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The Italian American Heritage

A Companion to Literature and Arts

Edited by
Pellegrino D'Acierno

The Italian American Heritage

Garland Reference Library of the Humanities
Volume 1473

THE ITALIAN AMERICAN HERITAGE

A Companion to Literature and Arts

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THE ITALIAN AMERICAN HERITAGE

A Companion to Literature and Arts

PELLEGRINO D'ACIERNO
Editor

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

DEDICATION

To Charles Calitri, novelist, author of *Father*
and to Edwin Shapiro, humanitarian

—George J. Leonard

DEDICATION

In memory of my father, Pellegrino A. D'Acierno, M.D., F.A.C.S., physician to the Italian American community and one of its first poets.

Chè ogni forza di vita è nel pensiero,
Che mena ad opre franche e generose,
E attinge sua virtù sempre dal vero.

For all power of life lies on the will
To accomplish deeds right, noble and free,
Never departing once from the truth's course.

—Pellegrino A. D'Acierno, from "Sursum Corda" (1912)

And in deep gratitude to the genealogy of "Donne che [hanno] l'intelletto d'amore": Anna, Carla, Lisa, and Fosca. And now also in memory of Anna (1918–1996), *mater dulcissima* and madonna of the loophole, whose countenance appears throughout the tradition of Italian painters of maternity from Perugino to Joseph Stella.

For Thomas Belmonte (1946–1995), shape-changer, who like Vertumnus, dancer of walls, loved the things Pomona loved and who, after lifting the last disguise, revealed the radiance that became what Pomona loved;

For Tommaso, ethnographer of Naples and serene guide through the drunkenness of its labyrinth, who, upon exiting the broken world, smiled back at the crippled boy, Ribera's double, and conferred a valediction to labyrinths: "Be grateful for what is offered. Go lighthearted into Paradise";

For Tom, lover of wisdom and trickster, always already remembered in Diotima's emblem of Love, always already remembered in Cavafy's words: "Remember, body, how they trembled for you in those voices."

—Pellegrino D'Acierno

First published 1999 by Garland Publishing, Inc.

This edition first published in 2021 by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017
and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Italian American heritage : a companion to literature and arts / Pellegrino D'Acierno, editor.
p. cm. — (Garland reference library of the humanities ; vol. 1473)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8153-0380-7 (alk. paper)
1. Italian Americans—Intellectual life. 2. Italian Americans—Social life and customs.
3. American literature—Italian American authors—History and criticism. 4. Italian Americans in literature. 5. Italian American arts. I. D'Acierno, Pellegrino, 1943– .
II. Series.
E184.I8I675 1998
305.851073-dc21 98-7963
CIP

ISBN 13: 978-1-03-216619-3 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-1-03-216766-4 (pbk)
ISBN 13: 978-1-00-325000-5 (ebk)

Contents

Acknowledgments

On behalf of our contributors and myself, I want to thank George J. Leonard, *amico per la pelle* and a writer's editor par excellence, for providing us with this forum, for inspiring our work with his inclusive—Whitmanesque—vision of ethnicity, and for his enlightened and liberating view of what constitutes the writing of ethnicity.

I wish to acknowledge the generous contributions of two patrons who have made possible the visual dimension of this volume: Eva Fasanella for her gracious permission to use three of her late-husband Ralph Fasanella's paintings to adorn this volume; and Carla Margulies D'Acierno for her largesse in subventing the costs of illustrating *The Italian American Heritage*, a gesture with which she wishes to honor the memory of her mother:

> In memoriam Loretta Jill Margulies (1908–1994),
> mother and artist of the Italian American quotidian
>
> —Pellegrino D'Acierno

Contributors

HELEN BAROLINI started her exploration of the Italian American experience when she received a National Endowment for the Arts grant that enabled her to write the transgenerational and transcultural novel *Umbertina* (1979). She is the author of three other novels, and her nonfiction books include *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women* (1985), for which she won an American Book Award and the Susan Koppelman Award for the best anthology in the feminist study of American culture. Her short fiction and essays have appeared in many publications and also in collections. Barolini has translated several books from Italian and taught in Italy; in 1991 she was invited writer in residence at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center on Lake Como in Italy. *Chiaroscuro: Essays of Identity*, a collection of her critical writings on ethnicity and Italian Americanness, was published by Bordighera in 1997 and will be reissued in revised form by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1999.

THOMAS BELMONTE (1946–1995) received his Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University in New York City. He was associate professor of anthropology at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. Belmonte was a specialist in mythology and media studies as well as urban anthropology and the ethnology of Mediterranean societies. His ethnographic study of the underclass of Naples, *The Broken Fountain* (second expanded edition, 1989) was named a Centennial Classic by its publisher, Columbia University Press. His long essay, "The Trickster and the Sacred Clown: Revealing the Logic of the Unspeakable," was published in *C. G. Jung and the Humanities: Toward a Hermeneutics of Culture* (1990).

MARY JO BONA teaches American literature at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. Her anthology, *The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian/American Women's Fiction* (1993) is published by Guernica Press. She has written articles on Italian American women's narratives for the journals *MELUS: Multiethnic Literature of the*

United States and *Voices in Italian Americana: A Literary and Cultural Review.* She is working on a critical study of the Italian American women's literary tradition.

ROBERT CONNOLLY is the former curator of the Paterno Library of the Casa Italiana, the Italian cultural center of Columbia University in New York City. He has taught at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, Queens College, the American Studies Center in Naples, and the English Institute in Naples and is a regular contributor to *Film Comment, Opera News, Stereo Review,* and *The British Opera.* Among his translations from the Italian are *Female Film Stars of the Third Reich* (1991) by Cinzia Romani (Sarpedon Publishers) and the version of I. Tarchetti's novella *Fosca* (unpublished) upon which Stephen Sondheim based his musical drama *Passion.* New York opera buffs are familiar with his voice from the insightful analyses of Italian opera he presents as a regular guest on Stephen Zucker's weekly radio program *Opera Fanatic.*

FOSCA D'ACIERNO is a Ph.D. candidate and Kenyon Fellow in the Italian Studies Department at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Her research interests include cinema theory, cultural criticism, and feminist and gender studies; *La Fusta* (Spring 1994) has recently published her essay, "Empty Desires: The Problem of Women in the Films of Antonioni." She resides in Florence, where she is researching and writing her thesis, *The Nights of Cabiria: The Representation of Women in Italian Cinema from Neo-Realism to the Present.* Formally trained in opera, she sings blues, jazz, and alternative music professionally in Italy.

PELLEGRINO D'ACIERNO is professor of comparative literature and the director of the program in Italian studies at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. He has taught a wide range of courses in comparative literature, Italianistica, critical theory, cinema, and intellectual history at Columbia, Cornell, and New York Universities, and the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles, where he has served as visiting critic since 1991. Among his publications are the following: *F.T. Marinetti* (1989); the English translation of Manfredo Tafuri's *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (1987) with Robert Connolly; *C.G. Jung and the Humanities: Toward a Hermeneutics of Culture* (coeditor, 1990); *The Itinerary of the Sign: Scenes of Seeing in Giotto's Frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel* (1995); and *Strange Hoops: Architecture and Cinema As Spatial–Temporal Practices* (forthcoming). The American Academy in Rome awarded him the Rome Prize in Postclassical Humanistic Studies in 1988–1989, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation appointed him a Guggenheim Fellow for 1995.

THOMAS J. FERRARO, who formerly taught at the University of Geneva, Switzerland, is Associate Professor of English at Duke University in Durham, North Caro-

lina. He is the author of *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America* (1993), "Ethnicity and the Literary Marketplace" in the *Columbia History of the American Novel*, as well as diverse essays on U.S. literature and film published here and abroad. He edited a special issue of *SAQ* (Summer 1994) titled "Catholic Lives/ Contemporary America," which, in 1997, was published, in expanded form, as a book by Duke University Press.

Richard Gambino is visiting professor of Italian American Studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He is on leave from Queens College in New York City, where he founded a program in Italian American studies in 1973. His primary work, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans* (1974), is a definitive study of the Italian American experience and one of the central texts in the founding of a discourse upon the Italian Americans. Among his other publications are *Vendetta* (1977), *Racing with Catastrophe* (1990), and the novel *Bread and Roses* (1981).

Fred L. Gardaphe is professor of English at Columbia College in Chicago. He is associate editor of *Fra Noi*, Chicago's Italian American newspaper; editor of *New Chicago Stories* (1990) and *Italian American Ways* (1989); and co-contributing editor of *From the Margin: Writings in Italian America* (1991). Gardaphe is also cofounder and review editor of *Voices in Italian Americana: A Literary and Cultural Review*. He has written extensively on Italian American culture, criticism, and representation of ethnicity in twentieth-century literature. His book-length study, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* was published by Duke University Press in 1996.

Frank Lentricchia is Katherine Everett Gilbert Professor of Literature at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. He is the author of *After the New Criticism* (1980), a magisterial history of, and landmark in, contemporary American literary-critical theory. Among his other works are: *The Gaiety of Language* (1968); *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* (1975); *Criticism and Social Change* (1983); and *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (1988); and *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (coeditor, 1990). Two other works of his, *New Essays on White Noise* (1991) and *Introducing Don DeLillo* (1991) are dedicated to the novelist Don DeLillo. In addition to his impressive body of literary criticism, which has placed him at the center of contemporary critical debate, he has written an autobiographical "confession," *The Edge of Night* (1994) and two paired works of fiction, *Johnny Critelli* and *The Knifemen* (1996).

Frances M. Malpezzi, professor of English at Arkansas State University, and William M. Clements, professor of English and folklore at Arkansas State, are

the coauthors of *Italian-American Folklore* (1992), published by August House. Based on interviews, journals, and other primary sources as well as on the scholarly literature on the Italian American experience, the volume is a groundbreaking work in Italian American ethnography that provides an overview of Italian American folk culture that is at once generic and attuned to the differences stemming from regional distinctions. Malpezzi and Clements, who are married, document the entire panoply of Italian American cultural expression: language, particularly proverbs; customs; folk supernaturalism; folk medicine; recreation and games; the performative genres; and foodways. The journalist Gay Talese has described their work as "a major contribution to the understanding of Italian character in America."

Liana Miuccio, a Manhattan-based professional photographer, has won numerous international photography awards, including, in 1997, the Yann Geffroy International competition for photographers under the age of 35. Her photographs have been featured in publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, and *Newsday* and in Italian publications including *L'Espresso* and *La Repubblica delle Donne*. Her photographic essay presented in this volume reproduces ten images from *An Italian Journey*, an exhibition first displayed at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in the summer of 1997. The traveling exhibit has also been displayed at Villa Trabia in Palermo, Sicily, the Museo Italo-Americano in San Francisco, and the University of Pennsylvania's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. *An Italian Journey* has received international recognition. The reviewer Reid Frazier writes: "The photographs piece together a matrix of signs that constitute the photographer's Italian identity. The hand gestures and facial expressions, food preparation and religious ceremonies she captures make up the jigsaw of what she thinks of as *Italian*. In essence, we watch the photographer construct her Italian identity right before our eyes. Miuccio pulls it off because her photographs are filled with absolute love and genuine curiosity about her subjects." Miuccio has a Bachelor of Arts from McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and has studied at the International Center of Photography in New York City, where she assists in teaching. She is in the process of transforming *An Italian Journey* into book form.

