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## The Language of Belonging in Pasquale Verdicchio's *This Nothing's Place*

ABSTRACT:

The aim of this essay is to carry out a stylistic analysis of the language used in a choice of the poems included in the collection *This Nothing's Place* by Pasquale Verdicchio, paying particular attention to instances of memory, time and space, which strongly contribute to a re-definition of the poet's identity through a sense of belonging. Verdicchio's poetic identity, being strongly influenced by his condition of migrant, finds its expression in a 'mind style' which reflects his concerns for these very issues, by means of a number of foregrounding devices: recurrence of lexemes conducive to the same semantic field, repetition and parallelism of syntactic structures. If the poet seems to find his appropriate dimension in a space of spaceless and timeless memory and imagination, this dimension of fluidity finds its stylistic representation in his extensive use of free verse and his limited use of punctuation.

KEYWORDS: Verdicchio, *This Nothing's Place*, language, sense of belonging, space.

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The currents of import  
spring from

another space  
another ground

where digging is  
unnecessary

all we can do is  
look

in each other's  
direction.

Pasquale Verdicchio, "Savary", *This Nothing's Place* (2008, 50)

## 1. Introduction

A huge amount of words connected with the cultural and emotional process of emigration and the so-called 'hyphenated identities' have been spent by academics and scholars while trying to define and pigeonhole Pasquale Verdicchio's poems under a single, identifying label. Italian-American (or, Italian American) has been the most likely container for his production, given the fact that Verdicchio was born in Naples, emigrated to Canada in his teens and was one of the founders of the Association of Italian Canadian Writers. He subsequently moved to the U.S., where he has spent most of his life teaching at the University of San Diego, California.

The first question we ought to deal with is the issue of identity. Verdicchio's is elusive and can only be defined by subtractions: he is not Neapolitan, he is not Italian, he is not Canadian or American. Moreover, he cannot be defined by a comprehensive, hyphenated identity, in that he does not feel to be built up by a sum of cultural layers. Rather, his identity could be approached through the idea of fluidity, where the diverse cultures merge in uneven proportions, depending on the different experiences he is going through. As Iain Chambers points out, drawing on the concept of "flexible citizenship" elaborated by Aiwā Ong, "[i]dentities are articulated across the hyphen, the transition, the bridge or passage between, rather than firmly located in any one culture, place or

position. [...] This interrogates the understanding of culture as a site of belonging with the idea of culture as a process of transition and becoming” (Chambers 1996, 53).

The question of identity is closely linked to that of emigration. How does emigration change the emigrant and, in which ways could these changes be realized and given voice? Emigration is not only a physical and geographical movement, but also a dynamic quality of the emigrant's mind, which questions any idea of fixity and belonging.

Emigration, as it often occurs to either transnational or transcontinental destinations, also poses the question of language. Will the ‘new’ language be able to become an effective vehicle of expression for the “nomadic trajectory” of the emigrant? Verdicchio's choice is, writing in the new idiom:

[...] having chosen English as his vehicle of expression (it could just as easily have been his mother tongue), Verdicchio has repeatedly challenged its syntactical rules and expanded its vocabulary by cross-pollinating it, as it were, with Italian sounds and forms. (Buonomo 2021, 212)

Soon after becoming proficient in English, Verdicchio started his ongoing experience with creative language, with the aim of seeking for an adequate means of expression for his changing condition. As Antonio D'Alfonso observes, “[t]here was no lost paradise behind him. He began at zero. His writings are presented like the first words uttered by a child: everywhere new horizons appeared” (D'Alfonso 2020, 10). Verdicchio's “new horizons” pertain both to language itself and to his apprehension of reality. The former, the idiom of his college and academic training, has been assimilated, but only to be misused, deconstructed and hybridized. The latter occurs from a perspective of absence, where the poetic voice is lost in space and time, thus perceiving the world through destructured and destructuring images which live out of commonly accepted logical connections. D'Alfonso writes that “his essential rupture consisted of realizing he was a person without a home anywhere. Inescapably, Pasquale identified with writers who deconstructed their working instrument: language” (*ibid.*).

A feeling of ‘spacelessness’ and timelessness haunt the whole of Verdicchio's poetic work and becomes particularly cogent in *This Nothing's Place*. As Buonomo aptly observes, “given Verdicchio's multicultural identity and experience (Neapolitan/Italian/Californian/North American), his ‘place’ may

be equally elusive and hard to identify, and yet what these recent poems convey, more so than the ones which preceded them, is his need to connect with a ‘strip of land’ of his own, made up of his heritage, memories, and art” (Buonomo 2015, 180).

