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"Io son venuto in America per cercar mia madre": Emigration and Nation in Edmondo De Amicis' American Writings

Paola Gemme

On 10 March 1884, Edmondo De Amicis embarked as a first-class passenger on the steamer *Nord America*, directed from the port of Genoa to Buenos Aires, Argentina, the destination of the 1,600 Italian emigrants also on board. De Amicis was already a well-known writer, the author of several travelogues and a foreign correspondent for the Argentinian periodical *El Nacional*, whose editor had invited him to give a lecture tour. His Milanese publisher, Emilio Treves, anticipating the topic would be of great interest to an Italian audience, encouraged him to accept the offer and write a description of the lives of the Italians living in South America. Based on the transoceanic crossing and the two months he spent in Argentina, De Amicis produced several texts: a long account of the transatlantic journey, *Sull'Oceano* (*On Blue Water*), published in 1889; a short story, "Dagli Appennini alle Ande" ("From the Apennines to the Andes"), included in his 1886 best-seller, *Cuore* (*Heart*); and a lecture, "I nostri contadini in America" (1887, "Our Peasants in America"), delivered three times in 1887 and then published in the volume *In America*.[1] Collectively, these texts describe Italian emigration to South America in its different stages, from departure to settlement and, for some, return.

De Amicis' American writings have received considerable critical attention, and particularly *Sull'Oceano*, the first extensive literary treatment of the migrant exodus that followed national unification.[2] Several critics have focused on De Amicis' intervention in the fierce debate over emigration.[3] Overall, the consensus, which my analysis qualifies, has been that De Amicis initially feared the migrants would be worse off abroad than in Italy but then assessed emigration positively once he witnessed the prosperity of the Italian communities in Argentina.[4] Other commentators interested in De Amicis' ideological evolution have noticed instead that *Sull'Oceano* evinces an interest in the causes and effects of social inequality that foreshadows the writer's conversion to the parliamentary socialism of Filippo Turati in 1891, although most agree that the solution proposed in this text is

[1] Luigi Cepparrone, *Gli scritti americani di Edmondo de Amicis* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino Editore, 2012), 7–16.

[2] Francesco De Nicola, *Gli scrittori italiani e l'emigrazione* (Formia: Ghenomena Edizioni, 2008), 34–35.

[3] The most extensive overview of the congressional debate on emigration is still Fernando Manzotti, *La polemica sull'emigrazione nell'Italia unita* (Milan: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1969).

[4] See especially Cepparrone's comparison between De Amicis' 1880 poem, "Gli emigranti" (in *Gli scritti*, 17–56), where the migrants' departure is overshadowed by intimations of death, and his 1887 lecture, "I nostri contadini in America" (in *Gli scritti*, 76–112), which describes the political and economic transformation of the Italian settlers in Argentina. Giorgio Bertone, "La patria in piroscafo. Il viaggio di Edmondo de Amicis," in *Sull'Oceano*, by Edmondo De Amicis (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2005), 25–26; Valentina Bezzi, *Nell'officina di un reporter di fine ottocento: Gli appunti di viaggio di Edmondo De Amicis* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2007), 76–78; and Vincenzo Pasquale, "Note sull'emigrazione: Emozioni ed emigrazione. De Amicis," *Forum Italicum* 47, no. 3 (2013): 664, among others, argue that De Amicis aligned himself with Francesco Saverio Nitti, who, in his 1888 *L'emigrazione italiana e i suoi avversari*, maintained that emigration improved the economic conditions of Italian peasants and benefited the mother country by expelling discontented laborers and expanding the nation's commercial ties with foreign countries.

sentimental rather than militant.[5] In this essay, while I build on and indirectly intervene in these scholarly conversations, I explore a different topic, namely how De Amicis tries to reconcile emigration with the project of nation formation at the discursive level. With his best-selling *Cuore*, in which pupils from all social strata are gathered together within the confines of an elementary classroom in the northern city of Turin and educated to respect the nation and all national subjects through narratives of heroism performed by young patriots from all parts of Italy, De Amicis had established himself as a pedagogue of national identity and cohesion.[6] For him, the issues are not whether migration can function as a social safety valve against the discontent of the poor, but how to reestablish affective harmony within the nation; not whether migrants prosper in their chosen destinations, but whether they maintain or sever their emotional ties with the homeland; and not whether the nation benefits from the creation of enclaves of Italians abroad, but whether it preserves its protective role towards them. Within this focus on sentimental bonds among Italians of different classes, and between nation and its national subjects, I argue against critics who have concluded that *Sull'Oceano* is still mired in philanthropic sentimentalism, that precisely that sentimentalism is an instrument of national reconciliation, and I analyze the narrative mechanisms employed to elicit it.[7] The overarching metaphor for the nation in De Amicis' American writing is familial: Italy is a mother, first unable to sustain her children and bemoaning their departure from her shores, then remote and elusive in the Argentinian plains, and finally restored to its role of protector, albeit from afar; Italians are brothers, initially divided among themselves by class and from the Argentinians by ethnicity, but eventually reunited by the circulation of affect. Migrants in the text and middle class readers alike are invited by the writer to feel sympathy for both homeland and each other. The discursive regeneration of a nation afflicted by social division and the ensuing exodus of the poorest of its children is thus achieved not, as one commentator put it, in spite of pathos, but through it.[8]

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[5] While commentators agree that the journey to Argentina contributed to De Amicis' awareness of the depth of the social question, some argue that *Sull'Oceano* anticipates *Primo maggio*, the author's socialist novel, while others insist that the narrative's solution to the social question is purely philanthropic, tied to middle-class benevolence rather than the elevation of the working class. Among the former, see Flavia Bacchetti, *I viaggi "en touriste" di De Amicis: Raccontare ai borghesi* (Pisa: Edizioni del Cerro, 2001), 81–108 and Caterina De Caprio, "Edmondo De Amicis e gli emigranti sull'oceano," in *E c'è di mezzo il mare: Lingua, letteratura, e civiltà marina*, ed. Bert Van den Bossche et al. (Florence: Cesati Editore, 2002), 397–408. Among the latter, see Alberto Brambilla, *De Amicis: Paragrafi eterodossi* (Modena: Mucchi, 1992), 47–61 and Bianca Danna, *Dal taccuino alla lanterna magica: De Amicis reporter e scrittore di viaggi* (Florence: Leo O. Olschki, 2000), 155–59.

[6] Bruno Traversetti, *Introduzione a De Amicis* (Roma: Laterza, 1991), 70–91.

[7] The one notable exception to the general discounting of *Sull'Oceano* as a text that denounces social inequality but fails to propose practical solutions is Gabriella Romani, "National Readership and Cultural Consumerism in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy: Edmondo De Amicis's *Sull'Oceano* and Its Strategic Appeal to Emotion," in *The Formation of a National Audience in Italy, 1750–1890*, ed. Gabriella Romani and Jennifer Burns (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017), 43–59. Romani argues that, for sentimental writers like De Amicis, emotional engagement was the most effective means for overcoming social divide, but she does not explore the narrative mechanisms through which affect is elicited in the text.

[8] De Caprio, "Edmondo De Amicis," 404. In my emphasis on the cultural work performed by sentiment in De Amicis, I align myself with the scholarship that has rediscovered and analyzed the role of feeling in nation building. For a review of historiography that underscores the emotional component of nationalist discourse, including that of the Italian Risorgimento, see Silvana Patriarca, "Il sesso delle nazioni: Genere e passioni nella storiografia sul nazionalismo," *Contemporanea* 10, no. 2 (2007): 353–60.

