

Chapter 10

First love and Italian postwar migration stories

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This chapter considers written memories and fantasies of first love as retold by Italian migrants in Australia in the late 1950s. These stories of first love were written in letters sent between 1957 and 1961 to *Il Salotto di Lena*, a weekly column of the Italian-language newspaper in Australia *La Fiamma*. In this column, readers were asked to tell a true story from their past. After strong editing, the best stories were published and their authors received a prize of £10. In this chapter, however, I will consider the original, unedited letters written by migrants, which are kept at the Mitchell Library at the State Library of New South Wales.¹

It is possible that by selecting, reading and analysing memories and stories written by migrants about their lives before migrating, one loses the perception of the transnational character of these lives and memories. On a historiographical level, this also implies the risk of locating these (hi)stories exclusively within the national boundaries of Italy. These risks are inherent in this chapter, despite my intention to write migration history from a transnational perspective. In fact, migrants' memories of ideal loves in the autobiographical stories that I consider here were often situated in a nostalgic geographical and temporal dimension, corresponding with migrants' youth and their life before migrating to Australia. Migrants usually wrote about love as a past experience, which was often idealised, set in their small town of origin in Italy, and permeated with literary resonances.

Despite these characteristics, it is only by acknowledging that these letters were written in Australia, usually a few years after migrating, that we can really understand migrants' emphasis on an idealised past in Italy. Migration history does not have to be a history of migration in a strictly literal sense. A strong focus on migrants' (hi)stories of their lives before migration is essential in order to understand the reasons why people migrate and the way past experiences in the country of origin are re-elaborated by migrants in the light of their experiences of migration and settlement. From this perspective, the migratory lens to which Hammerton refers in his chapter is at work not only when migrants

tell their experiences of migration, but when they remember and tell how their lives were before they even thought about migrating.

Figure 10.1: Italian migrants at Broken Hill mines, 1953.



National Archives of Australia: 2004/00287481, A12111,1/1953/16/16.

Drawing on Paolo Bartoloni's reflections on memory and translation,² I consider memory—in this case, memory of first love—not as a passive recollection of the past, but as an 'active recollection' that migrants use to 'remember forward'.³ I argue that migrants play with memories not simply to remember, but to forget. They reinvent their past in order to live their present, to give it meaning and to imagine and build their future. Therefore, while the stories that I consider in this chapter are set exclusively in Italy and are constructed mainly through references to Italian culture and traditions, they can be understood only from a transnational perspective.

In the introduction to this volume, the importance of researching and writing a transnational history of Australia has been emphasised. This means going beyond the boundaries of the Australian nation and challenging 'a comfortable frame for a historical inquiry'. Furthermore, it means taking into consideration those lives of migrants who were framed by the strict scrutiny, particularly of women, by an often hostile Australian society, as well as by close and conservative ethnic communities. As Thomson's chapter demonstrates, transnational lives can be paradoxically constrained. When studying the lives

of migrants from a non-English background, it becomes even more apparent how strict boundaries are imposed on migrants by their family, their community of origin, their ethnic group and by the host society. This is why it becomes essential for historians to consider, as Thomson brilliantly does, those spaces in which migrants are really able to transcend the restricted and imposed limits of their respectable lives. My chapter demonstrates how one way to do so is for migrants to recreate idealised memories. When considering migrants' intimacy, there are no doubts that one of the most intimate, protected and vital spaces for them is that of their own fantasies, imaginations and memories; these are safe shelters in which the limits of their lives can be extended, challenged and sometimes even surpassed. Stories of migration are always stories of intimacy, in which love, memory and imagination bridge physical and cultural distances.

Figure 10.2: *Il Salotto di Lena*.

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«LA FIAMMA DELLA DOMENICA»



IL SALOTTO DI LENA

HO RUBATO A MIA MOGLIE

Cari amici,

anche con «La Fiamma della Domenica» voglio essere vicina a voi con una rubrica speciale dedicata a tutti i lettori. Da questo numero ha inizio la rubrica «Il Salotto di Lena» che ha lo scopo di riportare racconti, episodi, vicende tratte dalla vita vera e che voi stessi mi racconterete. Quindi prego tutti gli amici di raccontarmi brevemente un episodio della loro vita vissuta ed io, fedele segretaria, lo adatterò per la pubblicazione.

Ogni settimana verranno pubblicati due racconti, ed alla fine di ogni mese, il migliore episodio verrà premiato con 110 (dieci sterline).

Tutti i lettori sono invitati ad esprimere un loro giudizio sull'episodio pubblicato, che dovrà essere con-

tenuto al massimo entro le 500 parole. L'episodio che avrà avuto più consensi, sarà il premiato ed inoltre fra i lettori che avranno mandato il loro giudizio per mezzo del taloncino in calce ad ogni pubblicazione, verrà mensilmente sorteggiato un abbonamento di 6 mesi a «La Fiamma» ed a «La Fiamma della Domenica».