Camille Paglia is one of America's foremost and most original (and outspoken) cultural critics. Professor of humanities at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, she is one of the few contemporary university-based intellectuals who have name and face recognition outside the academy. Paglia's chief work is *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990), a far-ranging interdisciplinary history of Western culture from antiquity to the late nineteenth century in which she applies the Nietzschean categories of Apollonian and

Dionysian to practical criticism and elaborates a comprehensive theory and genealogy of Western modes of personality concerned with the textual and extratextual play of erotic, artistic, and theatrical personae. The great breadth of her interests and her specific attempt to hybridize academic and popular culture in her criticism are evidenced by her two recent collections of essays: *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays* (1992) and *Vamps & Tramps: New Essays* (1994).

Stanislao G. Pugliese completed his doctoral dissertation, "Carlo Rosselli: Socialist Heretic and Antifascist Exile," at the City University of New York (CUNY) in 1995. Trained in modern European history, he has focused his work on the intellectual and cultural life of Italy in the twentieth century. He has studied at the University of Florence and has taught at City College of New York and Hunter College, both in New York City. Since 1995, he has served as assistant professor of history at Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York.

Stephen Sartarelli, poet and translator, is the author of *Grievances and Other Poems* (1989) and has translated widely from Italian and French, winning the PEN-Renato Poggioli Award for translation from the Italian in 1984. His poems have appeared in such journals as *New Directions, New Criterion, American Letters and Community,* and *Talisman* and have been translated into Italian, French, Spanish, and Russian. He is also coeditor of the literary review *Alea* (New York).

Jo Ann Tedesco is a New York City playwright, actress, and director. Born in Syracuse, New York, she began her theater experience at the Boar's Head Children's Theater of Syracuse University at the age of seven and has continued unabated. After completing her undergraduate work at a small Jesuit college in upstate New York and then working in regional theaters and local television shows, she made her way to New York City, where she acted in commercials and in numerous Off and Off-Off Broadway productions. She went on to establish and run two Off-Off Broadway theaters that produced a number of successful plays. Her first full-length play, *Sacraments: A Not-So-Divine Human Comedy,* was performed in New York City at both the Public Theater and the HB Playwrights Foundation in 1984. She has described *Sacraments* as both a memory play and a rite-of-passage play that traces the coming of age of a precocious Italian American girl during the 1940s and 1950s against the backdrop of the two major influences in her life, her family and her church. In 1980 three of her one-act plays, *On the Rocks, Interesting,* and *Tit for Tat*, were performed Off-Off Broadway. She is developing a play about Eleanora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt, *Of Penguins and Peacocks*, with Lilliane Montevecchi and Taina Elg under the direction of Tom O'Horgan. Another play, *Perfidia,* was staged at the California State Theater, Sacramento in 1995.

GIOIA TIMPANELLI, hailed as "the dean of American storytellers," is one of the master practioners of the art of storytelling of her generation. As the last of the *cantastorie* and the first of the new storytellers, she has served as the unique depository of the repertoire of Italian and Sicilian stories and the relay through which the oral tradition has been passed to Italian America and introduced to the American common culture. In 1987 she won the Woman's National Book Association Award for bringing the oral tradition to the American public. She has complemented her work as professional storyteller by creating, writing, producing, and broadcasting her program for educational television. Her series *Stories from My House* (1970–1971) received two Emmy Awards. She is the author of *Stones for the Hours of the Night: Nuraghe Sardinia* (1975), a collection of poems accompanied by photographs; *Tales from the Roof of the World: Folktales of Tibet* (1984); *Travel Images and Observations: An Italian Travel-Diary* (drawings by Fulvio Testa, travel notes by Gioia Timpanelli, 1987); and *Sometimes the Soul: Two Novellas of Sicily* (1998), inspired by Sicilian folktales.

ROBERT VISCUSI, professor of English and executive officer of the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities at Brooklyn College at the City University of New York, is also chair of the CUNY Italian Studies Advisory Council and president of the Italian American Writers Association. He has held grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, and the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of the City University. A member of the advisory boards of such journals as *Italian Americana, Voices in Italian Americana: A Literary and Cultural Review,* and *Italian Journal*, Viscusi is well known for his essays and studies of Italian American literature, Anglo-Italian literary relations, and questions of literary theory, which have appeared in many leading journals in the United States and in Europe. He has published, among other books, the long poem *An Oration upon the Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus* (1993), which has been praised as the "definitive epic" on Columbus (Daniela Gioseffi) and as "an Italian American *Howl*" (Fred L. Gardaphe). His novel *Astoria,* published in 1995 by Guernica Editions, Montreal, dismantles the French Revolution and the Italian migration to the United States in order to reconstruct them as versions of each other.

Preface

Making a Point of It

George J. Leonard

As the articles for this volume were forwarded to me, the non-Italian editor-in-chief, by this volume's editor, Pellegrino D'Acierno, Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of the Program in Italian Studies, Hofstra University, I began to see something take shape greater than our original plans. Professor D'Acierno had assembled a Who's Who of Italian American humanistic scholarship. Over the course of seven years, those contributors had slowly created a joint statement of unprecedented scale, in which we all rose to consciousness of a special moment in American cultural history: the Italian American Renaissance, one might call it. By the 1970s, Italian American men were pouring out of the nation's universities, graduate schools, law schools, medical schools, soon to be followed by Italian American women. (See Helen Barolini's article, p. 193.) By the 1980s, people with names like Ferraro and Cuomo were, respectively, the first woman candidate for Vice President from a major political party, and the front-runner for the presidential nomination. This was remarked on as something that had been unthinkable even twenty years earlier. But simultaneously—and this is just as a for instance—if American film had once been, as Neil Gabler has argued, piloted by Jewish studio chiefs, by the late 1970s, Hollywood was dominated by Scorcese, Coppola, De Niro, Travolta, Stallone, De Palma (and lately, Tarantino). Italian Americans similarly redefined other arts (like Madonna and Bruce Springsteen in rock music, Sinatra in pop music, Robert Venturi in postmodern architecture). What's more, from Madonna's erotic Mediterranean Catholicism to Springsteen's New Jersey drag-racer chic to Venturi's appeal that we "learn from Las Vegas," the most Sinatra-esque cityscape in the country, there seemed a strong *ethnic* component to their art.

Not until this volume's articles were massed together did anyone, even the authors, become aware of the extent of this phenomenon. An odd silence had

masked the event. During the Italian ascent, "multiculturalism" was unfashionable (it is highly controversial even now). Italians did not publicize what this book shows were important debts to what would have then been considered a "foreign" tradition. Take Frank Sinatra's account of his personal breakthrough on p. 423: "It occurred to me that maybe the world didn't need another Crosby. What I finally hit upon was the *bel canto* Italian school of singing, without making a point of it." Here we see Sinatra acknowledging he found his style by drawing on his ethnic tradition, *and* we see in the words he instantly adds—"without making a point of it"—how cautious even the ultraconfident Sinatra could be about that. Pellegrino D'Acierno confronts this very typical anxiety at length in his essay on "La Cultura Negata"—the "denied culture." One may have succeeded by drawing deeply on some part of one's Italian-ness—on being the boy from Jersey or the girl from Brooklyn, by loving Las Vegas and its arias of architecture—but one did so quietly, "without making a point of it." This book then, *makes a point of it*: uncovering those great debts without which one cannot fully understand these artists *or* their art, dealing with their denial, with "la cultura negata."

The Multicultural Curriculum: An Historic Moment in American Education

Pellegrino D'Acierno will specifically introduce this volume in the essay following this one. Let me, then, talk about the larger picture: the new American multicultural curriculum, one of the greatest challenges American education has ever faced. In the next few years reference librarians will be besieged by people seeking answers to new questions—besieged not only by students in the new multicultural courses but by instructors attempting to teach multiculturalism for the first time.

Why are the gangsters in Martin Scorcese's *GoodFellas* entirely different from the poetic gangsters in Francis Ford Coppola's equally classic *Godfather* trilogy? What exactly *does* "godfather" (*"compari"*) mean in Italian American culture? How is a student to learn? Turn, in this book, to Pellegrino D'Acierno's explication of the *Godfather*'s first scene (pp. 575–576). Puzo, Coppola, and Brando have packed the scene with significance, with insider references to codes of honor and social hierarchies and taboos. How I wish I'd known all that when I saw the film! But where was it written before now?

Not only the student but also the instructor will be coming to ask the librarian for help. Multiculturalism is so new that few of us were educated to teach it. People who quite likely took their degree in Chaucer or Dickens will be asked to explain a reference to the Festa di San Gennaro.

The "Companion"

If the student reading Madame Bovary is puzzled by a reference to Joan of Arc or to a "viscount," he or she can turn to Sir Paul Harvey's classic *Oxford Companion to French Literature.* But no such help exists for the student facing ethnic American literature and arts. If, in this volume, we had written our 27 articles about 27 different authors, composers, architects, we would have had to include, over and over, the same introductory explanations about *l'ordine della famiglia*, *campanilismo*, wedding *buste*, *onore*, the Mafia, the system of *compartatico* (or *comparaggio*—"godparentage").

Instead, we wrote long articles on *the topics that would unlock for the reader the greatest number of authors and artists now and for years to come.* There are topics such as "On Being an Italian American Woman," "Italian Catholic in my Bones—a Conversation with Camille Paglia," "Italian American Feste," "The Contradictions of Italian American Identity: An Anthropologist's Personal View," "Bread and Wine in Italian American Folk Culture." We have created a series of *tool kits*.

We have, to be sure, articles on the most-taught authors, and in all cases by great experts on them. If we consider Italian American gender roles, we have Frank Lentricchia on being an Italian American man and Camille Paglia on Italian American womanhood. "Italian American Women Writers," is by Helen Barolini, the Dean of that field, and it is 73 pages long. We have Robert Viscusi writing on "Italian American Literary History from the Discovery of America," Fred L. Gardaphe on "Italian American Novelists."

Timeliness, Usefulness

This is a crisis. Not only have we mandated multicultural courses, but even the old courses are being given multicultural additions. A college course on romanticism now, to be modern, will try to include ethnic American authors. The anthologies add them as rapidly as they can.

Across the nation, school administrations and Presidential commissions have been telling teachers "do it" without telling them how they were to do it or even exactly what they were to do. Students, encountering literature and art from each other's ethnic cultures, have needed special help. Yet few people now teaching were educated to give the help needed.

The "Multicultural" Classroom: From Experts Teaching Insiders, to First-Timers Teaching Outsiders

Our book is aimed at a new audience—the new multicultural classroom. This volume supports those students, instructors, and librarians facing this great change in the American canon.

When I first taught ethnic studies, I had to photocopy articles for my classes because there was no reference work to which I could send *my kind of students.* I emphasize "my kind of students." Ethnic studies—itself so new—was being taught, and is still generally taught, by experts teaching insiders. The professors trained in ethnic studies were almost always people from the ethnicity whose works they were teaching. As it turned out, they were usually speaking to classrooms filled with students primarily from the same ethnicity. There was a lot that didn't need to be explained. The artist's *weltanschauung* was partly shared, or at least easily entered. Work, teacher, and class drew from a common store of experiences.