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De Amicis was aware of the debates on emigration—its causes and its possible effects on Italy—that had begun as early as the 1870s. In a notebook compiled in preparation for his journey to Argentina, he listed the names of Leone Carpi and Stefano Jacini under the heading "Sull'Emigrazione e Colonie" ("On Emigration and Colonies"), suggesting his intention to familiarize himself with their work.[9] In *Dell'emigrazione italiana all'estero* (1871; On Italian Emigration Abroad) and subsequent publications, Carpi, an economist, gathered the first statistical data on the Italian exodus and assessed the creation of free colonies of emigrant settlers, as opposed to colonies of direct imperial domination, as a positive development that would remedy the poverty of the agrarian class and benefit the nation's economy as a whole through the extension of commercial ties to the countries of emigration and the remittances from abroad.[10] Also an economist, Jacini headed a parliamentary investigation into the conditions of Italian agriculture and released an extremely negative report, *Relazione finale sui risultati dell'inchiesta agraria* (Final Report on the Results of the Agrarian Investigation), in 1884. Jacini identified a long list of ills affecting the Italian agrarian sector: lack of investment on the part of the state, excessive taxation of agricultural property, the competition of foreign imports, outdated cultivation methods that exhausted the soil, and the plagues of malaria and pellagra. Those should be redressed, he suggested, with investments, modernization, and the reclamation of swamplands. Until the measures he recommended were implemented, Jacini considered emigration an antidote to the growing unrest in the countryside.[11] One additional name jotted down by De Amicis in his notebook is that of Paolo Mantegazza, author of *Rio de la Plata e Tenerife: Viaggi e studi* (1876, *Rio de la Plata and Tenerife: Travels and Studies*).[12] Mantegazza, who had travelled extensively in Argentina in the early 1860s, extolled the immense, fertile, and sparsely populated Argentinian plains as the ideal destination for Italian farmers suffering from economic insecurity. From his readings, then, De Amicis was conscious of the dimensions of migration, its roots in the agrarian crisis, and the existence of a luring global labor market in Latin American countries.[13]

Echoes of these and other arguments in the debate surface in the conversations among the passengers on board the *Galileo*, the literary stand-in for the *Nord America* in

[9] Federica Pastorino, "De Amicis dagli Appennini alle Ande," in *De Amicis: Riletture e approfondimenti*. *Atti del convegno di studi, Genova, 23 ottobre 2008*, ed. Vincenzo Guelfo (Sestri Levante: Gammarò, 2009), 47–49.

[10] On Leone Carpi and the distinction between colonies of population and colonies of conquest, see Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2.

[11] On the agricultural crisis and Iacini's investigation, see Piero Belivacqua, "Società rurale e emigrazione," in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, vol. 1, ed. Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina de Clementi, and Emilio Franzina (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2009), 101–07; and Maddalena Tirabassi, "Why Italians Left Italy: The Physics and Politics of Migration, 1870–1920," in *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, ed. William J. Connell and Stanislao Pugliese (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge University Press, 2017), 118–21.

[12] Pastorino, "De Amicis," 49–52.

[13] The Argentinian elites actively recruited European immigrants to populate the plains of the interior. The Law of Immigration and Colonization of 1876, for instance, offered migrants five nights of free lodging in Buenos Aires and free transportation to their destination. See Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Land of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 77.

Sull'Oceano. Some among the first class passengers defend the validity of Thomas Robert Malthus' theory, expounded in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), that population always increases faster than resources, so that emigration functions as a safety valve to counter unsustainable demographic growth, to which one counteracts that the exodus from Europe would leave the continent deserted of manpower.[14] A Venetian peasant reports similar concerns held by the Italian agrarian elite when he recounts his landlord's advice to him that he should not emigrate since emigration was a loss of capital for the nation: "Mi diceva che ogni emigrante che parte porta via al paese un capitale di quattrocento franchi. Tu vai a consumare e a produr di fuori, tu fai un danno al tuo paese" ("He used to tell me that every emigrant that leaves takes from the country capital in the amount of 400 francs. You go abroad to consume and produce, you do damage to your own country").[15] The same peasant also refers to the strategy adopted by the land-holding class, fearful that the scarcity of labor would increase salaries, counteracting the recruiting efforts of immigration agents by spreading negative rumors about the receiving countries, "che muoiono tutti di fame, e che tornan più *disparai* di prima, e che c'è la peste, … e *cussì via*" ("how they all die of hunger, and come back more miserable than ever, and how there is the plague, . . . and so on").[16] Finally, to his landlord's suggestion that he should wait for the land reclamation advocated by Jacini and move to uncultivated Italian territory rather than overseas—"*Lù me consegiava de spetar, che i gh'avaria bonificà la Sardegna e la marema, e messo a man l'agro romano*" ("He advised me to wait; Sardinia and the Maremma would be reclaimed and the land around Rome cultivated")—the peasant responds that he could not afford to wait: "*Ma se intanto mi no magno*?" ("And if I have nothing to eat meanwhile?"). His insistence that his one motive for leaving the country was hunger—"*Mi emigro per magnar*" ("I emigrate to have something to eat")[17]—implicitly refers to and counters the landowners' argument that emigration was, in the official terminology of the time, "artificial" rather than "spontaneous," that is, instigated by the propaganda of recruiters and maritime companies rather than by the peasants' actual state of need.[18] This construction of the peasant exodus as having external instead of social causes was reflected in government legislation. When, yielding to the lobbying of the land-owning classes, the Italian state intervened to regulate emigration with the Circolare Lanza of 1873 and the Crispi Law of 1888, it concentrated its efforts on curbing the influence of emigration recruiters by, respectively, inviting local authorities to caution prospective emigrants against spurious tales of easy gains overseas and imposing a state-issued license on all agents.[19]

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[14] Edmondo De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano* (Milan: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1889). Reprinted with preface and notes by Francesco De Nicola (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), 90–91. All references are to the 2004 edition and all translations of De Amicis are mine.

[15] Ibid., 202.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 203.

[18] Mattia Vitiello, "Le politiche di emigrazione e la costruzione dello stato unitario italiano," *Percorsi storici* 1, no. 1 (2013): 6–7. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278685643_Le_politiche_di_emigrazione_e_la_costruzione_dello_Stato_unitario_italiano

[19] Mazzotti, *La polemica sull'emigrazione nell'Italia unita* (Milano: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri, 1969), 69–76. See also Maria Rosaria Ostuni, "Leggi e politiche di governo nell'Italia liberale e fascista," in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, 309–12.

It is by emphasizing the reality of widespread rural starvation that De Amicis intervenes in the debate on emigration. In the separate, privileged space of authorial asides, as opposed to in the recreation of conversations among or with passengers, De Amicis insists on the necessity to acknowledge that leaving was the peasants' last recourse. In his words, "la maggior parte, bisognava riconoscerlo, era gente costretta a emigrare dalla fame, dopo essersi dibattuta inutilmente, per anni, sotto l'artiglio della miseria" ("The greater part, it must be acknowledged, were forced to emigrate by hunger, after having struggled vainly and for many years in the clutches of want").[20] This pronouncement is followed by a long catalog of agrarian workers from all Italian regions, uniformly described through the disconnection between their hard labor and their meager gains. In the North, for instance, "I mondadori di riso della bassa Lombardia […] per una lira al giorno sudano ore e ore, sferzati dal sole, con la febbre nell'ossa, sull'acqua melmosa che li avvelena, per campare di polenta, di pan muffito e di lardo rancido" ("The rice weeders of Southern Lombardy […] for a lira a day sweat for hours under a scorching sun, with fever in their veins, in the slimy water that poisons them, so they may have a little polenta, moldy bread, and rancid pork to eat").[21] In the South, peasants walk miles every day just to reach their assigned field, carrying their tools on their back, and yet the Calabrians "vivon d'un pane di lenticchie selvatiche, somigliante ad un impasto di segatura e di mota, e nelle cattive annate mangiano le erbacce dei campi […] come il bestiame" ("they survive on a bread of wild lentils, something like a paste of sawdust and mud, and in bad years they eat weeds off the fields [. . .] like cattle").[22] As for the causes of this misery, De Amicis radically shifts the conversation from the impersonal realm of demographics and economics to that of personal responsibility and ethics. All the reasons identified by social scientists and politicians, "impoverimento progressivo del suolo" ("progressive impoverishment of the soil"); "agricoltura trasandata per la rivoluzione" ("cultivation neglected on account of the revolution"); "imposte aggravate per necessità politiche" ("taxes exacerbated by political needs"); "concorrenza straniera" ("foreign competition") or "malaria," could not adequately account for all that suffering.[23] De Amicis adds an intangible cause not mentioned by others, the wicked pursuit of self-interest: "Non mi potevo levar dal cuore," he writes, "che ci avevano pure una gran parte di colpa, in quella miseria, la malvagità e l'egoismo umano" ("I could not but feel that human wickedness and selfishness were also greatly to blame for that wretchedness"). His list of felons is long: "signori indolenti" ("idle gentlemen"); "fittavoli senza discrezione né coscienza" ("tenants without discretion or conscience"); "usurai senza cuore né legge" ("heartless, lawless usurers"); "impresari e trafficanti che voglion far quattrini ad ogni patto" ("entrepreneurs and dealers who must make money no matter how"). Addressing both those who denied the social roots of emigration and those who discussed them as disembodied historical and economic forces, De Amicis thus puts the suffering of the agrarian working classes and the greed or disinterest of all others at the center of his analysis.[24]

"L'egoismo umano" ("human egotism") is not a venial sin in De Amicis' ethical worldview in so far as it breaches the compact of kinship upon which the nation is built.

