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The Italian Influence on Robert Ferro

Robert Ferro is, by his own definition, a gay writer.¹ His contributions to gay literature of the post Stonewall and early AIDS years are very well documented in Robert Bergman’s book *The Violet Hour: The Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture*. But Robert Ferro is also an Italian-American author. Although many have read his novels from a gay perspective, Ferro’s works have been deeply influenced by his Italian heritage.² In this paper I will examine three of Robert Ferro’s novels: *The Family of Max Desir* (1983), *The Blue Star* (1985) and *Second Son* (1988). In all three the Italian elements are essential: through his characters, Ferro relives his frequent trips to Italy, and in *The Family of Max Desir* and in *Second Son*, the main characters and their families closely resemble Ferro’s Italian-American family.

Robert Ferro was born in New Jersey in 1941, from an Italian-American family originating from the Italian regions of Calabria and Sicily. In 1962, after graduating from Rutgers University, Ferro moved to Florence to focus on his writing. He remained there until 1965, when he started graduate school at the University of Iowa.³ His three years in Italy had a deep impact on Ferro and on his writing. As fellow author Felice Picano recounts: “Robert would write several times about this brief era of efflorescence and of his life amid the far more evolved personalities of the tiny, family-like Florentine pensione, testimony to how climacteric it had been to his life and thought” (“Robert Ferro” 115).⁴

¹“Ferro is insistent that he be regarded as a ‘gay writer.’ ‘I am proud of that,’ he wants us to know” (Bergman, *The Violet Hour* 230).
²Few studies focus on Robert Ferro, other than Robert Bergman’s. Furthermore, whenever Robert Ferro is mentioned in other authors’ works, his name is mainly associated with gay literature. A few examples are John M. Clum’s “The Time before the War: AIDS, Memory and Desire” (1990) and Joseph Dewey’s “Robert Ferro” (1993).
³Ferro’s biographical information was taken from *Loss within Loss* and *The Violet Hour*, among the works cited.
⁴Robert’s connection with Italy remained so strong that he and his partner Michael Grumley, whom he met in graduate school, continued to spend spring and summer in Italy for several years.

*Voices in Italian Americana* Vol. 24, Nos. 1 & 2 (2013)
Ferro’s novels are heavily autobiographical. The Family of Max Desir and Second Son focus on gay Italian-American young men from the upper middle class, who travel to Italy. In Italy Max, the main character of The Family of Max Desir, discovers his ethnic roots, explores his sexuality and later falls in love. Mark, the protagonist of Second Son, rediscovers in Italy a zest for life, which he had lost when he was diagnosed with AIDS, and, just like Max, finds love. Ferro’s novel The Blue Star concerns the life of a young gay American, Peter, whose life journey begins in a Florentine pensione. In Florence, Peter finds friendship and love, in the name of a beautiful Italian man named Lorenzo. Because Lorenzo is married with children and Peter does not want to live a life in the shadows, he finally returns to the United States, alone.

Family plays a major role in The Family of Max Desir and in Second Son, as the titles of the novels suggest. What brings Max back to the United States after his long sojourn in Italy is his family, to whom he is very much attached. Second Son’s Mark is also very close to his family, and throughout his life he struggles to be recognized by his father, who seems to neglect him because he is only the gay, second son. Both Max and Mark come from affluent Italian-American families. Like most immigrants, Max’s and Mark’s fathers do not come from families with money, but they have worked very hard all of their lives to attain a wealthy financial situation. They even changed their names (from Desiderio to Desir and from Giorgio Valeriano to George Valerian) to sound more American and to better fit into the American upper middle class. This is the classic first-generation born reaction: to become as American as possible, which, in addition to financial stability, includes name change.

Max and Mark, on the contrary, are constantly struggling financially, the former as a writer and the latter as a gardener, and suffer from an inferiority complex in relation to their successful fathers. Max “hated the disparity in their lives” (Ferro, The Family of Max Desir 167). And during an argument with his father, who wants to help him pay his bills, Max counters: “It was not my intention to punish you by being poor” (209). While in Second Son, we are told that: “Gardening was of course not what Mr Valerian had in mind; to him it seemed an excuse to live an exotic, irresponsible life abroad. It was menial” (Ferro, Second Son 67). Although in Ferro’s real life his father gave him a monthly allowance so that he could just focus on his writing, Robert Bergman tells us that the: “allowance was never enough [...] and conflicts over money find their way into Ferro’s highly autobiographical novels” (The Violet Hour 4).

