

# A TERRIBLE BEAUTY 1976

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## Abstract

The poet William Butler Yeats is famous for capturing the essence of an event with a verbal image. Yeats applied the iconic phrase «A terrible beauty is born» to the Irish Uprising of Easter 1916, in which four hundred and eighty five people died. This phrase can also be applied to the tragic earthquake in Friuli of May 6, 1976, where we witnessed the paradox of destruction and the death of nine hundred and thirty nine people followed by the heroism and selfless actions of hundreds of others. In this essay I will explore the response to the Friuli Earthquake of 1976 by Italian-Canadian writers Rina Del Nin Cralli, Gianni Grohovaz and Beppino Redi, in order to see what they tell us about the value of Friulian identity abroad.

*1976: Una terribile bellezza*

Il poeta William Butler Yeats, famoso per catturare l'essenza di eventi con immagini verbali, definisce la Rivolta di Pasqua – Irlanda 1916 – dove sono morti quattrocento e ottantacinque irlandesi, con la frase iconica «Una terribile bellezza è nata». La medesima frase può essere applicata anche al tragico terremoto del Friuli – 6 maggio 1976 –, in cui si è assistito al paradosso della distruzione e della morte di novecento e trentanove friulani, seguite dall'eroismo e dalle azioni altruistiche di centinaia di persone provenienti da ogni parte del mondo. Il saggio esplorerà la risposta al terremoto del Friuli da parte degli scrittori italo-canadesi Rina Del Nin Cralli, Gianni Grohovaz, e Beppino Redi con l'obiettivo di far conoscere il valore dell'identità friulana all'estero.

## The Italian “letteratura del terremoto”

The poet William Butler Yeats is famous for capturing the essence of an event with a verbal image. One of these iconic phrases is, «A terrible beauty is born». Yeats applied it to the Irish Uprising of Easter 1916 in which 485 people died.

«A terrible beauty is born» can also be applied to the tragic earthquake in Friuli of May 6, 1976. There also we witnessed the paradox of the destruction

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of entire towns and the death of 939 people followed by the heroism and selfless actions of hundreds of others.

In this essay I will explore the response to the Friuli Earthquake of 1976 by Italian-Canadian writers in order to see what it tells us about the value of Friulan identity abroad and the sense of home and the loss of home, that is homelessness. These poems from Canada should be read in the context of the Italian “letteratura del terremoto”.

Italy has had many earthquakes in its long history, and these tragic events have often been referenced in historical writing and literary works. The Messina earthquake of 1908 destroyed the city and killed 60,000 people. Salvatore Quasimodo witnessed this quake as a boy of seven. The Nobel Prize poet wrote about this traumatic experience fifty years later in a 1958 poem dedicated to his father, Gaetano, who at the time went to Messina to help the victims. I quote here the powerful first seven lines of this moving poem, “Al Padre”.

Dove sull’acqua viola  
era Messina, tra fili spezzati  
e macerie tu vai lungo binari  
e scambi col tuo berretto di gallo  
isolano. Il terremoto ribelle  
da due giorni, è dicembre d’uragani  
e mare avvelenato (20-21).

The poet has a vivid memory of his father working at the damaged railway station in order to restore some train traffic and thus help with the recovery effort. That Quasimodo relives terrifying images from his memory so many years later is an indication of the power of the earthquake on the literary imagination.

The other important element that Quasimodo introduces is the condition of homelessness. He captures the feeling of betrayal as a familiar landscape turns against its people destroying their dwellings and thus making them homeless. The Quasimodo family had to live in a railway car for months. The ruined buildings, debris and everything turned up-side-down makes the young Quasimodo lose his sense of place; the sense of belonging in a physical location is lost.

### **The Italian-Canadian writers**

#### *Rina Del Nin Cralli*

The Friuli earthquake of 1976 is captured by ten writers in the collection: *La Notte che il Friuli andò giù: Dieci voci raccontano il terremoto del '76*. The contributors are from a variety of backgrounds and occupations. They each speak

about their sense of loss in the destruction produced by the earthquake. Some raise questions about their sense of home.

One author, Maurizio Mattiuzza, works in the Friulian language and has published several books of poetry. With the destruction of Friuli, the culture and language will also be lost.

In Canada one of the earliest poems on the Friuli Earthquake is in Friulian, an indication of the author's strong connection to Friuli and its culture. Rina Del Nin Cralli wrote her poem, "Il Sîs di Maj" soon after the earthquake:

La mê Carnie il mê Friûl,  
Un boât, il tremôr,  
La tiare si vierz  
Il cil si fas scur.

Cui clame, cui zighe  
La mame il frutin  
E cuvierz spauride  
Stret lu ten al cur

Ce tragedie ! Dut al crolle,  
Signor se succedie  
Veit un poc' di dûl  
Parcè tant dolôr tal nestri Friûl? (80)

The feeling of homelessness is also suggested by Cralli who laments the loss of her Carnie and her Friûl. These familiar family places are destroyed. People are being driven out of their homes because of the fear that they will collapse and kill them. The sense of safety and security they felt in their homes is lost since these homes are now death-traps. Many people do not feel at home in Friuli anymore. The English sociologist, Lindsey McCarthy used the term «homeless identity» to describe the condition of people displaced from their customary dwellings. She observed that these people accustomed to feeling secure in one familiar place, once they become homeless, begin to identify with other marginalized people such as the migrant, the exile, and the refugee (1-2).