Connecting with a “strip of land”, seeking for a virtual place of belonging, seems to be the main cypher of this collection. It does not necessarily correspond to real space, in that images emerge spontaneously from his mind, thus merging real with imaginary memories devoid of any space-time dimension. What is more, these images refer not only to physical *lieux de la mémoire*, but also to people, mostly belonging to his family, with whom he was or has been tied by strong bonds: the geography of their relationships, just as the geography of their bodies, aptly creates a “strip of land”, an intimate space of remembrance through which passes the assertion of his identity.

The aim of this essay is to carry out a stylistic analysis of the language used in a choice of the poems included in the collection *This Nothing's Place*, paying particular attention to instances of memory and space, which strongly contribute to a re-definition of Verdicchio's identity through a sense of belonging. To this purpose, it will be useful to draw on the concept of ‘mind style’, coined by the linguist Roger Fowler in his 1977 essay *Linguistics and the Novel*, where he defines it as “any distinctive linguistic representation of an individual mental self” (103), which is “created through the writer using cumulatively consistent structural options, agreeing in cutting the presented world to one pattern or another which give rise to an impression of a world-view” (76). Fowler acknowledges his debt to Halliday's paper “Linguistic Function and Literary Style” (1971), where Halliday writes that language has both an experiential and an ideational function, the former having to do with “natural meanings”, the latter with “social meanings”:

Language serves for the expression of content: it has a representational, or, as I would prefer to call it, an ideational function [...] the speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes his experience of the internal world of his own consciousness: his reaction, cognitions, and perceptions, and also his linguistic acts of speaking and understanding. (332)

The ideational structure of a text is, therefore, a representation of the world-view of an author (but also of a narrator or a character), which Fowler calls ‘mind style’. Fowler expands on this concept in Chapter 11 of his later

essay *Linguistic Criticism* (1996), where he illustrates ideational structuring through three types of linguistic features, namely vocabulary, transitivity and syntactic structures. Again, he borrows the concept of transitivity from Halliday, which he defines as

[...] a small set of presumably universal categories which characterize different kinds of event and process, different types of participants in these events, and the varying circumstances of place and time within which events occur. (Fowler 1996, 220)

Leech and Short devote an entire chapter of *Style in Fiction. A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (2007) to the discussion of mind style. In the wake of Halliday and Fowler, they underline the importance of a close linguistic analysis in terms of semantics, grammar and lexis, to be able to engage with a more subjective interpretive analysis, inasmuch as the style of an author reflects his world-view:

If the choices that build up this view of things are repeatedly used by a writer in a number of works then they become part of what critics regard as his typical 'style'. In other words, it is not just his preference for certain kinds of linguistic expression which is typical, but also the mind style which this represents. (157-58)

'Mind style' is therefore a reflection of a personality by means of linguistic markers that define that individual world-view. These linguistic markers are more easily observable in characters who are, for some reason, deviant from the norm. As a matter of fact, Halliday focuses on Lok, the Neanderthal man in Golding's *The Inheritors*, while Leech and Short analyse the perception of the world through the eyes of the cognitively impaired Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Seemingly, subsequent studies have focused on deviant linguistic features pertaining to the representation of deviant existential situations: the mentally ill Bromden in Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Semino and Swindlehurst 1996); the protagonist of Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Christopher, who, being affected by the Asperger syndrome, gets in trouble when it comes to decipher other people's use of metaphors (Semino 2007); Joe Rose, in Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*, and how he progressively develops a kind of "post-traumatic mind style" after a balloon accident (Montoro 2011).

On the other hand, Linda Pillière expresses a different point of view in her

essay “Mind Style: Deviance from the Norm ?” (2013). Later critics, she maintains, have too frequently focused on abnormal individual mind styles, while neglecting other significant factors:

[...] by focusing on mind styles that reflect limited cognitive skills, the concept of mind style has become far more limited than its original authors intended, and perhaps attracted fewer supporters than it actually deserves. From this two other hypotheses follow. Firstly, that the idea of deviance that is considered in most of the subsequent work on mind style is but one kind of deviance. Secondly, that the abnormal mind styles studied automatically lead to a focus on the individual, thus limiting the wider-reaching importance of the concept. (3)

Pillièrè analyses the language used by the butler Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*: although Stevens is mentally and cognitively sane, he is obsessed by his professional identity and by the idea that his behaviour perfectly meets its requirements.

