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Introduction

Maria Mazziotti Gillan (Paterson, NJ, 1940), one of the most prolific Italian American poets, has already published more than twenty volumes of and about poetry. The Founder and Executive Director of the Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College in Paterson, NJ, and editor of the Paterson Literary Review, Gillan received the 2014 George Garrett Award for Outstanding Community Service in Literature from the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP), the 2011 Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award from Poets & Writers and the 2008 American Book Award for her collection *All That Lies Between Us* (Guernica Editions). Bartle Professor and Professor Emerita of English and Creative Writing at Binghamton University-SUNY, she co-edited some groundbreaking anthologies on ethnicity with her daughter Jennifer – *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry* (Penguin, 1994), *Identity Lessons: Contemporary Writing About Learning to Be American* (Penguin, 1999), *Growing Up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning to Be American* (Penguin, 1999), and *Italian-American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose* (with Edvige Giunta, Rutgers, 2003) – and an essay collection with Susan Amsterdam, *The Poetic Legacy of Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg* (The Poetry Center Passaic County, 2017). Gillan's artistic production – which in the last two decades came to include her works as a painter – is the most surprising outcome of the interaction between her cultural and emotional legacy as a daughter of southern Italian immigrants and her cultural experience as a second-generation Italian/American woman.

The unpublished poem "What Is This Absence in the Heart?" celebrates her regret as a mother for having lost the emotional bond with her son John, who lives with his family far away from her[1] – "the distance between us can be counted in more than miles." Intensely autobiographical and unique in her literary *corpus*, Gillan's poems for John prove essential

to a complete understanding of her work as they insist on some crucial issues such as separation, absence, isolation, and incommunicability.[2] Even though Joe Weil labeled her work as "normative free verse confessionalism" (80), this poem in four stanzas seems to defy any label. "Pre-aesthetic" and "refreshingly devoid of postmodernist posturing" (73), Gillan's poetry dramatically differs from that of Plath and Sexton – among her favorite women poets – who framed their works in myth and psychology whenever they entered a world that made them feel uncomfortable with emotions. Her words, on the contrary, are most often a reaction to things on an almost physical level, a kind of "poetry rooted in the body" (Dougherty 17). No obscure allusions to other poets, no hints at any metaphysical reading of our society, but a kind of *whispered howl* – vaguely recalling Allen Ginsberg's tones – is the poem's pulse. Unlike her chief mentor, though, Gillan does not defy "the convention, but [performs] at convention's highest levels so as to steal the thunder from those who would exclude her" (Weil 75).

The *silent cry* of a mother facing a solitary failure – a defeat sounding more like a total débâcle than an unconditional surrender on her part – animates these verses. Resorting to an understated elegiac apostrophe to address her son, Gillan adds gravitas and a sense of magic (Francellini 128) to the poem through the use of anaphora and repetition – "So much that is broken or lost, / So much that we can never get back." Moreover, through the "gush," a peculiar "strategy of ecstatic speech […] far clearer than rhapsody," Gillan "states the obvious […] with such enthusiasm that the listener or reader is won over not by verbal strategy, but by its absence" (Weil 76). "What is This Absence in the Heart?" is built upon a "gush," since the factual matter of the poem is announced in the first two verses and pours forth in subsidiary sentences in the following stanzas. The syntax of "gushing, of someone getting emotional over a memory" (77), dominates the poem's overt, explicit, and prominent language. Gillan's style eschews the most obscure codes of postmodernist poetry or normative free verse confessionalism out of which, nonetheless, her work draws its structure and emphasis.[3]

Language, moreover, is a means more than an end to her as she speaks "from the standpoint of an immigrant's child," "an outsider" whose perspective is "complicated and, eventually, enriched by having lived a

more or less exemplary American life as an upwardly mobile suburban wife, mother and professional" (74). Part of the complexity of Gillan's poetry lies, in fact, in the process of constructing her voice as an Italian/American woman artist. Acting as the "literary foremother" in Italian/American poetry,[4] Gillan celebrates a world forever lost, crowded with people, sounds, tastes, colors, streets, stories from the past, and funny, heartfelt insights into the future. Underneath such a rich cosmos of feelings and subtle perceptions lies Gillan's unceasing quest for a "place to call home," where her identity – deeply rooted in her *Italian* childhood in Paterson – can be possibly defined.[5] Not *confessionalist* in the crisis sense of Ginsberg, nor a *sentimentalist*, Gillan "is a poet who risks sentiment by forging a poem out of it" (Vallone 53-54). She is "a poet of emotion rather than feeling, and this is almost in opposition to [...] William Carlos Williams, who believed poetry was not the fit vehicle for emotion and that emotion was better rendered in prose" (Weil 74).[6] Her poetry is also "anti-intellectual, [...] highly wise and even shrewd – the sort of honest shrewdness of someone who feels she has battled for every gain and who does not have time for convolution or deception" (75). At the same time, Gillan's production turns out to be highly "subversive," for it is not "what the French critic Roland Barthes termed 'a scriptable text' – aimed toward other aesthetes" – and does not require "the critic as middleman in order to be explicated and 'understood,' or, in the words of Harold Bloom, 'misread'" (73).