Instead of experts teaching insiders, the new mandated "multicultural" courses, however, will be taught primarily by first-timers teaching outsiders. The majority of professors will be people *outside* the ethnicity whose works they are teaching; speaking to classrooms filled with outsiders like themselves. I found myself in that situation in 1986, when—fresh from working with Los Angeles' Asian American community—I redirected some existing courses toward "multiculturalism."

Furthermore, many ethnic authors shuttle their action back and forth between two locales with which the new teacher will probably be unfamiliar. Think of Puzo's and Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy. Not only will teacher and student find themselves coping with unfamiliar parts of *American* experience, but with Old Country Italian customs and experiences as well. The teacher will discover that the student who, watching the film on TV, permissively ignored everything he did not understand, is in a less forgiving mood when seated in a classroom. If you dare to stand in front of that classroom, you are Supposed To Know, and no one very much cares that you did your doctorate on Hawthorne.

There is serious peril here. John Dewey used to warn that the students are "always learning something" in class, but not necessarily what you wanted. They may be learning "math is boring" or "unlike me, boys do not have to raise their hands to speak." The new multicultural courses, taught by neophytes to outsiders, could wind up teaching them "even the teacher can't figure out these people," "nobody in class could guess why these people do these things," "I can't relate to people like this."

Excellent critical works exist, but they assume the older ethnic studies situation in which experts address insiders. The essays are more often arguments than information. They are not enough help for first-timers bravely trying to teach outsiders.

Humanities Students Have Different Needs

As if all that were not difficult enough, the new multicultural courses are generally taught by exposing students to literature or arts, albeit with reference to the political, sociological, and historical contexts of the works.

There are some reference works, such as the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups,* that address the needs of social scientists and historians. For years, however, I looked for reference works organized to help my liberal arts students comprehend ethnic literature and arts.

Books meant to help people reading novels, watching films, or confronting works of art must include *much different information than books meant simply for social scientists.* Indeed, standard reference works can lead the humanities student seriously astray. Imagine a student from another country trying to learn about American Easter from, logically enough, fine books such as the *New Dictionary of Theology* or the *Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary.* "The solemn celebration of Christ's resurrection, which begins on Holy Saturday night and includes the blessing of the paschal candle. . . ." Wouldn't the student conclude that Easter in America was a "solemn" and awesome time? How then to decipher literary references to the Easter Bunny, or Easter bonnets, or kids coloring eggs for Easter baskets, not to mention Irving Berlin's *Easter Parade* (a Jew writing famous songs about *Easter?*). "Solemn celebration of Christ's resurrection" would be—if taken by itself—actually an obstacle to understanding American Easter's music, literature, and films.

I asked our contributors always to remember that humanists needed not only *more information,* but *different information,* than social scientists. Even when the subject matter of the essays overlaps topics in social science references, the content and emphasis will be quite different.

Special Features

Our authors have sought to make this volume as useful as possible by offering help on a variety of levels.

For Students

Each section contains articles that are popularly written and accessible even to high school students.

For Instructors New to Multicultural Studies

Many articles are aimed at the person at the front of the classroom who is trying to teach a multicultural course for the first time—a person who, given America's demographics, is probably not an Italian American.

For Advanced Users

Each section contains articles by unique authorities in their field, articles so original or so definitive that even experts will be grateful to have them.

The articles address women's contributions in detail. They analyze not only books but drama and films, not only painting but cuisine and textile arts. The articles are written in varying genres, for sometimes a first-person memoir can humanize and personalize a cultural custom better than a work of formal scholarship.

Since we assume that this is one of the first books people will be using in what will be a continuing self-education in the new American canon, we encouraged all our authors to add, when appropriate, an annotated Further Reading section at the ends of their articles, or to incorporate such advice clearly within the work. We have also added an appendix providing a detailed chronology detailing useful statistics of the Italian American experience.

Each article makes a special effort to build the user's cultural vocabulary. We encouraged the authors to define as many terms and concepts as possible in their writing. This volume also establishes a lexicon of key terms that informs the Italian American linguistic universe. Alphabetized in a separate Cultural Lexicon, these terms appear in the chapters in bold type.

Notice too that we speak here of arts, plural. Many ethnic cultures, and especially the women in them, practiced arts that were, until recently, dismissed as "crafts."

Daring To Do It

Ethnic studies frequently involve politics, and hot politics at that. It makes for fascinating classes, classes students look forward to, classes in which people who never talk at all suddenly argue points as if their lives depended on it, classes in which silent immigrant newcomers are suddenly turned to as experts and listened to with respect, classes in which friendships form across racial and ethnic bounds. No bones about it, it can be dangerous to teach classes that excite students that much. But people who rely on this volume can lead those classes with confidence.

The first obstacle to multiculturalism is that most of us were not educated to teach it and information has been hard to come by. The second obstacle is that the topic is so politicized, we wonder if we even *dare* teach it, even if we are of the ethnicity we are teaching. When teaching a newer canon means having to undertake a second education, who could blame people for deciding it's just not worth it?

Our book overcomes these obstacles by giving a reference work constructed according to a rigorous methodology. All the authors are not only renowned in their specialties, most are from the ethnic group being written about.

Furthermore, all authors worked with novel and unique freedom. You cannot just *talk* about multiculturalism, you have to *do* multiculturalism. For that reason I declined to impose a "house style" on Dr. D'Acierno and the authors, aside from a few agreements about typography. You cannot create a book celebrating America's many voices and then try to homogenize them—cannot celebrate diversity by pouring their essays into the old prose melting pot.

I do not by any means wish to imply that only scholars from an ethnicity can write about its art. Each perspective has value and validity. However, I do claim that, by having leading scholars of a particular ethnicity *supervise,* we produced a portrait of what *they* think their emerging canon is, and what topics *they* think need to be understood. We have all thereby gained something historically valuable.

I hope the wealth of information in this volume will newly encourage people to break out from the old canon, to dare teach exciting new works, to dare discuss in class the most controversial, and important, topics in America today.

A Personal Note

I confess to a personal agenda. I have a son—half-Jewish, half-Chinese, all-American—and I don't want him, or anyone else's sons or daughters, growing up studying a curriculum that marginalizes or trivializes them. This work, then, has been a labor of love.

Add to this that my first teacher was the Italian American novelist Charles Calitri (*Rickey, Strike Heaven on the Face, Father, The Goliath Head*) and my debt to Italian America may be seen. His father, Antonio Calitri, had left the priesthood to become a famous Italian poet, immigrated, and had, by World War I, become "Il Professore" to a generation of Italian Americans. (See cartoon.) Charles' son, Robin, is the longtime principal of South Side High School, Rockville Centre, Long Island, one of a handful of American public high schools formally accorded "Blue Ribbon" status by the U.S. Department of Education. For a century the Calitris have taught Americans, and I was lucky enough to be one of their students. What better way to honor my debt than to do this book about the culture Antonio, Charles, and Robin Calitri have exemplified and loved?

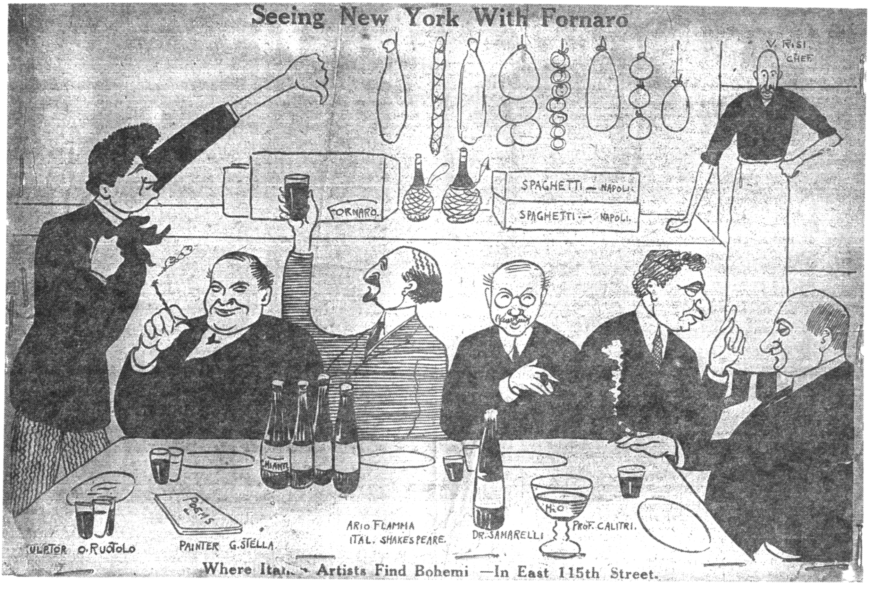
Perhaps multiculturalism is little more than learning to love. Certainly there is nothing new or radical about it. It is the logical continuation of the Western humanist project. The finest art works, the poet Shelley claimed, have a power no polemic has: they make us human to each other. "The great secret of morals is love," Shelley argued. By enlisting our imagination, art can put us "in the place of another, and many others," so that the "pains and pleasures" of all humankind become "our own" (*A Defence of Poetry,* 1821). This volume will, I hope, help ethnic

artworks "leap the gap" to the wider audience and accomplish that noble goal—long a central goal for the best spirits in Western culture.

George J. Leonard
San Francisco, 1998

"Italian American Literature and Arts, 1913"

A group portrait of the fledgling Italian American cultural community—in 1913, scarcely twenty years old—debating in a restaurant in New York's now vanished "Italian Harlem." Amidst boxes carefully marked "Spaghetti," then an exotic ethnic food, the Italians hoist glasses of Chianti and make Italianate gestures. (Ruotolo mimics a Caesar, Samarelli and Calitri repeat Raphael's Plato and Aristotle.) Second from left, smoking a twisty toscano *cigar, sits "Painter G. Stella," arrived from Italy for good only the year before, and still "Giuseppe" (hence the initial "G."). Six years later, painting as "Joseph" Stella, his "Brooklyn Bridge" series will bring Italian Futurism to America and make him the first, and most acclaimed, Italian American artist. (See p. 499, "From Stella to Stella: Italian American Visual Culture and Its Contribution to the Arts in America.")*



"Where Italian Artists Find Bohemi[a]—In East 115th Street" from "Seeing New York With Fornaro," in The Evening Sun, *Dec. 15, 1913. Antonio Calitri, "Prof. Calitri," is identified at far right. Courtesy of Robin Calitri.*

Introduction

The Making of the Italian American Cultural Identity: From La Cultura Negata *to Strong Ethnicity*

Prospero's Books and This Book As Their Dangerous Supplement

As Prospero does at the conclusion of *The Tempest,* I ask for your indulgence, dear reader, to set me free to begin in an unconventional way. Rather than introduce you directly to the contents of this book, I shall project an imaginary volume, a fictitious book to which the materialized book you now hold in your hands will serve as an epilogue. But only in appearance will I speak of something else, for how often when we probe what is on the margins of a given problem do we discover the most useful keys for dealing with the problem itself. This will become clear to you as we pass from Prospero's books, the metaphor I use to describe Italian elite culture, to the notions of supplementarity and inbetweenness, the figures I use to locate the Italian American cultural experience.