Se si desidera, il nome vero verrà sostituito con uno fittizio. Questa settimana ho tratto gli episodi che vi narro, da due lettere inviatemi precedentemente da lettori i quali hanno sentito il bisogno di raccontarmi un episodio della loro vita che sarà sempre nel loro cuore.

Atendo il vostro giudizio e mentre sono certa della vostra collaborazione mando a tutti un caro abbraccio.

LENA

Non tutti i ladri vanno a finire in prigione, come non tutti i matti vanno a finire in manicomio. Io ero (ora non lo sono più) un individuo della prima categoria.

Sono cresciuto in un ambiente dove il vizio e le cattive azioni regnavano sovrane e fin dall'infanzia avevo imparato a borseggiare sui tram affollati «Lavoravo» con un altro socio. Milano è una grande Metropoli e perciò il pane era sicuro. Questa era la mia filosofia spicciosa.

Ricordo che in quel mezzogiorno, freddo e piovoso, il tram n. 12 era affollatissimo come al solito.

Una donna nel piglia piglia si trovò davanti a me; aveva una borsetta a secchiello ed il suo portamonete era alla portata di mano. Prenderlo fu un gioco. Lo passai immediatamente al mio socio che scese alla prima fermata. Appena il tram riprese la corsa, un grido echeggiò: «Mi hanno rubato il portamonete». Era la solita reazione del rubato, la solita fermata immediata del tram ed il solito controllo dei passeggeri, fra lo sbuffare degli stessi. Ora la donna piangeva, ora la potevo vedere in faccia: era una

«Sono rovinata», dis-
singhiozzando; «mia madre è moribonda; torna dal Monte di Pietà dove ho portato le mie ultime cose di valore per comprarle le medicine».

Commosso e pentito promisi di comprargli le medicine. Ed insieme scendemmo dal tram. Da quel giorno smisi di rubare e cambiai vita. Mi fidanzai con Wilfrido (così si chiama la mia ultima vittima e la mia redentrica) e dopo la morte della mamma sposammo. Ora viviamo da due anni in Australia e presto il nostro sogno d'amore sarà coronato dal sorriso di un bimbo.

Newspaper cutting from *La Fiamma*.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, many Italian migrants' memories were constructed out of a national repertoire of rhetorical tools, narratives and *topoi* that were imposed on them through school, religion and popular culture, and travelled with them around the world. The history they contribute to creating is therefore much more a transnational history than a migration history. In other words, my chapter does not attempt to answer the question of what it means to be Australian, or Italian in Australia. This question in fact reaffirms the centrality of the nation at the exact moment in which it seems to challenge it. Rather, I am interested in understanding how cultural tools imposed by the nation can be employed when living, remembering and (re)creating a transnational life.

Homi Bhabha has argued that individuals do not have multiple identities to choose from; instead, they have to fight every moment of their lives in order to construct one individual self that is really less, not more, than one.⁴ This does not mean that identity is unchangeable. On the contrary, it is essential to consider the 'doubleness, and ambivalence, and contradictoriness of the subject'.⁵ In this sense, the concept of multiple identity should be replaced with an interpretation of identity as a continuous 'repetition with a difference',⁶ which determines changes, relocations, reinterpretations and renegotiations.

For migrants playing and displaying these 'repetitions with a difference', the interaction between memory, tradition and fantasy was fundamental. This could be seen most pertinently in letters written by migrant women. The mnemonic and imaginative repetitions of their experiences of first love were based on the repetition of idiomatic expressions, common sayings and rhetorical discourses. These repetitions, however, also present elements of difference that need to be brought to light, emphasised and analysed, as they contain the core of Italian migrant women's agency and freedom in remembering their past, living their present and building their future.

It is from this perspective that I consider, in particular, the migrants' use of the heart and the eyes in discourses about love. For instance, the repetition, particularly by migrant women, of idiomatic expressions, banal metaphors and common metonyms about heart and love, *cuore e amore*—two words that in Italian also rhyme—really opened a space for defining their identity, their personality and their relationship with the world around them. Moreover, these corporeal parts, which we might assume were made innocuous by their stereotypical, metonymical and metaphorical use, could signify an attempt by the writers to (dis)cover themselves—that is, to discover and express their subjectivity under the protection of traditional and often conservative literary models and idiomatic expressions. This ambiguous use of certain corporeal metaphors, metonyms and *topoi* related to the sentiment of love was possible because of the origins of this use, which needed to be identified in the materiality and corporeality of love. As Roland Barthes argues, '[W]e use this metaphor [of

the heart] in a dull and slightly cowardly way, while in reality I believe that “heart” refers to an extremely strong emotiveness, which is full of sexuality.’⁷

