The Healing Power of Writing: Traumatic Memories and Recovery in Italian British Literary Narratives of WW2

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ABSTRACT: Published over a long period of time, from the late 1960s to 2022, Italian British literary narratives continue to represent powerful testimonies of the violence and persecution that the immigrant community had to endure during World War Two. The aim of this paper is to focus on how their authors recounted their experience of trauma and how they finally overcame it: although the majority of them were writing several decades after the end of hostilities, their memories of the night of 10th June 1940, of the Arandora Star tragedy (2nd July 1940) and especially of their periods of incarceration/internment always remained vivid. Building upon a long research activity, which also entailed the discovery of the majority of Italian British narratives, this paper will mostly consider memoirs and autobiographies, while methodologically connecting them to the field of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). In this way, it will not only contribute to the popularity of authors like Joe Pieri, Bernard Moscardini and Peter Ghiringhelli, but it will also show the healing power of writing in migrant contexts

KEY WORDS: Britain; Italian immigrant community; World War 2; incarceration/internment; trauma; recovery

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INTRODUCTION

> Can you imagine ... being woken up in the middle of the night [...], children sound asleep woken up by the noise of banging and raised hostile voices. [...] Still sleepy, my grand-mother opening the door to aggressive policemen who force their way in to your home, telling you they were to arrest your husband; purely for being Italian? [...] Can you imagine the chaos, trying to console hysterical children, yet yourself feeling vulnerable, scared, confused and distressed. [M]y grandmother was not told where they were taking my grandfather. The next thing she heard of her husband, after that fateful night, was that he had been drowned on the Arandora Star. (Pelosi and Evans 32)

At a time when there is still scant information about the condition of the Italian migrant community in Britain during World War Two, the literary writings of its most talented members represent a lucid picture of those tragic years. Published since 1966[1] and unjustly neglected by critics, they now deserve the reader's attention as they contribute to a wider and deeper knowledge of the history of the Italian diaspora in English-speaking countries.

Indeed, very little has been written at a scholarly level not only about what represents a surprisingly rich textual corpus, but also on the war experiences of its authors.[2] On 10th June 1940, when Churchill issued the infamous order "Collar the lot!", they suddenly became "enemy aliens" and lost their freedom: their late autobiographies[3] show the terror, rage and pain that they felt, but also how the very act of writing contributed to their process of recovery. After the publication of some key research studies (Colpi; Sponza; Iacovetta *et al.*; Schmitz; Spizzica), it is important to go beyond historical facts and consider that these events heavily marked both their personal growth and their process of integration.

This is to say that the majority of Italian British authors were finally able to shake off the burden of a difficult past, and that their literary output also encouraged their community to pass from silence to words. Deleted from history handbooks, the tragedy of the Arandora Star in particular had been perceived as a form of punishment and a shame by its members (Chezzi 380-381): we may consider the increase in war narratives in 2010 as a form of celebration of its 70th anniversary and of a new cultural renaissance.

[1] Here we will only focus on memoirs and war accounts of WW2. It is important to point out, however, that the earliest piece of Italian British migrant writing is Cagliardo Coraggioso's *Wandering Minstrel*, which was first published by Oxford University Press in 1938.

[2] The complete list of the 21 Italian British authors and of their numerous literary writings can be found in D'Amore, *Literary* 23-25.

[3] Even though Italian British fiction, poetry and drama refer to the horrors of the Second World War, we will consider Peppino Leoni's *I Shall Die on the Carpet* (1966), Piero Tognini's *A Mind at War. An Autobiography* (1990), Les Servini's *A Boy from Bardi. My Life and Times* (1994), Joe Pieri's *Isle of the Displaced. An Italian-Scot's Memoirs of Interment in the Second World War* (1997), Hector Emanuelli's *A Sense of Belonging. From the Rhondda to the Potteries: Memories of a Welsh-Italian Englishman* (2010) and Peter Ghiringhelli's *A British Boy in Fascist Italy* (2010).

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The war narratives that we will thus consider will show how their authors described their emotional pain and how they recovered. Although they do not report any medical or psychoanalytic treatments, the episodes of violence that they recount are at the source of the suffering and estrangement that they felt even after hostilities ended. Thanks to the latest acquisitions in the field of Trauma Studies, we will discuss "the intrapsychic and social planes" of their experiences (Theisen-Womersley 31), as well as the impact of their "psychopathologic disorders" on their "sense of safety" and "community relationships" (31).

