

Interview With Maria De Dominicis Ardizzi

By Egidio Marchese

(English translation by Anthony Verna*)

Marchese: *In our discussion you emphasized that you are interested more in truth – at the moment at least – than you are in literature, and that the truth you refer to is the truth which you’ve apparently searched for and found in the Bible. In fact, I’ve come across many religious quotations in your books: the title pages of such works as Made in Italy, “Ecclesiastics I, 4-9-11; Il sapore agro della mia terra, Matthew 6, 21; La buona America, Psalm 49 (48) 21 contain a few but clear examples of this religious interest of yours. You then went on to say that what concerns you most is the notion of absolute “Truth”. In Women and Lovers you describe Giulia’s father as someone who “fed her desires of great things, absolutes, the possibility of an impossible love” (p. 8). In your Conversazione col figlio you rhetorically ask the question, “Cos’è l’Assoluto? / Non lo so... / Per me è qualcosa che dà senso a tutto...” (VI, pp. 23-24). And lastly, in one of the most interesting poems of this same work, your discourse revolves around the paradoxical exclamation: “Qual ebbrezza d’impossibili possibilità!” (XV, p. 57).*

Now, in your quest for “truth”, I’m under the impression that you underestimate the importance of your creative work, which is unfortunate in my estimation, because I’m convinced that the locus of your innermost “truth” is none other than your literary imagination. The way you describe the thoughts, the sentiments and the gestures of the characters in your novels, not to mention the events and scenes which emerge from those works, are all incredibly effective in revealing the truth of life as it really is. Indeed, where else but in poetry could anyone dare think of searching for an “impossible truth” or for “possible impossibilities” like you do in that beautiful poem in Conversazione col figlio (XV), where words dissolve into things and things into thoughts and dreams? Could you start perhaps by commenting on some of these preliminary remarks?

De Dominicis Ardizzi: Well, anyone who embarks on the difficult journey towards “Truth”, without first shedding or leaving behind the cares and the allures of the world, all that he or she can ever expect to find is a purely personal “truth”, a “truth”, that is, which really doesn’t count for anything, simply because it is subjective and arbitrary, the very qualities which can lead even the most enduring of ideologies to failure and oblivion.

This is why I believe that there can only be one “Truth”, that is to say the “Truth” which liberates us. The “Truth” I have in mind is at once objective and verifiable, and its nature is both eternal and immutable.

To me, the only book which reveals the complete “Truth” about the origin of Man and the eschatological principle which governs human history is the Bible. The depth of understanding that this book provides about the human condition, with all its greatness and misery, may well make it the most important book in Western culture. For these reasons the Bible has become a unique source of inspiration, not just for me, but for many other writers of all ages as well.

I've always loved reading. Even in my early teens, I was a voracious reader, especially of classical authors, with whom I felt a certain affinity. However, what I seemed to enjoy most were works which revolved around questions of "Truth" and the "Absolute". Those writers who had nothing to offer but their own individual "ideologies" about life and the world never appealed to me very much, and even today, I tend to avoid them as much as I can.

I began to see that "Truth", by definition, had to be objective, unique, and universal in nature, especially if a person was expected to identify with it. In creating my own characters, for instance, I always attempt to be as objective as I can. One way of achieving this is by identifying myself with a character's emotions and experiences so as to be as "truthful" as possible in describing the things I write about. This approach has been invaluable not only for the creation of my literary world but also for exploring my own consciousness.

But the Bible has always been a constant companion of mine. And if I say that the Bible has literally changed my life, it is no exaggeration. When I first read the words "I am the Way, the Truth, the Life", they penetrated my mind and heart with such force that nothing for me has been the same since then.

All of a sudden I felt that there wasn't just an "I"; there was also the "other", as well as a community with which to share the love and pain, the joys and fears, together with the hopes and burdens of everyday existence.

As a writer, it goes without saying that I am very interested in literature, although literature, as such, has never been my sole concern. What I mean is that my literary interests have always been conditioned by an *"ebbrezza d'impossibili possibilità"*. To reconcile dreams with everyday reality, to feel part of this universe while at the same time recognizing that my full human potential can only be realized in a future Absolute realm, are all things which are inextricably bound to my writing project.