As an immigrant from Friuli, Cralli can at some level identify with the earthquake victims. She was not in Friuli at the time of the earthquake, yet in her poem she imagines what it must have felt to be suddenly shaken by falling walls. The opening images suggest the end of the world and so we have moral implications for the upheaval. She puts herself in the place of a mother protecting her child. She creates a great empathy for the suffering victims of the tragedy. But Cralli also wants to look for a Biblical reason for the earthquake as an

act of God punishing sinners. For Cralli the tragic event of the earthquake provides an occasion to review the moral qualities of Friulian people:

Cussi mi soi domandade  
 cjalammi a tôr spaventade  
 ce vino fat di mal Signôr  
 par meretasi tant dolôr

O sin un popul lavoradôr  
 che poc chi vin  
 lu vin guadagnat  
 cun tant sudôr.

La rispueste mi vin dade  
 da i miei paesans che passin pe strade,  
 L'è ver si che noaltris furlans  
 sin un popul onest e lavoradôr,  
 ma une veretât a è che sin  
 ancje granc blestemadôrs.

Forse il Signôr  
 al si è stufat  
 di sintinus a blestemâ  
 e a l' à volut  
 danusle di insegnâ (80).

Like much of Cralli's poetry, this poem on the earthquake has a critique of the moral behaviour of Friulians. As a people they are hardworking, but they also blaspheme out of habit. Her concern is not so much with morality per se, but with the survival of a unique regional language and culture. The earthquake becomes another example of the destruction of Friuli and the degradation of the culture. For Cralli there is also some distance from Friuli; separation is necessary to critically evaluate the social conditions in her home town of Codroipo.

In Cralli's poetry there are many examples of laments over the loss of the Friulian language. In "La Nestre Lenghe" she has a call to action:

Furlans! Cjacaarît furlan,  
 lis tradiziòns zercjâit  
 di mantignì, o la nestre  
 biele lenghe 'o viodarin  
 a scompari (46).

In the poem, “Ce Ràzze di Tìmp, Duc’ la molin par talian” she laments that Friulians are abandoning their heritage language for Italian or the Veneto dialect. This evidences that in Cralli’s poetry there is a strong sense of nostalgia for Friuli, but it is balanced by a critical stand for civil society and the loss of Friulian culture (Pivato).

Cralli’s Friulian poems remind us of the poem collection by Ermanno Bulfon, *Un Friùl vivût in Canada*, which contains several poems devoted to the sense of home in Friuli: “La mê cjase”, “Me mari”, “Il miò pâs”, and “Friùl di primevere”. That Bulfon has two poems devoted to «la mê cjase» indicates the particular meaning of the idea of «cjase» for the Friulians. For the immigrant the uprooting can result in a sense of homelessness which is paralleled in the experience of the earthquake victims who lose their homes and any sense of belonging. For these Friulian poets in Canada, «la cjase» seems to have a profound psychological and spiritual dimension which is difficult to explain in English since it is part of the historical associations with the word and meaning of «la cjase» (Bulfon published his book under the pen-name Bepo Frangel).

#### *Gianni Grohovaz*

Originally from the city of Fiume, Gianni Grohovaz identified with the Friulians in Toronto. In fact, Rina Cralli devoted an elegiac poem to Grohovaz after he died suddenly, “Al Ami Gianni”

Gianni Grohovaz,  
il nestri ami istriàn,  
al jere simpri culi  
ancje s’al no jere furlan (68).

Grohovaz was made homeless by the Second World War, when his city of Fiume was made part of Yugoslavia. Italian residents were forced to leave the city forever. But they were not accepted in Italy as Italian nationals. Instead they were put into refugee camps and eventually migrated to different parts of the world. As a displaced person Grohovaz came to Canada and began to identify with the Friulians in Toronto, the close neighbours to Venezia Giulia. Given his own experiences of exile Grohovaz identifies with homeless victims of the earthquake of 1976.

After the Friuli Earthquake, the National Congress of Italian-Canadians commissioned Grohovaz to produce a commemorative book on the Canadians who aided the victims in the towns of the earthquake zone. After collecting many documents, newspaper articles and photographs Grohovaz produced *To Friuli from Canada with Love: L’Intervento Canadese nella Tragedia del Friuli 1976-1978*.

In this Italian language book Grohovaz reproduced information on the damage of the earthquake supported by photographs from the towns of Osoppo, Gemona, Venzone, Pioverno and Portis. There are reports of fund raising in many cities across Canada: Toronto, Montreal, Hamilton, Niagara Falls, Ottawa, Sault Ste. Marie, Oshawa, Windsor (Ont.), Manitoba and the Government of Canada.

Grohovaz documents the reconstruction of houses in Friuli. There is a photo of a rebuilding site, 'Comune di Venzone, Borgate Canada. Donazione di 92 Case' (103).