[20] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 35.
[21] Ibid., 35.
[22] Ibid., 36.
[23] Ibid., 37.
[24] Ibid., 37–38.

Alberto Mario Banti, whose *La nazione del Risorgimento* (2000, *The Nation of the Risorgimento*) is a foundational study for the analysis of nineteenth-century Italian patriotic rhetoric, finds that the nation was conceived of as a diachronically and synchronically extended family embedded in territory, or, as he puts it, "un fitto reticolo di nessi familiari, che lega una lunga catena di generazioni tra loro in senso longitudinale (con gli avi tanto quanto coi posteri), in senso orrizzontale (con i coevi), e fisicamente a un luogo, a una terra" ("a thick net of family relations that ties generations longitudinally [with both ancestors and descendants], horizontally [with contemporaries], and geographically to a location and a land").[25] Even acknowledging that there were competing types of Italian nationalism, namely the liberal, elitist nationalism that prevailed and the democratic, egalitarian nationalism that did not, to starve one's brothers and sisters into economic exile endangers the entire structure of the nation as kinship group regardless of political creed. To start with, the exploitation on the part of the upper classes creates a chain reaction of working class resentment that is as palpable on board the steamship as it was in the agricultural centers of the Po Valley, where tens of thousands of day laborers were participating in strikes of socialist inspiration at the very same time as the *Galileo* was crossing the Atlantic.[26] When De Amicis walks to the forward to mingle with the emigrants, the subject of the book he has been commissioned to write, for instance, he is rebuffed with a sarcastic "Largo ai signori!" ("Make way for the gents!") whispered to his back because to them, as a first-class passenger, he represented a group whose privilege, so visible in the restricted confines of the steamer (figs. 1–2), feeds upon their suffering, and pursues them even as they leave, "come un vampiro che li volesse andare a dissanguare fino in America" ("like a vampire that would suck their blood all the way to America").[27] On a different occasion, ascending the forecastle, where the most discontented among the emigrants congregate to recount their wrongs and laugh at the rage that would devour the landowners when they found themselves without any laborers, he is met with an equally hostile, "*Già, vegnen chì al teater*" ("They come here for their show"),[28] accusing him of a voyeuristic, disengaged interest in the lower classes to which the speaker and his group refuse to be subjected.[29] When he tries to caress children, mothers pull them away from him, again resisting a gesture they interpret as a self-serving pretense of kindness. In sum, the disuniting of the nation initiated by upper-class greed in turn promotes separation from below, a fracturing across class lines that theorists of the Risorgimento like Mazzini had already identified, in addition to the historical-geographical disunion of the Italian

[25] Alberto M. Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento: Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 69.

[26] Between 1884 and 1886, peasant discontent erupted in the Po Valley region in a series of strikes known as "moto de la boje" (in Lombard dialect, a boiling cauldron about to overflow). Unable to survive on the diminishing wages offered by landowners hurt by foreign competition, day workers demanded more secure employment and higher remuneration. The government reacted with military intervention, often using soldiers to replace the striking workers in the fields as well as to dispel them, and with massive arrests and trials. See Renato Zanzeri, *Storia del socialismo italiano*, vol. 2 (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), 69–140; and Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism, 1864–1892* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1993), 218–20.

[27] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 60.

[28] Ibid., 65 (emphasis in original).

[29] For an insightful analysis of the episode, see Edwige Cosmoy Fusaro, *Forme e figure dell'alterità: Studi su De Amicis, Capuana, e Camillo Boito* (Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzo Editore, 2009), 29–36.

peninsula, as inimical to the nation formation.[30] If a family at all, the nation on board the *Nord America* is riddled with discord.

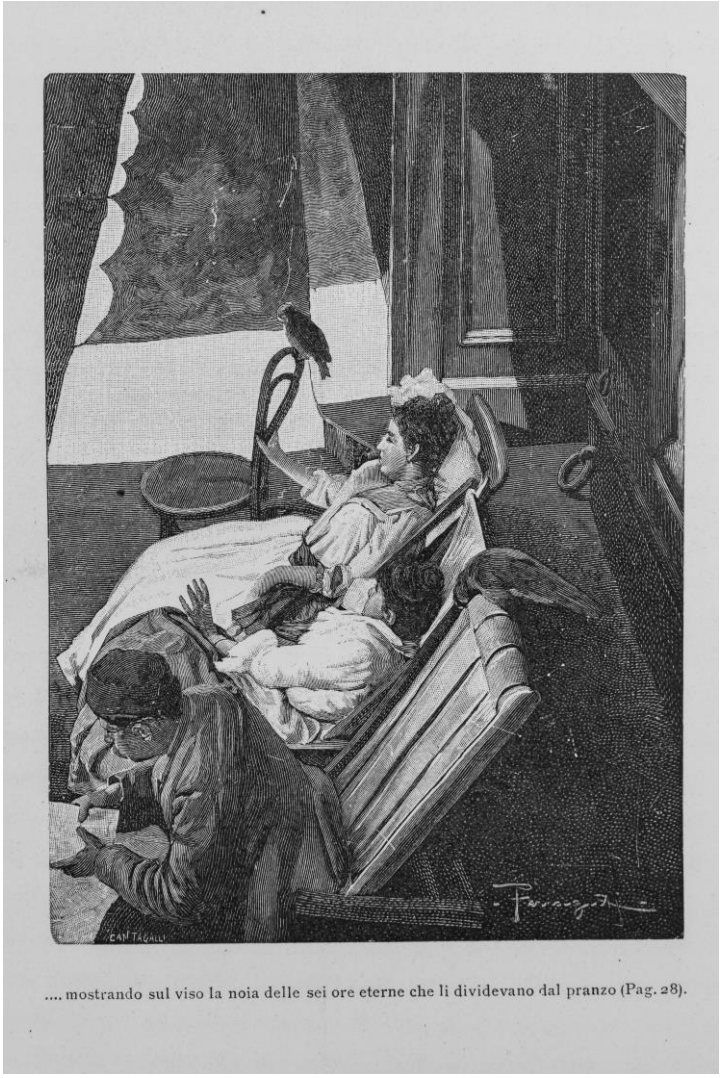

Fig.1. Arnaldo Ferraguti, First-class passengers.
For the 1890 deluxe edition of *Sull'Oceano.*[31]

[30] Banti, *La nazione*, 79–80.
[31] This, and all following images have been rephotographed from the 1890 deluxe edition of *Sull'Oceano* and are no longer covered by copyright.

Fig. 2. Arnaldo Ferraguti. Third-class passengers.
For the 1890 deluxe edition of *Sull'Oceano*.

Compromised by the severing of the ties of kinship, the nation suffers, wounded at several levels by the loss of its children and their disaffection. Repeatedly, De Amicis refers to emigration as a debilitating bleeding of the country and to the peasant diaspora as "sangue spillato dalle arterie della mia patria" ("blood spilled from the veins of my country").[32] In a particularly interesting simile that mirrors the representation of the poor as leeched by the elite quoted above, the homeland loses its blood to the steamer, compared to a parasitical sea monster biting into her shores: "Due ore dopo che era cominciato l'imbarco," writes De Amicis, "il grande piroscafo, sempre immobile, come un cetaceo enorme che addentasse la riva, succhiava ancora il sangue italiano" ("Two hours after boarding had started, the great ship, motionless, like a giant cetacean that had its fangs into

[32] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 154.

the shore, still went on sucking Italian blood").[33] The suffering inflicted upon the poor, therefore, translates into the suffering of the nation. And the nation is doubly wounded: while some of her children leave her with tears in their eyes, others, like the embittered old man who, upon embarking, shakes his fist at the shore and cries sarcastically, "Viva l'Italia!"[34] have exchanged hatred for love (fig. 3). If the cause of emigration is indifference to kinship, its consequences are both the sapping of the mother country's vitality and the weakening of her children's allegiance to her.

