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The Invisible Poet: Rina Del Nin Cralli

Joseph Pivato

A found-manuscript of over 100 poems in Italian and Friulian sits on a shelf in my old study. The poems are by Rina Del Nin Cralli who has been writing for many years in Toronto, Canada but has rarely published any of them. She has remained virtually invisible by writing in the Friulian¹ language in Canada, a language which has fewer and fewer speakers every year, even in Friuli itself. She also writes in Italian but has never published any of these poems. What is the relation of these poems to writing in Friuli and writing in Canada?

A measure of Rina's invisible status is that she is not included, and not even mentioned, in the book, *Pillars of Lace: The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers* edited by Marisa De Franceschi, who is also originally from Friuli. Rina Del Nin Cralli is mentioned only once in *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*², but there is no bibliographical reference to her since she never published a book of poems. In contrast her contemporary, Doris Vorano of Montreal, published her Friulian poems, *Puisis e riflessions* (1983), and is listed. Rina's work appears in no other general anthology with the exception of the one edited by Dôre Michelut, *A Furlan Harvest*. Between 1982 and 1983 Rina published seven poems in various issues of *Il Ponte*, the newsletter of Friuli Centrale printed in Codroipo.

Rina Del Nin Cralli was born in Codroipo in 1929 and came to Canada in 1958 with her husband. She did not start writing poems until 1979 when she was inspired by a presentation by Ermanno Bulfon (Bepo Frangel) with his collection of poems, *Un Friûl vivût in Canada* (1977). In my essay, "Elegy for the Future: Friulian Writers in Canada" (2005), I write about Rina's most noted printing of her poems in *A Furlan Harvest* (1993) edited by Dôre Michelut. There she published one short narrative and four poems, in Friulian with English translations.

The anthology, *A Furlan Harvest*, is the result of a series of writers workshops Michelut conducted at the Famee Furlane Centre in Toronto in order to redis-

¹ Note, I use the spelling 'Friulian' here but it has also been written as 'Friulan' and 'Furlan'.

² Pivato, 1998: 38.

cover the literary culture of Friuli and promote the work of local writers. Of the six women in the anthology only two women wrote in Friulian. Maybe it is too much to expect that the Friulian language will survive outside Friuli, outside rural Friuli.

The poems and sketches in Michelut's anthology are dominated by a nostalgia for a Friuli of the past. There is a sense of loss of a childhood in rural Friuli, a lost pace of life, a lost culture and a lost language. The poems of Rina Del Nin Cralli are in this vein. The very anthology in its collective attempt to capture this slowly disappearing culture becomes an elegy. A harvest after all is the end of the life cycle.

An elegy is a lament for the loss of somebody or something. These writers are lamenting the loss of the rural culture of Friuli, the Friuli of their childhoods. And they are writing about this loss for future generations. Writing in Friulian is a paradox since the language and folklore of Friuli survived all those centuries as an oral tradition. Now that it is disappearing it is being written down.

In *A Furlan Harvest* the poems of Rina Del Nin Cralli capture the simple language of Friuli based on rural expressions and vocabulary. Her poem "Nostalgjie e tulipans" demonstrates these qualities:

Nostalgjie e pôs bes
 tantis vajudis inta chel jet
 il problema al jere
 come compra il bigliet
 'O jeri vignude in Canadà
 parce c'o vevi scoltât il cur
 ma cumo 'o vevi tante voe di
 torna indaûr...³

The simple Friulian words capture the condensed power of the poetic image. The expression "tantis vajudis" reflects the sentiment of nostalgia in a vivid image of crying. The words "inta chel jet" mean "in that bed", but "jet" is the same spelling as the English word for 'jet' as in 'jet plane' so we get a double meaning here for flying back to Italy.

Her poem, "Prè Bepo" captures the indomitable spirit of the Friulani which helped them survive in Italy and in communities abroad. After a bicycle accident Bepo simply gets up off the ground, puts the broken bike over his shoulder and carries on:

³ Del Nin in Michelut, 1993: 64.

Nol si piart però di spirit,
la biciclete al met in spale,
indanant al va cun pas ardit⁴

The last line, “indanant al va”, ‘he goes ahead’, could be a motto for Friulani immigrants around the world.

The next poem, “Sium”, ‘a dream’, is a common motif among immigrant writers who express their nostalgia through dreams and descriptions of dreams:

Cun te in sium jo soi tornade...
(ma) il vèr tesaur al è dendri di me⁵

Many poems focus on this preoccupation with returning to Friuli, if only in a dream, and often end with the admission that these Friulani belong in Canada, they are better off in Canada. Like the Friulian poem of Ermanno Bulfon, “Emigrant”, the dream poems seem to be a way of dealing with the nostalgia for Friuli.

’O ài lassade la me tiare
Un sium, mi sumii ancjemò⁶.

I have noted that these Friulian writers can speak English and can write in Italian, but the language of dreams is always Friulian. In an unpublished poem, “Il Me Paîs” Rina writes,

ma la me tiare jo la sumii di di
e ancje in sium.

Yes, even her daydreams are in the Friulian language.