Following a strict chronological order and focusing specifically on their responses to the tragic events of those bleak years, the two core sections of this paper will also provide useful insights into the reconstruction years. It was in that period that Italian British authors "re-asserted control over themselves" and the world around them (32): their memoirs and autobiographies clearly show that the writing process helped them not only to finally recover from the pain that they always felt, but also to convey a message of courage and resilience to the younger generations.

THE NIGHT OF 10TH JUNE 1940 AND AFTER: SHOCK, DEGRADATION AND DISTRESS

It is not possible to discuss here how Italian British authors—Peppino Leoni, Joe Pieri, Les Servini, Piero Tognini, Hector Emanuelli, Bernard Moscardini and Peter Ghiringhelli—interpreted the Triple Trauma Paradigm (TTP) in their works. As reported in the literature, TTP also includes pre- and peri-migration experiences: apart from their original condition of poverty and starvation which their families suffered in their places of origin, "living a life between two halves"[4] in Britain caused them not only pain, but also rage. A 1.5-generation immigrant from Barga in northern Tuscany, Joe Pieri, for instance, never forgot that he was a victim of verbal and physical violence when he was young. He was a "Tally" in Scotland and "*Lo Scozzese*" in Italy: he perfectly knew that "the slights and insults" of the local population would have not "ceased", if he had had a different passport (Pieri, *Isle* ch. 2). For this reason, he finally decided not to become a British citizen in the years before the outbreak of the Second World War.

He was thus the first Italian British writer who overtly spoke about the painful implications of his multi-layered identity, particularly about his sense of "displacement" (ch. 1). After him, in 2010, the "Welsh-Italian" Hector Emanuelli described his "mind" as a "Tower of Babel" and contended that the "linguistic confusion" in which he grew up was one of the possible reasons "for the stutter that he suffered from" when he was living in Treorchy with his family (Emanuelli 5). It was only after he moved to England in 1933 that he gradually became more confident and also discovered his artistic talent.

[4] This is a brief quotation from Anne Pia's unpublished prose entitled *On Home (Scotland)*. This was specifically written for the seminar *Plurilingualism, Becoming and Belonging* which she held at the University of Catania on 19th April 2021.

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Distinctive elements of the first years that they spent in Britain, physical and verbal violence—as well as isolation and displacement—caused young Italians learning and speech disorders (Soppit 217-219). Compared to their parents who had faced other typical post-migration problems such as cultural shock, "insecure residency" and heavier "social discrimination" (Theisen-Womersley 39), they "merged well" into the British environment, but generally connected their school experience to a sense of dissatisfaction and failure. Les Servini in *A Boy from Bardi* (1994), for instance, recounts that Italian children "worked like slaves" and could rarely dedicate themselves to studying (Servini 12). Unsurprisingly, the majority of them left school at the age of fourteen to join in their families' businesses, and only rediscovered the pleasure of reading during the Second World War.

Thus, the desire to escape from poverty caused first-generation immigrants and their children strong emotional and cultural traumas. The most painful part of their experience, however, began on 10th June 1940, when Mussolini declared war on France and Britain. The War Cabinet immediately took severe measures against the Italian community (Colpi 103-112, Ugolini 93-100). As a result, major cities such as Edinburgh and Glasgow were struck by rioting and violent episodes (Pieri, *Scots-Italians* 93-94). The following extract from Ann Marie Di Mambro's iconic *Tally's Blood* (1992) offers a lucid representation of the terrible violence of those hours. In Act I, Sc. 12 in particular Massimo and Rosinella Pedreschi, a *Laziale* couple originally from Cassino, do their utmost to protect not only their niece Lucia, but also their ginger shop in Glasgow. Their only gateway to "a better life", it was destroyed by hooligans soon after:

> MASSIMO: What you doing? / ROSINELLA: Get these upstairs. Quick. Hide as much as we can. They'll waste everything. / MASSIMO: No, Rosie, leave it. Let them take what they like, waste what they like. So long as they leave you two alone. / ROSINELLA: (*Shocked*) Massimo! You don't think ... surely? They'll no touch us!
> *Noise of brick bashing against boards: the "mob" outside, banging on the doors and windows: shouting.*
> MOB: Get the Tallies! / Fascist bastards!
> *Lucia starts to weep, frightened, Rosinella holds her, crouches with her. The level of noise increases: Massimo crouches over them, arms protectively round them. Rosinella trying to shoosh Lucia: Massimo looking round him in despair: Rosinella putting a restraining hand on his arm.*
> MOB: Get the bastard. / Waste the place. / Fascist pigs. / Greasy Tallies.
> ROSINELLA: Stay here. / MASSIMO: I need to go. I need to see what they've done to my shop.
> [….]
> *Lucia starts to cry.* [….] *Massimo returns, defeated looking.*
> MASSIMO: Eight years' work gone in eight minutes. (Di Mambro 68-69)

Even though this extract is taken from a fictional story, it realistically represents the emotional response of the protagonists to the noises and violence of the "mob". The stage directions in particular are clear on the utter fear and "despair" that they were feeling that night. Massimo's final sense of "defeat" when he realised that his shop had been destroyed is followed by an even stronger sense of "shock" when the police arrested him. Following the Government's "alien restrictions", most Italian men aged 16-

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70 shared his same experience and began their path towards internment (D'Amore, *Neutralising* 131-132). Completely unaware of their future destiny, they were only sent to trial to declare their political beliefs and possibly renounce Fascism. The London restaurateur Peppino Leoni—who defined himself as an Italian "patriot" who had also fought in First World War—continued to support Mussolini until the moment when he was released from his internment camp on the Isle of Man in 1944.

Leoni was one of the two Italian British writers who were convinced Fascists;[5] the others, instead, belonged to a different generation and did not have strong political ideas. This was particularly true for Piero Tognini who was arrested in Auchinleck in Scotland on his sixteenth birthday. The numerous linguistic occurrences related to the semantic area of trauma—"panic", "heartache" and "shock"—in that part of the narrative testify to the vividness of his memories even after fifty years.

The latest literature in the field of Trauma Studies confirms that children and young adolescents are defenceless victims of the distress, sense of displacement and separation typical of war conflicts (Silove *et al.* 359-393; Chezzi 384-385; Theisen-Womersley 36). From this point of view, recalling his "nightmarish" experience at "Barlinnie", "Scotland's biggest prison" (Tognini 19-20), Tognini confirms that he always expected that "something terrible" could happen and that he feared that "they might even shoot at him" (20). Taken from the chapter entitled "Murderer Next Door", the following extract shows the level of stress and anxiety that he achieved in those difficult days:

> You can perhaps imagine my feelings when I was locked up among the real convicts, and treated like a criminal in every way, apart from the fact that I was allowed to wear my civilian clothes. In the adjoining cell was a chap who was serving seven years for killing someone—I think his wife. We were allowed only two half-hours per day in the open air, and were forbidden to speak to anyone as we waked, five paces apart, around the cramped exercise yard. What a nightmare! The day went by so slowly, and it was sheer hell to be locked up at my age, especially as I had done nothing to deserve it. I cried myself to sleep at night, and wondered where it was all going to end. (21)

Tognini was not the only detainee of Italian extraction who considered such an arbitrary deprivation of his personal freedom unfair. After over fifty years, Joe Pieri, for instance, was still enraged by the fact that they did not have the same rights as "bloody criminals": "at least they knew what they were supposed to have done". "In vain", as he recounts, "lawyers were hurriedly consulted: this was war time, and the normal process of the law no longer applied. With that the anxious families had to be content" (Pieri, *Isle* ch. 3).

"Frustrated" and "angry", he and his companions were transferred first to Maryhill Barracks (par. 22) and then to Woodhouselea, which were both located near Edinburgh. "Places-of-trauma" which could never be transformed into "places-of-sanctuary" (Whingham 88), internment camps in particular crystallised time and suffocated any

[5] The other one was the Italian Scot Eugenio D'Agostino (Cagliardo Coraggioso), who had already published his memoir when WW2 broke out and was interned. He praised Mussolini and Fascism on pp. 166-167 of the latest edition of *Wandering Minstrel.*

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possible hope. At a time when prisoners were not given any news about the war and "engaged in fruitless speculations about the future" (Pieri, *Isle* ch. 4), tragic events like the "Christmas Blitz" of 1940 or the sinking of the Arandora Star were perceived as even more "terrifying" and painful. Emanuelli, for instance, who was "locked up" at Walton Prison until the end of July of that same year (Emanuelli 71), retained horrible memories of the bombing which caused the death of over 365 civilians in Liverpool, and also wanted to give a brief account of the 2nd July tragedy:

> On July 1st 1940, the steamship had left Liverpool bound for Canada. On board were 1,562 internees, 764 of these were Italians, many of whom were Bardigiani from South Wales. There were also German and Italian Jewish refugees and some German prisoners of war on board. The Italians were housed below decks and the Germans on the top deck, which was surrounded by barbed wire. […] On July 2nd 1940 at 7:00 a.m. the ship was torpedoes by the German U-Boat U47 commanded by Captain Gunter Prien, known as "Bull of Scapa Flow". […]. The Arandora Star was 125 miles west of the Irish coast and sank within 30 minutes. Over 800 lives were lost, including many Italians and 46 Bardigiani from South Wales. This terrible event is still commemorated every year at the Arandora Star Memorial Chapel in Bardi cemetery. (72)

FROM CAPTIVITY TO FREEDOM: DISPLACEMENT, CLAUSTROPHOBIA AND ESTRANGEMENT

An open wound for the Italian community in Britain even today, the tragedy of the Arandora Star pierced the heart also of the younger generations. A third-generation immigrant, whose family originally came from the Comino Valley in southern Lazio, Anne Pia clearly describes how she felt in the 1990s when she first watched *Titanic* with Leonardo Di Caprio. She never knew her grandfather, who had drowned like another 445 Italians in the waters of the Irish Sea, but "in [the] final moments of the film" she could experience "his terror, his vulnerability [and] his powerlessness faced with his own death". On the physical level, she also sensed an "unexpected chocking feeling" and her "legs" began to "tremble" (Pia 38):

> It was the first time I had felt any emotional connection to this event in my family history. I was not on the Arandora Star, I have heard no first-hand accounts of it, though there were some survivors, I never knew my grandfather, but in those final moments of the film an instinctive, lucid knowing overwhelmed me; his terror, his vulnerability, his powerlessness faced with his own death; rapid, jumbled snapshots of his life, of Leith, of the mountains of Viticuso, his wife superb at that till in Shrubhill Café; his son and two daughters; all were my own; the force of his regret for not succumbing, not taking British citizenship; his bewilderment left me gasping. (38)

Thus providing clear evidence of Pia's "emotional connection" with the tragedy (Bowers and Sivers 626), *Language of My Choosing* also expresses her rage at the fact that there was "a shortage of lifeboats for the fifteen hundred or so men on board", and that the barbed wire around the top deck finally transformed the boat into a trap. For her, this was definitely a "war crime" (Pia 40-41).

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The British authorities shamefully remained silent,[6] but the news about this tragic event shook the immigrant communities in England, Wales and Scotland. We may understand why, in addition to their shock and sorrow, detainees like Joe Pieri, Les Servini and Hector Emanuelli hoped that they would all be taken to the Isle of Man: if so, "[their] confinement would last for only a few hours" (Pieri, *Isle* ch. 6).

Serena Balestracci's *Arandora Star: dall'oblio alla memoria* is rich in testimonies of grief and bereavement: women and children who were waiting for their loved ones in different parts of Britain were utterly "devastated" and "could not stop crying" (Balestracci 312). At the same time, a sense of collective anger diffused through the generations: "the notion that Churchill indiscriminately 'collared the lot' with regards to internment is a persistent belief", which can be clearly associated with a strong sense of betrayal (Chezzi 386-389; Crangle 91). Writing in 1994, Les Servini in *A Boy from Bardi* thundered:

> I was 26 yrs old I had lived [in Aberavon] for nearly 20 years, what about all my Welsh friends? I had been to Court twice, to help the police as an interpreter! My years at school and in business? […] I was still Italian, and technically I was an enemy. (Servini 21)

The sense of rupture that the Italians felt throughout the UK—and which they interestingly shared with the members of the Italian American and Asian American communities (Schmitz 206-247)—had serious repercussions on the relations between the Italians and the local populations in the post-war period. Internment experiences, in fact, had caused individual and "cultural" traumas (Nagata *et al.* 357, Crangle 91), which were, however, vital also to foster a stronger sense of transnational identity and of belonging.

Once again, migrant autobiographical writings help to gain a clearer understanding of this dark page of 20th-century history. The majority of Italian British authors—Peppino Leoni and Piero Tognini included—were all taken to the internment camps in Douglas on the Isle of Man, whereas Pieri was relocated on the Île Sainte Hélène in Canada. Unsurprisingly, one of the documentary sources that Stefano Paolini employed to discuss internment in the British dominions is *Isle of the Displaced*.