This disaffection from the nation invests even those among the travelers who had performed the military and cultural work of nation building. Above all those who have rejected the homeland rises the figure of the "garibaldino," a veteran of the campaigns led by Giuseppe Garibaldi in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1860 and in the Austrian territory of Trentino in 1866, who chooses self-imposed exile rather than bear the disappointment of post-unitary Italy. The leaders of the democratic fringe of the Risorgimento, Giuseppe Mazzini as well as Garibaldi, had a long list of critiques of the new Italy. They were dismayed that unification had been completed though international diplomacy and foreign concessions rather than popular uprising; that the Italian military, while unable to defeat foreign enemies, had been deployed in the South to contain the agrarian revolt for land redistribution known as "brigandage"; and that suffrage stayed limited to the propertied elite even after the electoral reform of 1882. As a member of parliament after 1874, Garibaldi asked, to no avail, for policies that would address the social question: universal suffrage, lay education, and public works around Rome to divert the Tiber and reclaim agricultural land.[35] Whether De Amicis met a garibaldino on board the *Galileo* or not, the disillusioned republican is a topos of post-unitary literature and stands for the disappointment felt by many that the finally united and independent Italy had failed to live up to their dreams of social as well of political reform.[36] The garibaldino's portrait of the new Italy is utterly negative. As he surveys the country "dall'alto al basso" ("high and low") from its ruling class to the workers, he sees only rottenness. Here again, not unlike in De Amicis' analysis of the causes of emigration, self-interest, that selfishness so antithetical to the bonds of nationhood, reigns supreme. The garibaldino accuses the ruling class of "una politica disposta sempre a leccar la mano al più potente" ("a politics willing always to lick the hand of the most powerful") the middle class of abasing the family into "una ditta senza scrupoli" ("an enterprise without scruples"), a shady business that would stoop to forgery to advance its members, and the peasants of "egoismo di belve addomesticate" ("egotism of tamed beasts").[37] His conclusion is that the "ideal" of the new nation is self-interest irrespective of the suffering of others: "Ciascuno vorrebbe veder più miserabili tutti, pur di campar lui meglio di prima" ("Each would like to see the others worse off so only they might get on better themselves").[38] In imitation of Garibaldi's retreat to the island of Caprera, the garibaldino joins the migrant exodus rather than witness the

[33] Ibid., 4.
[34] Ibid., 7.
[35] For Mazzini's evaluation of post unitary Italy, see Dennis Mack Smith, *Mazzini* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 212–13, 223–23; for Garibaldi's, see Lucy Riall's *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 348–87.
[36] See Emilio Franzina and Matteo Sanfilippo, "Garibaldi, i Garibaldi, i garibaldini e emigrazione," *Archivio storico dell'emigrazione italiana* 4, no. 1 (2008): 23–24.
[37] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 46.
[38] Ibid.

spectacle of universal corruption. Even De Amicis experiences emotional distance from the nation and downright shame at his national identity when the homeland's inability to sustain its children is paraded under the gaze of his fellow foreign travelers.[39] As the immigrants file to disembark, a procession of people of all ages united by visible signs of their common hunger and poverty, he acknowledges his embarrassment, "un senso di umiliazione che mi faceva sfuggire lo sguardo dei miei compagni di viaggio stranieri" ("a sense of humiliation that made me avoid the gaze of my foreign fellow travelers").[40] Thus, a feeling of national inferiority rather than pride fills the hearts both of the military man and of the writer.

Fig. 3. Arnaldo Ferraguti. An emigrant curses Italy upon departure.
For the 1890 deluxe edition of *Sull'Oceano*.

[39] See Silvana Patriarca, "A Patriotic Emotion: Shame and the Risorgimento," in *The Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy*, ed. Silvana Patriarca and Lucy Riall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 134–51.
[40] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 285.

The collective ethical crisis that has invested the nation and the danger it constitutes for its well-being is reflected in the prevalence of disease on board the *Galileo*. There is sickness among the working classes, especially malaria, but illness affects the privileged passengers in first class as well. Sick above all others is the "signorina di Mestre," a young woman travelling to Uruguay, whose emaciated body is visibly ravaged by tuberculosis, and whose character, though largely ignored by critics, is central to the narrative economy of *Sull'Oceano*.[41] Consumption, a fatal disease characterized by the gradual wasting of the organism's resources of flesh and blood, is a most appropriate signifier for the effects of emigration on the national body politic consumed by division and expatriation.[42] It is not coincidental that the "signorina" suffers "un trabocco di sangue" ("a severe hemorrhage"),[43] right at the eve of the *Galileo*'s arrival in South America. Blood and life leave her body just as the emigrants, consistently referred to as "sangue che fugge dalle arterie della patria" ("blood escaping the arteries of the fatherland")[44] in De Amicis' works on the peasant exodus from Italy, prepare to leave the steamer, thereby severing their last tie to the motherland. The parallelism between young woman and nation, moreover, extends beyond their common and debilitating bleeding to the fact that both fail to be mothers. Italy, unable to sustain her children, sees them leaving, looking for "un'altra madre al di là dell'oceano" ("another mother beyond the ocean").[45] The "signorina di Mestre," whose death is imminent, holds other women's children with a tenderness she will not be able to express towards her own: "contemplava il bimbo con il capo chino, mostrando negli occhi tutti i tesori di maternità che avrebbe portato nella tomba" ("with her head bent, she gazed at the baby, displaying in her eyes the wealth of maternal love she would take to her grave").[46] In the end, whether unable to sustain or to give life, both country and woman are without child. The barrenness of the infirm woman mirrors the loneliness of the deserted homeland.

While her disease is a metaphor for national malaise, the "signorina di Mestre" also plays a salvific role in the text. Tuberculosis, a disease fostered by industrialization and urbanization, rose to epidemic proportions in the nineteenth century and appeared frequently in coeval literature, where it marked characters distinguished by their purity, spirituality, and altruism. As a disorder that destroys the flesh, consumption was associated with detachment from earthly matters and a virtuous disinterest in the accumulation of

[41] On the whole, the figure of "signorina di Mestre" has been neglected by commentators. Caterina De Caprio ("De Amicis," 405), Francesco De Nicola (*Gli scrittori italiani e l'emigrazione*, 46–47), and Roberto Salsano ("Letteratura e simboli dell'emigrazione: *Sull'Oceano* di Edmondo De Amicis tra Ottocento e Novecento," *Esperienze letterarie* 40, no. 3 [2015]: 6) barely mention her, focusing on her spiritual nobility and generosity. Only Giorgio Bertone and Alberto Brambilla dedicate relatively more space to the analysis of this character. Bertone ("La patria," xxvii) notices her role as intermediary between first and third class, but Brambilla (*De Amicis*, 56–57), who builds upon this observation, highlights the material limits of her purely philanthropic response. Overall, critical attention has been superficial and dismissive. Rather than discounting her character as predictable, I attempt to unpack how her illness functions in *Sull'Oceano* both as metaphor of national crisis as instrument of national redemption.

[42] See Katherine Byrne, *Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2011), 45–68.

[43] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 250.

[44] Edmondo de Amicis, *In America* (Rome: Enrico Voghera Editore, 1897). Reprinted with preface by Maddalena Tirabassi (Vibo Valentia: Monteleone, 1993), 61. All references are to the 1993 edition.

[45] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 227.