In poems reflecting the agrarian traditions and the rural origins of the Friulian vocabulary Rina’s poems are full of references to nature. Her final poem in *A Furlan Harvest* is “Riflessions”, a meditation on a starry night by the water. Here the poet identifies with nature through the use of personification:

Senze fermasi mai l’aghe a va e ven
o par c’a vadi in serce ancje je di un pôc di ben⁷.

Rina sees the moving water searching for some good space.

⁴ Del Nin in Michelut, 1993: 66.

⁵ Del Nin in Michelut, 1993: 68.

⁶ Bulfon, 1977: 38.

⁷ Del Nin in Michelut, 1993: 70.

Some of the poems she wrote in 1980-81 are published in *Il Ponte* (February 1982) and demonstrate a deep homesickness for Friuli. The poem “Il Distac”, ‘the separation’, ends with the three promises that she made to her mother before she left Friuli,

Tre robis 'o ai prometût prime di parti:
 jo tornerai al paisut prime di murî
 simpri orogliose sarai dal me paîs
 e a me mari o scriverai ogni trente dîs
 La tierze promesse jé stade fazile di mantigni,
 'o eri cusi desolade che jó scrivevi ogni altre di.

For Rina this feeling of desolation from being so far away from her family in Friuli was only alleviated by gathering with friends from Friuli. With the long poem, “Nostalgje: Mal inguaribil” (*Il Ponte*, 1983) she celebrates one of these large gatherings at the Famee Furlane, “j erin plui di sis-cent e vinc”, ‘we were more than 620’. Here she debates the problem of nostalgia with people who say they don’t have this longing for Italy, “no steit ve’ nostalgje”. She claims that it is impossible to deny this feeling no matter how much people talk. Her proof is in the feeling of happiness when she is gathered with other Friulani. She writes in “La Tiere co ai lasât”:

jo 'o sai une robe sole
 có soi cu la me int
 il me cûr a si console.

In another unpublished poem dedicated to fellow writer, Gianni Grohovaz she laments his untimely death in 1989,

Al jere conosût come poete e scritôr,
 ma di sigûr al nol jere diventât siôr.
 Une di sul plui biel, a l'improvîs
 nus a' lassâs, prime che i siei scrits
 e fossin completâs.

The poem tries to recreate the sense of community that the post-war generation of Friulani had in Toronto. Gianni Grohovaz wrote about these associations in his poems and essays. He produced a book about the Friulani in Canada and their aid in response to the devastating earthquake in Friuli in 1976, *To Friuli from Canada with Love* (1983).

In terms of writers the Friulian community has a very small group compared to people from other regions of Italy. The best known is probably Dôre Michelut

who published a number of books in English. Her much anthologized essay, “Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue”, deals with the role of the Friulian language in relation to English and standard Italian for herself as a writer, but has been acknowledged by other authors. Michelut explains,

The balance the Furlan and English struck within me long ago is so very entrenched it feels saturated and inaccessible. At a certain point, my two acquired languages, Italian and English, were forced to come to terms with each other within me. It was this experience that led me to consider ways of approaching the more remote Furlan⁸.

After high school in Canada Michelut returned to Italy to study at the University of Florence; there was no university in Udine, Friuli, at that time. After eight years in Italy she returned to Canada and found herself disoriented in both language and context:

At first I lived the impossibility of translation as silence. In fact, I became aware of the exclusion of myself from one world and the other to such an extent that I started to feel irrelevant to both. The more attention I gave to the English world here, the less I understood the intense and committed life I had lived for eight years in Florence, and the more it haunted me. Then I started to write, in any language and despite all grammars. It would have been unintelligible to most but, as far as I was concerned, I was producing meaning, and on my own terms⁹.

For some readers this language and identity conflict is one reason they find Michelut’s writing so interesting. Some European linguists and critics describe this phenomenon as code-switching and give it a positive connotation. In North America, the land of immigrants but not of popular bilingualism, critics describe this problem as language interference.

Rina Del Nin Cralli consciously chose to write in her mother tongue Friulian and so tried to avoid all the linguistic problems of changing languages. In several of my essays on the different languages used by Italian-Canadian writers I have referred to the theory of French linguist Henri Gobard and his model of the four levels of language. I outline them here. First, the vernacular language of rural and maternal origins. It signifies the here and now. Second, the vehicular language, urban, commercial, state-controlled and bureaucratic. It is the dominant language found everywhere and acts as the primary agent of deterritorialization. Third, the referential language, the language of culture, the language of over there. Fourth, the mythic language, that of religion and of the beyond.

⁸ Michelut, 1989: 145.

⁹ Michelut, 1989: 146-147.

For writers like Rina Del Nin Cralli the Friulian tongue is the vernacular language of rural and maternal origins. English is the vehicular language of commerce and deterritorialization and standard Italian can be the referential language of culture and over there. For writers like Del Nin Cralli and Ermanno Bulfon, Friulian is also the mystic language of the beyond. Maybe this is my point of view of a language that is slowly disappearing. In Quebec Bianca Zagolin chose to write in French rather than Friulian or English and so would have a different configuration with these four levels of language.