In fact, the Italian men on the Ettrick were the last names to be selected for deportation (Paolini 131). Pieri perfectly recalls that he and the other convicts were "in panic" when they realised that they would cross the Atlantic "caged like so many animals" (Pieri, *Isle* ch. 7). Writing about his twelve-day navigation, he clarified that although he had decided to remain "on the dock area" "to breath some fresh air" (ch. 7), again, he began to suffer from a heavy sense of claustrophobia.

And this sense of claustrophobia, together with the strategies that he adopted during his long three years of internment, are at the heart of the core chapters of his iconic narrative. He paradoxically perceived the arrival of The Ettrick in Canada as "the end of misery" (ch. 8). It was, in fact, after one of the British officers realised that the

[6] It was only after fifty years that the historian Terri Colpi gave the complete details about each of the Italian victims of the tragedy. See her seminal monograph, *The Italian Factor*, on pages 271-300.

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Italians in particular "all spoke English" that "treatment changed dramatically": they "were no longer kicked, no longer shoved, no longer nudged with rifle butts. [They] were given orders brusquely but not a finger was laid on [them]" (Paolini 130).

Compared to the short but touching narratives of the majority of Italian British authors, Pieri seems to confirm that "everything that occurred [during the war] occurs right here, right now, and repeats in a perpetual present-tense time loop" (Cao 106). Combining writing with hand-drawn maps of Camp S near Montréal, he wanted to "re-experience" those painful years to share his traumatic memories with his readers (Bowers and Sivers 626). The beauty of nature in that remote part of Canada sharply contrasts with his emotional responses both to captivity and what he perceived—especially at the beginning—as a constant condition of danger. Expressions like "my stomach grew cold with fear" or "we sat petrified with terror" (Pieri, *Isle* ch. 8) are revealing of the atmosphere of tension which he and the other internees had to endure before they adapted both to the military system and to a new daily routine. One of the descriptive sequences on Camp S significantly shows their effort to "make the best of [their] circumstances":

> As a permanent dwelling place Camp S left a lot to be desired. Sleeping quarters were cramped and lavatory accommodation was inadequate, which led to long queues in the morning. Recreational facilities were non-existent, and the compound was far too small to accommodate 400 men at any one time.
> On the plus side the food was good, and the military presence was at a minimum, although we could always see the two machine-gun towers overlooking us as we walked about in the compound. Our view across the river was spectacular, with the bridge and the magnificent vista of the city. The benefit of the view was two-edged, however, for as time passed, and with no end to our captivity in sight, the presence of the city such a short distance away served only to increase our longing for freedom. But such emotions had not as yet had time to formulate. (ch. 9)

A pivotal element in Trauma and PTSD Studies, time can perpetuate emotional pain—thus causing compulsive thoughts—or can more positively help to elaborate and clarify past behaviours and feelings (Zimbardo *et al.* 31). Peppino Leoni in the chapter entitled "Lacrima Cristi", for instance, insists on the "gloom" of his camp in Douglas, as well as on the boredom and aimlessness of his life in those years (Leoni 22). He too must have been a victim of the so-called "barbed-wire disease" (Schmitz 255-256), in fact, it was only after several years that he understood that he gathered his strengths only when he was asked to abjure his belief in Fascism by the Court. Needless to say, he paid for his firm political ideas and was released from Camp M in Douglas only at the end the war.

Pieri's narrative is equally rich in episodes which show his strong reactions to injustices or inhuman treatment. Although he confessed that in some cases his memories "blurred", he could never forget his outbursts of anger and repeated both the officers' and his words verbatim (Pieri, *Isle* ch. 10). Chapters like "Mutiny", "Mr Paterson" and "Escape" clearly show how he reacted to intolerable forms of abuse, as well as to a growing sense of claustrophobia. Escape plans may also be rooted in "patriotism" and

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"the desire to embarrass the authorities" (ch. 18), but miserably failed, thus causing severe forms of punishment and restriction.

Surprisingly, the end of this part of Pieri's story is brighter than expected: his release had already come through from the Home Office in London, but he was also given the opportunity to work as an interpreter in the US. Although he was seriously tempted to accept, he decided to return to Glasgow and reunite with his family (ch. 20).