It is interesting to note that Peter Conrad, the protagonist of The Blue Star, shares the same name as the main character of Ferro’s first novel, The Others (1977). However, the two characters are not the same person: Peter Conrad from The Others is 30 years old in 1936, when the story takes place (cf. p. 1) and he is a designer (cf. p. 8) while Peter Conrad from The Blue Star is 21 years old in 1963, when the story begins (cf. p. 3) and he is a writer (cf. p. 5).
In both *The Family of Max Desir* and in *Second Son*, Max's and Mark's homosexuality only increases tensions with their fathers, whose Catholicism permeates their views and creates even more conflicts with their sons. As Bergman puts it, *The Family of Max Desir* is "a highly autobiographical novel pervaded by the Ferro's family's Italian Catholicism" (*The Violet Hour* 75). In *Second Son*, the third person narrator informs us that: "Mr Valerian saw homosexuality in religious terms — as a sin — which then threatened the great buttress of his own defense system: Religion" (Ferro 21). Both fathers love their sons very much, despite their differences and their religious beliefs, but they struggle to understand their sons' homosexuality. In *The Family of Max Desir*, one of the most heated discussions concerns Max's father's fear that everyone will discover that his son is gay. The altercation begins when Max's niece makes a tapestry with the family tree on it, and donates it to Max's parents. After Max hangs it on the wall, his father demands that Max's lover's name be removed from the tapestry. "I don't want everybody asking me who Nick Flynn is, he said. It's my house. It's my wall. I don't want *My son is a homosexual written on it*" (Ferro 116). Max is deeply hurt, and, if Nick's name is erased, threatens to be no longer a part of the family. Instead in *Second Son*, the most bitter father-son clash concerns Mark's father's failure in being by Mark's side through the last stages of his life, when he has to deal with the worsening symptoms of AIDS. Mark attributes his father's carelessness to his homosexuality: "I can't even get your attention with a fatal disease" (Ferro 180). And later: "What happened to your big speech about us going through this together? I haven't seen or heard from you in two months" (Ferro 180). Throughout the two novels though, Mr. Desir and Mr. Valerian reassure Max and Mark that their love for them is unconditional. After Max's coming out, his father tells him: "No matter what, you're my son" (Ferro, *The Family of Max Desir* 70). And in *Second Son*, Mr. Valerian's reassurance to Mark of his love for him is even more poignant due to Mark's illness and the fear that he would not be around for very long:

Mark [...] you must believe me. I love you. You're my son. There's not a day goes by that I don't think about you and worry about you. You're my first priority. And if I say things I don't mean it's because I'm confused and frightened and worried, about you, about me. About all of this.... (Ferro 203)

Despite their disagreements, Max's and Mark's families try to integrate their gay sons into their family lives. Bergman, who thoroughly analyzed the lives and works of other gay writers of the Eighties, says that back

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6Throughout the novel, Robert Ferro never calls Mark's disease by its name; he refers to it as "the disease" (cf. p. 54), "It" (cf. p. 69) or "the Plague" (cf. p. 188).
then these attempts of inclusion were not very common in American gay novels and that these were examples of "how the close-knit Italian family differs from Anglo-Saxon families" (Bergman, "Alternative Service" 80).

If the relationship between fathers and sons is turbulent and never totally softens up, the relationship between Max, Mark, and their mothers is different. Ferro was very close to his mother and was devastated when she passed away after a long battle with cancer. This autobiographical element appears in both *The Family of Max Desir*, where Max's mother is diagnosed with cancer, and in *Second Son*, where Mark's mother recently passed away after a long disease. In *The Family of Max Desir* Max's relationship with his mother is so strong that it continues beyond her death. For example, Max talks to her at the cemetery: "he realized that his relationship to his mother had not changed. He had only to speak to her aloud at the grave" (Ferro 157). Max's mom is continuously on his mind and is present even in his most intimate moments, to the point that Max occasionally sees her when he is about to climax: "sometimes, on the point of coming, the floor opened and the image of his mother flew up at him" (178). In *Second Son*, Mark also dreams often of his mother. In both cases, the mothers' recurrent presence in their sons' dreams shows what an important figure she was in their lives; furthermore, for Mark, who is in the last stage of his life, having his mother by his side, albeit only in his dreams, makes him feel less alone and gives him hope to see her again, in the afterlife.