Whether mind style is studied in relation to characters, authors or narrators, the idea is that a peculiar existential situation, be it blatantly deviant or not, finds a corresponding deviant linguistic form. Verdicchio’s complex cultural identity and his use of language make no exception.

## **2. *This Nothing’s Place***

The collection *This Nothing’s Place* appeared in 2008, after eight years of poetic silence. The title of the previous collection, *The House Is Past*, as well as this one share the idea of space. In the former, space is identified with the lexical item “house”, which is linked to “past” through a relationship of identity. In *This Nothing’s Place*, the lexeme “place” is linked to the lexeme “nothing” by means of a possessive case: far from implying identity, it manifests a dynamic tension, which moves backwards from “place” to “nothing”, thus foregrounding a process of progressive engulfment of the dimension of space into its very denial. As Buonomo observes, Verdicchio’s collection *This Nothing’s Place* “owes its intriguing title to a passage in Canadian writer and painter Emily Carr’s book *Klee Wyck* (1941). Recalling a walk she took on Vancouver Island’s West coast, Carr tells how, while treading “a strip of land that belonged to nothing... neither to sea nor to land,” she found her way blocked by a “fallen tree [that] lay crosswise in this ‘nothing’s place’” (180).

This quotation contains at least two relevant features: first of all, the

reference to Canada. When Verdicchio's family decided to emigrate in the late Sixties, they settled in Vancouver, B.C. As a teenager and a young man, he spent his life there and his parents continued to live there after he had left to continue his academic studies. Even after settling down in San Diego, he has continued to visit his family in Vancouver every summer. Later in his life, he bought a house at Savary Island, a small island located Northwest of Vancouver, which is evidence of his emotional attachment to this area of Canada.

Secondly, the image of the "fallen tree", lying "crosswise" in that savage environment, suggests attraction for non-anthropized natural landscapes, and a reference to a Christological image of suffering. The death of his father represented a moment of crisis. His staying next to him during the last weeks of his life gave him the opportunity to reflect upon his family bonds, his cultures and languages and, ultimately, upon his identity and his sense of belonging. *This Nothing's Place* is the product of this reflection.

*This Nothing's Place* is composed of a first section, which bears the name of the collection itself, and a second section, entitled simply "Father", which apparently stands out as an appendix. The first section includes 26 poems of various length. A considerable number of their titles makes reference, either directly or indirectly, to the semantic field of place: "At Home Here", "This House", "At Bo", "Pyramids", "Volcano", "On Edge", "The Way Home", "The Tombs", "Three for Claude Beausoleil in Bologna", "The Sacred Lane/La Sacra Corsia", "Savary", "Exile" and "The Desert Alone". The second section, "Father", is made up of three movements, whose titles revolve around the idea of death, followed by a Postscript.

### **3. Geographies of Places and Bodies**

As previously mentioned, *The House Is Past* is the title of the previous collection of poems, where "house" and "past" are connected by a relationship of identity. The title of the second poem collected in *This Nothing's Place* is "At Home Here", where the idea of "home" is vague and dynamic and seems to be closer to a feeling than to an actual idea of place.

AT HOME HERE

Not this going on day trips

a habit to break  
through with some thought or other  
it is just around the corner  
related incidents would suggest  
the very old and very young  
susceptible new strains develop  
these maladies  
are all enveloping  
large and no one in charge  
of what might happen  
people try to survive  
property of someone else's attempts  
but ready for anything  
and where I am not here  
when there is another place  
appear or someone else  
and when I am at home here. (Verdicchio 2008, 10-11)

The poem starts with the negative particle “Not”, which negates the idea of motion (“going”) and opens the sequence of rambling thoughts that



characterises this piece. The preposition “through” (l. 3) works as a hinge between l. 2 and l. 3 and makes possible the *enjambement* between the two, thus creating a relationship of exclusion between “day” and “some thought or other”. Though there is no punctuation, the poem could be divided into two parts: ll. 1-10 and ll. 11-18. Line 10 opens and closes with the alliterative lexemes “large” and “charge”, providing a frame for the negative compound “no one”, which refers back to the starting word “Not”. The alliteration that links “large” and “charge” could be considered as an instance of chiming which, as Geoffrey Leech observes, is “the device of (in Empson’s words) connecting ‘two words by similarity of sound so that you are made to think of their possible connections.’” (Leech 1969, 95) Far from being brought together by the common destiny of “maladies [...] all enveloping large”, everyone rejects the possibility of taking care of the consequences (“no one in charge”), if not in an individualistic perspective.