How do these different languages and different levels of language relate to one another in any given writer? This is a difficult question to work on with most Italian-Canadian writers, especially those who were born in Italy in a rural area and learned the local dialect as their first language. When they moved to Canada most of these young people were educated in one of the official languages. As writers they began to work in English or in French. Rina came to Canada in her late 20s, continued to speak Friulian and later wrote in this mother tongue.

The theory that has helped me to work out the relationship between the different languages is that of the Russian linguistics scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin who described the tension between languages in terms of dialogism and heteroglossia. Bakhtin wrote his theory essays in the 1930s and 1940s but they were only published in Moscow in 1975 as *Voprosy literatury i estetik*. The English edition is entitled, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). For Bakhtin a dialogic work is one that is in continual communication with other works, and also with works in other languages. He argued for the polyvocality of a language as the different languages, and different levels of language interact with one another.

To some the Friulian tongue is a dying and isolated language, but it is nevertheless capable of evolving its heteroglossia, the extra linguistic context. Friulian words once bound only to the territory of Friuli, have gone beyond and now emerge in the territory of Ontario. The new context changes the words by giving them additional meaning. The Friulian words must interact with English. Bulfon's book title suggests this, *Un Friûl vivût in Canadà*. Would Rina have written all those Friulian poems of nostalgia for Friuli if she had not migrated to Canada, "il vêr tesaur al è dendri di me"¹⁰. These invisible poems are nevertheless linked to the wider literary context. Michelut's anthology, *A Furlan Harvest*, with writing in Friulian, Italian and in English translations demonstrates the polyvocality, the dialogue with other languages. In her introduction to the anthology she suggests that the writing workshops with the five women were a celebration of the dialogic imagination. She explains,

¹⁰ Del Nin in Michelut, 1993: 68.

For me, personally, what I gained in this workshop is perhaps more than the other members. The freedom of meandering through three languages with no external barriers is an experience I will never forget: the absolute delight of speaking theory in Italian, doing readings in English, spreading the density of Furlan onto thin paper¹¹.

Michelut expresses sentiments shared by many Italian-Canadian writers. The contradictions and ironies of shifting languages and attempted translations are revealed to the writers as they work with the language. Some are aware that the small minority language of Friulian has the problem of survival.

In terms of Bakhtin's dialogism the Friulian words in Rina's poems have a different meaning for the Friulian readers in Canada than those in Friuli who may never have been to North America. The Friulian reader in Ontario can relate the Friulian words to English expressions and to Italianes. Different readers will also have varying views on the nostalgia for Friuli and for Italy. They will also have different relationships and skills in Italian. And we must recognize that the dialogic position of a small minority language like Friulian is different in Canada and in Italy.

The irony of Rina's nostalgia for Friuli is that she is very conscious of the fact that this idyllic region has changed since she left in 1958. In her poem, "La Nestre Lenghe", based on her return trip to Friuli, she records her shock at the disappearing language of Friulian:

Cuand che mi rivolsi
a la int in Furlan
lor mi chalin in muse
e mi rispuidin par 'talian.

The poem ends with Rina acknowledging that she speaks more Friulian at the Famee Furlane Centre in Toronto than in her hometown of Codroipo in Friuli.

At the Famee Furlane she has also participated with others in putting on plays in Friulian for a number of years. She persisted in writing in Friulian. Though she published few of her poems she did attempt to promote her writing by producing a recording in a cassette in 1982. The recording Side A has Rina singing five of her poems to the musical accompaniment of Gino Salvador and Valentino Taglione. The rhyming of her poetic lines gives the simple songs the quality of old folk songs. At times they remind us of the Italian immigrant songs of the 1950s such as *Terra Straniera* (1953) and *Campanaro* (1953). We have here another dialogic relationship for these Friulian poems to Italian *musica leggera*.

¹¹ Del Nin in Michelut, 1993: 18.

Side B has Rina reading 20 of her poems in Friulian. In this plain recitation we become conscious of the rhythm and beauty of this old language. This is made all the more evident by the rhyming in the poems. The nostalgia in the recitation is balanced by the irony in Rina's observations of human behaviour, an irony often found in the folktales and proverbs from Friuli. And so we have another dialogic relationship of these poems to the folklore of Friuli and *provèrbis dal Friùl*.

Rina Del Nin Cralli spent many years promoting Friulian language and culture; it is only fitting that her achievements be acknowledged in this essay.

Coda

I will end my essay by mentioning some of the other Italian-Canadian authors born in Friuli. Some of them have read and spoken at the Università degli Studi di Udine. Dôre Michelut became well-known as a writer because of her collaboration with other writers in her books of renga poems and because her poems and essays on the mother tongue were anthologized collections of women authors. Marisa De Franceschi is well-known as a novelist and short story writer. In Quebec Bianca Zagolin has a number of works in French as has Philippe Antonio Poloni. Novelist and poet Genni Gunn was born in Trieste, and her father was from Udine, but she does not necessarily identify herself as a Friulian author. There are a number of other writers who have published just one book: Doris Vorano, Ermanno Bulfon, and Silvano Zamaro. None of the five women in *A Furlan Harvest* have published a book as far as I can tell.

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