[46] Ibid., 166.

wealth and the acquisition of goods.[47] In *Sull'Oceano,* the "signorina di Mestre" adheres to this characterization and stands in stark opposition to the self-centeredness identified by the author as the root cause of mass emigration and the nation's infirmity. Full of pain herself, she feels the pain of others. While other members of the upper classes have taken from the poor to the point of inducing them to economic exile, she offers empathy, "una pietà ardente per le miserie umane" ("a fervent pity for human hardship"), and "un amore violento per tutti quelli che soffrivano" ("a passionate love for all who were suffering").[48] To the rapacious logic of capitalist economy she opposes her own economy of the gift, bequeathing a range of offerings—her sympathetic presence by a sickbed, a sweet to a child, her ring to an especially virtuous young woman—upon third-class passengers regardless of regional provenance, thereby ignoring a traditional element of division among Italians (fig. 4).

Her ministry among the migrants offers a model of reformed, compassionate, elite behavior, but it would not suffice to heal the divided nation without her own physical affliction. Central to her apostolate of unity is the fact that compassion runs in more directions than just from the top down. Adding another layer to the play of parallel infirmities in *Sull'Oceano,* the wasting of her body resembles and surpasses that of the migrants. Her arm is "senza carne" ("fleshless"),[49] "un povero osso bianco che pareva uscito da un sepolcro" ("a wretched white bone that seemed out of a grave").[50] The peasants are also described as gaunt though, in their case, "le privazioni" ("deprivations") not sickness, "avevano strappato la carne" ("had stripped the flesh") from bodies that had at one time been solid.[51] Still, this common devastation of the body across class lines allows empathy to be reciprocal. Describing the emigrants' reverence towards her, so unlike the hostility demonstrated toward all other first class passengers, De Amicis writes, "al suo apparire anche i contadini più rozzi si scansavano, e tutti guardavano attentemente le vene azzurre di quel collo sottile, quelle mani gracili" ("as soon as they saw her, even the coarsest among the peasants made way for her, and they all gazed at the blue veins on her slender neck, at her thin hands").[52] "Non era," he adds, "rispetto per la signora, ma per la triste sentenza che le vedevano scritta sul viso" ("It was not so much respect for the lady but for the death sentence they could read on her face").[53] All eyes are on the signs of her illness, on the veins and bones that show through the skin, on a suffering so much like theirs in that the sufferer has no guilt of her own. In fact, after having lamented that life was too hard on too many among the poor for things to continue this way, the peasant from Veneto that more than any other functions as De Amicis' informant, adds that yet another example "che el mondo va mal" ("the world is awry") was the fatal illness of the signorina di Mestre. "[Q]uella povera *putela* inferma," he declares, "[*u*]*n anzolo compagno, ghe tocarà morir zovene*" ("That poor sick girl, a true guardian angel, she will have to die young").[54] The perceived parallelism between two injustices, that a saintly young woman should have an untreatable disease and that hard-working peasants should not earn enough

[47] Byrne, *Tuberculosis,* 1–11.
[48] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano,* 117.
[49] Ibid., 167.
[50] Ibid., 16.
[51] Ibid., 36.
[52] Ibid., 112.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 205.

to live, thus allows for the transformation of the negative, divisive cycle of exploitation and resentment into a positive, unifying one of mutual compassion. The solidarity among classes essential to well-being of the nation is thus re-established.

Fig. 4. Arnaldo Ferraguti. The "signorina di Mestre" offers her scarf to a third class passenger in the steamship's infirmary. For the 1890 deluxe edition of *Sull'Oceano*.

The disembarking of the "signorina di Mestre" in Montevideo, Uruguay, witnessed by the migrants assembled to bid her farewell, is the culminating ritual of national reconciliation. The young woman has suffered greatly during a storm and does not have the strength to walk. Having changed from her habitual green dress to a black one, she is propped on a chair and carried by two sailors who lower her on the boat that will take her ashore. The scene echoes the burial of a Piedmontese peasant she had attended during the transatlantic journey, whose corpse, like her feeble body, had to be borne on a plank by mariners (figs. 5 and 6). While the captain wishes her well, "Buon viaggio, signorina… guarisca!" ("Have a good journey, miss… be well!"), she is clearly dying and her vanishing in the distance, again a mirror image of the disappearing of the peasant's body in the depth

of the ocean's water, is a figure for her death.[55] Precisely because witnessing the young woman's departure is in fact participating in the funeral the migrants will not be able to attend, the scene has great emotional impact on the witnesses.[56] The murmur of greetings that rises from the third-class passengers expresses "tutto quello che le amarezze e i rancori di un'esistenza travagliata avevan lasciato di buono e d'affettuoso in quella moltitudine" ("all the virtue and the tenderness that the bitterness and grievances of a toilsome existence had left in that multitude").[57] To her, who cannot give anything any longer, the migrants offer their prayers—"Dio la benedica! Dio la faccia guarire!" ("God bless you! May God heal you!").[58] *Sull'Oceano* closes with a victory of interclass sympathy over bitterness and resentment, and of emotional cohesion over division. The "signorina di Mestre," significantly described here as "dolce come una sorella" ("sweet like a sister") dies to save the nation, a martyr after the end of armed conflict, to restore the relationship of kinship compromised by greed.[59]

Such is the power of the final scene, that it has a salvific effect, or at least a silencing one, on the two most discordant voices in the narrative, the garibaldino who leaves post-unitary Italy in self-imposed exile out of contempt, and the old migrant who raises his fist to curse the homeland as the *Galileo* leaves the Italian shore. Both characters feature prominently as disruptive presences in previous episodes in the text which, like the departure/funeral of the "signorina di Mestre," had the potential to produce emotional cohesion, namely, the funeral of a Piedmontese peasant who is travelling to join his son in Argentina but dies of pneumonia during the journey and the baptism of the "piccolo Galileo," named after the ship, the one child born during the transatlantic crossing. The garibaldino stays stoic, unmoved by either the grief of an unfulfilled dream of family reunification or the joy of the new parents. The old migrant instead foments class antagonism by crying that the poor are expendable, thrown overboard to feed the fish—"La carne dei poveri si butta ai pesci" ("the flesh of the poor is flung to the fish")[60] —or that the child everybody fusses around will be worked to death nonetheless—"Oggi lo tengono a battesimo e quando sarà grande lo faranno crepare di fame" ("Today they baptize him, but when he is grown they'll starve him").[61] The final scene of national reconciliation, however, is different: the old migrant is nowhere to be seen, his dissonant voice silent, and the previously impassive garibaldino, finally redeemed, bursts into tears: "Era il pianto finalmente! Era forse la bontà, l'amore, la patria, la pietà delle miserie umane . . . che rientravano impetuosamente nel suo largo petto di ferro per il vano che v'aveva aperto quella piccola mano di moribonda" ("Tears came at last! Perhaps it was kindness, love, patriotism, pity for human misfortune . . . rushing back into his hardened breast through the narrow crack opened by a dying woman's frail hand").[62] Thus, the working-class revolutionary is hushed and the middle-class cynic rehabilitated by the restorative force of

[55] Ibid., 291.
[56] Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 1–10.
[57] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 292.
[58] Ibid., 292.
[59] Ibid., 291.
[60] Ibid., 201.
[61] Ibid., 227.
[62] Ibid., 292.

an innocent's sacrificial death.[63] At last, empathy for others and love of country are universal, on surface at least.