In both novels the mother has a powerful role as the mediator between father and son. One conversation that Max has with his mother right after his coming out is particularly pertinent:

> It's all right, Max, she said. As long as you're happy and hurt no one. But your father... he simply hates it.
> What's going to happen? he asked.
> Who knows? You must try not to let him upset you, try not to get angry.
> He says things that he doesn't mean.
> Like what? He asked.
> You name it.... Oh God. Oh Max! Her eyes filled up but did no spill over.
> He made every effort to gauge the precise calibration of her suffering, so that he could hate or excuse himself for it. It appeared that her deepest intention was to protect both him and his father as once. (Ferro, *The Family of Max Desir* 78)

Even though being the family's peacemaker is an overwhelming task, Max's mother does not give up her role. In the most typical Italian tradition, the mother is the person who keeps the family together, and Max and Mark's mothers are no exception. In *Second Son*, Mark thinks that his mother had tried so hard to bring her husband and her son together, that
she "had given her life as part of this prolonged struggle" (Ferro 18). Unfortunately, despite her sacrifice, Mark and his father will continue to have a tumultuous relationship even after her death.

The similarities between the families described in the novels, particularly in *The Family of Max Desir*, and Ferro's actual family are so evident that Bergman tells us that when he visited Ferro's sisters, they "introduced themselves as the characters in his book" (Bergman, *The Violet Hour* 231). And after *The Family of Max Desir* was released, Ferro wrote a letter to his father that shows how the fictional tensions between father and son were based on Robert Ferro's difficult relationship with his own father: "I would like you to know it was never my intention to hurt you with the book. It was not written as an act of vengeance, as I have heard that you call it" (Bergman, *The Violet Hour* 231).

Two of Ferro's novels, *The Family of Max Desir* and *The Blue Star*, were clearly influenced by Ferro's early time in Italy, as they both focus on a young American man who moves to Florence with literary aspirations. Max Desir goes to Italy right after college, to start his writing career and to look for a fresh start:

He felt he had done everything wrong thus far and must start over. He had put himself in the wrong places, learned the wrong attitudes—about himself, so that he didn't know who he was; about his education, so that he hadn't learned anything; and about sex. At twenty-two [...] he was still a virgin. (Ferro, *The Family of Max Desir* 54-55)

In the novel *The Blue Star*, the main character Peter also moves to Florence, where he tries to find inspiration to write his second novel while staying in a small, family-run pensione. This is Ferro's only novel that begins in Italy. Peter, who writes in the first person, states outright that Florence had changed him completely and, therefore, he did not find it necessary to reveal any details of his life before going to Italy: "I have not said anything of myself as I was before arriving in Florence the first time in '63, because in that year I changed from one sort of person into another and my earlier self is beside that point" (Ferro 193). Max and Peter's Florentine experience will prove extremely fruitful, although not on a professional level. In fact, neither fictional character finds the time or the energy to concentrate on their writing, because they are too busy discovering themselves. In Florence, Max and Peter explore their homosexuality, discover sex with other men and fall in love for the first time: Max with an American, and Peter with a Florentine.

In his novel *Second Son*, Ferro recreates his later trips to Italy, when he had already been diagnosed with AIDS. The main character Mark, who is sick, goes to Italy in search of peace. However, in Italy Mark will find
much more than that. In Rome, for the first time since his diagnosis, he finds hope to defeat his incurable disease. Romolo, a Roman card reader that he befriended, tells him that a cure to his illness will be discovered, and Mark decides to believe him: “Mark was astonished and blinked back sudden tears of gratitude. He realized he had not felt this momentary lightness since the day they had said he was ill” (Ferro, Second Son 74). Back in the United States, Mark’s family’s attempts to give him hope had failed miserably making him even more hopeless and depressed. But the Italian environment makes it possible for Mark to hope again. In Rome Mark finds love as well: he meets an American man, who is also ill with AIDS, and the two of them discover that it is possible to be happy even when afflicted by an incurable fatal disease.

In all three novels, Ferro’s characters find love in Italy. These encounters would probably not have happened in America, where family and other limitations would not have provided the freedom that a distant country would offer. As Max underlines: “it helped, it seemed, to have met [his partner Nick] in a foreign country where it was obvious, as it might not have been clear at home, that they were alone and on their own” (Ferro, The Family of Max Desir 72). It is significant to note that Robert Ferro and his alter egos’ journeys are completely reversed to that of the typical Italian immigrant story. The Italian immigrant leaves his country in search of a better future in America, and only when he has created a stable situation for himself and his family can he consider returning to Italy. But for Ferro the “promised land” is Italy. Through his characters he seeks to migrate to Italy to find all those answers that he had not found in America.