If the first part can be connoted as the *pars destruens*, the second one is the *pars construens*, where the use of the pronouns “what” (l. 11), “where” (l. 15) and “when” (ll. 16 and 18) provide a parallelism of structure, which represents a deviation from the previous lines. The devices of repetition and alliteration highlight the final meditation of the poet concerning the idea of space. Again, the point of departure is a negation (“where I am not here”, l. 15). Leech and Short, while analysing a passage from Henry James, observe that

[i]n commenting on James’s use of negation, Watt raises the philosophical point that ‘there are no negatives in nature, but only in the human consciousness’. We may go further, and affirm that a negative is used, generally speaking, when there is a need to deny some expectation (in the mind of author, reader, character) that the positive is true. In other words, a negative cancels the expectation of its positive. (Leech and Short 2007, 83)

As a matter of fact, the space Verdicchio refers to by the end of the poem does not seem to be a question of physical or geographical presence, but rather a question of imagination (“appear”, l. 17) or of proximity to a fellow human being (“or someone else”, l. 17). Ultimately, it is an emotional perception (“and when I am at home here”, l. 18), which has nothing to do with geographical space or the place of origin.

In “This House”, which follows “At Home Here” in the order of the collection, the enchainment of the different images is provided by instances of

parallelism of structure and a wide use of lexical repetition and alliteration.

THIS HOUSE

If this house were to stand  
for the stamp that accompanies  
the edge of its inhabitation

on the lawn of mouth to mouth  
on the hedge of resonance  
in the waning light  
that is made of such things

if we were to stand  
for all that distance  
has come to mean

for the slight of the everyday  
and the nothing that is residence  
then the order of the word  
would coincide with hidden names

and today would spin  
onto itself to reveal  
the said of like mouths. (Verdicchio 2008, 12)

The poem opens with a hypothetical clause, which is paralleled by the same sentence repeated, with the only change of the subject (“this house” in l. 1 and “we” in l. 8). The long sentence going from l. 1 to l. 7 is made up of both a hypothetical clause and a defining relative clause, but lacks its main clause. L. 8 opens with the parallel hypothetical clause, followed by another relative clause (“all that distance has come to mean”, ll. 9-10). The two parallel structures come to a meeting point at l. 13, where they start sharing the main clauses (“then the order of the word/would coincide with hidden names” and “today would spin onto itself”, ll. 13-16). The punctuation is completely absent and the cohesion in the text is ensured by the markers “if” (ll. 1 and 8), “then” (l. 13) and “and” (l. 15). The binary rhythm which is set up in the first part of the poem is counter-balanced by the coordinated couple of main clauses, which ideally brings together the two different planes evoked by the hypothetical

clauses, that is, geographical space and an intimate perception of distance. As Leech maintains, parallelism is an instance of “foregrounded regularity” (Leech 1969, 62-5), which is made even more significant when the syntactic repetition is reinforced by alliteration, as it happens here with the voiceless fricative /s/ in “stand”, “stamp”, “distance”, “slight” and the voiced labial-velar /w/ in “were”, “lawn”, “waning”, “would”, “word” and “with”. The fourth stanza, which seems to be the ideal point of arrival of the argument, contains the simile “the nothing that is residence”, thus suggesting the denial of a physical perception of distance and origin in favour of a perspective which has to do with emotional and cultural legacy. The function of this stanza is highlighted by the concentration of three /w/ alliterations and the marker “then”.

The deconstruction of physical space is foregrounded in other poems included in this collection and, in particular, in “The Way Home”, “Savary” and “Exile”. In “The Way Home”, the trajectory that brings home is not only in one direction, but it is built “[i]n the corridor of dialogue/[...] where the astray might be/from one continent back/and this is what home was”. The physical and mental roaming through places and continents is underlined by the brisk rhythm of the couplets and, again, by the syntactic parallelism in four of them.

