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The Other Columbiad

Peter Carravetta

Review-essay on *An Oration upon the Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus*. By Robert Viscusi. W. Lafayette (IN): Bordighera, 1993.

Written or better crystallized in the heat of the contested 1992 Columbus Quincentenary celebrations, this lyrical-narrative text is a major addition to the growing body of Italian American literary culture. There is no doubt in this reader's mind that Viscusi's *Oration* will stand out as a rich, problematic, indeed troubling and yet unavoidable critical ganglion in the current literary history network. In Fred Gardaphé's estimation: "*An Oration* could be read as an Italian/American *Howl*, that monumental epic of Allen Ginsberg which spoke for a whole generation." This is a perceptive starting point: Viscusi is speaking for, as well as to, this our generation, his being a poem about America, primarily. Yet America is a complex geohistorical construction, its political and

aesthetic discourses evolving at asynchronous times and with unpredictable multidirectional speeds. Ginsberg's re-writing of Whitman aimed at rocking post-WW II, post-Korean War America, which was optimistic and arrogant, totally convinced that the lofty values of its mostly petite bourgeoisie were a divine right. The Beat generation did much to shake the country from its blatant contradictions and narcissistic denial, especially as we edged into the Sixties. *Howl* and *The Fall of America* as well as Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* are rare examples of combined linguistic experimentation and ideological, political incision only thinly veiled as aesthetic constructs. Their invective sent ripples across a broad cultural range within the alienating geography of McCarthyism and big business driven pseudoconsumeristic endorsements, the topica major of poetic exploration focusing on political opportunism and corruption, homosexuality, alienation, rebellion by non-participation, the problematization of imagism and the revaluation of minor and foreign music. Today, with the decline of the greedy-yuppy Reagan cycle, the dissolution of Cold War politics, and an alleged ideological bankruptcy, we have an entirely different vocabulary to contend with. The *Oration* comes at a time when confusion about what multiculturalism means is at an all time high, set against a diffused and uncanny self-awareness of origins and belonging, an unprecedented world wide explosion of nationalisms, ethnic solidarity and/or cleansing, and a hotly debated reframing of the meaning of colonialism, national mythologies, and social stratification. So it came as no surprise that among the idealized if not idolatered icons of social consciousness to be contested there would be Christopher Columbus: history, it is held, must be re-written from the point of view of the excluded and the silenced, the uprooted, the "victims" of someone else's past "victories" and glories. The semantics of standard, textbook keywords of Modernity is deconstructed to underscore the negativity of social and historical process: discovery becomes intrusion, achievements signal the belief in one's superiority vis à vis some other group, commerce means exploitation, spreading a religion is an act of ideological imposition, progress very often entails subjugating and or erasing other cultural practices and traditions, in short civilization itself reeks with violence, prejudice, conformity to an external (and typically West-European) organization of society and cultural practices. The need and search for difference against the centripetal, compacting pull of transcendental values based on Identity has

exploded into a myriad cases and positions each voicing its right to be heard and, more than that, the right to accuse someone else of having violated, at some such point in history, their personal rights or cultural heritage. Yet wanting to be different *and* assimilated into the mainstream at all costs exacts a toll, as the perversion of political correctness demonstrates. For, in the meantime, the academic orthodoxy, the silent majority, and official government policy, continue to vociferate, legislate and implement their "ideology" of distracting, disinforming, and divide et impera. Up to ten, fifteen years ago, marginalized constituents clamored their right to a stake in Mainstreet, to be included in the Canon. Today, the question of being marginal is relevant to some groups, at least in terms of social and political empowerment, but critically and philosophically it is fast becoming a jaded issue. For those enmeshed in the self-annulling network of middle America, marginality is now actually something to be yearned for, as it reconfigures an ontological necessity, proof of a visual angle, a limited but not abstract topology, there being no credible Center or Grand Value any longer. In fact, when it comes to reinterpreting the value of certain symbols, or emblems, or metaphors, or images, the stakes are high, complex, disorienting, risky.

Columbus is one such iconic, multilayered figura.

Columbus is central to the very history and myth of America, and he is *gioco-forza* a major point of reference in the cultural unconscious of the Italian Americans, beginning with the earlier uneducated generations. Yet though in the history of America, Italian Americans have played a minor role, some of their cultural heroes did in fact represent, simultaneously, Italy and America, and with that necessarily their ambiguous reciprocal relationship. As these dynamics and domains resurface in Viscusi's text, the poetic persona recalls them against the fibres of a disturbing historical tapestry, one which is still pointing the finger at the upper classes for their cynicism and greed, and is also downsizing the excesses and the hypocrisy of America the great this and that. A political poem, in short:

the fact is columbus day will go the way of the dinosaur
 along with everything else
 meanwhile what about garibaldi
 who was fighting for the poor of italy
 but after the revolution
 lived to see the rich steal italy
 and starve the poor
 selling them to labor gangs in suz

shipping them to new york to dig subways
 in return for cheap american grain
 they brought back in the empty ships
 the italians went to america in steerage (stanza 4)