Ferro demonstrates interest in his family history and in his Italian heritage. In The Family of Max Desir, the most autobiographical of his novels, Ferro provides a very detailed ten page account of Max’s maternal grandparents’ life in Messina, and thoroughly describes the circumstances that brought them to immigrate to the United States. Later in the book, Max and his parents decide to visit Messina. The family trip to Sicily marks a very emotional moment for the whole family. It is especially moving for Max’s mother, who had left Messina with her mom when she was merely a little child. Back then her father was already in New York, where he was supposed to stay for a limited amount of time, to avoid the threat of a

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7A very similar situation occurs in Men Who Loved Me, the fictionalized autobiography by fellow Violet Quill author Felice Picano. Felice, the Italian-American main character, moves temporarily to Europe and says: “I’d come to Europe only partly to get away from social work and New York City. My real reason had been deeper, more insidious: to break all my ties with the past — and to become homosexual. I longed for this, knew with naive certainty it would only happen outside of my home ground” (22). Later in the book, after Felice moves back to New York, he comments: “I’d gone to Europe to change my life, and I had changed my life. I was starting fresh” (Picano 144).
second drafting into the Italian army. Meanwhile, Max’s mother and her mother were living with her father’s sisters. But her father’s sisters hated her mother, for she came from a poor family and, in their eyes, she was just a smelly “pescatora” (Ferro, The Family of Max Desir 23) who wanted to take advantage of their family’s wealth. Therefore, they constantly harassed her. When Max and his parents are driving around Messina, Max’s mother identifies the spot where her mother last fished before moving to the United States:

She said, pointing a few feet away, I stood right there with my mother. Marie looked out across the straits, then at the little beach, the houses, the hills and the trees behind. She fished the morning we left, Marie said. Right here where we’re standing. Some big fish, I can tell you. If she hadn’t fished we wouldn’t have left and you would never have been born, Max. Can you see how a little thing like that can make a big difference? (Ferro, The Family of Max Desir 59)

She is referring to the fact that, after fishing, she brought the fish back home and her sisters-in- law started calling her names. At that moment, she reacted hitting them with the fish and that is when she decided that she would follow her husband to the United States and never return to Italy.

Ferro’s characters’ Italian adventures are very detailed and Ferro’s constant use of Italian words and expressions throughout his novels makes their Italian experience all the more real and authentic. Italian interjections in all three novels abound. For example, in The Family of Max Desir, Max says: “Dio, Dio” (Ferro 65). And in Second Son, when Mark’s cleaning lady asks him if he wants something to drink, he answers: “No, niente” (Ferro 89). There are occasional mistakes, both in spelling and grammar. In The Family of Max Desir, Max says to his Italian lover: “Te amo. Ti voglio bene” (Ferro 72). And in Second Son, the card reader Romolo warns Max that “ci sarà della radioattività” (Ferro 75). Interestingly, English translations or explanations do not always follow the Italian words that Ferro uses, thus allowing only a reader fluent in Italian to appreciate all the facets of the various occurrences. For example, in The Blue Star, Peter, the main character, is staying at a pensione in Florence run by an Italian woman named Signora Zá-zá. At the pensione he befriends a flamboyant and effeminate Moroccan man. When Signora Zá-zá kicks the Moroccan out of the pensione, after hearing that he had called another guest a bitch, she complains: “ma basta con quella” (Ferro 26). A reader who does not understand Italian would miss not only what she says, but also the derogatory use of the feminine “quella.” Furthermore, the fact that Max, Peter and Mark all speak Italian helps them integrate into Italian life. It is not clear to what extent Max and Mark are fluent in Italian, but in The Blue Star we are told that Peter
studied Italian with a tutor and his Italian went from “rudimentary and dim” (Ferro 12) to fluent. In all three novels there seems to be the desire on Max, Peter and Mark’s part to use the language as a means to become more Italian. For example, the narrator informs us that when Mark speaks in short sentences “he was totally authentic” (Ferro, Second Son 88).

Ferro’s characters are also very fascinated with Italian customs. In The Family of Max Desir, when Max attends in New York the funeral of his paternal grandmother, a Sicilian immigrant, this is how he describes it:

> Her funeral was like an opera, the ripe, full-blown production of a transplanted culture reverting in death to the old, intense ways; with women in black sitting in vigil for three days like crows on a lawn, with huge floral tributes. (Ferro 43–44)

This episode shows that Max, even as a boy, was already intrigued by Italian culture, although he was often confused by his Italian relatives’ loudness and language, which he did not fully comprehend:

> His relatives, and the neighbors with whom their lives had become entwined, were exaggerated, theatrical and raw. The old people seemed fierce, especially in the eyes and around the mouth, with intensely held opinions and vivid personal quirks. [...] Grandma Desiderio talked in the dialect of a Sicilian hill town, delivered with such high-pitched staccato urgency as to be unintelligible except in terms of stark dread and alarm. (43)

In an attempt to distance himself from his Italian heritage, Max’s father had moved his family to the suburbs, away from his relatives who lived in an ethnic neighborhood in the city. Therefore, Max was exposed to his grandparents only occasionally while he was growing up. As a consequence, their language and behavior made them look all the more different and bizarre to Max.

