann calls communicative memory to cultural memory. This implies an unripe transformation of very recent memories, going no further back than two or three generations, into mythical memories, evoking an ancestral past, whose timelessness has taken the place of documented, historical events. Therefore, to live and move in Astoria means to experience "an ancient universe of dandelions and escarole, tomatoes and grapes, eggs, chickens, goats, my father, my mother" (Viscusi 173). Astoria is where myth takes the place of history, an Arcadia of ancient pleasures and values, imposing itself upon the youngest members of Italian American community, who were unable to fully understand these religious-like precepts mostly because they couldn't decode the language their elders



used. Thus, not only is Astoria synonym with mythical narration and abrupt substitution of history, but it also reaches “a new and strange absoluteness” which “it could never have possessed when the children at least could understand the things they heard eavesdropping” (174).

These considerations provide us with two consequences. First, besides being a non-time, Astoria is also a non-place. In this sense, Viscusi parallels Astoria with Paris, since both of them are places you will never be able to live in. They are the result of constructed images, artificial myths, and thus insincere. In Paris, like in L’Astoria, everything is transformed into mythical relics, a cluster of souvenirs produced in series. There, collective memory reaches the status of a final, unconscious monumentality (52). In other words, as Viscusi himself overtly states, “Paris to you is what L’Astoria is to me: what you can buy but could never inhabit once you wanted to” (55). How could one inhabit a place which is the result of an incessant attempt to preserve a version of the past discovered to be completely a-historical? How could one live in a place which does not exist? Astoria is a *there*, which will never become *here* and looks less like a collective memory, than, to use Viscusi’s word, a “collective dream” (312).

Secondly, this impalpable but persistent presence of an a-historical past, pretending to be history, haunts the Italian American individual as a malady brought from the Old Country across the Atlantic Ocean:

This fraudulent Italy of ours, this bible much studied by folklorists and family counselors, burdened and marked and soaked us (...) We could touch nothing without staining it with the blood of ancestors whose names we didn’t even know how to discover. (298)

L’Astoria represents an overwhelming disease which “didn’t want me dead, it wanted me dying” (291). Surprisingly similar is Roland Barthes’ idea of myth, as described in his *Mythologies*:

The myth is a language which does not want to die: it wrests from the meanings which give it its sustenance an insidious, degraded survival, it provokes in them an artificial reprieve in which it settles comfortably, it turns them into speaking corpses. (132)

Barthes chains up the myth to the image of a dreadful force, which “stifles the man in the manner of a huge internal parasite,” subjugating the individual and all his/her creative impulses and provoking an inevitable slope toward the atrophy of the self (156). “Why try to destroy what already doesn’t exist?,” asks Viscusi, meaning Astoria is a paradoxical disease that cannot be healed because it doesn’t exist (312). Or does it? Even though the author asserts its inexistence, Astoria is a force undeniably rooted in Italian American identity, and it is also undeniably historical. A-history is born from historical necessities and contingences, the paradox being that this historical force denies history because of the mythical form it has taken.

The “point of blindness” that, in Viscusi’s opinion, characterizes his own self, his own *I*, constitutes the reason why the author and his alter-ego seem unable to go down to the core of the problem (146). The historical disease has compromised his *point of view*, his ability to read reality and history with a critical, more objective perspective. As Viscusi himself suggests, thus, the shocking experience lived in front of the tomb of Napoléon Bonaparte has not to be stigmatized as a condition to feel uncomfortable with. The Astoria Syndrome should not be regarded as pathological and its victim should be “hailed, as Stendhal so often has been, as a precursor of a new age” (19). Now the point of view is turned upside down. The shocking event is not something to be cured, but a collateral symptom indicating a disturb and, as such, it represents the only chance the individual has in order to face the monumental problem of l’Astoria. At fist the shock looks like “a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off” (Woolf 78). But as soon as it is followed by the desire to understand it, to write it down, to fix it in paper in order to break the *omertà*² forcing critical thought to silence, the shocking episode is