The appropriation of traditional stories and *topoi* by Italian migrant women in their memories and fantasies of first love is particularly important when considering the social environment in which they were living in Australia. For instance, between 1947 and 1960, 90.4 per cent of Italian women in Australia married Italian men.⁸ This statistic seems to suggest a very strong link between gender and ethnicity, in particular women’s role in preserving ethnic and religious identities and values. Ellie Vasta⁹ and Franca Iacovetta¹⁰ have rightly emphasised that Italian migrant women were cultural custodians, playing a vital role in cultural maintenance. Together with the repetitions of traditions, stories and memories, however, we need also to emphasise the small but significant differences in their discourses—differences that came to constitute the core of their stories and their lives.

In the body of letters that I considered, first love—*il primo amore*—was usually represented by migrants as that moment of life when for the first time one was in love with a person who returned this love, and when everything seemed to be perfect. Nevertheless, this wonderful moment of love always ends for various reasons: the protagonist might discover an unspeakable or unacceptable secret; the beloved person dies; love is impeded or prohibited by parents, relatives, envious enemies or poor socioeconomic conditions. A common love story often told by migrants is the kind interrupted by the experience of migration. The perfect love usually ends, despite lovers’ promises. Sometimes the story told was the one of a man who left his first love to migrate. Sometimes writers declared that their decision to migrate was in fact determined by the end of their relationship. In other cases, the fact that migration was the real reason for the end of a relationship was hidden behind improbable narrative explanations. This was the case with a man who, despite the fact that ‘*il mio cuore ardeva sempre perciò non c’era ragione che io potevo lasciare il mio amore*’¹¹ [my heart always burnt so there were no reasons to leave my love], he decided to migrate to Australia. The girlfriend was supposed to have joined and married him, but, unfortunately, she was killed by a lightning strike: ‘*[L]a saetta di fulmene malvagio e crudele a stroncato la tenera vita di Maria*’¹² [The flash of lightning of the cruel and wicked thunderbolt ended Maria’s young life].’

In these stories of ideal love as retold by migrants, the love is perfect precisely because it is already impossible. Indeed, this perfection is contingent on the absence of the beloved person from the narrator’s present life. In other words, the ideal love can be described and retold only when it has already ended, usually for a reason that is external and independent from the two people in love. It exists only as a memory of a sentiment that ended before it could be spoilt by the protagonists themselves. What makes love impossible also makes

it perfect, unchangeable and incorruptible, moving it from the dimension of reality to the dimension of memory, fantasy and imagination.

While this representation of perfect, impossible love is typical of popular culture,¹³ it is also constructed out of a large cultural tradition that runs from biblical texts, liturgical formulas and classical Italian literature to contemporary literature and cinema. In autobiographical letters about first love, a literary tone is typically expressed through what Abruzzese calls '*ricordo di feuilleton*' (memory of feuilleton).¹⁴ That is, the tone of these stories is informed by memories and fragments of stories, characters, situations and expressions typical of mass literature and broadly related to European literary tradition.

Two important characteristics of this memory of feuilleton need to be pointed out. First of all, popular culture makes use of many different models of tradition: religious and liturgical texts, poetry, famous novels and artistic and religious icons. Moreover, popular culture recycles all these materials through many different artefacts, discourses and media, such as film, popular literature, proverbs and everyday life discourses. These memories of feuilleton are therefore available even to those people who have never read mass literature. For instance, religious references frequently used in the letters—such as comparing a girl with a blonde Madonna or with an angel, or expressing the desire to spend life in a convent (usually after being disappointed in love)—are drawn from religious stories and religious iconographies, as well as popular and high literature. The representation of the pure and beautiful girl as blonde or angelic probably came from classical Italian literature (Petrarch and the *dolce stil novo*, respectively) and religious iconography.

The second and even more relevant point regarding the use of feuilleton was the fact that, while references to models of mass literature and popular culture were motivated in general by a literary intention, for migrants they also represented, using the definition of Abruzzese, a '*strumento di organizzazione emotiva della memoria*'¹⁵ (a means of emotive organisation of memory). In other words, literary models gave the writers a plot and a repertoire of situations and expressions through which they could organise and retell their own life experiences, and elaborate and express the emotions related to such memories. Sometimes the fictional character of the narrative was taken from a typical plot of popular literature and erased the direct experience of the writer. In the following example, a man explains that he wanted to marry his girlfriend but suddenly discovered she was his sister:

[Mio padre] mi abbracciò piangendo, mi strinse più volte a sé dicendomi ripetutamente 'Perdonami, perdonami figlio mio' e, ad un tratto, con una voce che non aveva più niente di umano mi gridò... 'è tua sorella.' Credetti che sarei impazzito.¹⁶

[My father embraced me while he was crying, he pulled me close many times saying to me continuously: ‘Son, forgive me, forgive me,’ and, all of a sudden, in a voice that didn’t seem human, he screamed at me... ‘She is your sister.’ I thought I would go crazy.]