The concluding passages of Italian British narratives are similarly marked by happiness and hope. This is true for Tognini, who, due to his young age, was set free after six months and could see his mother and sisters (Tognini 29-30). As for Les Servini, he could savour "the wonderful aroma" of breakfast being served on the ship which would take him first to Liverpool and then to Fleetwood (Servini 32). He now knew the importance of freedom and was eager to begin a new life.

Yet, these new arrivals and settlements were not easy. The latest literature confirms that depression and "feelings of detachment or estrangement from others" are two of the principal post-traumatic stress disorders particularly in migrant and war contexts (Tekin *et al*. 3). Hector Emanuelli, for instance, who greatly suffered during his detention at Brixton Prison in London in 1942 (Emanuelli 82), clearly describes his difficult psychological condition at the time:

> After two years of confinement I was a nervous wreck. I felt that all eyes were on me and that I was completely abandoned and isolated. For a while, I even wished that I was back on the Isle of Man with the friends that I had made there and who had cried for me when I left the camp. Nor did I feel that my release had been a complete exoneration. I still felt branded and an outsider. (97)

Quoting from the melancholic verse of Petrarch and dedicating himself to poetical writing, in 1943 he sadly wondered "why there is no justice on this earth" and especially "why" they continued to "fight and bomb and kill, / Murdering [their] brothers against [their] will" (100). At a time when London was still being raided, he significantly concluded this part of his memoir saying that he "was no longer to be the master of his own destiny" (98).

John Schmitz has shown that internment represents a form of "segregation", which also caused "alienation in postwar society" (Schmitz 255). If we consider the particular case of children, *La Vacanza* (2009) and *A British Boy in Fascist Italy* (2010) respectively testify to how the young Moscardini and Ghiringhelli felt when they returned home. The former overtly wrote about "a strange feeling of unreality" and was always "a little apprehensive that perhaps the following morning [he] might find [himself] still in Sommocolonia" (Moscardini 208). The latter, who had significantly taken Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* on his journey back to Leeds, struggled to re-adapt to his new daily routine (Ghiringhelli 169, 173). It was only after some time that he found the courage to look for his old friends in the area where he used to live and return to his life.

Despite the distress that Italian British authors felt on their return home, none of them received any medical-psychological treatments or followed a family therapy. As PTSD, however, can be more effectively healed by "promoting resilience and growth"

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(Measham 209), we can consider that the new atmosphere of openness and inclusion in Britain greatly favoured their final recovery.

The closing chapters of *Isle of the Displaced* are rich in terms like "anxiety", "apprehension" and "trauma", which confirm that also Pieri greatly feared the freedom that he had been suddenly given, worst of all, that he feared how he would have been treated in Glasgow. As an Italian immigrant, he was used to prejudice and racist slurs. At a time when he felt completely "depersonalised", he was surprised by the warm welcome of the Glaswegians:

> Remarkably enough, when I did go back to serving in public, I found that attitudes seemed to have been transformed. Complete strangers, ex-soldiers who had fought in the Italian campaigns and who correctly assumed that I was Italian, would regale me with their stories of Italy. Of how they were treated as liberators, of the hospitality received from Italian families, of the help given to escaped British prisoners and of the friendliness of the population in general. For whatever reason, the war seemed to have broadened attitudes and increased people's tolerance. Paradoxically, after all that had happened, for the first time in my life I began to feel welcome and a part of the society in which I lived.
> At the end of 1945 my brother Ralph was demobbed, and together we applied ourselves to the family shop and the eventual expansion of the business, and in this I never had the impression that the fact of my Italian background mattered in any way. (*Isle* ch. 22)

AFTERMATH: THE DISCOVERY OF WRITING AND REBIRTH

Elizabeth Wren-Owens has explained that the late emergence of Italian British writings has its roots in the condition of marginality of the members of the immigrant community. The two World Wars had greatly hindered their process of cultural growth, furthermore, the tragedy of the Arandora Star had made them shameful and even more silent (Chezzi). It was in the reconstruction years, as we have seen, that they could improve their financial position and even find new ways of expression. In London, for instance, Peppino Leoni's Quo Vadis became one of the most iconic restaurants in Soho; in the Welsh Valleys, authors like Les Servini, Hector Ghiringhelli and Victor Spinetti were finally able to abandon the catering industry and to dedicate themselves respectively to teaching and their artistic talents. Thanks to his collaboration with The Beatles, Spinetti in particular became an internationally famous actor.