#### THE WAY HOME

In the corridor of dialogue  
a turn may be mine

to retrace a doubt  
against the back of a chair

hard spine and a jump  
where the astray might be

from one continent back  
and this is what home was

because it has been pushed back  
And it becomes where home is

with a different name

but a familiar call

the misstep a shift  
and take up residence

in a past city a past life  
a momentary distraction or not

you take advantage of it  
and find comfort in it

the shortest way home. (Verdicchio 2008, 20)

The coordinating conjunction “and” is anticipated at l. 5 before the noun “jump”, which provides a link between the geographical level and the level of emotion and memories, connected to the idea of actual residence both in the past and in the present. “And” is then repeated in the fourth, fifth, seventh and ninth couplets, to underline the poet’s wandering between past and present, actual and emotional residence.

The idea of an atopic “house” is brought further in the poem “Savary”, inspired by the already mentioned small island in the Strait of Georgia, not far from Vancouver, where Verdicchio often spends part of his Summer. This island is still wild, little anthropised and serves as a perfect place to experience inhabitation in a “nothing’s place”. Here are the first two movements of the poem:

SAVARY

I am on  
an island

I see islands  
clear

or as muted shapes  
through haze

and water so flat

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to walk across

seems possible  
here we are

surrounded  
by ourselves

the sea  
and the house

residence  
in pieces of ourselves.

\*

This place  
has become my mouth

the light swarms  
through the forest

to the beach  
under the guise of words.

Days are longer  
than we know

and the nights are  
trees and wind.

Stars and satellites orbit us  
oblige us into sight.

My children ask  
about the silence

their eyes search for it

their mouths hang open

in expectation.

Nothing announces night. (2008, 47-48)

In the first part, the reader meets with the bafflement of any expectations. The poetic “I” states his being on an island, where his sight is clear (l. 4), but can also be confused by the presence of haze, which distorts his perception of the other islands. Water is there, though it does not seem to be real water, since it seems possible to walk on it. “[H]ere we are”, at l. 10, serves as a turning point and provides a syntactic and lexical parallelism with l. 1: in both cases, there are personal pronouns, the verb “to be” and a place determiner. The latter could be considered as an instance of “internal deviation”. As Leech and Short observe:

The recognition that a text may set up its own secondary norms leads to a further conclusion, that features of language within that text may depart from the norms of the text itself: that is, they may ‘stand out’ against the background of what the text has led us to expect. This is the phenomenon of internal deviation [...]. Internal deviation explains the prominence [...] of an ordinary, even banal piece of language which seems to gain its impact from the context in which it is found. (Leech and Short, 44)

As a matter of fact, the focus is moved from the natural and geographical space to the space of relationship and insight: he and his family actually surround each other, their residence being not so much in the sea and the house, but “in pieces of ourselves”.

The first couplet of the second part provides an identification between the poet and the place: “This place / has become my mouth”. Any border between place and insight is lost: light is disguised as words, days and nights depend on his inner perception of them, silence wraps both their inner and outer space. The change of approach which is brought about in this movement is emphasised by a further internal deviation. This time, it has to do with sentence length and the presence of punctuation. Sentence flow without any limits in all parts, with the exception of this second part and of the last one, where the five last couplets are separated by a full stop. In this second movement, sentences are short and go from one to six lines, thus signalling, by this very change of

rhythm, a twist in the poet's approach.

In "Exile", Verdicchio deals once more with the concepts of identity, place, immigration and memory by adopting again an inward approach.

EXILE

What remains of exile  
if not a long drawn-out breath  
in which life expands  
and continuous motion.

We are but a ridiculous number  
whose reality unites across oceans  
and deserts boundless territories  
and confined lives.

There will be no survivors  
in the war of identity  
we will be the only ones  
to recognize ourselves  
to keep our reciprocal memory  
of distance alive  
to witness other times  
other habits other ancestries.

What remains of exile  
if not our absence  
and our denial. (Verdicchio 2008, 53)

Emigration, which is considered as an exile, is viewed in terms of a dynamic situation, "in which life expands". The non-defining place determiner "boundless territories" (l. 7), just like "oceans" and "deserts", displaces the focus from physical space to a metaphysical search, which might expand life experience of the exile's "confined lives" (l. 8). The first and last stanzas provide a frame for the poem, which is underlined by the syntactic and lexical parallelism of their first sentences and of the structure "if not" at the beginning of the second line. The legacy of exile is "absence" and "denial": defining what is home is impossible and the "memory of distance" of the exile is the only point of reference to "witness other times / other habits other

ancestries” (ll. 15-6). Again, the repetition of “other” foregrounds the three words which synthesise the idea of distance. None of them is semantically linked to the idea of place.