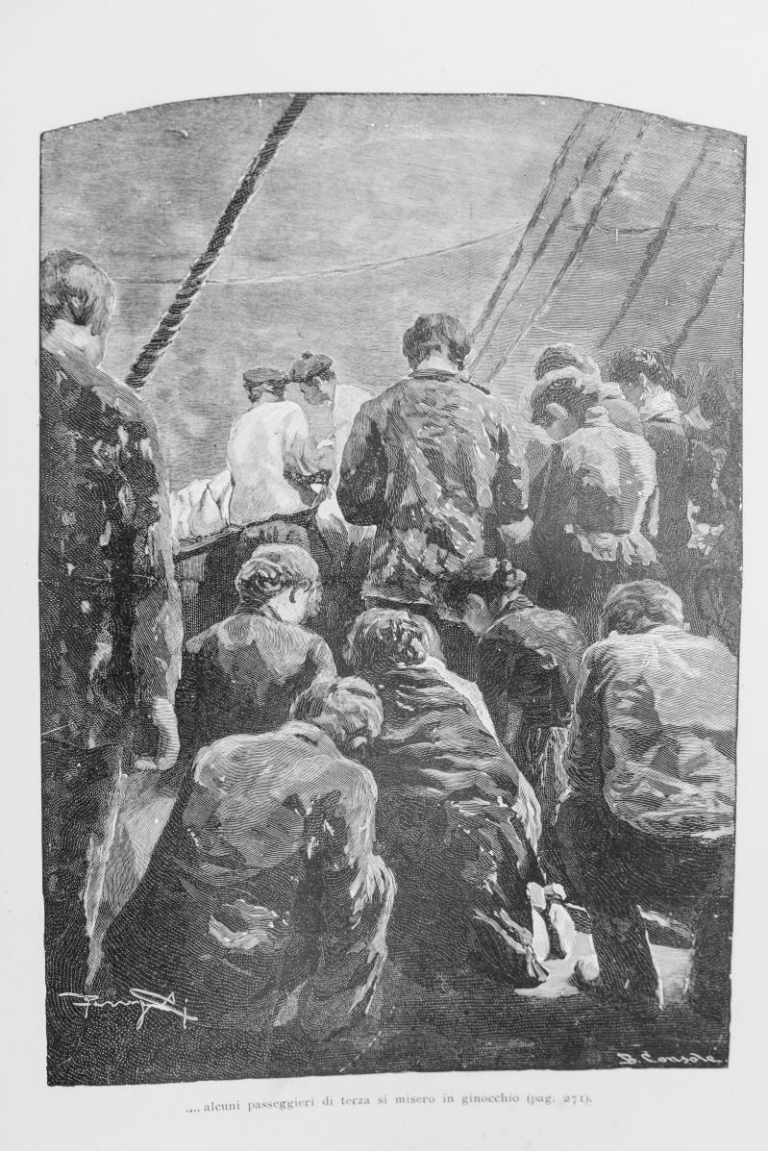

Fig. 5. Arnaldo Ferraguti. A funeral on board the Galileo.
For the 1890 deluxe edition of *Sull'Oceano*.

[63] It is not the purpose of this essay to take a stand on whether *Sull'Oceano* anticipates *Primo maggio*, De Amicis' socialist novel, or instead offers a purely philanthropic solution, tied to middle-class benevolence rather than the elevation of the working class. However, I implicitly intervene in the discussion by noticing the multidirectional circulation of empathy, which refutes the philanthropic reading. My attention to the negative characterization of the old revolutionary, the one silenced but unredeemed character, similarly refutes a proto-socialist reading. Inspired by the scholarship on the cultural work of sentimental texts, I read De Amicis as placing collective emotional transformation at the center of his project of national renewal.

Fig. 6. Arnaldo Ferraguti. The disembarking of the "signorina di Mestre." For the 1890 deluxe edition of *Sull'Oceano*.

While *Sull'Oceano* ends with this vision of national rehabilitation through the multidirectional cycle of affect initiated by reformed elite behavior, it is by no means a triumphant narrative. The emigrants, whether devoted to the homeland or not, resentful or compassionate, are still, in the image repeatedly used by De Amicis, blood leaving the national organism. The counterpart of the garibaldino's emotional rebirth is the imminent death of the "signorina di Mestre," martyr for but also figure of the homeland, her body drained of blood like the nation's. In fact, the balance of life and deaths on board the *Galileo* is skewed towards the latter. For one healthy birth, that of the "piccolo Galileo" mentioned above, there is one miscarriage and the intimation of a second one. A pregnant woman is thrown off her berth by the violent rolling of the steamer in rough seas and loses her child. Another faints in front of De Amicis, "arrovesciando la faccia bianca tra le braccia delle vicine" ("her ashen face falling amidst the outstretched arms of the women near her"),[64] and her neighbors fear she may have died. Neither deaths in childbirth nor miscarriages are good omens for the emigrants' quest to find "un'altra madre al di là dell'oceano" ("a new mother beyond the ocean"), the main topic of De Amicis' lecture, "I nostri contadini in America," which records his impression of the Italian settlement in Argentina as he experienced it in his two-month stay in the country.[65] Indeed, on board the *Galileo*, burials and baptisms alike are haunted by their taking place in the middle of the ocean, in locations identified only by their coordinates and in a space that cannot be revisited, devoid of cherished memories from the past. It is precisely this absence of land

[64] Ibid., 226.
[65] Ibid., 227.

made sacred by ties with history and ancestry that compromises the Italian settlement in Argentina as described by de Amicis in his lecture.

At first sight, De Amicis finds an encouraging reality of prosperity and continued allegiance to the country of origin. The immigrants, most of them from the Northern Italian region of Piedmont, which until World War I sent the largest percentage of Italian emigrants to Argentina,[66] are concentrated in the state of Sante Fé, significantly boot shaped like the Italian peninsula, where they have founded a "piccola Italia americana" ("small American Italy").[67] Faces, clothing, and especially sounds are the same in San Carlos, the largest of the Italian settlements, as in Piedmont. De Amicis, born in Oneglia but raised in Cuneo, recognizes "la voce della patria" ("the voice of the homeland"),[68] the dialects of Turin, Alessandria, and Pinerolo, which are not only retained, but spread to the surrounding population, including the indios. Yet, the immigrants have changed, and for the better. Whereas on board the *Galileo*, amidst the traveling migrants, the author had been scorned as a representative of exploitative elite, in the Argentinian plains he is a conational, and the colonists welcome him as "un figliolo della loro grande madre lontana" ("a son of their great and distant mother").[69] There is no vestige of the divisive class conflict that had marred national life in the homeland. In moving from the abject poverty at arrival to the relative wealth of the more established colonists, moreover, the Italian settlers have also expanded the range of their interests. They now participate in the administration of the "colonias," as the immigrant outposts were called, and are concerned with the building of railroads and the education of their children. Most importantly, they are eager to learn about Italy. They inquire about its reputation among nations. "E così—dica un po'—fra di noi—quest'Italia come va? è rispettata? è forte, è in buone mani?" ("So, please tell us—in confidence—how is Italy doing? Is it respected? Strong? Well-governed?") they ask their visitor.[70] Thousands of miles removed from their country of origin, they have become invested, like the patriots who fought to free Italy from foreign domination, with national honor. Significantly, they refer to each other as "*patriotti*,"[71] a noun that characterizes them both as compatriots, those who being from the same country are bound by ties of mutual support, and patriots, or lovers of country. Love of country is evident everywhere, in the ubiquitous Italian flag and in the names of the settlements—Garibaldi, Cavour, Nuova Torino, Bell'Italia—inspired by the heroes and places of the Risorgimento (fig. 7). De Amicis acknowledges his surprise and declares, "Io non riconoscevo più in loro i contadini piemontesi. È una trasformazione stupefacente" ("I could not recognize in them the peasants of Piedmont. They had undergone an astonishing transformation").[72] They are no longer hungry, or self-centered, or resentful. Instead, De Amicis finds in them "un sentimento più vivo di fratellanza in quella grande lotta di pochi contro l'immensa natura" ("a stronger feeling of brotherhood in the struggle of the few against a boundless nature") [73] e "il sentimento della patria […] vivificato in loro dopo che

[66] See Maddalena Tirabassi, *I motori della memoria: Le piemontesi in Argentina* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2010), 35.
[67] De Amicis, "I nostri contadini in America," in *In America*, 38.
[68] Ibid., 43.
[69] Ibid., 40.
[70] Ibid., 48.
[71] Ibid., 40.
[72] Ibid., 48.
[73] Ibid., 51.

per loro la patria non è che una memoria della giovinezza" ("patriotism [. . .] revitalized now that the homeland is only a memory of youth").[74] It is as if the economic emancipation and civic and political education of the masses, which had failed to take place in post-unitary Italy, has finally occurred across the Atlantic, in the absence of a parasitical elite.

Fig. 7. Gino De Bini. The Italian flag on a cart driven by Italian colonists in Argentina. Illustration by for Edmondo De Amicis' "I nostri contadini in America," in *In America* (1897).