I do not mean to sound religious or moral about things. What I just said about literature may well be the view of someone who feels that the world is too small or perhaps too confining to be able to satisfy that quest for immortality which, as Seneca believed, dwells in the hearts of people everywhere.

Marchese: *What do you make of the statement: "Bisogna avere il coraggio di vivere in un universo senza frontiere"? And Ungaretti's lines: "Il mio supplizio/ è quando/ non mi credo/ in armonia"? How do these words apply to your own experience as an immigrant to Canada?*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: With reference to the first statement, this is precisely what Nora, the protagonist of *Made in Italy*, attempts to do with her own life in order to encourage others to do likewise. Although Nora is not highly educated, she is nevertheless an essential role model who shows how important native intelligence can be in certain social contexts.

As far as Ungaretti is concerned, I'm convinced that what he is saying is central to any immigrant's experience. If harmony can be viewed as the primary condition of Creation, and if man is created in the image of God, it follows that barriers between people have no rational basis on which to stand other than the one which any misguided anthropology can provide. Again, Nora is a good illustration of the need to remain authentically human and in harmony with one's own spiritual principles.

Marchese: *A number of your characters (Giulia, Agostina, Teresa, Peggy...) often walk around barefooted. Does this have any special meaning for you? Someone wrote: “Nessuno può aumentare la propria statura. I tacchi posticci delle nostre superbie ingannano soltanto gli uomini. A Dio arriveranno con i piedi scalzi”.*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: Yes, “to walk barefoot”. I did not use that symbolism consciously. The fact that you noticed it is proof of your close and attentive reading of the text. In a certain sense you read between the lines, so to speak, something that only a few are capable of doing. That we all have to meet our Maker is an incontrovertible Truth. Fake heels can scarcely make us taller than we are. Our pride and arrogance stay behind, with all the other things with which we deceived ourselves. When we return to God, we’ll be viewed from the inside and we’ll be “judged only in love”, as St. John of the Cross said.

Marchese: *In Women and Lovers there is an extraordinary description of Agostina, which is very concise yet extremely suggestive: “There was about her something voluptuous and sacred, and, at the same time, painful” (p. 17). Don’t you think there is something here that reflects the culture you inherited, which is typical especially of Southern Italian women, as indicated by the use of such words as “voluptuous”, “sacred”, and “painful” in order to create the sense of the religious importance attached to sexuality, which falls somewhere between the sacred and the profane?*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: I don’t think that those adjectives apply only to Italian or to Southern Italian women. Agostina possesses the Truth and sees no need to philosophize about it. Her sexuality is natural; it represents a powerful force, which is redirected towards love and grief. There are no religious strictures governing Agostina’s actions and her feelings are authentic, that’s why I say she is “sacred”.

Marchese: *In the Preface to Made in Italy you write: “Ho evitato di indulgere al compiacimento facile di situazioni piccanti” (pp. xi-xii). But at times your reticence seems somewhat excessive and may even generate a certain amount of semantic ambiguity. For example, in Women and Lovers there is a moment when Giulia is overtaken by an “internal excitement, a sudden and uncontrollable ferment” (p. 30); in a flash she turns the car around and heads off in another direction, presumably because she wants to rejoin her lover...however, the text gives no clear indication that this is the case. This sort of ambiguity also comes up in Il sapore agro della mia terra where you describe Pietro’s encounter with Mara and “il loro inavvertito appartarsi nel campo...” (p. 12): here, too, there are no unequivocal signs as to whether or not Pietro actually makes love to Mara before he leaves her to go to Canada...*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: I’ve always detested books which dwell on sensational or “trashy” situations. Those writers who fill their works with pages and pages of gratuitous eroticism have probably nothing to say. And if they have to titillate readers in this manner, it is probably because these writers have only one thing in mind: how to achieve a quick and easy success. But that’s not what I call literature.

Marchese: *Could you tell us something about your happiest and, why not, your most painful experiences of life?*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: Happiness is always tinged by some sort of sadness, if for no other reason than the fear that you might lose it. Pain, too, is always alleviated by the hope of overcoming it. In my particular case, I've come to know happiness and pain in their most extreme manifestations: the first has made me love life, the second has made me aware of it.