Although physical geography, in its traditional meaning, is present in *This Nothing's Place*, the poet appears to be more interested in a geography of memory, body and insight. This is what happens in “Savary”, as we saw, where the poet and his family are “surrounded by [them]selves” and residence is “in pieces of [them]selves”; but it is also the case in the final part of the same poem, where “all [they] can do is look /in each other's /direction”.

In “Your Sleep” the sleeping body of one of his beloved is observed and analysed as if it were a map.

YOUR SLEEP

Your sleep

reminds me

of the turns some take

on their way

to selfishness.

The drooping jaw

the slack arm

and your mouth

almost drooling

at the thought of

eternal self-absorption. (2008, 51)



Sleep, as the poetic "I" states, is a way to selfishness, because the individual is living in a world which is completely detached from space and time. In the second part, starting at l. 6, the sleeping body seems to be longing for eternal meditation, if not death. And "selfishness", the last word of the first part of the poem, is echoed by "eternal self-absorption", the final syntagm of the poem.

The first and the second to last poem in *This Nothing's Place* bear the same title, "M", the first letter of the name of Verdicchio's daughter. In the first composition, the world is apprehended through M's eyes. Space is read through "a coloured headband" and "a smile half-hidden / behind a self-conscious hand".

M

The light of May and your pupils  
collect the world.  
All that is left is  
a coloured headband  
and a smile half-hidden  
behind a self-conscious hand.

The silence of your body  
accompanies me  
across the landscape  
of comings and goings;  
then you ask  
about the space  
that has opened in me  
and I can only answer  
with a gesture that means you. (2008, 9)

The poet reads the world through the syntax of M's body and its silence is his companion in his wandering. But when she finally asks about space, it is all about the space that has opened in him, which coincides with M herself. The two lexemes "landscape" and "space" find their true dimension in M's body and in the poet's insight. Silence becomes a metaphor for absence: being a migrant, the poet himself embodies an absence both in the present homeland and in the past, original homeland. As Demetrio Yocum points out, "the poet is consumed in the separation from the lost homeland and *articulates its absence.*"

But this does not prevent him/her from inhabiting

[...] a new 'home', and his/her being and be-coming, by inscribing the self in poetic discourse: writing as the suspended space of the re-turn to selfhood through the dialogic and interrogative encounter in language of the subject with an internal/external other; writing as the territory of loss and memory, as the site of an imaginary and unfulfilled journey home. (Yocum 1996, 221-22)

In the second composition, Mara is seen as an energetic element that contaminates the landscape as she passes.

M

Mara gives fire  
to the fields  
as she walks through  
to the beach  
in her hot pink skirt. (Verdicchio 2008, 55)

The three odd lines are directly referred to Mara, while the remaining two even lines make reference to two physical places, "fields" and "beach". The even lines are emphasised by a parallelism of structure, since "fields" represent Earth and "beach" stands for Water. The four natural elements are completed by "fire" (l. 1) and by Air, which is indirectly evoked by M's bracing walk to the beach. Fire, the central element, which gives both energy and hope, is referred back in the last line, where M's skirt is qualified as "hot". Mara comprises all natural elements and, to the poet, her body is the key to a new appraisal of a geography of space.

The closing poem of the collection, "The Desert Alone", provides a long meditation on the relationship between body and soul, space, time and the illusoriness of our certitudes. The first part comes to be particularly relevant to our approach:

THE DESERT ALONE

Over time  
our bodies become  
perfect strangers.  
Living together  
a habit of movement

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action and reaction,  
life little more than  
an itch to scratch  
then forgotten.

After years of proprietorship  
body parts lose their distance  
are absorbed, taken for granted.  
We lose touch  
with that arm  
sight of that foot.

Pieces of ourselves  
drift along  
life's tectonic plates  
our physical body  
hardly able to break through  
the ground of personality  
erased memory  
and no map to position it  
aside from what is marked  
by our full attention.

Sitting  
mostly through pain  
then fine  
the usual progression  
and an illustration  
of the first truth  
that is noble  
the practice  
guides out of it  
unnoticed  
the body  
turns  
from being me  
to my being  
no body. (2008, 56-57)

While time passes by, the unity between mind and body is lost. We lose awareness of our body parts, because we take them for granted, just as we are hardly conscious of our actions and movements. Fragments of ourselves are

caught in the current of being without a purpose and are not able to emerge to the level of consciousness. Memory is wiped out and there is “no map to position it”. In the second line of the third stanza there is a blank space before “mostly through pain”. This sudden deviation in the layout provides a space for meditation upon life, which opens to the cyclical nature of life (“pain / then fine”). The five last lines of the stanza are foregrounded by the steady recurrence of parallelism and repetition: “the body” is echoed by “no body”, “from being me” by “to my being”, which hint at a progressive (“unnoticed”) depersonalisation and anonymisation of the individual.