Just as Max was puzzled by his Italian grandparents’ behavior, in return they also did not understand the Desir’s American life in the suburbs and felt out of place whenever they went to visit them:

> When John’s family came to visit they were stiff, though momentarily jocular in front of the camera, and dressed either too warmly or too well. They brought white boxes of sweet cookies and cannoli. In their mind this was the country, ineffably American. They were back in the city by dark. (Ferro 34)

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8A friend of Peter complements him by saying that he could speak Italian “perfectly well” (Ferro 40).
However, unlike his father, Max is naturally drawn to his Italian roots and, as a young adult, his interest for Italy and its traditions will eventually entice him to move there in order to explore better his Italian heritage. Italy offers Ferro, through the eyes of his characters, the perfect opportunity to learn more about the Italian lifestyle. Max, Peter, and Mark all try to incorporate some Italian customs into their own lives. For example, in The Blue Star, Peter wants to look more like an Italian:

I would try to blend in, to speak minimally but convincingly as a Florentine. I bought other clothes and cut my hair, fitting myself out in the manner, perhaps, of a young Italian student. This meant looking less American, less middle-class, less white, less male, less of everything I was — and more of this other thing. (Ferro 7)

And when he falls in love with a Florentine named Lorenzo, Peter calls him for his “onomastico,” because “in Italy it is more important than a birthday” (Ferro 67). Also, all three characters, Max, Peter and Mark are called with the Italian version of their names, when they are in Italy: Massimo, Piero and Marco, as if Italianizing their names would make them more Italian. In a sense, it is the exact opposite of what Max and Mark’s fathers had done when they had Americanized their last names from Desiderio to Desir, and from Valeriani to Valerian. By attempting to be more Italian, Max, Peter, and Mark are also trying to feel more accepted: they have been outsiders all of their lives and in Italy, where they finally live their homosexuality more freely, passing as “Italians” means to them to feel normal, for the first time in their lives.

At first glance, Ferro’s novels may seem to belong only to the genre of gay literature, but when examined at a deeper level, it is apparent that they have a strong Italian component. Ferro’s Italian heritage is part of his work: his characters, their families, and their interactions are very Italian. In The Family of Max Desir, all four of Max’s grandparents are Italian immigrants who have maintained their Italian customs and lifestyle in America and Ferro dedicates several parts of the novel to their stories’ accounts, because they help the reader understand better Max’s background. Max’s parents are not very Italian; their desire to distance themselves from their roots is typical of second generation Italian Americans who grew up at a time when “Italians were greaseballs” (Ferro 31), as Max’s mother explains to her son. In Second Son, Mark’s father tries to erase all signs of his

9The same attempt to blend in can be found in Men Who Loved Me by Felice Picano, where the main character also tries to look more Italian during his sojourn in Italy. For example, he tells us that his shirt had “three buttons open to my sternum like all the young men in Italy” (44).
Italian origins in an attempt to make himself and his family look more like the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants that he aspired to be: “The world took them for one thing while they were quite another — not wasplike and cool, but beelike and quick to anger and perhaps unpleasantness” (Ferro 49–50). However, Mark is aware that it is not possible to change someone’s nature completely and “when he lost his temper or fell flights into depression he thought, This is my blood which can’t be changed” (Ferro 50). One of the aspects that differentiate Max and Mark from their fathers is that they embrace their heritage. They are not ashamed of their roots, but on the contrary they want to learn more about Italy and the Italian lifestyle.

If various elements of Ferro’s Italian-American family are recreated in The Family of Max Desir and in Second Son, Ferro’s strong interest for Italy is evident in all three novels. Many elements of Max, Peter, and Mark’s Italian adventures are based on Ferro’s own stays in Italy. In his works, Ferro rediscovers the country where his family came from and this exploration and learning process radically changes the course of his characters’ lives. Although Ferro did not write an autobiography, his novels have so many autobiographical elements that they are a manifest of all the life experiences that shaped Ferro, as a man and as a writer, during his long visits to Italy.

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Works cited