Most of her poems for John focus on memories in an apparent attempt to go back to the precise moment in time where everything happened, changing the terms of the mother and son relationship, as if returning to the point of trauma and acknowledging it could suggest how to negotiate between past and present. Gillan's fascinating journey into memory – "Memory opens like a hand inside me and, all the secrets I cannot bear to know spill out" ("If I Had the Courage," *Where I Come From* 182-83) – brings the past back into the future, as in the most powerful poem, "Strange," where John appears again as a child and adolescent:

> Strange how some moments remain caught
> in our memory, John at four on his new two-wheeler,
> his grandpa, helping him until John took off and rode away.

It seems to me he's been riding away ever since,
first to college, then law school, than with his family
to Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina and now Dallas,
but as if it had happened yesterday, I remember
sitting on the side of his bed the night before
he started high school, his hand in mine,
while I found the words to give him courage
[…]
this moment was one where I was learning,
what I'd learn again and again,
how to let him go.
(*The Place I Call Home* 44)

The first lesson here is about *things*[7] vanishing quickly, but the second is about learning to let people go. Alternating past and present, Gillan keeps confronting the reader with the process of the corruption of a fundamental relationship. If the first stanza of "What Is This Absence in the Heart?" insists on *grief* and *regret* – "In memory, you still lean into the circle / of my arm, lean your heavy head / against my chest" – the second focuses on some vivid memories of John as a child:

I read a book to you.
You are two years old,
already in your flannel pajamas,
getting ready to sleep,
though you will keep on asking for another book and then another.

Another picture of John sitting on the laundry wicker basket, "turning the pages in a book [he] can't read but ha[s] already memorized," brings about a topic very dear to Maria Gillan, her passionate love for books and reading, described as a salvific boat to reach a world of magic and creativity.[8] Resorting to the literary device of the "spotlight" – "a loving, glowing light in which the speaker feels protected and included" (Jennifer Gillan 38) – the poet involves the reader in an atmosphere of fear, love, and sadness lingering in the poem. Through the harsh juxtaposition of past and present scenes, Gillan magnifies the contrast between communion and isolation, dialogue

and chit-chatting, openness and closure in a frame where words are all that matters. An objective correlative of the troubled relationship between mother and son is the telephone, a symbol of the frailty of their connection – "a phone wire the only tentative cord left between us" ("Poem to John," in *What Blooms in Winter* 275). This ever-occurring element – whose cord alludes to the umbilical cord – is the only means through which Gillan can "auscultate," in the literal meaning of "examine by listening," her son's "tight" voice, its "tense tone" and "heaviness [...], weighing [him] down as though [he] were carrying stones in [his] pocket." No further intrusion into her son's emotional world is allowed, but a few minutes in a phone call are enough for her to perceive his unhappiness, distress, and pain. In another poem, "Letter to My Son," a younger version of the poet appears next to John: "I remember / you as a little boy, your legs chunky, / your eyes gray and dreamy as a Turner / landscape..."; "A figure moves toward you, / a younger version of myself. / She holds your hand, You speak" (*What We Pass On* 17). The juxtaposition of past and present – "You, miles away, have grown into a man / I can be proud of" – imbues life into the jarringly painful contrast, highlighted by some keywords often occurring in Gillan's poems for John: "miles away," "phone call," but also the verb "struggle" reveal her efforts to find the right words to say and mark the feeling of irredeemable loss, made even stronger by the lack of any physical contact between mother and son. Gillan therefore establishes a connection between "the act of speaking" and "the physical contact" between mother and child. By writing, "She holds your hand, You speak," Gillan elicits the fact that, by "holding" his mother's hand, John "holds on" – another idiom of phone conversations – to a salvific dialogue with the only woman who can "find the words to erase [his] sorrow" ("What Is This Absence in the Heart?").[9] Locked in a prison of *mute* dialogue, on the contrary, he grows more and more convinced of the inanity of words to fill the gap between him and his mother.[10] The magic circle where they both used to be safe – "We are unchanged, moving / in our accustomed circle;" "I'm safe in a circle of love" ("Letter to My Son," *What We Pass On* 17); "In memory, you still lean into the circle of my arm" ("Awakening," 23) – seems lost in a distant time in the past.[11] Mother and son also share a common need to take care of the

people they love, almost a neurotic impulse pooling them together, and the poem concludes on this fundamental element:

> I can't resist taking care
> of the world,
> I who find myself
> giving unasked for advice
> like my mother,
> [...]
> ... my son
> who, though he doesn't know it
> now, is me, the one
> who takes care of everyone,
> the one his family goes to
> for advice and comfort,
> [...]
> my son whom I so annoy,
> my son who is just like me,
> though he would deny it
> and refuses to recognize
> when he speaks sometimes
> it is my voice he hears.[12]
> ("When I Speak Sometimes," *The Place I Call Home* 69-70)

Lack of communication and chit-chatting take the place of a frank, open dialogue in "What Is This Absence in The Heart?" ("Your voice tells me how you are, / though you no longer tell me"), and separation wins over communion. The looming presence of what is forever lost or broken leaves the poet at the mercy of fear, anxiety and a strong desire not to keep holding on to the slender cord linking her to John. An invisible "screen" separates mother and son – "when you call, / I feel I'm speaking to a person / hidden behind a screen" ("Letter to My Son," *What We Pass On* 17) – a wall made up of bricks of silence and misunderstanding, the last act of their problematic relationship.

A dramatic poem, "My Son, the Lawyer Quotes Dylan Thomas to Give Me Courage," from Gillan's recent collection *When the Stars Were Still*

Visible (2021), seems to turn the whole situation around. Here the poet is "brought low" by a bad fall: "I lose my balance and fall, / smashing my nose against the hardwood floor. / I slip in a huge puddle of blood, / try to stand up but my feet keep sliding" (74-75). Despite this sudden and depressing "recognition of frailty," she still drives four-hours to Binghamton, teaches her "class, looking battle-scarred," and, only then, starts coming to terms with her "son who used to tell [her]" to "cut back and give up poetry," proving once again "that he did not understand anything about" her (74). Surprised and "shocked / to hear defeat," in the words of his mother, "always optimistic about everything / even in the middle of calamity," John seems to find his own voice and addresses her, speaking from the depths of his heart: "How many women your age have a life they love, / work they love doing?" Is it the terrific end of a long-lasting, chilling silence, or a gentle prelude to what John will do next? "Later," – we read in the poem – John sends his mother a quote from Dylan Thomas: "Do not go gentle into that good night, / Old age should burn and rave at close of days; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light" (74-75). As we keep these lines in mind – "I repeat the lines over and over to myself, / grateful to this son I was sure didn't understand anything about me" (75) – we cannot help thinking that poetry – "Words [sparkling] like stars" ("My Mother Used to Wash My Hair," *The Place I Call Home* 14) – has once again manifested its immense power "to turn straw into gold" and break down the walls of isolation, changing a mute dialogue into a few powerful words. Upsetting the old painful balance, John lets his mother enter his own "magic circle," a place of perfect beauty where everything lost can be found again and starts "to fix what is broken in" her.

Notes

[1] "My son, whom I cannot talk to, my son, who seems so distant from me" ("If I Had the Courage," *What We Pass On* 182). Interestingly enough, Gillan experienced something very similar in her youth: "The world I was constructing for myself was so different from the world my mother had known" ("Carlton Fredericks and My Mother" 264).

[2] "Letter to My Son," "Poem to John: Freshman Year, Drew University, 1983," "The Leavetaking," "My Son, That Gray-Eyed Dreamer," "In the Pages of a Photo Album,"

"Yesterday," "Poem to John," "What I Can't Face About Someone I Love," "Is This the Way It Is Between Mothers and Sons" (*What We Pass On* 17, 36, 88, 131, 180, 184-85, 274-76, 401-02, 403-04). Some short proses – "My Son Tells Me Not to Wear My Poet's Clothes," "If I Had the Courage, I'd Ask My Children What They Remember About Me When They Were Growing Up," "In My Family," "How to Turn a Phone Call into a Disaster" (*What We Pass On* 120, 182-83, 299, 328-29) – deal with the problematic mother/son relationship.

[3] "I think of my own poems, the ones I wrote thirty years ago which suffered from the deliberately obscure Greek god reference syndrome, and the ones I write today that are as direct and honest and plain as I can make them" (Gillan, *Writing Poetry* 51). For another example of "gush" see also "Blessed" (*Italian Women in Black Dresses* 11).

[4] "Maria Gillan has been an influence on and a supporter of Rachel Guido De Vries, Maria Russo Demetrick, Maria Famà, Denise Leto, Mary Ann Mannino, Vittoria Repetto, Mary Jo Bona, and Jana Patriarc;" "Her modus operandi is fundamentally collaborative. Poets like Rose Romano demonstrate a connection with Gillan in poetic style and editing projects, such as Romano's chapbook series and anthology *La Bella Figura*, which features Gillan's most famous poem, 'Public School no.18: Paterson, New Jersey,' as its first epigraph" (Bona 257, 161).