Near the end of this commemorative book Grohovaz includes a Friulian poem by Paola Vidoni from the village of Forgaria:

No si veva pui lagrimas par vai,  
 las mans a nus sanguinavan a fuarcia di raspa  
 tra la marcerias.  
 A e finida, par simpri,  
 Giarin lontan  
 a ciri furtuna,  
 a murii forsi.  
 Dopo a son vignuz i amis da l'Italia,  
 da for  
 siso rivaz vuaitis, e nus viaz ricuardat  
 cu no sin bisuai.  
 Vuaitis no savarias mai ce ca son par nua  
 las ciasas cu vias volut costrui.  
 Par nua a son il sentiment di vita,  
 l'amor,  
 l'amicizia,  
 il caluar.  
 A nus somea che cuest al seti  
 important par vivi e par gi indevant  
 E duc i nestris fradis dal Canadà  
 an da savia che quand che an nostalgia  
 dal Friûl, ogni fogolar a Forgaria  
 al scialda ancia par luar (162).

Though dedicated to the Canadians who helped with the rebuilding of her village, Vidoni's poem also recognizes that the victims of the earthquake are not alone; that aid came from many different people. She thanks the Canadians for providing homes for her village and thus ending their desperate condition of homelessness. In this poem she is very much connected there and in the moment.

Grohovaz never went to the earthquake zone, but wrote about it based on the accounts of people who were there on sites of destruction. He includes one of his own poems on the earthquake, "Perché nessun uomo è un'isola".

Tremò la terra  
quella sera di maggio  
e le fessure de suolo  
inghiottirono i vivi,  
restituendo invece, riluttanti,  
resti di morti antichi.  
Alla furia del sisma,  
la magione amica denudava  
le sue carne ferite di calce,  
mentre la cima del monte  
rovinava a valle.  
Taceva la campana spodestata (145).

Grohovaz takes his title from the famous English poet, John Donne's 1624 meditation:

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.

[...]

Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind.  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee (211-212).

Even Grohovaz's reference to the 'campana' alludes back to the question, «for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee». John Donne's theme of the solidarity of all human beings is appropriate for a book that records the aid that many Canadians gave to the people of Friuli after the earthquake. The help and unity of human beings makes up for the isolation of the homeless victim.

On the final page of his book Grohovaz includes "Costabeorchia", an elegiac work by Umberto Sarcinelli and Raffaele Zannier which combines Italian prose and Friulian poetry:

In memoria di un paese che non ci sarà più, come tanti altri nel Friuli, un paese che i prefabbricati di legno, baracche senza nome e colore, non serviranno a far vivere, un paese che era già morto prima che la terra facesse sentire le sue ragioni: Costabeorchia.

Di matine, quan' che si cjapave  
L'arie fresche shurtade dal Tilement

la int ere belsà strache  
dal lavòr di chel atre di

[...]

Costabeorichia, una realtà, un paese di cui rimarrà il nome finché vivranno i suoi poeti e i suoi pittori, i suoi amanti e le sue vestali. O più semplicemente finché rimarrà nel palato il sapore di un vino e nei polmoni la freschezza di un'aria che prima che con il sensi si avvertono con il cuore (185).

We can see how intimately connected these writers are to the region and its tastes and smells; the very air itself. Writing about the earthquake reminds these poets that small villages in Friuli are disappearing, «Quello che non hanno fatto l'emigrazione e la miseria l'ha fatto la terra» (Sarcinelli 185). The *terremoto* is a stark reminder of the fragility of human life and of communities. The residents of these small vulnerable villages lose not just their homes but their whole community.

### *Beppino Redi*

The last example of a literary response to the Friuli Earthquake of 1976 is an obscure poem by Beppino Redi entitled, “Friuli 1976: The Broken Wall”. The images capture the trip he made by chance to Friuli in 1979 when the recovery effort was still progressing.

Cro-Magnon bones and mediaeval mummies  
lie uncovered near the baptistry of Venzone  
cries lie buried carnage in Carnia  
life time history rubble  
Gemona sprawled on the hillside  
where is Coloredo fogolar furlan (110).

Redi's title is taken from a poem by Yeats, “Leda and the Swan”, that alludes, in passing, to the destruction of the city of Troy by the Greeks, «The broken wall, the burning roof and tower and Agamenon dead» (127). By using Greek myths about conflict, treachery and revenge the poem suggests that the beauty of Friuli is cursed by the danger of earthquakes. Like Cralli's poems, there is a distance here from the intimate feeling for Friuli. Is Friuli still seen as a possible home by these Italian-Canadian authors?

The poems by Italian-Canadian writers on earthquakes, read in the context of the Italian “letteratura del terremoto”, are concrete examples of the degree of identity they maintain with the specific region of Friuli. Ethnic identity is an evolving condition, and it is interesting to consider whether the danger and



destruction for the earthquake made these people renew their allegiance to Friuli, even at a distance. With so much creative writing, the deadly Friuli Earthquake did indeed produce a terrible beauty.

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