Here we have a very concise history of Italian Americans origins. And as offended, insulted, resentful as a poet and critic who hails from these beginnings can get. But no less compelling and, above all, true, as a look at a good history book will confirm. Tragic, cynical history. The allegory of the text is not to be sought in the parade of traditional, folksy, discounted images, but in its prying and then subverting a host of self-serving and marketable platitudes our confused modern day American cherishes. For example:

the americans loved columbus in those days
 he was the *right* kind of italian
 not like those dirty dagoes . . .

and after a rehashing of all known violent and denigrating stereotypes leveled at these people, the poetic persona continues with its social-political reassessment:

the americans preferred columbus
 our man who wore a telescope in his pants
 who bought america from the indians
 and gave it to the bankers
 and for which the official culture could not but reward him with glory everlasting:
 they named sixty or seventy cities and towns columbus
 columbia a university a country
 they called a world's fair
columbian meaning *forward-looking*
inventive daring not afraid of fools and bigots (stanza 5)

The conundrum disclosed at this juncture is that appropriating the myth as so much greater than the man entails creating a symbol-churning machinery which cannot always be controlled, as in fact it strives above all to reproduce itself, like a generator, like capital, making a mockery of national ideologies and moralizing aesthetics. In stanza 6, we are reminded of how Columbus found a congenial atmosphere in Puritan households, "passing" in contorted discursive formations from one Mediterranean and Catholic mold into a Northern European and Protestant one. In fact Columbus was turned into a symbol of the progress of sci-

ence and inquiry, although even before the final desecrating irony the reader is fast made aware of how the Columbus myth contained a darker side:

in those days they would sic columbus on the priests
 they would have a play in which the inquisition said to columbus
the earth is flat, it says so right here in this book
of theology
 and columbus would stand there all smug like galileo
 signifying the progress of science and the freedom of inquiry
 while the priests competed to see
 which of them could say the dumbest thing
 people loved these plays
 in a protestant country
 where they were afraid of priests
 because they hated them
 and found they hated priests
 because they were afraid of them
 this particular logical slave-bracelet
 often called itself the history of science.

This is a brutally accurate encapsulation of three centuries of American history, and how it strove to equate scientific progress, imperialism and self-serving morality.

However, the times they are a-changing. The next stanza zooms in on the aftershocks of the crumbling of the American dream:

nowadays of course this history of science includes
 a lot more chapters than it had a hundred years ago
 in those days they never heard of auschwitz
 they never heard of hiroshima
 they never thought someone could kill lake erie

 so of course it is no longer so wonderful
 to be the patron saint of science.

As befits the poetic form of old, the oration proceeds by deploying a demonstrative rhetoric, one which conflates several aspects of our social and aesthetic reality. The organization of semantic clusters typically begins by stating a Columbus-spun issue, then retraces it in the labyrinths of both world and American history, then deftly sketches the paradoxes and bitter-sweet results of its tentacular, hypothetic nature, and finally returns, over and over and with a conviction neither tainted nor deluded, to how in the mind and heart of an Italian American

Columbus will always be "ours". But because from stanza to stanza a variety of metrical and stylistic devices are employed, each and every time there's a conclusion reached, the text avoids turning into a catalogue of complaints or sculpted statements, and manages thus to sustain the dynamism, the serious playfulness and semantic polyvalence that make it so enjoyable and interesting. For example, in stanza 3 the poetic persona responds to the dethroning of Columbus with the resonant participation of children's songs:

we will learn to get along without columbus
whom we used to love so well
there's macdonald's in columbus
but colón has gone to hell

there's an awful smell
where he must dwell
we will live without columbus
whom we used to love so well

Yet at a later point in the poem, after having rearranged European and early American fantasies with Columbus, the poet draws for us some of the rituals from more recent memory, from the sixties and the seventies:

at first everyone thought it was the end of civilization
the day columbus dies
forty thousand italians came to the funeral in black cars
and afterwards ate heavily
because it had been a long day
but the new regime turned out to be good for tourism
wellheeled germs coming to new york
to see stockholders who wear beaded moccasins

He then links up with the personal identifications of the myth, and the procession of national or binational ambivalent heroes it spawned:

columbus by my reckoning
died in seventy-one
when my grandpa died
the last i knew
who believed mussolini
a god among other gods
caruso vespucci
da vinci colombo

and cut the cord
 that held the continent
 america drifted into the pacific
 where it has rested and stayed

This polarized link between the personal and the national, the private and the public, is picked up a few stanzas later:

we have been living in a theoretical country
 a mapmaker's metaphor *america*
 this expression means
a mere european riding in columbus's afterglow
 america has been a sort of outer space
 where people come from other places
 to try out dangerous ideas
 while working on the railroad
 according to my granpa (stanza 17)