And yet, when De Amicis asks the Italian colonists how they fare in the new land, they have a litany of complaints. They mention conflict among warring political factions, which distracts the government from the administration of the country and the building of infrastructure. They lament the recurring financial crises, which put their profits at risk. Most important in this context, however, is the colonists' grievance that in cases of disputes with native Argentinians, local courts unfairly side with the latter, an indication of the de facto second-class status of the Italian immigrant community in Argentina.[75] De Amicis acutely observes that while immigrants are needed to populate the country, and the government actively recruits them, the local population resents the deluge of foreigners

[74] Ibid., 48–49.

[75] Ferdinando Devoto mentions the arbitrariness of the local justice system in his synthesis of Italian emigration to Argentina in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, vol. 2, 30.

and feels "un vago timore d'essere soverchiato dalla popolazione immigrante" ("an indefinite fear of being overrun by immigrants").[76] Indeed, about half a million Italians emigrated to Argentina in the decade between 1880 and 1890, or sixty percent of the total immigrant population. At that time, Buenos Aires, the capital, was half foreign-born and one-third Italian born, with whole neighborhoods inhabited by emigrants from the same Italian region who continued to speak their home dialects, as in the Piedmontese settlement visited by De Amicis.[77] Native Argentinians feared the immigrants were transforming their country rather than integrating into Argentine society. They reacted with hostility, expressed, for instance, in naturalist fiction like Eugenio Cambacéres *En la sangre* (1887, In Blood), where a newly rich villain of Italian origin schemes to infiltrate the Argentinian elite through marriage, which would compromise its racial purity.[78] De Amicis captures this antagonism against Italians in the most famous of the narratives included in *Cuore*, "Dagli Appennini alle Ande," in the exchange between the young protagonist, Marco, and an Argentinian whom he asks for help. To his plea, "Ma io, io son solo! Io ho bisogno!" ("But I, I am alone! I am in need!"), the other angrily replies, "Eh! Andiamo […] non ce n'è ancora abbastanza della gramigna del tuo paese a Rosario! Vattene un po' a mendicare in Italia" ("Eh! Come now, [. . .] as if there were not plenty of weeds from your country in Rosario already! Be off, and do your begging in Italy").[79] In the sentence that chases Marco away, Italians are compared to a fast spreading weed, undesirable and infestive, capable of contaminating and smothering the native element.

The possessive "tuo" in "gramigna del tuo paese" distances the Argentinian man and the Italian youth. The Argentinian sets himself apart from and above people "del tuo paese"—the immigrants—and implies at the same time that Marco and his fellow Italians do not belong to his country—Argentina. In "I nostri contadini in America," the marginality of the Italian community and its exclusion from the status of full citizenship is discussed explicitly. While the Argentinian constitution granted foreign immigrants the same civil rights as native-born citizens, the Italians are conscious of their alterity: "sentono qualcosa dintorno e sopra di sè che dice loro continuamente: Voi non siete in casa vostra" ("They feel something around and above them that tells them again and again: This is not your home").[80] "Non essere a casa propria" means not having found a homeland. Argentina, even if the emigrants have succeeded in buying parcels of its plains, still belongs to the native-born Argentinians, "i nostri ospiti" ("our hosts") as the colonists call them, hosts in whose house the Italian peasants are barely tolerated guests.[81] "Patria" is not just a physical territory, the land that the colonists now own, but territory endowed with historical memories that bind geographical space and community. The South American plains cannot be this emotionally charged space for first generation Italian colonists, who have received land from those who conquered it but did not fight for it. Only the Argentinian, "signore primo della sua terra […] ch'egli conquistò e […] concede" ("the first master of this land […] which he conquered and […] grants"), the Italians

[76] De Amicis, "I nostri contadini in America," 52.
[77] See Baily, *Immigrants in the Land of Promise*, 54–59.
[78] See Vanni Blengino, "Nella letteratura argentina," in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, vol. 2, 648.
[79] Edmondo de Amicis, *Cuore: Libro per i ragazzi* (Milan: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1886). Reprinted with preface by Luciano Tamburini (Turin: Einaudi, 1974), 298. All references are to the 1974 edition.
[80] De Amicis, "I nostri contadini in America," 53.
[81] Ibid., 55.

acknowledge, can claim the title of "figli[o] del paese" ("son of the country").[82] For first generation Italian immigrant in Argentina, the search for the mother country remains unfulfilled.

Precisely this elusiveness of the homeland is dramatized in "Dagli Appennini alle Ande," which follows the young protagonist, Marco, as he embarks on a transoceanic crossing and then walks across half a continent to find his emigrant mother, who had stopped sending news of herself to the family left behind in Genoa. He does find her, on her deathbed, on the very last page, just in time to agree to the operation that will save her life. The focus of the story, however, is not about the reunion between loving son and a mother who would die without such love, yet another image of the patria ailing because deprived of her children, but rather about the search for the mother (fig. 8). Marco moves from town to town, from Buenos Aires to Rosario, Cordóba, Santiago del'Estero, and Tucumán, always to be told the mother is elsewhere. Until the end, she is tantalizingly present and absent at the same time. And while the Italian emigrants consistently assist Marco, the Argentinians alternate between compassion and derision or even outright brutality, almost as if the story were an allegory of the schizophrenic attitude towards Italian immigrants, actively recruited to colonize the interior plains but also regarded with apprehension and marginalized. Having achieved solidarity among themselves, the Italians now face interethnic tension. In effect, they have exchanged a hierarchy based on class for one based on ethnicity. And if the Argentinians refuse to accept them as kin, then Argentina cannot be the common mother.

The sense of extraneity lamented by the men in the Italian community is magnified in the experience of the women, whom De Amicis finds in their "piccole case rustiche sparse per la campagna" ("small unadorned houses scattered about the countryside"), intent on domestic tasks while the men work in the field outside.[83] De Amicis describes them fixed in nostalgia, in rooms decorated with pictures of family members left behind, portraits of Garibaldi and Vittorio Emanuele, and images of Italy from old illustrated magazines. "[I] nostri pensieri, le nostre affezioni son sempre là, dove abbiamo lasciato i nostri morti" ("Our thoughts, our affection are there, where left our dead"), they tell him.[84] The Italian flags they display in front of their solitary small homes, mended with care when the wind tears them, are not enough to recreate the mother country left behind. To refer once more to Banti's definition of the nation as "comunità parentale allargata" ("extended familial community"), entailing horizontal bonds of kinship with contemporaries and longitudinal ones with progenitors, the women cannot find a homeland in a space not sacralized by the burial of past generations.[85] At least in one case reported by De Amicis, homesickness becomes so great to turn into an illness the women call "mal del paese," a longing for the place of origin so great to become an infirmity.[86] De Amicis refers to the phrase as "un poema sulla nostalgia" ("epic poem on nostalgia"), thereby identifying Italy, the country left behind, as the source of the debilitating yearning. [87] However, "paese" is a generic term for "country," and could also indicate Argentina as the source of the illness. In the latter

[82] Ibid., 52.
[83] Ibid., 55.
[84] Ibid., 55.
[85] Banti, *La nazione*, 69.
[86] De Amicis, "I nostri contadini," 55.
[87] Ibid., 55.

case, Argentina fails to be a nurturing mother for Italian women, impairing them rather than sustaining them, and this in spite of the economic gains that have accompanied migration. On the contrary, the women actually lament the excessive focus on material concerns of the transplanted Italian community. "*Trigo, plata plata, trigo*," complains one of them, "grano denaro, denaro, grano—e non si parla mai d'altro; che Dio ci perdoni!" ("Wheat, money, money, wheat—and no one ever speaks of anything else; may God forgive us!").[88] They would prefer to barely survive in Piedmont than to prosper in Argentina. In their words, "meglio un pezzo di pane in Piemonte che essere signori qua!" ("better a piece of bread in Piedmont than to be lords here!").[89] Better the land of affection—"il villaggio, quell'angolo di cimitero, quella valle, quelle montagne" ("the village, that corner in the graveyard, that valley, those mountains"), rich with the emotional nourishment of ties of proximity, ancestry and tradition, than the plains owned but to which they have no attachment.[90]