While this story is clearly fictional, it is important to note that the author uses it in order to motivate his decision to migrate to Australia. He also wrote that he continued to write hundreds of letters to this girl, without being able to forget her. While it is impossible to know the facts behind this story, it is clear that a popular plot is often the medium through which a real sentiment of detachment and unacceptable suffering, related to the experience of migration, is expressed. A complex interplay between memory and tradition, and between absence and presence, is evident here, as well as in many other letters in which this appropriation and reinvention of models is clearly related to real biographical events, and helps writers to elaborate their emotional memories. As already anticipated, this is particularly evident in the rhetorical reduction of the body to heart and eyes, which were considered not as corporeal organs, but as literary tools for describing the experience of love.

The relationship between heart and love has a great tradition in European culture. The heart and the eyes are the two parts of the body that have also been used traditionally in describing love in Italian literature since its origins. The rhetorical use of the heart in speaking and writing about love is obviously related to physical sensations, particularly to rising heart rates in emotional situations and during sexual activity. In relation to love, however, the heart is rarely described as a natural organ that strongly and physically influences our relationship with the loved person. Rather, its use is abstract and rhetorical. One of the rare references to the heart as a physical organ in the corpus I have analysed appears in a woman’s letter retelling the first encounter with the man she loved:

*Non riuscivo proprio a spiegarmi perché dovessi sentirmi il cuore battermi così forte e le ginocchia farsi così deboli al solo vederlo.*¹⁷

[I couldn’t understand why I should feel my heart beat so strongly and my knees become so weak just from looking at him.]

Even in this case, however, the heart is also treated metaphorically: ‘*Il cuore mi cantava dentro*¹⁸ [My heart was singing inside me].’

Pure love is typically expressed through reference to the heart, in implicit but substantial contraposition to genitals and orifices. As such, the heart is used as a metonym for love and it implies the exclusion of the body and corporeal sensations from the sentiment of love. It is therefore not surprising to find in this corpus a sentence such as ‘*L’amore non conosce età...come il cuore non invecchia*¹⁹ [Love does not know age...like the heart, it does not grow old]’. In this sentence, the reference is clearly not to the heart as an organ but as a

rhetorical *topos* expressing love. This does not, however, necessarily mean that references to the heart are always purely romantic and immaterial. While the heart often takes a paradoxically incorporeal connotation in relation to love, it also signifies the involvement of the person who is in love and, as such, leaves writers a certain space in which to express their subjectivity. References to the heart are therefore important not only because they represent perfect love, but because they represent this love through the exclusion of the world and the people around the two protagonists. It is precisely in this imaginary and suspended space—accessible only to the lovers—that writers and readers, above all women, can find a way of (dis)covering themselves.

A similar process can be identified in the role played by the romantic gaze into each other's eyes—a *topos* as common as that of the heart. The essential difference between the rhetorical use of heart and eyes is in the fact that the heart expresses the individuality of the loving subject, while the romantic gaze expresses the isolation of the loving couple from the world. For this reason, while women often use the heart to emphasise their subjectivity in relation to the family or the loved person, men and women often use references to eyes (and in particular the romantic gaze) in order to portray the couple as one entity, clearly distinct from (if not opposed to) the social environment. Not surprisingly, this gaze is usually specular—that is, he looks at her as she looks at him. Due to these specific characteristics, the romantic gaze is often used in order to describe a happy love that is over or that is opposed by people and/or situations external to the couple, particularly by the act of migrating—in this context, often retold as unavoidable—and by the opposition of the woman's parents (especially the father).

Through the analysis of a series of excerpts from the corpus of letters to *Il Salotto di Lena*, it is my intention to better illustrate the elements of migrants' love stories that I have pointed out. After a first example through which the general elements will be demonstrated, I will focus on some of the numerous letters that insist on the metonymy of the heart/love, and then on the most significant letters that represent love through the references to eyes and the romantic gaze.

In the first example, the woman who retold her story was just 15 years old when she met the man who '*doveva legarmi a sé col suo amore per tutta la vita*'²⁰ [was going to bind me to him with his love for all of my life]. He was handsome and three years older than her. This is how she describes their first encounter:

*Ci guardammo e ci leggemo negli occhi tutto ciò che contenevamo nei cuori, ma purtroppo non sapevamo ciò che il destino ci aveva riservato...Io ero felice del mio bellissimo principe azzurro.*²¹

[We looked at each other and we read in each other's eyes all that was contained in our hearts, but unfortunately we didn't know what destiny had in store for us...I was happy with my handsome Prince Charming.]