They all began to write many years later, interestingly after retirement. Winners in life, they wanted to leave a positive message especially to the younger generations: their families and friends greatly supported them, revising their manuscripts and even helping them to follow the thread of memory.

Are we really sure, however, that such a late discovery of writing only had a social significance? The textual path that we have followed clearly shows that even as octogenarians Italian British authors continued to feel the same negative feelings—shock, fear, shame and anger—as they had experienced during the war. It seems clear that once they returned from their internment camps at the end of the war, they faced

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the new challenges of the reconstruction years with their families and never had the opportunity to really come to terms with them.

In fact, as we have said, they never followed any medical or psychoanalytic treatments. Clare Makepeace has recently defined the programme of Civil Resettlement Units (CRUs) as "one of the first controlled experiments in social psychology," "which is notable for its humane treatment of returning service personnel" even today (Makepeace Introduction). Begun in 1944 and led by Lieutenant-Colonel Tommy Wilson, an army psychiatrist recruited from Tavistock Clinic, this programme was specifically addressed to British Prisoners of War, which obviously excluded Italian, German and Austrian ex-internees. Although the latter suffered from the same "anxieties of re-adaption" after captivity ("A 'Normal' Problem"), they could not but benefit from the love of their families and the new atmosphere of inclusiveness which pervaded the country. Once again, they were victims of unequal treatment.

It is for this reason that their encounter with writing represented a turning point in their process of final recovery. James Pennebaker, a social psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin, first studied the beneficial effects of what he specifically defines as "emotional writing" in 1986 (Siegel-Acevedo 2). Since then, also Italian American author Louise De Salvo provided evidence that it decreases "perceived stress" and trauma: her *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Stories Transforms Our Lives* (2000) gives practical advice to turn victims into "narrators with the power to observe" (Siegel-Acevedo 4).

Indeed, completely unaware of this aspect of the scholarly debate of their times, Italian British authors intuitively gave their works a solid structure, while enriching them with "concrete, authentic and explicit details". It was following the course of historical events that they could share their memories with their readers, while "reclaiming some measure of agency" (4).

They all profited from the writing process. They may have faced difficulties at a formal-stylistic level both in English and in Italian, but they could finally reflect on their complex identities, thus giving a clearer idea of their sense of belonging. A symbolic praise to "chameleon-like personalities", *Isle of the Displaced* also represents Pieri's first reconciliation with the past. At that time, he was already acting as a reference point for the Bargan and Bargan Scottish communities: he thus utilised writing to give an orderly shape to his memories and clarify—also re-interpret—the most important choices of his life. At the same time, he came to terms with and recovered from all his traumas.

One of the most prolific Italian Scottish writers, Joe Pieri continued to revive his memories, particularly those of the Second World War. In the following years, younger literary talents in England, Wales and Scotland offered new representations of those bleak times, thus helping the members of the Italian community to free themselves from the resentment and sense of shame that they had felt until then.

This is to say that even in the early 2000s, the healing power of those accounts was greater than the numerous art exhibitions and cultural events which celebrated the 70th anniversary of the tragedy of the Arandora Star. Evidence of the "rebirth" of the Italian community, also of its new positive image, can be found in Pia's *Language of My*

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Choosing:[7] building upon her considerations, we can say that the time is ripe to promote also the social and literary significance of its migrant writings. They bear the scars and torments of at least two generations of Italians, but speak powerful messages of courage and resilience. Adopting different, interdisciplinary approaches will be crucial to their success also in the wider context of the Italian diaspora in English-speaking countries.

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[7] See Pia 85: "Italian is now synonymous with flair and creativity. There is a respect for our enterprise and endeavour and a recognition of the impact we have had on the fabric and institutions of this country. Our imprint is to be found in every profession and area of Scottish life, in almost every town, hamlet and city. We now find ourselves trumpeting a colourful, glorious tradition, one to be envied. No longer downtrodden, fearful, hopeful and apologetic, we see pizzerias [*sic*], panettone, Illy coffee and Gaggia coffee machines, as a sign of quality. Replacing the standard vanilla of our early years of Italian ices, sold from barrows and vans, there is a gelato industry. Across Europe, in Greece, Spain, France and beyond, flavoured ice cream of every description can be had, the most intriguing being still for me, apple crumble and naughty *zabaglione*".

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