The book that meticulously records and painstakingly documents the 3,000-year Italian contribution to world culture, including the elaborate 500-year migration to America of ideas, traditions, and movements, of artists and intellectuals and their works, and other things Italian—even that supreme fiction, the "Italy of the mind"—is virtually impossible to write. If it were to be written, it might take the physical form of an enormous and profusely illustrated tome, a book of books designed in the Florentine manner, perhaps with Arcimboldo's painting of the "man made of books" as its frontispiece. Perhaps it could be compressed into several labyrinthine chapters of that "total book" that Borges cannot seem to locate in the library of Babel or, if it were composed on a computer, perhaps it would take the form of an infinite hypertext that would map the intricate movement of Italian culture to other cultural spaces and from one period to another.

Boldface terms are defined in the Cultural Lexicon which starts on p. 703.

And who would be able to write such a compendium? Those individual authors who have attempted to write just a chapter or two of the cultural history of the Italian legacy have, with very few exceptions—for example, Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance* (1860) or, more recently, William Vance's exhaustive *America's Rome* (1989)—traditionally proceeded by reducing that history to the shorthand of a series of pertinent and impertinent stereotypes, usually descriptive of the Italian national character. I say "impertinent" for as Giulio Bollati, in an essay on the history of the Italian identity, has pointed out: "Non esiste 'l'italiano,' ma esistono gli 'italiani.'" (The "Italian" does not exist, only "Italians" exist) (Bollati 1972). And, of course, Bollati's is itself a most pertinent cultural stereotype for it quite correctly exposes the lack of an organic and psychological Italian national identity and the historical reasons for such a lack: Italy's lateness in consolidating itself as a modern secular nation; its linguistic fragmentation as a country of dialectics; its ***campanilismo*** (allegiance to a local identity)—from *campanile* (church bell tower), indicating that identity was conceived in the local terms of the parish; and its status as a "heterotopia"—that is, its 3,000-year-long tradition as a culture of mixture, eclecticism, and grafting.

The most (im)pertinent stereotype regarding Italy is that it is a culture of differences. And one of the ironies of the Italian American cultural identity, the making of which the present volume will describe, is that the Italian differential identity in its transplantation to America has received in the name of ethnicity a stability and genericness that it lacked in the Old World. Indeed, one wonders whether Bollati's formula can be applied with the same apodictic force to Italian American identity—"The Italian American does not exist, only Italian Americans exist"—given that Americanization has produced, as a corollary to minorization, an ethnic construct through which Italian Americans have assimilated themselves and, insofar as that construct has been imposed by the majority culture, through which they have been assimilated. This construct is based primarily on the image, at once archetypal and stereotypical, that had crystallized around the southern Italian, the ***Mezzogiorno*** being the region that supplied the vast majority of immigrants. But since these southern Italians were, by and large, members of the Italian underclass, their class image was transferred to immigrants from other regions who also belonged to the same (transregional) subaltern class and who reconstituted their regional identities in terms of this generic ethnic construct. In other words, the United States served not only as a universal melting pot into which Italians were immersed together with other ethnicities and races and assimilated/hybridized as part of the process of Americanization, but as a specific "Italian" melting pot in which regional and local identities were amalgamated into

that formula of sameness that occludes difference—the "Italian American." As Micaela di Leonardo has amply demonstrated in *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender Among California Italian Americans* (1984), the Italian American experience was, and continues to be, a diverse and heterogeneous phenomenon. On the other hand, the fact remains that the figure of the Italian American has been constructed by the majority culture, particularly the mythic stereotype fixed by the mass media as part of its Italic discourse—a highly contradictory and ambivalent "discourse," as is always the case in such ethnic constructions—that is at once Italophilic and Italophobic. It is precisely this long-established discourse that contemporary Italian Americans must come to grips with as they struggle to forge an identity that is not Other-induced but self-generated. One of the tasks of this volume is to describe the formation of this discourse upon the Italian American and to locate it within the larger discourse upon the Italian, to which it serves as a supplement.

But to return to the question of writing the "big book": It, of course, would have to contain an archive of (im)pertinent stereotypes for they, too, are a primary means for the transmission of culture. That archive might be divided into two sections, one containing the cultural stereotypes coined by non-Italians, another containing those devised by Italians themselves, beginning with Dante, who played out the characterological game by assigning historical figures who embodied the generic traits (vices) of certain regions or cities to an appropriate zone of hell. Central to the first section would be those impertinent stereotypes that exploit "the lurid exotic appeal of Italy"—for example, those devised by the Elizabethan dramatists who, as the English essayist Vernon Lee pointed out, employed "the darkened Italian palace" as their favorite background, exploiting what the Italian literary historian Mario Praz has called the "two sides of the Italian appeal": "the splendour of its princely courts, and the practice of poisoning." These sinister images were recycled in such popular Gothic novels as *The Castel of Otranto* (1764) and *The Monk* (1796). On the other hand, there is an Italophilic discourse extending from Chaucer and Shakespeare through Henry James and Edith Wharton to post–World War II Hollywood filmmakers who, in such films as *Roman Holiday* (1953) and *Summertime* (1958) would celebrate Italy—however superficially—as the mecca of mass tourism, the land of "three coins in the fountain" romance and erotic wish fulfillment.

As a paradigm of an (im)pertinent stereotype, consider the remarks of that most solemn of German philosophers, Immanuel Kant, who divided European national identities according to whether they have a feeling for either the sublime or the beautiful. Naturally, the Italians as aesthetes par excellence are located by Kant on the side of the beautiful, their genius seen to express itself in "music,

painting, sculpture, and architecture." Here Kant is guilty of striking a grossly impertinent stereotype, for he ignores the significance of the Italian literary sublime as well as Italian philosophical and scientific culture. Kant wrote in *Anthropology* (1798):

> *As the French prevail in their gusto for conversation, the Italians prevail in their gusto for the arts. The French prefer the private celebration; the Italians, public celebration: the pomp of the parade, processions, carnivals, the splendor of public edifices, paintings, mosaics, Roman antiquities in the noble style. They like to see and be seen within a numerous company.*

Here we approach the pertinent stereotype that sees Italians as the people of the magnificent spectacle; the Italian world, including the world of everyday practices, as a work of total art; the idea of Italy as the site of a global aestheticization and theatricalization of reality. And at this point, we are not far from the Italy described by Luigi Barzini in *The Italians* (1961). Barzini has long been the foremost purveyor of impertinent stereotypes—that is, cultural stereotypes—that, regardless of their superficiality, can be recuperated if they are regarded as symptomatic of the ways in which Italians stereotype themselves. They thus become useful as instances of self-understanding. Consider his description of the everyday performance of the self as spectacle:

> *What exactly are those* cose all'Italiana? *They are things in which we reflect ourselves as if in mirrors: a gratuitous* beau geste, *a shabby subterfuge, an ingenious deception, a brilliant improvisation, an intricate stratagem, a particular act of bravery of villainy, a spectacular performance. . . .*

In addition to the scribe who would painstakingly catalog these (im)pertinent stereotypes, our conjured book would have to be written by many hands—by architects, painters, sculptors, poets, and other practitioners of the beautiful as well as the sublime; by scholars and historians of all of the above disciplines and many more and also by linguists and philologists conversant in Latin, medieval Latin, even Etruscan if such a scholar exists, as well as in modern Italian and its plurality of dialects, including the "spaghetti Italian" the Italian Americans have devised; but also by *bongustai* (gourmets) and others adept at the art of Italian cuisine; by archivists of desire who would document the Italian contribution to the *ars amandi* and its disparate practices of sacred and profane love; by modernists and futur-

ists who would write the history of twentieth-century Italian culture; and, above all, by semioticians of the spectacle who, unlike Kant and Barzini, would be armed with a magic philter that would protect them against the enchantment of a culture that unfolds through and as a spectacle, of which this projected book would also be a part.

Such a book of books would comprise more than the twenty-four books of ancient Italian wisdom that Shakespeare's Prospero, the deposed duke of Milan, brought with him in his exile from Italy—if we accept the count of Peter Greenaway, who has "rewritten" Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in his stunning film *Prospero's Books* (1991), itself a consummate postmodernist exercise in the recycling of Italian Renaissance visual and architectural culture. These twenty-four books form the basis of Prospero's "rough magic," enabling him, according to Greenaway, "to find his way across the oceans, to combat the malignancies of Sycorax, to colonize the island, to free Ariel, to educate and entertain Miranda, and to summon tempests and bring his enemies to heel." And, we should add, enabling him to replicate on his newfound island, as a way of cutting the melancholy of his exile, the lineaments and spectacles of far-distant Italy. The figure of Prospero, the bearer of culture and exponent of civilization par excellence who not only travels with books but is himself a book, a cultural text, is a perfect metaphor for the way in which Italian culture has traveled to other territories, especially the "brave new land" of America. Prospero is a fictional prototype of the "illustrious immigrant," a Renaissance forerunner of those Italian artists and intellectuals who have immigrated to America from its origins to the present: from Filippo Mazzei and Lorenzo Da Ponte (Mozart's librettist and the first professor of the Italian language in America who was the first great cultural mediator between the Old and the New World) to Giuseppe Garibaldi and Arturo Toscanini to Enrico Fermi and Bernardo Bertolucci.

But Prospero is also a colonialist of sorts, a decidedly Italian one, however, in that he "colonizes" primarily by the force of images and the "white magic" of his books and their traditional wisdom. I have deliberately chosen Prospero, rather than Columbus, as a figure of cultural transmission not in concession to recent Columbus bashing but to shake up assumptions regarding the "Children of Columbus": Italy never directly colonized America, although its role in Eurocentrism and Catholic imperialism makes it a paracolonial party; on the other hand, its immigrants, who belonged, for the great part, to the Italian underclass, were colonized by the American experience and, in turn, liberated by it, passing from a subaltern class that had no history to a socially integrated one that has a history within the larger history of America. Columbus was a bearer of history; the fic-

tional Prospero, a humanist and magus, a master of the "liberal arts" and "secret studies," was a bearer of civilization. If Italians have been thought of as bearers of universal culture, it has been that of humanism—hence, Prospero.

Although in a moment I shall describe the specific ways in which Italian culture—elite and popular—has traveled to America, it is important to point out that cultural transmission does not take place only through the Prospero-like agency of the individual talent—the great intellectual or artist—but by many diverse paths: from "ordinary" person to "ordinary" person, from situation to situation, from one historical period to another period, and, as in the case of the Italian Americans of the Great Immigration (1880–1920), from emigration to immigration, from (class) exile within the motherland to (class) exile within the promised land of America, eventually the homeland. This is to say that the collective cultural text the immigrants brought with them—very rarely that of Prospero's elite formation for many of the immigrants were illiterate, but instead that of a lived culture revolving around the everyday practices of ***la famiglia*** (the family)—must also be recognized as a primary means of cultural transmission. The present volume is dedicated both to describing the historical process by which the Italian Americans transplanted their "cultural text" from Italy onto American ground—that cultural text being primarily though not exclusively that of southern Italy, the region from which 80 percent of the immigrants came, although, regardless of the regional identities of the immigrants, they shared on the whole the generic culture of the subaltern—and to documenting how that translocated cultural text, however transformed by acculturation and assimilation, has provided the basis for the Italian American identity and for the cultural production of Italian American writers, artists, and intellectuals. Although this volume addresses the adventures in America of cosmopolitan Italian culture—that is, the culture deposited in Prospero's books as they have been augmented by post-Renaissance and modern Italian culture—its central concern is to construct a critical history of Italian American culture as it extends from the Great Immigration to postmodern culture. As such, this volume ought to be regarded as a supplement—a "dangerous supplement," as I shall demonstrate—to Prospero's books, for Italian American culture is both an appendix to Italian culture and an extension that completes it and, therefore, an integral part of it. With this notion of supplementarity—the immigrant experience is fundamentally an instance of supplementarity—we begin the difficult task of locating Italian American culture.