The following stanzas focus on fragments of a meditation on life, time and space inspired by the “desert fathers”’ teachings. Space is to be recognised, but only to “let it be [...] for it to dissipate / as much as it needs / to expand as it needs / to expand beyond all limits / of place or origin” (ll. 80-85). The idea of expansion is underlined by repetition and comes to be the real signified, beyond any idea of geographical or identitarian specification. It is not by chance that the meditation occurs in the desert, the “nothing’s place” *par excellence*.

As for time, it is an illusory category we have built “to prevent everything / from happening simultaneously” (ll. 105-06). But if we let time go, we will discover that “there is more sense outside of it” (l. 103). Time might expand out of the dimensions of past, present and future, to create meaningful correspondences. The desert fathers’ indication is to “develop a meditation that is like water”, which might at once comprehend and deny space and time in its progression to wisdom.

#### 4. Belonging

We mentioned that the first section of *This Nothing’s Place* is made up of 26 poems, but we are now able to detail the structure more accurately. The first and the penultimate poems bear the same title and provide an outer frame for the twenty-three “inner” pieces, which fluctuate between a geographical search for belonging and a search for belonging which finds its correlative in his beloved’s bodies. Mara’s poems enshrine this second pole, by suggesting a reading of the world through her own physicality. The last poem, “The Desert Alone”, works both as a synthesis and as a culmination of the themes outlined in the previous poems. Verdicchio’s search for identity and origins gets farther

and farther from a physical and geographical perspective to open to a wider and higher dimension of inclusiveness. He is not rooted in a specific time or place, but his search attains a desert, a “nothing’s place”, which is the apex of his atopic sense of belonging.

“The Desert Alone” also provides a transition to the second part, “Father”, an intimate meditation in poetic prose which revolves around his appraisal of his father’s illness and death. “First Death”, the first movement, finds the poet taking care of his dying father in hospital. His mind roams in the past, recalling memories of his family life, of the different cities he inhabited, together with the emotions they aroused in him. The premises hint at a journey without purpose or direction:

This is not a beginning, and there can be no end. Our stories cross in an odd manner to confuse any idea of direction and goal. Thirty-three years after your transatlantic crossing and three years older than you were then, I turn around and find myself back in Italy between spaces of habitation. (2008, 65)

Italy, San Diego, Vancouver, “a city that seeps into your body like the humidity of its long rains. I left it happily a while back and I have missed it ever since.” (2008, 67). But his family has always remained there and now his stay there is like going back to the origin of his geographical movement and to the source of his sense of belonging: “[n]ow I was back in Vancouver on a visit different from any other, a visit that required an accounting of all our lives.” (2008, 68). Verdicchio does not focus on the outer features of the city but on his father’s physicality “I have been taking photographs. I don’t know why. What am I attempting to capture?” (2008, 71) His father’s body seems to be a map to be analysed in depth, to find marks of his roots:

The lines of his brow deep and always present, from as far back as I can remember, are testimony to the pensieri, the thoughts that are his life baggage. [...] The pattern of the moles around his neck, shoulders and arms are the ones I recognized in myself when I entered my forties. Looking at a photo of my son Giuliano [...], I notice a similar pattern on his shoulder. Those moles are a map of our history, a sort of chart of descendancy, a pattern of familiarity and affiliation. (2008, 76)

Now that his father is on the point of leaving him for good, Verdicchio is desperately trying to introject a map of his body:

My whole life I have been told that I resemble my mother. [...] Only in my forties did I begin to notice how my body was the body of my father. [...] And when I did begin to find my father, it was not in my facial features but in the shape and carry of my body, my arms, my back, my shoulders. [...] I resemble you in the shape a body takes with age. (2008, 77)

At the end of the first movement, his last gesture is running his hands over his father's, only to feel the "smoothness" of formerly strong and rough hands, which has become an "identifying absence" (2008, 79). The focus on his father's body comes to represent the lot of the migrant, who is doomed to remain naked and "stripped of history":

All migrants leave their past behind, although some try to pack it into bundles and boxes – but on the journey something seeps out of the treasured mementoes and old photographs, until even their owners fail to recognise them, because it is the fate of the migrant to be stripped of history, to stand naked amidst the scorn of strangers upon whom they see the rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging. (Salman Rushdie 1984, 63-64)

