

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

Toti O'Brien

### IRREVERSIBLE

The emigrants were those who left and the immigrants those who arrived—but they were, indeed, *the same persons*. I can't believe how long it took me, not to understand this banality (what is there to understand?), but to focus on it and perceive its inherent strangeness.



Entities of various kinds are differently labeled at different moments in time. See, for instance, caterpillars and butterflies. This ice cube, that small pool of water. Correct.

Let me quote a three-year-old cousin that once left me dumbstruck (I was ten). One night, she was sick of her stomach. She threw up and called me for help. As I cleaned her, she candidly asked—with a calm, philosophical tone—"why do you call this puke? It was called soup, at dinner." Of course, she meant no irony, at all.

Pardon me if the example sounds gross. Not only it pops up spontaneously, as it has remained with me since. I also believe that it nicely resonates with my present subject.



I learned about emigration at a very early age, because I am Italian. All throughout my childhood, the concept was a familiar one. The phenomenon belonged to the past, already—but a recent one. Echoes of mass exoduses (occurred on the cusp of the twentieth century and between the two wars) were still strong—they shaped my imagination and consciousness, leaving an indelible mark.

On the other end, Italy hadn't witnessed, by then, the opposite scenario. When I was a child, people didn't come from other countries to find work and/or a new life if not individually, sparsely. Things were about to change, and dramatically—but they hadn't yet. They did, after I myself left for good.



Perhaps, this imbalance between a known reality and an abstract idea made it harder, for me, to sort the two words I stubbornly kept mixing—to exactly understand those ships leaving the harbor (I saw them on post-cards, pictures, movies, and each time they evoked vivid reactions—sighs, commentaries, anecdotes—from the grown-ups), those fluttering kerchiefs, those thin airmail envelopes, all referred to the "E" word (the one tinted in sepia, soaked in sadness, long distance and broken promises, the one frayed by fear, uncertainty and loss).

While, the other word (in my mind, neither brown nor brownish—printed in black, bold, marked by a double "m" that glued lips and tongue, to finally explode like a gunshot) referred to the same boats, same people, but...

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Well, that wasn't in fact, clearly stated. "Immigration" referred to folks similar to those who had embarked, after walking in line on southern, dusty roads, cardboard suitcase in hand. But about their *identity*, I wasn't quite sure.

Only later, as I said, did I realize that the terminology shift addressed the same bodies, same souls. From this shore, we bid farewell to the emigrants. Those who saw them disembark on their land, called the same crowd "immigrants."



So, the question lingered, about where the hinge was. Where exactly did the change of status occur?

Not that it really mattered.

Still, I thought it natural to mark the split at midway. I could easily imagine that, as soon as half the journey had occurred, one would cease to be leaving the place of origin and begin to aggress (*aggredio* = come forward, approach) the land of destiny. So the "immigrant" label would apply, then adhere, to the traveler as the new shore—there, there—progressively came into sight, gradually magnifying itself.

Perhaps. After further musing, I concluded the change must be instead of an abrupt nature—as it happens, for instance, with the neural impulse, which is only released when it meets a specific sill, following the law of all-or-nothing. At is happens, for instance, at birth—fetuses remain such, no matter how far they have progressed through the uterine channel, until their tiny lungs first inhale fresh air.

Is air the very point? Do emigrants become immigrants when they actually breathe in the new land? Maybe not. Earth must be the point. They don't change until they tread new ground. Should the ship sink before docking, even right in the harbor, those fellows—no matter how long and perilous was the journey—would never become immigrants. Correct?

No. It took further thinking (sorry for the laboriousness of my unraveling the obvious) to understand geography had nothing to do with the matter. Only via their relationship with the nationals of the land of destiny—not with the land itself—did the arrived start wearing the immigrant uniform. Which I found, when I finally grasped it, to be mind-blowing. *Our* emigrants were, are, *their* immigrants. Now, everything was clear.



Almost. Then, I wondered about reversibility. What happened to those who returned? I knew they were relatively numerous (though certainly a minority), and the coming back could occur at different times. After a brief, failed attempt. After a successful stay, in old age, in order to die "home." Assimilation, as it is well known, means different things for different people. Some could live and work somewhere for decades, while maintaining a clear sense of transiency—abstracting themselves from language and mores, firmly keeping allegiance to their birthplace, looking forward to when they'd retrace their route.

On their return way, did they get relieved of the immigrant label? If yes, when? Specularly, that should have occurred on leaving the place

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where they once had come. Right there, right then. And what were they called, as they journeyed back? What did they become when they reached the motherland?

We could hypothesize that the pattern would be simply reversed. After all, the entire operation was a commute of sorts. In airports, in rail stations, the same sign says “departure” in the front, “arrival” in the back. The same door bears the words “entry” and “exit” on opposite sides. These terms indicate direction, not essence. Therefore, emi and immi labels should allow to be switched.

They don’t.

Should someone wave a kerchief to the old pal who leaves the US for his Sicilian hometown, the guy couldn’t be possibly called an emigrant. We emigrate only once. I mean, only from one place. Once? Yes, once, from one place.

In the motherland, the folks who came back were indifferently called returned immigrants, or returned emigrants—though, only the second diction seemed logical from the point of view of those who saw them leave. They returned to the place from which they had escaped, evaded, were evicted—the “e” place.

But, if the motherland had never seen these people as “immigrants,” now it was known that they had been such, and that status, that event, had become part of who they were. Not *had been*. Were. It appeared, in other words, that the immigrant label, first applied because of mere “positioning”—a description of how the local perceived the newly arrived—once acquired, became substantial. Indelible.

We emigrate only once, I said, from one place. All the other crossings, no matter where bound (even “home”) are varieties of immigration. Perhaps, not varieties. All the motions that follow the initial exodus are legs of the same travel, which—since the first docking—bears the “i” prefix as a permanent feature.

After all, why should returning emigrants/immigrants be called anything? Didn’t they come back to the very habitat of belonging, where no place-related label is needed? To the habitat, yes. Not to the status. It would seem that the “native” status requires a kind of purity, kind of innocence. Once altered, it can’t be fully recovered. At least, recognized.

This, I have learned slowly, but certainly—not in childhood, but throughout my life. And it makes me realize that my premise was, indeed, incorrect. So, emigrants and immigrants were... were not... are... are not... *the same persons?*

Wait. Those who left, when they arrived, were still the same people. They were suddenly categorized otherwise. In the motherland, they were seen as subtraction, as loss tinged with very frail hope. In the new land, they were seen as intruders, as a burden, a threat. When they arrived—those who arrived—they were the same bodies. Perhaps, their souls had started to be indented. That kind of travel does it.

Those who arrived, *once and after they arrived*, were never the same. Those who returned home weren’t the same people who had left.

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It's a matter of space and time, combined. Time cannot be turned upside down, inside out, even when space does.

It's a matter of language. When you leave the mother tongue, then you take it back, you realize it has changed. It is not the same tongue.

It's a matter of belonging. You don't re-belong.

There's this thing about letters—I mean, typographical characters. Yes—their impact, their power, their meaning.

Think of E as a comb, a rake, or a fork. It opens and separates. It unravels. You have been freed, that you wanted it or not.

Think of I as this stick, this toothpick. This half cigarette, broken pencil. Inconsistent, isolated and lost. Individual. On your own and for good—that you wanted it, or not.