Before addressing this task, let us return to Prospero, who is at once a humanist—a strict philologist in the sense, still dear to Italians, of a traditional intellectual committed to the affirmation of the past and thus to the difference

that comes from repetition—and a consummate artist and stage director who operates through the magic of the spectacle. In this dual identity, he is a supreme example of those qualities that define Italian culture: on the one hand, the *pietas* (piety) toward tradition and its transmission, the joy rather than the anxiety of influence, as illustrated by the fact that Prospero's originality lies in his status as a duplicate and duplicator (a point Greenaway's film underscores)—that is to say, he is committed to the originality achieved through eclecticism, the mixture, the graft; on the other hand, those qualities of lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, and multiplicity as defined by the celebrated novelist, Italo Calvino (see Calvino 1988), all of which are at play in Prospero's art of the spectacle. Tradition and spectacle, these are the means through which Italian culture has exerted its Prospero function—its disciplining and magical effect—on world culture.

Remember that Prospero educates and entertains his daughter Miranda while also disciplining her suitor, Ferdinand. But also remember that Prospero works his "rough magic" in reference to his doubles: Ariel, the necessary angel of the imagination, who operates through the enchantment of music and spectacle; and Caliban, nature that refuses nurture, the chthonian force that rejects Prospero's discipline. For certain, Italian culture has not unfolded only under the rarified signs of Prospero and Ariel but also under the dark and transgressive sign of Caliban. You may recall the notorious stereotype—impertinent to the point of being pertinent—spoken by Orson Welles in the Machiavellian role of Harry Lime in the film *The Third Man* (1949):

> *In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, and they had five hundred years of democracy and peace. And what did that produce?—The cuckoo clock.*

Here we approach the image of Italy as the dangerous Other, for Europeans as well as for American "innocents abroad," the labyrinth of labyrinths, a culture infiltrated by violence, be it of moonlight or *Machiavelleria* (Machiavellian intrigue). Those who have traveled to Italy are perhaps familiar with the most benign symptoms of its fatal gift: Roman fever, the Daisy Miller syndrome and its late-twentieth-century installment, the so-called Stendahl syndrome, that melancholy caused by the overwhelming effect of too much beauty. A chapter of the book would have to be dedicated to such symptoms and might follow the many chapters dedicated to Caliban and his heirs.

Having projected a fictitious book, a book that cannot be contained within the covers of a single book, I want to identify once again this volume as its *supplement*. I borrow the notion of supplementarity from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who has explored the ways in which a supplement functions both as something that comes after, an appendix or addition, and as an element that is nevertheless intrinsic to and thus capable of modifying, the main body of a text, in this case the Italian cultural text. From this perspective the Italian American cultural experience (as well as this volume, which documents it) is a supplement at once extrinsic and intrinsic to Italian culture. I would add, following Derrida, that it is a distinctly "dangerous supplement" in that it exposes those things that in Italy were denied or suppressed. By "dangerous" I do not mean the scandal of the Mafia or the other elements of Calibanism that have led to the negative stereotyping of the Italian American, what Richard Gambino, one of the contributors to this volume, has summed up in the formula the "mark of Cain." The Italian American experience is a dangerous supplement to the Italian experience in that those subaltern groups who made up the immigrant class and were denied a history in postunification Italy came to America where they would have a history. Within this history, Italian Americans would occupy the postexilic role of supplements, as those who are simultaneously outside and inside their original culture. This historical condition of supplementarity would be eventually rotated into what might be called the position of "inbetweenness"—the contradictory position of a group that, of the outsiders, is the most inside and, of the insiders, is the most outside: the minority that denies its own minority status and that authentic, or more codified, minorities—Blacks, Jews, Latinos, Asians, and so on—regard as part of the White, European, Christian majority, and that the majority culture regards as the most alien, the most Other. (For a brilliant historical account of inbetweenness, see Robert Orsi's essay "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street *Feste* and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem in the September 1992 *American Quarterly*.) It is from these positions of supplementarity and inbetweenness that Italian Americans have produced their formidable culture and achieved great successes in America. On the other hand, their inbetweenness, their double status as both a paraminority and a paramajority, has placed them in a double-bind situation: Theirs is the liminal realm of the inbetween, a space of double demarcation, marginal yet overdetermined with respect to both majority and minority cultures. It should come as no surprise that they are the figures through whom the American unconscious is made to speak—and here we approach their (re)current role, that of the dangerous supplement, but this time with respect to American majority culture.

Locating Italian American Culture: From La Cultura Negata *to Strong Ethnicity: A Critical History*

> *The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Therefore, it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.*
>
> —Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*

Like the subject it treats, this volume, *The Italian American Heritage,* is a hybrid construction—a collection of essays, some profoundly personal, others more formal—designed to serve as both a reference work documenting the history of Italian American cultural production and a critical project dedicated to the analysis of the Italian American cultural self as it has constructed itself and been constructed by its elaborate intersection with the common culture of America.

Although the field of Italian American studies is in certain respects well established, this volume is probably the first to undertake a systematic mapping out of the entire field of Italian American culture, from everyday practices to literary and artistic accomplishments. Central to its attempt to locate Italian American culture are three historiographic tasks.

The first is the setting out of the history of Italian American cultural creation within the context of a more general history of the Italian American cultural experience.

The second is the delineation of canons in literature, music, drama, and cinema, many of which have not been previously established. That is in part because Italian American cultural production has not been regarded as an autonomous entity but has been relegated to the position of inbetweenness—too Eurocentric and too enmeshed in the culture of the masters to have the formal status of a minority culture, while at the same time too minor and too marginal, especially with respect to literary creation, to constitute a full-fledged and self-conscious tradition; its canonical writers and artists defined—either by exclusion or inclusion, but always through excision from the Italian American context—in terms of the dominant culture.

The third task is the elaboration of the Italian American worldview as it has evolved from the immigrant experience to the "strong ethnicity" of the late twentieth century and as it is embodied in the traditions, life practices, and cen-

tral literary and artistic texts of Italian America. Crucial to the understanding of this worldview is the lexical dimension, and each of our contributors has been asked to incorporate into his or her essay those keywords—whether in standard Italian or dialect—through which Italian Americans have organized their world.

In its function as a critical project, this volume interrogates the Italian American identity from multiple perspectives—among our contributors are an anthropologist, a storyteller, a playwright, several poets, several novelists, a singer, a photographer, an opera critic, and a number of literary critics and cultural historians—and in a critical spirit. That spirit is best epitomized by the quotation at the beginning of this section from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1970) by Antonio Gramsci, probably the most significant Italian thinker of the twentieth century, who instructs us to make an inventory of those traces that American culture has deposited in us as it has constructed us as ethnic subjects and inserted us within a discourse on American Italianness by which our presence and persona in the majority culture have been fabricated. If the authors of this volume can be seen to share a project, it is to inventory those traces deposited by both the process of Americanization and the antecedent cultural experience in Italy by which the majority of those participants in the Great Immigration were constituted as a subaltern class. Gramsci described their social formation as that of ***la cultura negata,*** by which he meant a culture that is denied or suppressed and, as part of the vicious circle it imposes, self-denying and self-suppressing. Although it would be historically inaccurate to limit the great variety of Italian American ethnic experiences to a single denominator, it is nevertheless true that the great majority of the immigrants came from the *Mezzogiorno* and that an even larger number came from the transregional culture of poverty that was the underside of post-Risorgimento Italy. The immigrants were already strangers in their own land, preliterate or semiliterate ***contadini*** (peasants) who had no purchase on Prospero's books and whose primary text was the land.

To inventory those traces of the pre-immigrant experience in Italy requires us, in the first place, to derive a genealogy of the passage of the immigrant self to America and its subsequent generational transformations within the process of acculturation and assimilation in the United States. This involves, above all, tracing the history of *la famiglia* for, however that family may have been economically disadvantaged, it was extraordinarily resilient and imparted great cultural strength to its members. Nowhere has the ethos of *la famiglia* been better set out than in the political vision and example of former New York Governor Mario Cuomo.

In addition to this genealogical work, a more difficult task is also required: Given that the majority of our contributors write from the position of third-

generation Italian Americans twice removed from the immigrant experience and its Italian matrix, the problem becomes a question of excavating those traces as they have been displaced, fragmented, hybridized, and erased by the process of Americanization. Here we approach the contradictions that inform the late-twentieth-century Italian American identity: a destabilized identity that vacillates between Being Italian and Becoming Italian (to be more precise, between Being Italian by descent and Becoming Italian by consent and at a cultural level—by constructing a cultural persona that maintains the creative duality of Italian Americanness), between maintaining an archaeology of the self linked inherently to Italianness and fashioning a postmodern—post-immigrant and post-exilic—identity self-consciously and in terms of the play of those ever-receding traces, traces that can be reinforced by an intellectual and, therefore, ironic return to traditional and contemporary Italian cosmopolitan culture, the very culture from which the immigrants were denied access.

From this perspective this volume might be best described as a critical history written in the form of personal essays—that is, written, affectively not technically, in the first person and in the voice of third-generation (but also second- and fourth-generation) Italian Americans. This means three things:

First, our project—at once historical and critical—is also a linguistic project that raises, in its way, the problem of writing as an Italian American, one of the central themes in the cultural history this volume sets out. In other words, in defining the discourse of, and upon, the Italian American, the volume is in itself an instance of that discourse, a historical index—an archive in the making—that registers the current voice of Italian America as epitomized in some of its leading intellectuals and writers.

Second, the essays, considered as an ensemble, are concerned with writing a *history in the plural,* a history that operates on the many different territories of the Italian American cultural space and seeks to articulate the differential identity of Italian Americans, a pressing task given the manner in which Italian Americans have come to be stereotyped by the majority culture and, to a certain degree, have internalized that stereotyping.

Third, rather than producing a monumental and linear history such as that written by Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale in *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (1992), we are concerned with presenting a provisional and somewhat fragmented version of ***la storia*** (history), one that is constantly being modified—rewritten and unwritten—by our contributors, who write from diverse disciplinary perspectives and often conflicting ideological positions. In this sense, the essay, considered as an open form, a fragment of an analysis, and a form

of writing that sets itself in crisis and yet moves toward synthesis, is the appropriate literary register with which to confront contemporary ethnic identity—in flux, in crisis, always inbetween.