"Final Death", the second movement, opens with the poet wearing his father's wristwatch. The sentence "I am wearing your watch" which starts the first paragraph is repeated at the beginning of the second one. The batteries died some years before he retrieves it from his father's drawer. Time has stopped. His arm is his father's arm. Time has run out for his father. Again, he tries to take more pictures of his father, this time with his panoramic camera, in the attempt "to get close to you and including myself. I am struggling with the idea of how to embrace your corporeal space." (Verdicchio 2008, 82-3)

The last movement, "Dreams After Death", gives an account of a series of dreamlike visions, which involve, either directly or in an allegorical way, his father, his relatives and his children. Space and time are discarded and the sole geography of belonging left resides in his father's body:

I feel my arm around my father's small shoulders. I draw close to him. I smell the familiarity of his clean white shirt over the body of work and effort. I can feel the warmth of his body and every little topographical feature of it. This dream traces the geography of his being. (2008, 87)

In the "Postscript", Verdicchio relates his journey to Naples to ideally bring his father back to his native city after his death. He carries along a number of commemorative cards but he realises that everything has changed and "[n]ow

our building is a congestion of offices, health spas and a privileged crust of high income inhabitants.” (2008, 93) There is no point in leaving “him” there, since any marks of belonging have been wiped out by time and displacement. “My last thought was to leave you at the station. But as the train pulled out of the Napoli Centrale, I found myself holding your photograph, glad to be carrying you off with me.” (2008, 94).

## 5. Conclusion

*This Nothing's Place* brings Verdicchio's poetic reflection one step further with respect to the previous collection. The first section of the collection, by including diverse pieces where the images evoking places and bodies are recurrent, prepares the backdrop for the final section, “Father”, where his father's body comes to be a metaphor for his legacy. The two “M” poems provide a frame which suggests an appraisal of reality through the reading of Mara's body. The two sections are linked by “The Desert Alone”, where the metaphor of the desert both comprehends and denies real and imaginary perspectives.

The emigrant, the “exile”, far from giving expression to his nostalgia for a specific place of origin and not being anchored in space and time, questions the issue of identity itself by discovering a place of belonging in a space of spaceless and timeless memory and imagination. Verdicchio's poetic identity, being strongly defined by his existential condition of “exile”, finds its stylistic representation in a number of corresponding linguistic strategies, which build up his ‘mind style’. From a lexical point of view, in the poems more closely linked to the ‘geographies of places’, namely, “At Home Here”, “This House”, “The Way Home”, “Savary” and “Exile”, there is a recurrence of lexemes directly connected with the semantic field of space: “place”, “here”, “distance”, “residence”, “continent”, “city”, “home”, “island”, “forest”, “beach”, “motion”, “exile”, “oceans”, “deserts” and “territories”. In the poems which focus on the ‘geographies of bodies’, namely, “Your Sleep”, the two “M” poems, “The Desert Alone” and the whole of the “Father” section, a minor incidence of spatial lexemes and syntagms (“landscape”, “fields”, “walks”, “beach”, “tectonic plates”, “map”, “direction” and “spaces of habitation”) meets with an increase in lexemes and syntagms connected with body parts:

“physical body”, “moles” as “maps of our history” and “corporeal space”. Devices such as internal deviation, repetition of lexemes and parallelism of structure foreground the language connected with the idea of space.

Being an exile also means questioning the concept of time and memory. The latter, which should connect the dimension of the past to the present, is vague and fragmentary and proceeds by vision and subtraction. Time is signalled by the recurrence of lexemes such as “past”, “days”, “nights” and “times”. Memory and its subtraction is formally expressed by lexemes which are conducive to the semantic field of absence: “nothing”, “no one”, “denial”, “silence” and “no body”. Moreover, from a syntactic point of view, a repetition of negative structures can be traced in some of his poems: “Not this”, “I am not here”, “Nothing announces night”, “if not a long drawn-out breath”, “if not our absence” and “no map to position it”.

To conclude, the geographies and maps his poems hint at are not only related to physical places but to spaces of emotion which intertwine in a dimension of fluidity. The latter is stylistically suggested by an extended use of free verse and a limited use of punctuation. It is to this very dimension that Verdicchio feels to belong and his mind style reflects his apprehension of the world in terms of space, time, memory and vision.

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