In this excerpt, the influence of popular culture is evident in the description of the beloved as ‘Prince Charming’ and in the expression ‘we didn’t know what destiny had in store for us’—a typical narrative device that makes the reader sympathetic with the two main characters and, at the same time, curious to discover the end of the story. It is also possible to note the clear references to the eyes and heart, which represent the reciprocal understanding and feeling of the two lovers. The letter then retells how the writer’s parents forced her to marry another man. In the conclusion of the letter, she addresses her beloved directly, and she writes:

*Amor mio...sappi che il primo posto nel mio cuore è stato occupato da te, e così sarà per sempre finché i miei occhi si chiuderanno.*²²

[My love...you must know that the first place in my heart has been for you, and so it will be forever until my eyes close upon this world.]

Her love for him was eternal precisely because their relationship was interrupted forever by external factors—in this case, her parents. The dimension of love constituted the space in which this woman could affirm her (relative) independence from her parents. The heart is the place that is inaccessible to everybody but the lover, where not only love, but independence can be affirmed. The final sentence of the story is particularly emblematic:

*E dall’aldilà aspetterò con ansia che quel Dio che abbiamo sempre chiamato in nostro aiuto mi darà la grazia di tenerti il posto vicino a me così si unirà in cielo ciò che in terra gli uomini hanno voluto separare.*²³

[And from the next world I will wait with longing that the God we always called to for help will give me the grace to keep a place close by me so that what men wanted to rend asunder can be joined together in the sky.]

Here the writer inverts the same liturgical formula of the Catholic wedding ceremony that trapped her in an unwanted marriage.

In a second example, it is possible to identify another typical plot from popular literature. A young woman’s boyfriend dies in a car accident, so she marries his brother. In this case, however, the story was probably related to the real experience of the writer. In a short note attached to the letter, she affirmed that what she wrote was ‘*realmente realtà*’²⁴ [really reality]. Moreover, to judge from the woman’s other letters to *Il Salotto di Lena*, it appears probable that she did indeed marry the brother of her deceased boyfriend. Even if the story did correspond with the facts, however, this does not mean that it had to be retold through realistic features. In the first part of the story, she describes falling in love with the boyfriend through an opposition of heat and cold that recalls the tone and language of a romance:

Ed il mio viso vampò di rossore...di sfuggita accoglievo i suoi sguardi brucianti...ogni suo sguardo dava una scintilla al mio cuore facendolo palpitare che fino all'ora era stato di gelo. Con le sue calde parole piano piano, squagliava i miei freddi sentimenti.²⁵

[My face went bright red...I fleetingly welcomed his burning looks...every look sent a spark to my heart and made that which had been ice, until that moment, beat. With his warm words, little by little he melted my cold sentiments.]

In the second part of the story, she tells how, after the boyfriend died, his brother went to see her at the psychiatric hospital and declared his love:

Vedendo in me tanta sofferenza con una mano alzo il mio viso ancora disfatto dalla sofferenza, e vidi nei suoi occhi tanta speranza... 'sappi che c'è ancora qualcuno che ti vuole bene...e da molto che il mio cuore ti aspetta' Ma la mia anima parlava ancora in silenzio...la ferita e ancora aperta il mio cuore sanguina ancora...Il destino mi donò in cambio suo fratello che pazientemente aspettava che il mio cuore gli desse un po' di affetto.²⁶

[Seeing so much grief in me, he lifted up my face, still wasted by grief, with his hand, and I saw much hope in his eyes... 'know that there is still somebody who loves you...my heart has been waiting for you for a long time.' But my soul still spoke silently...my wound is still open, my heart still bleeds...Destiny gave me his brother in exchange, who was patiently waiting for my heart to give him some affection.]

As is evident in these two excerpts, references to popular literature—what the writer herself calls '*le storielle*'²⁷ [silly little stories]—gives a literary tone to the story and, at the same, represents a means of structuring and organising past memories, which are characterised by a strong emotional involvement. The image of the injured and bleeding heart is certainly inspired by the religious iconography of the Madonna of the Sacred Heart. What seems to be more relevant is that the heart is cited four times in the few lines I have quoted from a very long letter, and it clearly expresses the difference between her love for her boyfriend and her love for her boyfriend's brother. In the first part, her heart is passive and cold and is eventually warmed by the boyfriend: the boyfriend is clearly acting on her and determining her sentiments. In the second part, the heart of her boyfriend's brother takes on a passive behaviour: it is waiting for her. The female protagonist's heart now becomes active: instead of being warmed, it bleeds; instead of receiving the vital sparks of the loved man's gaze, it gives some affection to her future husband. The different ways in which hearts are represented express the woman's feelings, but also the difference between the ideal love—already impossible as the boyfriend has died—and the affection for the person she marries, linked to her everyday life.