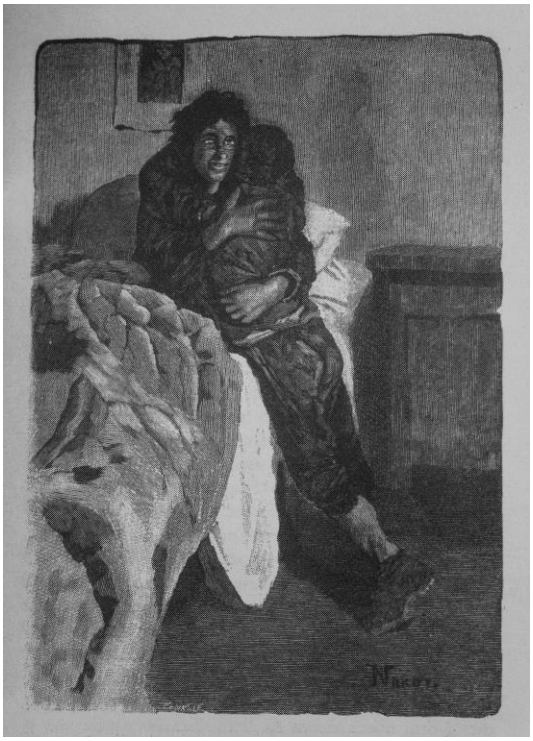

Fig. 8. E. Nardi. Marco's reunion with his mother in "Dagli Appennini alle Ande." Illustration by for the 1892 edition of *Cuore.*

De Amicis accurately describes the Italian emigrant experience as it pertains to gender. While the men's encounter with ethnic prejudice is tempered by their economic success, the women, extraneous to the commercial sphere, feel the pangs of unabated loss. Regardless, the desire to return to Italy was widespread among the colonists. In the 1880s, in the decade of De Amicis' journey, about twenty-six percent of the Italian migrants to

[88] Ibid., 56.
[89] Ibid., 55.
[90] Ibid., 56.

Argentina travelled back to Italy, either to visit or with the intent to stay.[91] Yet, according to De Amicis, returning is destined to be a failing project. Once in Italy, among other Italians, the former emigrants find that the wealth they have accumulated not sufficient to distinguish them in the eyes of the cultural and economic elite from those of their class who never left. "Laggiù," that is, in Argentina, "come coltivatori della terra, abitatori di una parte di mondo rifatta da loro, non avevano alcuna classe di cittadini immediatamente sovrapposta alla propria" ("There, as farmers, dwellers of a corner of the world they had transformed, they did not have anybody directly above them").[92] In Italy, instead "si risentono daccapo sulle spalle tutto l'edifizio gerarchico della società antica" ("they feel the burden of ancient hierarchies all over again").[93] Across the Atlantic, at least in the agricultural immigrants enclaves of the hinterland, established immigrants had status whereas in Italy they have none. Class of origin rather than country of origin placed them again "tra gli ultimi" ("among the lowest"), at the bottom of the social hierarchy.[94] Inevitably, many crossed the ocean again, never to return. De Amicis insists that only those emigrants who have never gone back to Italy express the desire for a permanent return, but not those who had gone back for brief periods and experienced anew the weight of social stratification. While he is correct about the returned emigrants' impatience with old habits of deference in their communities of origin and the traditional elite's intolerance of the egalitarian ambitions of the returners, De Amicis lacks the historical perspective necessary to understand the circular nature of Italian emigration, which, especially as transatlantic crossing became faster and cheaper, did allow for repeat, temporary stays abroad determined by the timing of seasonal work in different hemispheres.[95] Regardless of historical accuracy, his first-generation emigrants are doomed to have no homeland. They are like the infant delivered during the crossing on the Galileo, born in a no man's land identified only by latitude and longitude. Like him, they find themselves "a mezza strada fra la patria perduta e una terra ignota" ("midway between their lost homeland and an unmapped territory"), children of neither.[96]

As in *Sull'Oceano*, however, De Amicis conjures up a narrative solution to the plight of the dislocated Italian migrant, rejected by both country of origin and country of destination. At the very end of "I nostri contadini in America," he foresees a day when, in a complete reversal of the nativist prejudice he had described, the Argentinians would recognize the role played by the Italian agricultural workers in the building of their country and "la storia dell'America pagherà solennemente il debito di gratitudine dell'opera gigantesca dei coloni italiani [...] che allargano con l'aratro i confini del mondo civile" ("American history will solemnly pay the debt of gratitude owed for the gigantic work of

[91] Baily, *Immigrants in the Land of Promise*, 59. Baily's data is confirmed by Patrizia Audenino and Maddalena Tirabassi, *Migrazioni italiane. Storia e storie dall'Ancien régime a oggi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008), 67. Audenino and Tirabassi write that return migration for Italian immigrants diminished from as high as fifty percent to twenty-one percent by the end of the 1880s, when the community started experiencing a higher degree of integration in Argentinian society.
[92] De Amicis, "I nostri contadini in American," 54.
[93] Ibid., 54.
[94] Ibid.
[95] On social tension between traditional elites and returned emigrants as well cyclical migratory patterns, see Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*, 94–99.
[96] De Amicis, *Sull'Oceano*, 169.

the Italian colonists […] who with the plow widened the borders of the civilized world").[97] This inclusion of the Italians in the history of Argentina on an equal footing with the native-born population, in turn, leads him to advocate for a new policy towards emigration. If Italy, the country of origin, wants to boast of the achievements of the Italian peasants—"il diritto d'andarne altera" ("license to be proud")—it needs to play an active role in the protection of emigrants "dagli abusi scellerati dei trafficanti della miseria" ("from the abominable abuses of the merchants of misery") rather than create impediments to their departure.[98] The recommendation that the Italian state should safeguard rather than control emigration, which De Amicis voices over a decade earlier than when the Legge Luzzati of 1901 provided assistance to migrants from departure to settlement, is vital in this context because it returns to the country of origin the role of protective mother figure which the immigrant exodus, itself prompted by the nation's failure to support its children, had compromised.[99] In these final lines, therefore, all the tensions evoked by De Amicis' American writings are resolved: Argentina includes the Italians in the annals of its history, emigration metamorphoses from a wound in the national body into a source of international prestige, and Italy resumes its mothering role towards its children across the ocean. Even class tension, the prime cause of the emigrant exodus and impediment to their return, is resolved in a final emotional appeal. De Amicis asks his audience, undoubtedly all middle class, to join him in saluting the Italian peasants abroad. "Io mando un saluto a questi poveri lavoratori lontani" ("I send a greeting to these unfortunate workers far away"), he writes. "Ripercosso dai vostri cuori passerà l'oceano, rimonterà il grande fiume, e giungerà fino alle loro capanne, dove sarà accolto certamente con lo stesso affetto con cui fu mandato" ("Repeated in your hearts, it will cross the ocean, go up the big river, and reach their huts, where it will be received with the same warmth with which it was sent").[100] Compared to the scene of the disembarkation of the "signorina di Mestre" in *Sull'Oceano*, the direction of the circulation of affect is inversed here, from middle class audience to migrants abroad rather than from migrants to elite passenger, but the cohesive effect is identical. The peasants had already reconciled with the elite, and now the elite reconciles with the peasants—at least from afar.

While *Sull'Oceano* had focused on national class division and the possibility of the migrants' disaffection from the nation, "I nostri contadini" superimposes international ethnic conflict on class division and concentrates on the absence of the nation in spite of the migrants' renewed affection. Both texts offer an emotional solution to the ruptures they highlight. In the first one, interclass empathy ensures the allegiance of the migrants to the nation. In the latter, empathy has to travel across more axes, from the Argentinians to the Italians and from the ruling class in Italy to the migrants across the Atlantic. Not surprisingly, the solution is delayed to the future. Should the circulation of affect be successful, however, the migrants would be both "nostri" ("ours"), children of the land they left behind, and "figli del paese" ("children of the country") in Argentina. Instead of searching for a mother, they would have found two.

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[97] De Amicis, "I nostri contadini in America," 61.
[98] Ibid.
[99] The Legge Luzzati created a Commissariato generale dell'emigrazione which protected emigrants by providing consular reports on the job market at destination, establishing and enforcing space and hygiene measures during the transatlantic crossing, and facilitating remittances from abroad. See Audenino and Tirabassi, *Migrazioni italiane*, 41.
[100] De Amicis, "I nostri contadini in America," 61.