We hope that our "essaying" of the Italian American identity remains in keeping with our founding editor George J. Leonard's enlightened idea of what constitutes the tasks of a work on ethnicity: to provide a general readership with an objective and scholarly account of the history of the cultural production of a given ethnic group written primarily by members of that ethnic group while also defining the cultural identity of that group in a personal way and thus speaking through the voice(s) of that group. This volume, then, is a medium with which to do the historical work, only just begun by Italian studies, of (1) establishing literary and artistic canons; (2) defining the specific nature of American Italian texts whether they be strictly Italian as the opera, strictly Italian American as the ***macchiette coloniali*** (colonial sketches: Americanized versions of the Neapolitan ***macchietta*** or character sketch) of the immigrant theater, or strictly Italian American as the "mean streets" films of Martin Scorsese; (3) elaborating a micronarrative of the Italian American cultural experience and situating it within the master narrative—*la storia*—of Americanization; and (4) formulating a lexicon of the linguistic terms that have served Italian Americans as a grammar of living. It is also a medium in which to "essay" the Italian American identity: to find a way of speaking about that identity and to inventory the traces that the historical process has deposited in it.

Since I have already lapsed into the "we" construction above, it is important to confront the question of the readership for which this volume is intended. All ethnic cultural texts are, to a certain extent, double voiced, addressed at once to an ethnic insider and a nonethnic outsider. Although this work is designed specifically to give that information that will permit the outsider to become an insider, it nonetheless remains double voiced. Whereas the general reader will find it to be a guide through the labyrinth of Italian American culture, and the ethnic but non-Italian reader might use it as a mirror with which to reflect his or her own ethnic experience, the Italian American reader is under a specific charge. Although the volume is a celebration of the Italian American cultural heritage, it is intended to do something more than engage the Italian American reader in an ego-affirming exercise or in a consoling game of recognitions. If the volume practices a politics of identity, it is that of an identity in crisis that needs to rethink in a critical way its history as it extends from *la cultura negata* of the first and second generations to the strong ethnicity of the acculturated third and fourth generations as well as the weak ethnicity of the assimilated members of those genera-

tions. Such historical work—the inventorying of traces—leads always from the question of Being Italian to that of Becoming Italian. Becoming Italian for the contemporary Italian American, the people of inbetweenness, the most assimilated of the minorities, involves making that inbetweenness into a strategy for forging a strong identity. This means, among other things, recognizing the weaknesses of strong ethnicity and the strengths of weak ethnicity.

Consider as an expression of immigrant strong ethnicity the tirade spoken by Maestro Farbutti in Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939): "We are Italians! Know you what that means? It means the regal blood of terrestrial man! Richer than the richest, purer than the finest, more capable than an-y! an-y! race breathing under the stellar rays of night or the lucent beams of day! . . ." The maestro goes on with his aria of rage, listing the great Italian artists and concluding with the declamation: "We are the glory of Rome, *the* culture! By us the rest are scum! And it is the duty of us great Italians to—" Breaking off at this point, he transposes his fury into the singing of "Ritorno Vincitore." Of course, what di Donato gives us here is immigrant rage: the aria of the grandiose self that arises in reaction to the humiliation and stigmatization of the figure of Italianness. Because it is simply reactive, it is a negative version—a travesty—of strong ethnicity that, at least in my definition of it, is active in its affirmation of selfhood, inclusive and dialogic with respect to others, not self-referring. Furthermore, strong ethnicity requires the labor of the negative—that is, criticism and self-criticism that is not reactive but active. The challenge it presents is to pass from being an ethnic subject to a critical agent.

Italian Americans have traditionally been extremely lax in guarding their image (see the essays of Thomas Belmonte and Richard Gambino in this volume) and in adopting a critical stance toward the process of "Othering" to which they have been subjected. It has become a truism that the Italian Americans are the only group that can still be defamed with impunity in the public sphere. This volume is intended to provide information by which to gain a more accurate sense of the Italian American identity and the image Italian Americans hold of themselves. It is not intended, however, to codify the grievance Italian Americans have with the majority culture regarding their (mis)representation in the media and in the American imaginary itself. It is designed, instead, to provide models for reading through such (mis)representations and for critically analyzing the assumptions that underlie the stereotyping process.

Let me give three examples of the sort of critical work that needs to be done. The first pertains to the English critic John Sutherland's review in the *New York Times Book Review* (6 February 1994) of *The Edge of Night,* an autobiographical

"confession" by Frank Lentricchia, one of the contributors to this volume and a leading American literary critic who teaches at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. (The first chapter of *The Edge of Night* appears in Part One here, retitled "The Genealogy of Ice.") The heading of Sutherland's review reads "The Don of Duke: A Literary Critic Fancies Himself Part Corleone and Part Prufrock." Throughout the (begrudgingly positive) review, Sutherland, a professor of literature at University College, London, has no other way of dealing with Lentricchia's aggressively ethnic style and his literary performance as blue-collar professor—"his Italian hoodlum act," as Sutherland puts it—engaged in an agon with T.S. Eliot than to resort to Italian stereotypes: the "don of Duke" is not Oxbridge in style but evocative of Al Pacino playing Michael Corleone; Lentricchia's literary persona is part "Raging Pasta," part Prufrockian. If one is to employ the codes of Italianness to frame a reading, why not employ the correct ones? To wit, those of Lentricchia's applied Gramscianism and Scorsese's mean-streets rage carried over into academia? What Sutherland gives us is, in effect, the equivalent of evaluating Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980), a text that Lentricchia both invokes and evokes, in categories proper to a Merchant and Ivory film. In this so-called Age of Hybridity in which the strategy of hybridity has been elaborated, why is not such a strategy seen to be at the heart of Lentricchia's attempt to write as an Italian American and through the persona of blue-collar professor? Why does Sutherland not bring to bear on his reading of *The Edge of Night,* Lentricchia's Gramscian attempt to theorize his own contradictory status as a traditional or cosmopolitan intellectual that places him at odds with the working class identity of his origins? And why are the class implications of Lentricchia's attempt to affiliate himself with his modernist "Godfather," T.S. Eliot—"my kinsman" as Lentricchia puts it—not explored and seen as an Italian American troping of Eliot's attempt to affiliate himself with his own "Godfather" and kinsman, Dante? And why is Lentricchia's attempt to forge a scriptural self not placed within the history of Italian American writing since, within that context, the violence of his language and his attempt to write as if he were speaking become comprehensible as the appropriate means with which to break through a collective, subcultural writer's block and to move from silence to confession? And why not read Eliot as a gangster, for are not masters literary gangsters of sorts?

The second example is initially linguistic but leads us into the area of Italian self-hatred. Let me preface my remarks by saying that they are neither politically motivated nor concerned with political correctness in speech. They are concerned, instead, with identifying the misusage of a particular term from the Italian lexicon and the implications of that violation for both the speaker and the Italian

social text. Bob Grant (an Italian American born Robert Gigante), the host of a program on WABC Talk Radio that commands an audience of one million listeners, launched a relentless attack against the then governor of New York Mario Cuomo during his campaign for re-election in 1994. Grant repeatedly designated the former governor as "the *sfaccimm*": "Down with the regime of the *sfaccimm!*" went Grant's rant. Grant translated *sfaccimma* (often shortened in speech to *sfaccim'*), a term appropriated from the Neapolitan dialect, as "low life, heel, low born." The word, in fact, is a *parola brutta* (prohibited or interdicted word) that means literally "sperm" or, more suggestively, "the sperm of the devil." At the connotative level it summons up all of the negative attitudes associated with the waste products of the human body: the word "scum," in one of its unprintable intensifications as a compound word, would be the approximate English equivalent. It is a word that epitomizes the linguistic violence of the dialect, with dialect understood as the language of the skin, of the vendetta, as the vade mecum of the streets. Since it designates the heterogeneous elements of the body, it is the perfect term to target an enemy.

What was disconcerting about Grant's deployment of it was his ignorance of the protocols of its usage. It is not to be addressed to the face of one's opponent for it is a fighting word, a word of aggravated insult that leads, at least in the private sphere, to escalating violence. Furthermore, it is a taboo word that has no place in the public forum. Its repeated use in a public way indicates that its user has no awareness of its shock value as a vicious slur and of how it indicates to the knowledgeable Italian speaker, who will take umbrage at its use, that its speaker is a ***cafone***. (*Cafone,* literally a "peasant" but by extension a "barbarian" or "Yahoo," is one of the key terms in Italian American social language, marking the great divide between those who know and those who do not know the codes of their own cultural text. Even though it is a word of standard usage, the C-word cuts the Italian skin much deeper than the S-word.) Therefore, Grant's misusage was not simply a matter of political incorrectness but of transgressing a social language whose primary concern is the "face," showing respect for the territories of the self, especially those of an opponent. Thus the use of such a stigmatizing epithet is defamatory (in any other context other than the Italian American, it would be considered racist) and, from the Italian American point of view, *defacing* and tactically incorrect. I say tactically incorrect for however Grant intended to use the epithet as a provocation, its public—"in your face"—usage indicated that the speaker was ignorant of the word's meaning and the protocols determining its usage. It is a gutter word to be used behind the back of one's enemy or uttered to oneself or, when in the context of acting as a "with," addressed collusively to a

pack operating within the frame of street behavior. That this frame-breaking word succeeded in conveying an affective charge to an audience ignorant of its specific meaning, serving as a conduit to channel the political discontents of a right-wing audience against a political figure perceived as being all too liberal, is a testimony to the archaic power of the dialect. This power can be attributed to the phonetic properties of the word, its pronunciation taking the expulsive form of a spitting out or "ejaculation" that reinforces its semantic (dis)charge. But as is the case with all linguistic utterances, especially an affective word designating repulsion, one not only speaks language but language itself also speaks. In this case, language tells us that the speaker is unable to confront his opponent in the conventional language of political debate and that the repulsion directed at the target ought to be redirected toward the speaker himself. That the semantics of this word took place behind the broadcaster's back is indicative of a misappropriation of Italian American codes and ultimately a demonstration not of the stigmatization of a political enemy but of self-stigmatization. (This critique of Grant is not politically but culturally motivated; neither does it raise the characterological question of rivalry between the little man and the great man, nor the arbitrariness—authoritariansim—of Grant's on-the-air style, the preemptive strikes of which short-circuit all possibility of dialogue.)

On the other hand, one of the functions of this volume is to equip its reader with the knowledge to read through such linguistic disfiguration, such *disfacements.* Furthermore, the notion of self-stigmatization leads us to the area of Italian American self-hatred, to borrow a term that has seen hard service in Jewish and African American self-understanding. It is time that Italian Americans be strong and critical enough in their ethnicity to designate those texts in their tradition that involve self-hatred whether they take the social form of the Mafia, clearly the greatest instance of Italian self-hatred; the literary form of Albert Innaurato's 1977 play *Gemini;* or the self-stigmatization of Bob Grant's use of a linguistic signifier of his own ethnicity to violate the standards presumably sustained in broadcasting.