Marchese: *Could you elaborate a bit on some of your major disappointments of life? And which dreams of your adolescence and youth did you realize?*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: In a sense, all of life can be viewed as a disappointment, if you judge it on the basis of its successes or failures. But life can also be a beautiful "dream" if one is able to accept the gifts – even the smallest ones – when they are freely given. Personally, I feel I have received a lot more from life than what I could ever have dared to expect, which is to say: the courage to face my failures and disappointments without succumbing to the temptation of looking away from them.

Marchese: *Who are your favourite writers and which ones have influenced your writing the most?*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: I've always enjoyed reading modern and contemporary authors, although I am most familiar with Italian, Russian, and French literature, in that order. I can't think of a single author who has not given me, in one way or another, something useful to think about. But if I had to come up with a short list of names, I would definitely include such writers as Silone, Verga, Deledda, and Pavese both for the quality of their writing and the seriousness of their intellectual commitment. Dostoyevsky is another great who also influenced me immensely, especially from an existential point of view. However, the author that supersedes all others in that list is St. Augustine not only for the way in which he pursued his search for Truth, but also for his profound insights into the nature and dynamics of the human spirit.

Marchese: *Psychologically people seem to fall under three main types of learning behaviour: there are those who learn more effectively through auditory perception (like my wife), those who favour the visual (like Stendhal), and still others who are most receptive through feelings. Which one of these categories do you belong to?*

De Domenicis Ardizzi: Frankly, I'm not sure that any one of those categories really applies to me. And the reason for this is that I seem to learn much more effectively through the apperception mode than through sensorial perception.

Marchese: *I find that you have a very keen sense of observation in describing nature, the gestures and feelings of your characters. How do you account for this? Is it because you are also a painter (the cover page of La buona America is a reproduction of one of your paintings) and use your drawing skills in your writing? As you do, for instance, in this sentence: "Lontane immagini si compongono nella sua memoria, come su di un telo sbiadito" (La buona America, p. 154). Or when you describe the colours of summer as if you were using a brushstroke: "a little bit of the yellows and oranges of summer" (Women and Lovers, p. 13). You pick up the colours of nature even when Giulia is at the keyboard: "she sees only red almonds – her fingernails" (p. 14), while synesthetically adding another touch of colour to the "gray distance" of space (Women and Lovers, p. 16).*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: Painting has always been a part of my life (I speak as an amateur, of course.) So it was spontaneous of me to see the places and the characters I've described in my works from a painterly point of view... This stance of mine is always the same and yet always different, just like the sky at sunset.

Marchese: *A follow-up comment on what you just stated: I find the words of this passage particularly striking: "...sulla valle il sole dissolve ogni colore nella sua luce abbagliante. I campi sembrano ondeggiare avvolti in una fiammata" (La buona America", p. 154). I think there is always a connection, no matter what period or author we choose, between a style of writing and the visual arts... What school of painting do you feel closest to?*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: Neither my writing nor my painting belongs to a specific school or tradition. Writing has always been a spontaneous act for me, something that resembles a feeling of urgency, which I give vent to whenever I feel I have something to say.

Marchese: *Let's go back to the question of writing as a search for truth. Quite often your description of nature and the state of mind of your characters are very closely linked (Manzoni is a master at this) to one another. For instance, in Il sapore agro della mia terra there is a beautiful scene in which the characters are sitting down at the table eating, Santa had just scolded Sara, then enters the father and, with a masterly brushstroke, you complete the picture showing him wiping his mouth with the back of his hand: "Si pulisce la bocca col dorso della mano" (p. 14), immediately after chastising his daughter. This seemingly innocent gesture of a peasant casually wiping his mouth takes on added meaning when seen in relation to Sara's "loose" tongue and the upbraiding she endured. Does this sort of connection or correspondence between gesture and meaning come spontaneously to you or is it the result of careful planning and study?*

Let me give another example: in La buona America Pietro is upset by the fact that his children want to return to Canada rather than remain in Italy; he is confused and is in a state of turmoil: "Cammina senza una direzione, lo sguardo annerito. Prende per un sentiero, penetra tra gli ulivi su un pendio sassoso" (p. 154).

Pietro's walking about aimlessly down a "rocky" slope corresponds almost literally to his state of mind. He has no other choice but to go back to Canada and is later depicted with his shoulders against the wall, without a way out: "Lui si butta sulla panca, con le spalle al muro" (p. 155).

