

**Antonella Riem Natale**

*The passage of the frog and the wild strawberries in 1942 by Beniamino Petrosino. Christchurch: Hazard Press, 2003. Pages 214.*

Beniamino Petrosino's *The Passage of the Frog and the Wild Strawberries of 1942*, set in the Italian post-Second World War scene, maps the invisible passages and inner paths of the poor country peoples of the South (Campania, Basilicata and Puglia). The novel traces the socio-cultural geography of a socially and politically depressed and psychologically diseased Southern Italy, involving the readers in a poetic and thorough analysis of the country, 'travelling' both in space and time and ploughing deep in the conscience and memory (both personal and historical) of the characters.

This is a wry and ironic tale of the "superstitions, religion, traditions and beliefs of an illiterate way of life", written in a stern but poetical style, which often echoes the rhythms of Petrosino's Italian and dialectal 'mother' tongue/s, thus adding to the originality and intercultural interest of the text. Petrosino's usage of the English language has the texture of spoken language: tales told around the fireplaces on cold winter nights, or under the refreshing shade of an oak tree, in the burning summer heat.

The story puts together a series of (autobiographical) family and "genealogical" events, involving the protagonist in a hard and difficult *Bildun* that will in the end lead him to emigration, first to the North of Italy, then elsewhere, but this is for the reader to surmise. This search for one's roots involves a suffered reconciliation with the "Father" (the Count) and a coming to terms with the experience of patriarchal violence and exploitation against both women and children, which can become an indestructible chain, where the son runs the risk of repeating the same mistakes of his grandfathers. Narrating seems for the protagonist a temporary resting place within the moving and movable landscapes of his composite "selves"; it is a continuous journey of mapping and re-mapping known and unknown territories, both the inner recesses of the psyche (with the fascination for magic and witchcraft) and the outer spells of the landscape (with its scorching sun and hard earth), which often have a deep correspondence.

The narrator's voice, ironic and low key, wraps the reader in a realistic web, where borders dissolve, unveiling an ethical issue - in all its complexities. The veil shadowing the past must be torn and 'truth', however painful, must be seen, acknowledged, and hopefully transcended. In spite of the fact that "the seeds of superstition and brutal ignorance planted in young minds have found fertile ground, the ideal conditions to thrive", the narrator is "still fighting [...], hoping to defeat [his] old ways of behaving that [he] inherited from a hungry, ignorant yet innocent world" (p. 210). Innocence is a key word here, and it is the innocence of those who have lived fully, in spite of their mistakes and sufferings. Only when the songs of innocence finally become songs of experience can the protagonist

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be ready for the real journey to inner freedom. Only when acknowledging that guilt is not the same thing as responsibility, can one forgive himself, his past and his family, and get ready to walk the path leading to love and partnership.

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