The third example pertains to the class stereotyping of Italian Americans as blue-collar creatures. Stanley Aronowitz, in *The Politics of Identity: Class, Culture, Social Movements* (1992), offers the following generalization about Italian Americans: "Their signal achievement has been to win a secure place in the industrial working class as semi-skilled and, especially in the construction and needle trades, as skilled workers." However such a totalizing generalization may have held for the second generation (in New York perhaps, but certainly not in California and elsewhere)—the sons and daughters of those immigrants who belonged to an exploited underclass in Italy, whose migration was thus in great part economi-

cally determined, and for whom blue-collar identity was an honorable means of achieving the first step of the American Dream—to invoke such a formula to describe the extremely diversified and evolved class positions of Italian Americans in the 1990s is to resurrect the superannuated and ironclad formulas of an essentializing sociology that seeks to keep Italians in their place in an innate class and racial hierarchy. This is all the more alarming since the seventies and eighties were the period of the third generation's great breakthrough. That breakthrough was trumpeted in the mass media (see, for example, Stephen Hall's "Italian-Americans Coming into Their Own," in the *New York Times Magazine,* 15 May 1983), and the group's entry into the upper echelons of the professions and managerial class carefully documented in the specialized literature. Theodore White's assessment in *America in Search of Itself* (1982) was typical in its identifying Italian Americans as "the most important among the rising ethnic groups." Moreover, it was in that period that Italian Americans made their great breakthrough into academia after a long resistance to the process of education, producing for the first time a group of intellectuals able to explain to Italian Americans their own history of cultural exclusion and to articulate the contradictions of their identity. Rather than refer to the recent literature on the transformation of the Italian American identity, such as that of Micaela di Leonardo's previously mentioned 1984 work or other statistically documented studies, Aronowitz persists in recycling the usual stock of stereotyping formulations: the "sports, entertainment, organized crime" model as the route for ethnic economic advancement, the tritest model of assimilation that explains nothing except the obvious; racial violence toward Blacks, what might be described as the Bensonhurst syndrome, which is taken as normative rather than as historically anomalous and without an accompanying attempt to understand that violence as being symptomatic (see the previously mentioned essays by Belmonte and Gambino in this volume and by Orsi in *American Quarterly*); and the invocation of the film *Moonstruck* (1987) as providing "relatively dignified portrayals"—albeit violent—of Italian American behavior when in fact that movie has very little to do with Italian American behavior and is a flagrant example of the fantasy history projected upon the Italian family by the majority culture. If this volume serves both the general reader and the Italian American reader as a counter-history to such stereotypical assumptions at work in the three examples set out above, it will fulfill its tasks as a critical project and a history written in the plural. Cultural historians—and, by extension, readers concerned with encountering cultural difference—must be workers in the plural because the ethnic subject is effectively plural and because not to confront that plurality is to repeat the stereotyping discourse by which the other is reduced to the same.

Specific Instructions for Reading This Book

Having already laid out the general objectives and the rationale of this work, I want to alert the reader to a number of problematics that run through the entire volume and that are not indicated by its formal structure. That structure is threefold: (1) an opening section raising the general question of identity, past, present, and future; (2) a second section on traditions and everyday practices, including the traditional life cycle, the house as the locus of Italian American identity, and storytelling as a medium for transmitting the tradition; and (3) a large section—the heart of our study—treating Italian American cultural creation, which is subdivided into literature (the novel, women's writing, poetry, and other genres) and the arts (theater, music, the visual arts, and the cinema). Whereas this volume takes as its master narrative the passage from *la cultura negata* to strong ethnicity, it also unfolds a number of (his)stories within that history. Among them are the following:

The Discourse on the Italian American

First of all, let me indicate that, to ensure stylistic uniformity, we have followed Garland's protocol, based on those of the Library of Congress and the *Chicago Manual of Style,* regarding the graphic appearance of this volume's central term: *Italian American.* The editors had originally considered the possibility of taking the graphic risk of preserving all three of the different punctuations used by our authors: *Italian-American, Italian/American, Italian American,* the latter being the most neutral and politically correct form, whereas the first two variations are charged with polemical associations. (The present author introduces a fourth variant, ~~*Italian American,*~~ to designate the bracketed or erased identity—the "weak ethnicity"—of the contemporary period.) That our contributors are equally divided over the punctuation of the term is a clear indication that the designation is itself under question and in flux within Italian American culture at large. The marking or unmarking of the term is, in effect, a declaration of one's attitude toward ethnic and self identification, a manifesto in brief by which difference or sameness is announced. The ambivalence of the term, as reflected in our authors' refusal to come to a consensus, is emblematic of the present crisis of the Italian American identity, which is far removed from its first terminological designation as *Italo-American,* a term to be abnegated as a sign of colonialization. Although the traditional term *Italian-American* is the most proper grammatical form (grammatical correctness often hides ideological impropriety, needless to say) and, as of 1996, is used, for example, by the *New York Times,* it is problematic because it foregrounds

the status of *Italian-Americans* as hyphenated Americans. The hyphen, when negatively construed, is a graphic marker of a fractured and incomplete identity, not necessarily the sign of a rich bicultural self. (For a reading of the hyphen as as positive mark, see the chapter by Thomas Belmonte in this volume.) Therefore, the use of *Italian American* removes the minus sign of the hyphen, thus neutralizing the fracturing effect of the hyphen and introducing in its place a gap that maintains a respectful silence. On the other hand, *Italian/American,* a usage advocated by Anthony Tamburri, to whom this discussion is greatly indebted, and employed polemically by our younger contributors, introduces the aggressive mark of the slash that activates all the contradictions at work in the hybrid identity of the *Italian/American,* thereby effecting a radical disturbance in the traditional equations and the nominal identities such equations enounce: Italian = American (the unity of the assimilated self); Italian - American (the separation and disjunction of the culturally divided or hyphenated self), Italian + American (the balance of the self enhanced by acculturation.) It is important, therefore, that the reader recognize that our usage of the term *Italian American* in this volume marks a terminological conflict and that the gap between the two terms ought to be read as a full sign—not an empty or insignificant blank—that activates and keeps in play all the terminological options discussed above.

Although no formal history of the formation of the discourse upon the Italian American is given, the various essays constantly refer to, and position themselves with respect to, it. A distinction ought to be kept in mind between (1) that discourse written primarily by non-Italians—usually from the disciplinary positions of ethnography, sociology, cultural anthropology, and urbanism, but also by journalists who assumed ideological and even racialist versions of the above positions—that first designated the immigrant as an ethnic Other, as a subject to be judged in terms of "meltability" (assimilation and genteelization); and (2) that discourse written by Italian Americans about themselves, usually from an emic position and concerned with self-exegesis.

The first discourse can be seen to extend from the documentary work of the journalist and social reformer Jacob Riis through the polemical literature that crystallized around the Sacco-Vanzetti case and on organized crime in the twenties to Edward Banfield's *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958), in which the thesis of "amoral familism" was first elaborated. The temper of the Italophobic side of this discourse is epitomized in such titles as "What Shall We Do with the 'Dago'?" and "The Importation of Italian Flees—An Infernal Plot." (See the 1973 anthology edited by Salvatore LaGumina, *Wop: A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States.*) In the sixties and subsequently, Italian Ameri-

cans tended to be treated as part of studies of White ethnicity in general, a sign not only of their assimilation but of the legitimization of the category of ethnicity.

The discourse by Italian America, on the other hand, despite its long but sporadic genesis from the colonial period onward, crystallizes in the post-1968 period, that moment in which *The Godfather* phenomenon—the novel by Mario Puzo and its cinematic adaptation by Francis Ford Coppola—and Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) erupt within mainstream culture. (Perhaps the best source to trace the formation of that discourse is *A Documentary History of the Italian Americans,* edited by Wayne Moquin along with Charles Van Doren and Francis Ianni and published in 1974.) The formation of this discourse signifies that Italian America had produced a group of organic intellectuals, to use Gramsci's term, who were concerned with writing *la storia* from their own point of view and with bringing to the interpretation of their own culture the instruments of sociological and anthropological analysis, if not yet critical theory. The central foci of this discourse were the two elements that had traditionally dominated the stigmatizing discourse on the Italian Americans, but now they were approached from within and in terms of "thick description": *la famiglia,* the strong and enmeshed family considered as good object, and, as a corollary, its demonic displacement, the "bad family" or crime "family." Crucial to the formation of this discourse was Richard Gambino's *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans* (1974), which codified the forceful workings of *la famiglia* as a disciplinary and identity-forming structure in terms of such traditional ideals as the ***uomo di pazienza*** (literally man of patience, but implying masculine behavior governed by inner control and reserve) and the ***donna seria*** (a nurturing woman who embodies the ideal of seriousness in her role as the center of *la famiglia*), thereby providing Italian Americans with a cultural grammar with which to speak of their selfhood. On the other hand, such works as Francis Ianni's *A Family Business: Kinship and Social Control in Organized Crime* (1972) began to move beyond the denial of the Mafia and to come to grips with its historical genesis as a subcultural formation. These works, along with others such as Andrew Rolle's psychological portrait *The Italian Americans: Troubled Roots* (1980) and Humbert S. Nelli's authoritative history *From Immigrants to Ethnics: The Italian Americans* (1983), would establish a way of speaking about the Italian American experience from within while preserving the objectivity of historical analysis.

One of the characteristics of the Italian Americans' discourse upon themselves is that it has only rarely taken the form of an operative criticism concerned with mobilizing a political identity or with intervening at the levels of anti-defamation and aggressive monitoring of their image. This can be seen as a result

of their position of inbetweenness and their political assimilation—Italian Americans have to some degree abandoned their traditional political affiliation as Democrats; they cannot be counted on to vote in a bloc either for a Democratic candidate such as Mario Cuomo or a Republican candidate such as Alfonse D'Amato, the styles of the two political figures representing the ideological schism within the Italian American political identity, a schism that the Republican Fiorello La Guardia and the leftist radical Vito Marcantonio, both of whom commanded large Italian American constituencies, did not need to brook.

In any case, this important groundwork established the foundation for more specialized work in the eighties such as Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (1985) and Di Leonardo's previously mentioned *Varieties of Ethnic Experience* (1984), which were supplemented by a series of celebratory works such as *The Big Book of Italian American Culture,* edited by Lawrence DiStasi and published in 1989, and Allon Schoener's richly illustrated and documented *The Italian Americans* (1987), which features a magisterial introductory essay by A. Bartlett Giamatti. A key work of journalism, which had a tremendous impact upon the way Italian Americans were perceived within mass culture, was "Italian-Americans Coming into Their Own," the previously cited 1983 *New York Times* article written by Stephen Hall.