While there are good reasons to suppose that this story has some links with reality, what is more important is that through this story the protagonist/writer expresses herself as a woman. The metaphorical and metonymical use of the heart, even if influenced strongly by given models, is neither abstract nor immaterial, as it refers to implicit and explicit corporeal sensations. Such use gives once again to the female writer the possibility of covering and discovering herself simultaneously, precisely because it is so stereotypical but at the same time finds its origins in corporeal sensations.

The importance of such ambiguous rhetorical use of the heart becomes explicit in another woman's letter. After discovering that the man she loves is already married, she convinces him to go back to his wife. In this letter, in which she retells her sacrifice, the heart is used three times, each time expressing a very different emotion:

*La felicità che esisteva fra loro [the man and his wife] fu come un balsamo soave che scendeva nel mio cuore ferito...però un leggero velo di malinconia si stese sul mio cuore...Cara Lena, non so se il fatto successomi possa valere di esser scritto ma sapesse come mi sento il cuore più leggero ora che mi sono in un certo senso sfogata.*²⁸

[The happiness that existed between them (the man and his wife) was like a delicate soothing balm for my wounded heart...but a subtle film of melancholy extended over my heart...Dear Lena, I don't know if what happened to me is worth writing but if only you could know how my heart feels so much lighter now that I have shared my pain.]

The first use of 'heart' supports the moralistic tone of the letter: her injured heart recovers when she sees that the man she loves and his legitimate partner are happy together again. In the second instance, she expresses her sense of melancholy for losing the man she loves. In the third, she makes the importance of writing to Lena explicit in order to share her pain.

The importance for women of using *topoi* and stereotypical phrases related to the heart in order to (dis)cover themselves within and beyond given boundaries makes an interesting contrast with the frequent but substantially different use of the heart in men's letters about love. In these letters, the use of the heart seems not to have any strong meaning. It would be possible to quote many purely rhetorical sentences written by men, such as: '[F]arei di essa la regina del mio Cuore!!?'²⁹ (I would make her the queen of my heart!!?); '[I]o quelle parole ce lo scritte nel cuore'³⁰ (I have those words written in my heart); '[T]i amo, ti amo con tutto il cuore'³¹ (I love you, I love you with all my heart); '[I] nostri piccoli cuori battevano di un sincero affetto'³² (Our little hearts beat with sincere affection).

These sentences suggest that men use common expressions related to the heart as empty formulas, behind which it is impossible to uncover any real attempt to express their feelings and their subjectivity. This rhetorical emptiness was consistent with the cultural habits preventing men from expressing emotions. Once appropriated by women, however, it often became a tool for expression, while also protecting them with the apparently harmless but implicitly corporeal metonymy of heart/love.

The gendered difference in the rhetorical use of a metonymy is not typical of all the letters about memories of love. In particular, narrators' insistence on the romantic gaze characterises in similar ways women's and men's letters. Such insistence is often strong, as in the following passages, taken from two different letters, the first written by a woman, the second by a man:

*In quello istante meraviglioso in cui i miei occhi fissarono i suoi compresi che il mio timore e la mia speranza erano veri, c'era solo lui nella mia vita... I nostri occhi esprimevano solo quello che due occhi innamorati possono dirsi.*³³

[In that wonderful moment when my eyes looked into his I understood that my worry and my hope were true, there was only him in my life... Our eyes expressed what only two eyes in love can say to each other.]

*Ti vidi, mi vedesti, ci guardammo e furono sguardi d'amore quei primi sguardi che ci scambiammo.*³⁴

[I saw you, you saw me, we looked at each other and they were looks of love those looks that we exchanged.]

In another letter, recounting a love story that ended after the man migrated to Australia and the father of his girlfriend forced her to marry another man, all the most relevant passages in the story were emphasised by references to the romantic gaze and the lovers' eyes: 1) the moment in which they fell in love ('[C]i guardammo negli occhi e ci fu tanto da notare in quello sguardo'³⁵ [We looked into each other's eyes and there was so much to see in that look]); 2) the first kiss ('[C]i guardammo negli occhi ancora una volta ma questa volta ben differente'³⁶ [We looked into each other's eyes once more but this time in a different way]); 3) their life while they were in love ('Se mi prometti che vieni allora mi metto a cantar. Ed io con un cenno d'occhi le facevo accettativa e lei di nuovo riprendeva a cantare'³⁷ [If you promise me that you will come, I will start to sing. And I with a wink accepted and she again started to sing]); 4) the separation ('[F]ra le lacrime degli ultimi appuntamenti ci abbiamo promesso tutto quello che poi svani'³⁸ [Between the tears of the last dates we promised each other all that which later vanished]); and 5) the present moment, in which he was remembering and retelling his story ('[T]utto mi appare innanzi agli occhi in questi momenti'³⁹ [Everything appears before my eyes in these moments]).