The *Oration* is singing the disintegration of America with bitter and melancholy tones, and though it does not conflate the myth of Columbus with that of America, it does expound how one has been the analogon, at times, or the metaphor, of the other, how both have been shorn of their former grandeur and recklessness, and how the way Columbus day is sinking in the popular estimation, so may soon America become a ghost of its more demonic self: "america will not die so quickly as columbus", essentially because "people sort of got used to america"! But these are no longer times for tragic remedies, and no amount of irony will sweep the truth under the carpet, as the poet asks, "who will weep for america/when america passes away" if there is no one, no saint or hero or natural wonder creature to do so: "will the duck or the moose or the bison/where the deer and the antelope play," reattaching memory to the endless and endlessly challenging vastness of its land, drawing culture into its natural spring folds. At this point, the poet brings his Vichian hermeneutic one step further still, and pictures a futuristic situation where america is only an archeological subject, a topic fit for a new edition of an ancient mythology. In the poetic logic of the *Oration*, this foreboding slide our social reality has taken reveals itself as the appropriate, present-day context within which to reconsider who or what the Italian Americans are:

will the italians go back to italy
 some have left already for other destinies
 eternal nomads who live in the wastes of australia

or teaching chemistry in china
 many will stay however
 more comfortable as indians
 than ever they were as theoretical objects (stanza 21)

Perhaps, once again, being marginal, as all immigrants have been and as their ethnically marked descendants are, is not so bad when compared to being a fully homogenized and functional "theoretical object", an allusion I believe to the Risorgimento dictum of having to forge the Italians once national sovereignty had been attained. Note also that calling the Italians "eternal nomads" is not inconsistent with the poet saying of them, earlier in stanza 8, "italians are a family people/not as in some political speech/but as in the caves of desolate matese/as on the frosty mountains of gran sasso/family people since the days of visigoths" because what is highlighted here is the difference between the ethical values and social patterns of a people as it more or less remains put in one geographical site over generations (the fodder of invented Traditions), and the necessarily mercantile, experimental, stoic and frugal dimension of the lives of those who *must* take the voyage or journey away from one's roots. On the other hand, Italian nomads are not entirely new to what is dangerous, foreign or strange because their own very history is laced with the language, weapons and rituals of an endless catalogue of invasions and subjugations:

family people since the days of visigoths
 and the roman legionaries
 families protecting their own
 from the soldiers and the police
 even their so-called criminals
 even their real criminals
 because who were the soldiers
 they were worse than criminals
 they were *foreigners*
 they were foreign soldiers
 whom no one was watching
 they came where they came
 and they took what they liked

In other words, there is a way of reading this brilliant miniepic as a philosophical poem. As their long and complex history tells, Italians seem to have occupied all possible slots on any political or social hierarchy, their cultural unconscious appears to have a sense—or the encrypted memory—of what it means to be on

different sides of the fence at different times. This may underlie both the resilient character traits of the Sicilians as well as the tragicomic masks of the Neapolitans, and it may underlie as well the socially constructed demeanors of merchants and farmers, aristocrats and their servants. This may sound Hegelian, but it is not a two-pronged yet resolute dialectic of history I am extracting from the *Oration*. Rather, the capacity, in the face of adverse destiny, to accept and embody a belief in change, take existence as constant becoming, full of risks and fears but also potentially more rewarding, at any rate as justifying a different kind of dream, a particular choice of itinerary, a will to dis/cover, to ex/perience, an aesthetic rooted on sensing, on being-there for awhile. And nothing is more American than mobility and invention. That sets the stage for a possible ontology which can be expressed in heideggerese as "being-in-the-world-with-others *through time*." This means accepting movement, change, risk, a constantly shifting background or landscape. Stanza 24 in particular makes epochal predictions on what will happen against some unsettling aspects of this becoming. America is going to wither, decay and vanish, becoming the mythical memory of itself. Again, a Vichian paradigm seems to be at work here, perhaps unconsciously. But here myth and history conflate, as is wont to happen in prophetic or allegorical texts. The *corsi* and *ricorsi* of scripted memory, from genesis through babel all the way to technology-as-world view, reiterate emblematically some basic patterns in human social development. They are picked up again in Stanza 28, where with a more traditional and song-like rhythm the re-course is made, specifically, to the cultural construct, or the hermeneutic figura, of Columbus, the traveler who knows death is a real possibility, the migrant who wonders and wanders at once, the exile whose words go unheard: "the sails of columbus were straining the mast/till the wind simply tore them away/and the dead disappeared in the wake of the past/as night disappears in the day." This overarching philosophical take is further sounded in stanza 30, where echoes of *Finnegans Wake* are entwined with Allen Ginsberg, Flann O'Brien and Nietzsche, scansion in classic English tetrameters and pentameters, even reviving an ABAB rhyme scheme. There is no doubt, as I mentioned earlier, that this text will keep us busy for some time to come: "vast anxieties grow in the populace/a movement to revive columbian time" (stanza 28) in the main because "it seems he can never stay dead/whenever he thinks he is slipping away/they come and

they find him in bed." (stanza 30). Columbus, then, truly suffered another "recent death," but he is far from dead and gone: Columbus is also the museums of iconographic, pictographic, allegorized figures, the philology of its textual representations, over a period of time, through many social groups, and in terms of effective symbolic power. Perhaps as Italian American critics we should explore in greater detail the motivations behind the desire for wanting to kill Columbus yet again, five centuries later, especially in North America.