[5] Gillan's perception of having grown up in *Italy* reflects in her feeling that she "was always Italian" (Dougherty 16).

[6] "Of poetry, Ginsberg writes: 'Poetry is not an expression of the party line. It's that time of night, lying in bed, thinking what you really think, making the private world public, that's what the poet does'" (Weil 79).

[7] See Gillan's "My Father's Tuba Disappeared," and "The Cedar Keepsake Box" (*The Place I Call Home* 33, 45).

[8] "Books were the boats that carried me away from the skin / I was born in" (*The Place I Call Home* 14). In "Why I Loved the Library" (*What Blooms in Winter* 17) Gillan recalls the feeling of "stepping into another land, / one full of quiet, the soft muted colors / of the book covers, the well-worn pages, the hours in the children's section, the chairs the perfect / size for me." Similarly, John seems to merge himself in books in this unpublished poem.

[9] "Words that offer comfort stuck like a fishbone in my throat" ("Poem to John," *What We Pass On* 275).

[10] In *Writing Poetry to Save Your Life,* Gillan focuses more on the writing process than the writing craft.

[11] See also "Magic Circle" (*Italian Women in Black Dresses* 38) where Gillan encloses the women of her family into an enchanted ring to keep them and their stories safe from the assault of time.

[12] "My son John wants to think he is not like us. [...] He takes everything seriously. [...] I know that even my son, who wants to think he is not like our family, is driven as we are, to keep on going, no matter what" ("In My Family," *What We Pass On* 209).

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Maria Mazziotti Gillan

"What Is This Absence in the Heart?"

So much that is broken or lost,
so much that we can never get back.
In memory, you still lean into the circle
of my arm, lean your heavy head
against my chest.

I read a book to you. You are two years old,
already in your flannel pajamas, getting ready to sleep,
though you will keep on asking for another book
and then another. During the day you sit in the wicker
clothes basket playing with your Matchbox cars
or turning the pages in a book which you can't read
but have already memorized.

So many hours between then and now.
So much that is broken or lost.
Your voice on the phone tells me how you are,
though you no longer tell me.

We are so alike, you and I, that I know
the sound of your voice when you're unhappy,
the tightness in it, the tense tone –
the heaviness of it, weighing you down
as though you were carrying stones in your pocket,
and how it leaves me afraid for you, leaves me
struggling to find the words to erase your sorrow.

I wish I could carry us both back to those days
when I held you in my arms and where there was

always something I could do to help you and not like now
when the distance between us can be counted
in more than miles. We both know
you need to take care of everyone,
to fix what is broken in those you love,
in this way we are alike, and that is the one thing
you cannot bear to know.

"Che cos'è questa assenza nel cuore?"

Traduzione italiana di Carla Francellini

Quanto si è spezzato o perso,
quante cose non torneranno più.
Nel ricordo, ti appoggi ancora alla curva
del mio braccio, poggi la testa tua pesante
contro il mio petto.

Ti leggo un libro. Hai due anni,
nel pigiama di flanella, pronto per dormire,
e mi chiedi un libro e un altro e
un altro ancora. Di giorno siedi nel cesto
di vimini della biancheria a giocare con le macchinine Matchbox
o a sfogliare le pagine di un libro che non sai leggere
ma sai già a memoria.

Quante ore tra quei giorni e adesso.
Quanto si è spezzato o perso.
La tua voce al telefono mi dice come stai,
ma tu non me lo dici più.

Siamo così simili io e te, che riconosco
il suono della tua voce quando sei infelice,
il timbro stizzito, il tono teso –
pesante, che ti trascina giù
come se avessi le tasche piene di sassi,[1]
e mi lascia così in pena per te, mi lascia a cercare le parole
per cancellare il tuo dolore.

Vorrei tornare indietro con te a quei giorni,
quando ti tenevo tra le braccia e sapevo

sempre come aiutarti e non come adesso
che la distanza tra noi non si calcola più
solo in miglia. Devi sempre prenderti cura di tutti,
lo sappiamo entrambi,
aggiustare quel che si spezza in quelli che ami,
in questo siamo simili io e te,
e questo tu non lo vuoi sapere.

Notes

[1] A recurring element in Sylvia Plath's poetry, the stones appear in many other Gillan's poems: "This is a safe place we've come to, / a place where all our scars can be revealed, / a place where we can put down our sorrow/ like a basket full of *stone*" ("Here in This Gray Room," *The Place I Call Home* 79); "I struggle as if I were speaking to a person/ I barely know, the conversation so heavy / it is a sack of *stone*…" ("In the Pages of a Photo Album," *What We Pass On* 180).