The opposition between the couple and the world is expressed through two narrative strategies, often complementary. The first consists of emphasising the moment in which for the first time the two lovers meet each other and look into each other's eyes. This representation, focusing on the reciprocal lovers' gaze and on its importance to the first time they meet, clearly defines the unity of the couple and the importance of their love, in contrast with the following obstacles that make (or made) that love impossible. The second stratagem consists of describing the moment in which this romantic gaze is broken, the moment in which the two lovers are forced to break off their relationship. This moment is frequently emphasised by tears, which metaphorically mark the breaking of the gaze and physically mark the pain of separation. Here, I wish to quote two very similar passages from two different letters, the first written by a man and the second by a woman:

*Si dammo l'ultimo bacio si facciamo le ultime promesse e poi fissandoci nelli occhi in lacrime con il fazzoletto nella mano si dammo l'ultimo addio.*⁴⁰

[We kissed each other for the last time, we made the last promises and then staring into each other's eyes, in tears, with handkerchiefs in our hands we waved our last farewell.]

*Vidi che piangeva e fra le lacrime mormorò: 'Non partire.'...Lo vidi allontanarsi curvo, io lo seguii con lo sguardo fino a vedere una piccola ombra lontana...L'urlo della nave mi fece colmare gli occhi di lacrime.*⁴¹

[I saw he was crying, and, in tears, he whispered: 'Don't leave.'...I watched him leave hunched over, I followed him with my eyes until I could see just a small, far shadow...The cry (toot) of the ship made my eyes fill with tears.]

In both these examples, the moment described is that of separation because of the man's migration to Australia. This moment takes a definitive relevance as in both cases the father of the woman has forced her to become engaged to and/or to marry another man. At the same time, it also gives the writers the possibility to express in very emphatic terms the tragic moment when migration begins, as a separation from the beloved person.

It is essential to note how the *topos* of the romantic gaze has a rhetorical meaning elaborated from the physical experience of human beings. For this reason, its use in narrative discourse can vary from a purely literary resonance to the strong expression of a memory of love and/or a sentiment of rebellion.

In concluding my analysis of the role played by the romantic gaze in migrants' memories of first love and migration, it is important to specify that in other kinds of migrants' discourses this romantic reciprocal gaze becomes a strong and unidirectional gaze of men on women's bodies. In other words, while men and women in love stories look into each other's eyes, women are regularly

prevented from moving their gaze from the man's eyes to the man's body. In romantic stories, the gaze is reciprocal and is fixed mainly on the beloved person's eyes; in other discourses, it becomes an exclusive male gaze on the feminine body.

It is for this reason that I consider my final example particularly noteworthy. It suggests a different possibility from the romantic reciprocal gaze in love stories and the unidirectional gaze of men on women's bodies in sexist and misogynist discourses. It suggests the possibility of women gazing at men. A woman retells her first encounter with the man she subsequently married. They were on a bus, seated beside each other. She described the scene in these words:

*Noi donne vediamo anche senza guardare e continuando a sfogliare il giornale vidi che il giovane era biondo e aveva dei meravigliosi occhi Verdi.*⁴²

[We women can see even without looking and while still reading through the newspaper I saw that the guy was blond and had wonderful Green eyes.]

In this sentence, the fantasy seems to be coherent with social norms that prevented women from gazing at men, particularly at strangers. The writer avoids and at the same time respects this prohibition, through her ability, as a woman, to see without looking. Such a fantasy, however, should not be considered simply a rhetorical trick. The sentence 'we women can see even without looking' sounds like a popular adage and implies a fundamental reflection on the ability of women to secretly control their environment and, in particular, their men. What she is essentially affirming is not the ability of women to see without looking, but the ability to look at men without being discovered. In fact, she pretends to read a newspaper while she is really looking at him.

The few examples I have proposed throughout this chapter have illustrated the importance of memories, fantasies and stories of first love for Italian migrants, particularly but not exclusively women. Recounting memories of first love gave migrants the opportunity of coping with complex feelings, which were related not simply to the love for a person, but to the experience of migration, cultural displacement, loneliness and nostalgia. At the same time, migrants' stories of first love also show how migrant women appropriated and re-elaborated models of popular culture and literature in order to express their desires and their relative independence. Memory and tradition, in their interplay between presence and absence, constituted a possibility for migrants, particularly migrant women, to construct in autobiographical stories their provisional and incomplete identity, out of discursive practices that could certainly be described as repetitions with a difference. While those repetitions were at the core of women's role as guardian angels of the house and traditional values, that difference allowed them to express the secret core of their stories and their transnational lives.

