

ELÈNA MORTARA

## Barbara Kreiger and the Nature of Here

It is a pleasure for me to introduce an unpublished text by Barbara Kreiger in the Journal of the Italian Association of North American Studies. Barbara Kreiger is a New Englander by birth, who was raised in Connecticut, received her Ph.D. in English and American Literature from Brandeis University in 1978 (where I first met her one year later) and soon after moved to New Hampshire with her husband, novelist Alan Lelchuk. Since 1982 she has taught literary nonfiction and creative writing at Dartmouth College, in the English Department and in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program, where she is Chair of the M.A.L.S. Creative Writing Concentration. She is the author of *The Dead Sea: Myth, History, and Politics* (1997, first published in 1988 as *Living Waters*; “a rare natural, political, and human history ... Remarkable and timely.” – *Booklist*) and *Divine Expectations: An American Woman in 19th-Century Palestine* (1999; the little-known story of an American Christian pioneer in Palestine, woven “into the larger context of the region and its history,” and written with “the deft touch of a novelist”). A Distinguished Lecturer Award from Dartmouth College enabled her to travel to Jerusalem and Jaffo one more time before the latter book was in print. In 2004 she received a Fulbright Award and spent the 2004-2005 academic year in Rome, where she taught literary nonfiction (including memoir, travel and the personal essay) to graduate students in English at the University of Rome “Tor Vergata.” Since then she has returned, upon my invitation, to “Tor Vergata” as a Visiting Professor to pursue her research on memory and place, and accomplish her own nonfiction creative writing project.

When Barbara Kreiger’s first nonfiction book was published, a review in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* stressed “Kreiger’s remarkable literary gifts,” enabling “the book to be ranked with the best of travelogues as she makes it possible for the reader to participate in all facets of the region, natural, human, and political.” I know the transformative influence she has on her students, as I have seen her at work at my University in Rome and have read the

amazing collection of short English essays by her Italian students, which she edited after that experience (“Reflections from Here and There,” 2005).

In the following excerpt from *Echo, A Home: Reflections on Memory and Place*, Kreiger digs into her own life, and writes what she calls a “venture into memory, more than a memoir.” Echoes from the past reverberate as sensations of the present, in the inner territory of a sensitive and reflective person’s mind, and threads of memory combine in the narration, showing the multilayered interplay of space and time acting in individual experiences, as well as in collective histories. The excerpt offers two segments from the chapter called “Gerunds and Place.” The chapter is composed of a number of sections, each considering a different verb action expressed in the gerund. The complete list includes “Gardening,” “Woodworking,” “Walking,” “Speaking Italian,” “Traveling,” and “Playing the Violin.” I have asked the author to contextualize the extract given here with her rationale for the whole chapter. And this is Barbara Kreiger’s answer, a further text which will serve as the author’s introduction to the published selection:

This short segment is taken from the chapter “Gerunds and Place,” where I explore a number of gerunds in order to reflect on how inner space is constituted as an echo of home and the past. From a grammatical point of view, we customarily refer to the activities that are most important to us in the verb form, by which “doing” takes precedence over “being.” In this chapter, by shifting verbs into gerunds, I try to internalize what we “do,” transforming an activity into inhabited space. Regarding activity in this way opens up an interior spatial dimension by which, for me, its deeper meaningfulness is realized.

I try to link the various gerunds by the repetition of words and images that function as a kind of “knitting” mechanism, so that all the spaces created by one’s devotion are part of a unified internal experience. This means, finally, that one is never “empty,” or ungrounded, as associations emerge and create internal continuity, weaving a new fabric of experience. The book as a whole is concerned with the questions implied here. Loss is never really loss, because the terms of reconstitution, which is a kind of self-location through sensate memory, mean there is always a layering of experience that has a lasting freshness. Sustenance is found in the ordinary, achieved by locating meaningful experience in the perpetually available. I’m also interested in what could be called “memory space,” which opens when one experiences a sudden fusion of past and present. The illusion that time is compressed and even erased when one is thus

transported is felt as an expansion of inner space, so distinct that it creates a new, unprecedented experience.

The pages from *Echo, A Home* presented here are inspired by Kreiger's experiences of life in Italy. These experiences play a further role in her book; towards its conclusion, after a fundamental chapter on "Homemaking," full of a painfully secret nostalgia for an almost-lost home in the U.S., a long chapter, "The Nature of Here," is devoted to the writer's year-long stay in Rome and her finding a momentary "home" in this city. I thank Barbara Kreiger for agreeing to add to the original title of her chapter a subtitle, "After Italy," which clarifies its setting and source of inspiration.

### Works cited

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