Then comes the climax: "Pietro chiude gli occhi. Risente l'ansito delle ruspe e delle betoniere" (p. 155). Here, too, you show the extraordinary power of language: with one bold stroke you capture all of Pietro's present and future fears and hopes. Deep down he knows he has lost but is not subdued.

De Dominicis Ardizzi: If you found a correspondence between my descriptions of nature and the state of mind of my characters, this is no doubt the result of your critical ability and the attention you dedicated to my work. Furthermore, if certain characters or situations in my novels take on symbolical overtones, this is not in any way deliberate on my part.

Marchese: *In your novels we often come across images of women with "their heads down". Thus, Pietro and Mara: "Tu, quando ci passavi davanti, tenevi sempre la testa bassa." ///*

“Allora le ragazze dovevano tenere la testa bassa” (La buona America, p. 155). *Agostina says to her daughter Giulia*: “We were not that different from girls today. Only difference was that we couldn’t say what we thought”. /// “So then?” /// “We kept everything inside”.

What would you say the differences are between today’s women and the women of the preceding generation like yours?

De Dominicis Ardizzi: Every generation reflects the times in which it lives. Walking with the head down is not always a sign of weakness or inferiority. The only difference between the women of my generation and those of years gone by is the difference between the different times. The women of my generation were not exposed to as many risks and opportunities as the women of today are. Consequently, we had more limited ambitions because our world was much less complex than it is today, but this does not mean that we lacked character. Women today have much greater freedom than we ever had and I don’t see why they should not make the best use of it.

Marchese: *In many of your works there is always, psychologically speaking, the presence of a “split soul” or “divided Self”, which characterize the immigrant experience, and the novel Women and Lovers is certainly no exception. However, in this novel, some characters, such as Giulia and Julie, also display a highly conscious identity of themselves as liberated women. You mentioned that in this respect these latter themes represent a turning point in your narrative. Could you elaborate on this?*

De Dominicis Ardizzi: It’s obvious that changes in space and time affect the human psyche in profound ways. The identity issues *vis-à-vis* immigrants could easily be boiled down to two questions: “Who was I?” “Who am I?” An immigrant’s experience is by definition tied to a divided identity, and at least one generation has to go by before an immigrant can truly feel at home. To brush aside the difficulties that all immigrants have to face is unrealistic. We all know how complex it is to solve those problems relating to social, linguistic, cultural, and sometimes even racial, factors.

Literature, too, is not exempted from these phenomena. It evolves and changes constantly. To write in the traditional mode, with a well constructed plot, etc., became impossible for me, almost from the start. For instance, *Women and Lovers* follows a different literary style because everything is centered on the characters who decide what I should write and how I should go about it. So you’ll come across pages that are written just as Giulia or Agostina wanted me to write them. I wrote the novel without any predetermined goals *per se*, and allowed my characters to take over the writing process. Generally, I do not concern myself with the results of my writing in any *a priori* fashion, but this I do at the risk of failing altogether or of being totally misunderstood.

Marchese: *In general, grief elicits two different and opposite responses: prayer or blasphemy. When your son died of leukemia at the very young age of twenty, you wrote Conversation with My Son, which carries the following dedication:*

To those who have been to the depths of sorrow
and returned:
to those who have replaced fear with hope
and doubt with certitude:

to those who walk with Death
and are still able to see Life.

Could you briefly comment on this dedication?

De Dominicis Ardizzi: The way we elaborate our bereavement constitutes an integral part of our personality. Prayer and blasphemy are spontaneous reactions, which reveal the very core of our inner selves, especially in critical moments of our lives. Grief can destroy a person, but it can also save us.

With my son Paolo I experienced an extraordinary moment of faith. His courage taught me what courage is. He, being as young as he was, showed me how it is possible to die without rebelling.

During this painful period I met many mothers and fathers who were also walking in the shadow of death, yet each day they found the courage to celebrate the beauty of life. To all these courageous people, I dedicated *Conversazione col figlio*.

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NOTA - La versione originale in italiano della "Intervista a Maria De Dominicis Ardizzi" di Egidio Marchese verrà pubblicata prossimamente nella *Rivista di Studi Italiani*.

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