Notes

- ¹ Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1956–64, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6–10(70), Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.
- ² Bartoloni, Paolo 2005, 'Memory, translation and the urban space', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 15, n. 2, pp. 109–18; and 2006, 'Face-to-face with tradition', *International Yearbook of Aesthetics*, vol. 10, pp. 40–7.
- ³ Bartoloni, 'Memory, translation and the urban space', p. 109. Bartoloni took the term 'active recollection' from Husserl, Edmund 1970, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, p. 360.
- ⁴ Bhabha, Homi 1994, 'Between identities', in R. Benmajor and A. Skotnes (eds), *Migration and Identity. International yearbook of oral history and life stories 3*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, pp. 183–99.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- ⁷ Barthes, Roland 1981 [2001], 'L'ultima solitudine', in R. Barthes, *Frammenti di un discorso amoroso*, Einaudi, Turin, p. 247 (my translation).
- ⁸ Favero, Luigi and Tassello, Graziano 1983, 'Caratteristiche demografiche e sociali della comunità italiana in Australia e della seconda generazione', *Studi emigrazione*, no. 69, pp. 58–80.
- ⁹ Vasta, Ellie 1992, 'Italian migrant women', in Stephen Castles et al. (eds), *Australia's Italians*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, pp. 140–54.
- ¹⁰ Iacovetta, Franca 1993, 'Scrivere le donne nella storia dell'emigrazione: il caso italo-canadese', *Altreitalie*, no. 9, pp. 5–47.
- ¹¹ *Avevo diciassette anni*, 2 October 1960, Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1960, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/8(70), Mitchell Library. Original migrants' letters have been reproduced without editing, therefore grammatical mistakes have not been corrected. In referring to migrants' original letters, it was my intention to protect the privacy of the migrants and to facilitate the search for specific letters, which were stored uncatalogued in large labelled boxes in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. I have therefore substituted the name of the author with a title in italics and the date of the letter. This title contains the original title of the story told by the writers. When a title is not present in the original letters, I have given the title as the first few words in the letters, with the exclusion of typical openings such as 'Cara Lena', 'Cara mamma Lena', 'Gentile Lena', and so on. When an original letter has been cited more than once, I have inserted the full reference for the first quotation and only the title for the following quotations. In translating the excerpts from migrants' original letters, I have tried to respect as much as possible the original contents and forms. The resulting translation could therefore sometimes seem strange and/or grammatically incorrect, however, I have also tried to make the English version immediately intelligible to readers even when translating excerpts that were scarcely intelligible in Italian due to the limited literacy of the writers. It is only by reading the original excerpts in Italian that it is really possible to grasp the textual characteristics of the excerpts.
- ¹² *Avevo diciassette anni*.
- ¹³ A good example of this is in the film *Titanic*, directed by James Cameron. The love of the two protagonists can be remembered by the main female character (and can be perceived by the audience) as a perfect love precisely because of the death of the main male character, played by Leonardo Di Caprio.
- ¹⁴ Abruzzese, Alberto 1983, 'Antagonismo e subalternità nella produzione di scrittura', in Alberto Asor Rosa (ed.), *Letteratura italiana. Volume VII. Produzione e consumo*, Einaudi, Turin, p. 482.
- ¹⁵ Abruzzese, 'Antagonismo e subalternità', p. 482.
- ¹⁶ *Atroce dilemma*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1957–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.
- ¹⁷ *Lui: una scoperta*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1957–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Spero che sarò compreso*, 13 August 1963, Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1963–64, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/10(70), Mitchell Library.

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²⁰ *Espiazione*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1958–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/7(70), Mitchell Library.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Ti ho perduta*, 27 March 1958, Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1958–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/7(70), Mitchell Library.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *Cuore ferito*, 16 February 1959, Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1958–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/7(70), Mitchell Library.

²⁹ *Anchio, come tanti altri Italiani*, 28 August 1958, Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1957–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.

³⁰ *Prega per me*, 12 September 1958, Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1957–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.

³¹ *Sogno di gioventù*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, *Il Salotto di Lena/Vicende vissute da pubblicare*, 1957–61, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.

³² *Un fiore che non colsi*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1958–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/7(70), Mitchell Library.

³³ *Il giovane dagli occhi verdi*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1960, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/8(70), Mitchell Library.

³⁴ *Cosa farò*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1957–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.

³⁵ *Il primo amor non si può scordar*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1957–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Questa è la mia vicenda*, 30 April 1960, Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, *Il Salotto di Lena/Vicende vissute da pubblicare*, 1957–61, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.

⁴¹ *Il diario dell'infanzia che mi portò fortuna*, n.d., Lena and Dino Gustin Papers, 1909–92, Readers' correspondence, 1957–59, ML MSS 5288 Add-on 1982/6(70), Mitchell Library.

⁴² *Il giovane dagli occhi verdi*.