² The term *omertà* is an Italian word indicating “the code of silence that governs what is spoken or not spoken about in public” (Gardaphé 20). Besides being often linked to the Mafia world, *omertà* is also supposed to have influenced the development of the Italian American literature because of the immigrants’ reluctance towards the written word (197). In his novel, Viscusi himself confesses that he feels he is betraying his ancestors’ antique code by telling his own and his family’s stories: “I, me, is the name also of the breaker of silence, the accuser, the traitor, the teller of secrets” (146).



reborn as a dynamic impulse to life, as suggested by Virginia Woolf's insightful words, describing a similar experience:

I feel that I have had a blown; but it's not, as I thought as a child, simply a blown from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; (...) It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; the wholeness means that it has lost the power to hurt me. (72)

Undergoing the shock and enduring the process of redefinition of identity is certainly a cause of pain, distress, and fear. Facing the power of history—because the lack of historical sources is of course as historical as any historical event can be—disrupts individual identity and annihilates his/her certainties. In this sense, Viscusi's history works like the concept of *Herkunft*, the history-as-descent, analyzed by Michel Foucault. The intellectual claims the dissociation of the self as the primary consequence of the investigation of descent, and plainly affirms that this search cannot but disturb “what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (147). Therefore, Foucault explains, the only history worth studying is “effective history” whose task is to introduce discontinuity, because “knowledge is not made for understanding, it is made for cutting” (154). However true this assertion may be, Foucault's perspective seems too restrictive and, in a way, nihilist. What must follow the *pars destruens* of effective history is the reconstruction of self-awareness. From the ruins of the self and his past, “there still remains an *I* to consider, not yet ready to be sliced in neat strips, (...) not to be reduced but to be constructed, yet to be built for the wreckers” (Viscusi 146). Being himself a wrecker of time, Viscusi needs to try and stay afloat in the stream of memories and silences flooding his mind, fighting Astoria with a conscious, critical thought. Now this mission is not only his own, for he is struggling the stream of history to help all the contemporary and future wreckers lost in Astoria.

The only way to survive is to abandon oneself to the stream of memories, thus flowing history backwards. Getting through this experience is a role play, in which the individual has to act as *if* all those memories, all those precepts and anxieties were his/her own: “only by the straightforward method of reading all history as if it were my private troubles rising to the surface of the dialogue did I succeed in escaping” (24). In this sense, the individual has to re-enact the past so that, as Collingwood suggests, “by understanding it historically, we incorporate it into our present thought, and enable ourselves by developing and criticizing it to use that heritage for our own advancement” (30).

I knows itself not merely to be fragmented and splintered and self-opposed in its waking and sleeping, but to feel long thin nerve-lines popping like high voltage wires deep into the past and long into posterity. (Viscusi 200)

The historical activity necessary to struggle against Astoria needs to analyze history not as an abstract phenomenon to look at from the outside, but as “an experience to be lived through,” an approach suggesting that “historical inquiry reveals to the historian the powers of his own mind” (Collingwood 16). If it is true that, as stated by Ricoeur, crisis is what constitutes the essential sign of a human being's condition, it is all the way appropriate to state that historical knowledge and a critical investigation of the past succeed in stimulating human desire to weave a coherent autobiographical narration in a more conscious way (Ricoeur 1998, 28). History may cause you to feel dismayed at the myriad of unknown—and unknowable—events and personalities unpredictably emerging the surface of time, but it may also provide you with patterns by means of which to understand your personal and collective past. Damasio's neuroscientific approach reassures us about the unstoppable ‘force’ pulling human consciousness together, no matter how lost in time we may be:

You are busily all over the place and at many epochs of your life, past and future. But you—the me in you, that is—never drops out of sight. All of these contents are inextricably tied to a singular reference. Even as you concentrate on some remote event, the connection remains. The center holds. This is big-scope consciousness, one of the grand achievements of the human brain and one of the defining traits of humanity. (177)



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