

from

**Voices in Italian Americana**

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James Nicola. *Out of Nothing*. Brunswick, Maine: Shanti Arts, 2018.

James B. Nicola's recent volume of poetry, *Out of Nothing*, speaks to the essence of the creative process in both art and writing. Nicola uses art as a springboard, one that propels him into quite extraordinary journeys. He is a bold explorer, willing to go wherever his fertile and inventive consciousness leads.

Looking at a painting can be like looking into a mirror, discovering something new and unexpected, about the world, and about ourselves. The experience of looking offers the possibility of insight, but there is no guarantee. The journey is our own. Nicola has set himself a gargantuan task, to stand before a work of art in an open frame of mind, letting the flow of association, memory, and imagination take its free-form course, and capturing the traces of the journey in poems. The poem then becomes a second "work of art" that the reader responds to, and the processes of question and discovery then activate a new cycle.

The experience is a very full one for the reader, exposed not only to engaging poetry, but also to images of art printed in full color. In "Marmorata," Nicola riffs on the sounds of contemporary hard and soft rubber-soled footwear clicking and squeaking on the worn, ornate paving of St. Peter's in Rome. The onomatopoeic words, "clackle ackle ack / scuffle squish scuffle uffle squeak," definitely capture the sense of myriad diverse footsteps treading on the layers of history present in the huge basilica. Even a crowd is diminished in size by comparison to the grandeur of the architecture. The transitory nature of human life is shockingly laid out. The silence of the stone remains, and endures.

Nicola intertwines the classical and the contemporary in "*Pietà*," which translates into "pity." A woman, sitting on a sidewalk, a baby across her lap, a toddler by her side, evokes the iconic *Pietà*, which resides in St. Peter's. The line "A hundred hard-soled feet on the senseless stone clack by" brings to mind the numberless Romany refugees that have made begging a profession in tourist Rome. This, in turn, is a sharp reminder of the current challenges that face all of Europe in the wake of the refugee crisis. The poem is in stark contrast to the image of Michelangelo's pristine masterpiece. Who deserves the most pity?

Stone again figures in a poem about Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The bright flag in the photograph contrasts sharply with the somber block letters incised in black Indian granite. In *Names in Stone*, Nicola attests to the importance of remembrance, "where we have at least / been made to last." What is preserved is remembered. Art is a testament to our humanity. In seeing the 58,318 names

stretching as far as the eye can see, how can we not reflect on the effects of war on each individual life?

A perennial question in all of the arts is, what did the creator intend, and what does the viewer interpret, and does it matter in the end? In *So, the Modern*, which accompanies Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, Nicola asks "what it wants to be, what I want it to be." The creator *feels* deeply, and puts as much as possible into the work that he/she creates, and then releases it. The work of art has its own life after that. The viewer/reader comes with his/her own history, and responds. Each response is individual. Nicola leaves ample room for interpretation, offering free-ranging associations and multiple twists of perception, always informed by a keen, questing intelligence.

Nicola's surrealistic leaps of imagination are exciting, tantalizing, and never boring. He is unafraid to use language or sentiments from the past in combination with contemporary language or metaphor as when he addresses Dante Gabriel Rossetti's exquisite Pre-Raphaelite portrait of *Sibylla Palmifera (Venus Palmifera)*. His poetry is as alive as a performance. Each poem unfurls in unexpected ways before our eyes. His is an easy and unabashed conversation with the spirit that animates art, and he offers the reader a lived experience, not a mere intellectual exercise. Nicola is willing to engender questions, but unwilling to answer them all. He gives hints and clues, and we must become the detectives of our own lives and histories and find our fit in the pantheon of time.

*Out of Nothing* is really about creative process, its results and its after-life. What each artist hopes for is an artifact or a trace of the process that will ensure that the art, and artist, will not be forgotten. What we, as viewers and readers, encounter is that "after-life" — the trace of the process that the artist or writer has gone through to create the work. It then takes on a renewed life in the interchange with a new viewer or reader, and the cycle begins again.

In "Gates of March" which refers to Christo and Jeanne Claude's joint project, *The Gates*, Nicola boldly writes, "When I saw the Gates, I couldn't help dream / that someone had wrapped Emily Dickinson / in a giant, orange, heavy-metal tutu." This antic, unexpected image is perfectly suited to the transformation of Central Park from a gracious walking, relaxing, running, cycling space into a billowing series of 7,500 saffron-colored portals that continually brought a look of wonder to the eyes and faces of New Yorkers during its sixteen day installation. Despite the ephemeral nature of installation art, *The Gates* imprinted themselves on the city of New York and still have the ability to rekindle a smile when remembered or viewed in photographs. As an ending line, Nicola offers, "You hold the key to the gate, now. / Going through?" The choice is ours alone, to open to the magical expansion that art and poetry offer, or not.

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