Into the 1990s Italian American discourse has evolved beyond its immediate concern with documenting its institutions and history and turned toward the more critical tasks of theorizing about its traditions and contemporary identity, locating its presence in the common culture, and probing its representation and self-representation in literature and the arts. In other words Italian American writers and intellectuals have moved toward an operative criticism in keeping with the notion of strong ethnicity. In addition to Richard Gambino, whose seminal role has been discussed above, most of our contributors have played crucial roles in the elaboration of the contemporary discourse on the Italian American. In *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women* (1985), Helen Barolini, a distinguished novelist and one of the strongest practitioners of Italian American women's writing, has singlehandedly established a canon of Italian American women's writing, thereby transforming a previously neglected and dispersed—"negated," in the Gramscian sense—group of works into a viable literary tradition from which future writers can claim a legacy. This breaking of the silence that has enveloped the "minor literature" ("minor" in the territorial and nonpejorative sense elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [1986]) practiced out of necessity by Italian American woman writers is a model for understanding Italian American writing overall as

well as minority literature in general in that it provides a diagnosis of "negated" writing, that solitary form of writing that is perpetually infiltrated by two silences: the silence stemming from the impossibility of writing and the silence stemming from the impossibility of writing the literature of the masters. It is, of course, from this silence that Italian American writers have won their strong voice. Mary Jo Bona, a literary critic who works from a feminist perspective, has extended Barolini's work in her anthology, *The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian/American Women's Fiction* (1994). Thomas Belmonte, the distinguished cultural anthropologist and polymath, has in *The Broken Fountain* (1989) elaborated a detailed anatomy of the Neapolitan culture of poverty that provides an essential counterpoint to the understanding of the Italian American urban condition. A specialist on autobiography, Fred Gardaphe, together with Anthony Tamburri and Paolo Giordano, has edited an omnibus volume *From the Margin: Writings in Italian America* (1991), that is an invaluable compendium of creative works and critical essays that at once presents the voice of Italian American writing and theorizes its position—the margin—within the common culture. Through his critical work (*Italian Signs/American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*) and journalistic reviews (gathered in *Dagos Read* [1996]), Gardaphe has come to define a new breed of scholar-activists who specialize in the emergent field of Italian American studies and who are attempting to integrate the study of Italian American culture into the curriculum of the contemporary American university. This institutionalization of Italian American studies remains the fundamental task of this generation of Italian American intellectuals. Frances M. Malpezzi and William M. Clements, her husband, have meticulously recorded and painstakingly documented the entire "lived" cultural text of Italian Americans in their *Italian-American Folklore* (1992). Robert Viscusi, executive officer of the Ethyle R. Wolfe Institute for the Humanities at Brooklyn College at the City University of New York and the president of the Italian American Writers Association, has been instrumental in defining the emerging field of Italian American studies, in which he stands as the most authoritative reader of the Italian American literary experience. He has been both a practitioner and a theorist of "writing as an Italian American" as evidenced by his creative writing—the novel *Astoria* (1995) and the long comic poem *An Oration upon the Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus* (1993)—as well as by his extensive critical output. His attempt to bring contemporary theory to bear on Italian American literature is epitomized by the series of tropes he proposes, in his essay in this volume, for a radical revision of Italian American literary history. Thomas J. Ferraro's *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America* (1993) is destined to become a classic in the field. His broad-ranging essay in this

volume on Catholic ethnicity, with its use of "Mediterranean Catholicism" to understand ethnic spirituality, constitutes an important redimensioning of the discourse upon Italian Americans by situating their Catholicism within the context of transethnic American Catholicism and by establishing a grid with which to read the applied Catholicism at work in "secular"—artistic and cultural—practices. As exponents of strong ethnicity, Camille Paglia and Frank Lentricchia, two of America's foremost literary critics, have defined the tasks of the contemporary Italian American intellectual. As academics who have gained wide recognition in the media culture, they have constructed their intellectual personae in the typical Italian fashion by practicing a ***divismo*** (superstar-ism) of the "aggressive ethnic edge," thereby subverting the "laid-back" style of the "WASP establishment," as Paglia describes it. Having moved out of the "small world" of academia and gained name and face recognition in the media culture, they embody the traditional worldliness of the Italian intellectual, but the hybridity of their positions can once again be seen as a version of the inbetweenness discussed above. Both write otherwise, as Italian Americans who bring a libidinal force to their writing—the alternating current of Dionysian flows and staccato of Paglia's *Sexual Personae* and the oral speech rhythms of Lentricchia's *The Edge of Night*. Both theorize otherwise, bringing a particular Italian perspective to their reading of cultural texts: In *Sexual Personae* Paglia reads Western culture in terms of Italian pagan Catholicism; in *Criticism and Social Change* (1983) Lentricchia uses Gramsci to theorize his own conflicted transformation from a working-class identity to the role of a "traditional intellectual," always with reference to the Italian American context. "Making it," Lentricchia writes, "in my kind of context, then, may be one of the most insidious forms of betrayal, because the conditions of 'success' underwrite the social and political interests of that *padrone* who exploited our ancestors."

The work of these writers, all of whom have contributed to the codification of Italian American studies as a discipline and have written, at least in some of their work, from the subject position of ethnicity, can be seen to culminate in their essays in this volume. Thus, the volume can be read as an attempt to focus and extend the contemporary discourse upon the Italian American and as a historical index—and an "archive in the making"—of that discourse. Moreover, among our contributors are a number of artists and performers who approach their subjects through the lens of métier: Gioia Timpanelli, hailed as the "dean of American storytellers," tells *la storia* of storytelling from her unique position as the last of the ***cantastorie*** (professional storytellers) and the first of the new storytellers; Jo Ann Tedesco, whose play *Sacraments* (1978) involves the dramatization of everyday life that is emblematic of Italian American theater, presents from

the perspective of a New York playwright and actress a historical overview of Italian American theatrical culture that builds upon the work done on immigrant theater by Emelise Aleandri and then surveys for the first time the contemporary period; Stephen Sartarelli, a poet and translator, presents a history of Italian American poetry that is concerned with both thematic and formal matters as well as with situating Italian American poetry within the context of American modernism; and Fosca D'Acierno, our youngest and most decidedly fourth-generation contributor, brings to her essay on Madonna the hybridity of her generation's cultural identity, a hybridity reflected in her own bordercrossing between academia and performance, between America, her birthplace, and Italy, where she makes the scene as a singer of blues and alternative music.

Where the volume breaks new ground are the areas of music—popular as well as classical—and dance, visual culture (painting, sculpture, and architecture), and popular culture and the media, including the cinema, which has become one of the primary forms of Italian American expression. With the exception of cinema, which has a rich critical literature dedicated to it, these areas have not been previously treated in a systematic way in part because Italian American musical culture and visual culture have been so integral to the mainstream. The essays in this volume titled "Italian American Musical Culture and Its Contribution to American Music" and "From Stella to Stella: Italian American Visual Culture and Its Contribution to the Arts in America" are highly provisional attempts at mapping out these intricate areas and establishing canons of composers and dancers-choreographers and artists, sculptors, and architects.

Here I want to express my gratitude to Robert Connolly, an opera historian and "naturalized" Neapolitan, for his ***sprezzatura*** and dedication in serving as all-purpose musicologist for this volume. Moreover, as coauthors of the essay on music, Robert Connolly and I want to express our gratitude to Walter Simmons, Ron Odrich, and Gene Lees for their contributions and advice. I also want to thank Stanislao Pugliese, assistant professor of history at Hofstra University, for supplying us with a detailed timeline that will give the reader a sense of the monumental and linear history of the Italian American experience as it extends from 1492 to 1998 (see Appendix 1).

Italian American Language: Key Terms

As previously mentioned, this volume establishes a lexicon of key terms that inform the Italian American linguistic universe. Alphabetized in a separate Cultural Lexicon, these terms and their definitions are integrated into the individual essays, where they appear in bold type. Since our authors share a common lexicon,

most of the terms are repeatedly used, but they are often defined in slightly different ways by individual contributors. The idea is to preserve the sense each author has of a given term and, by repeatedly redefining these terms, to suggest the rich connotations they evoke. It is interesting to note that our lexicon of Italian American key terms is almost identical to the repertory of forty-two current Italian terms set out by Giorgio Calcano in *Bianco, Rosso e Verde: L'identità degli italiani* (1993). This is quite surprising given that the Italian American terms derive in great part from the Italian of the Great Immigration. Of course, there are some lexical displacements: For example, while our lexicon constantly employs the traditional term *cafone, Bianco, Rosso eVerde* uses instead *burino,* a more contemporary term that covers the same social language of boorishness. Also, our lexicon contains an additional number of terms rooted in the culture of the *Mezzogiorno* that do not come into play in the repertory of standard Italian.

The Making of a Linguistic Identity: From Silence to the Construction of a Scriptural Self

Perhaps the most important narration this volume sets out is that of the generational formation of a linguistic identity, of a way of speaking and writing as an Italian American. The *contadini* of the Great Immigration emigrated from a culture of poverty (primarily agrarian) to a culture of poverty (primarily urban). These *contadini,* who came primarily from the *Mezzogiorno,* the "place where Christ stopped" or failed to penetrate, to use the emblematic title of Carlo Levi's 1945 ethnographic novel, the place that Marx had called the *Lazaronitum* (from the Italian ***lazzarone,*** Neapolitan beggar, and thus a pejorative designating the wretchedness of the southern subproletariat and its supposed laziness and dishonesty), were disenfranchised from official Italian civilization. Theirs was the archaic culture of the enmeshed and enmeshing family and the class culture—essentially folkloristic—of the subaltern. It was a culture of silence. They were, by and large, estranged from the mother tongue, the standard Tuscan-based language that had been imposed as the official, and effectively utopian, language of Italian unification, the language of the ***signori*** (masters), of bourgeois domination, and of the system that marginalized them. They spoke primarily a local dialect, although some of them were bilingual. Their linguistic identities were thus constituted in terms of the subcultural language of difference. Their culture was not oriented toward writing (the text) or the Word—official, bourgeois, the law. They in fact systematized the exclusion from, and refusal of, the official wor(l)d by the practice of ***omertà*** (a word derived from *omo* [man] and originally meaning manliness or self-reliance, but coming to have the primary meaning of a code of silence and dissimulation observed by criminals when interrogated by the law and by which

they maintained a conspiratorial network of protection. The term also has the secondary meaning of the wall of silence erected by a subculture or subaltern class to mask the secrets of its inner life from the intrusiveness of the "Other.")

This prologue in the *Mezzogiorno* helps to understand the alienation suffered by the immigrants to America. Their original estrangement from standard Italian was compounded by a second linguistic estrangement: their exile within their new mother tongue, English. Italian American immigrants and their children would come to be perceived as English-breaking speakers, as sublinguistic subjects unable to appropriate the new language, a status that has hardened over the years into the stereotype of Italian Americans as a group who disfigures, and whose members are disfigured by, language. (See in this volume the essay on the cinema.) Jacob Riis was among the first to diagnose the language problem of the Italian immigrant in a stigmatizing way:

> *His ignorance and unconquerable suspicion of strangers dig the pit into which he falls. He not only knows no word of English, but he does not know enough to learn. Rarely only can he write his own language. . . . Even his boy, born here, often speaks his native tongue indifferently (Riis, 1890).*

Although this is not the place to read through this assessment as A. Bartlett Giamatti has done, it is important to take the passage—against the grain intended by Riis—as a document of the linguistic deterritorialization experienced by the immigrant, a stranger in the house of the language. A more living document of the immigrant linguistic condition is provided by the famous vaudevillian Eduardo Migliaccio in one of his famous *macchiette coloniali,* spoken in the voice of Farfariello (see the essay on drama and the theater by Jo Ann Tedesco for a full description of these character sketches and their importance for immigrant vaudeville). I present first the original text "a lingua 'nglese," followed by a translation. (This *macchietta* can be found in H.L. Mencken's revised 1936 edition of *The American Language.*) Infiltrated by Italianized English words, which I have italicized, the sketch is just as much in "broken Italian" as in broken English.

> *Ne sera dentro na* barra *american dove il patrone era americano, lo* visco *era americano, la birra era americana, ce steva na* ghenga *de* loffari *tutti americani; solo io non ero americano; quanno a tutto nu momento me mettono mezzo e me dicettono:"Alo spaghetti; iu mericano men?"*
>
> *"No! No! mi Italy men!""lu biacco enze?""No! No!""iu laico chistu contri?""No, no! Mi laico mio contry!"A questo punto me*

chiavaieno lo primo fait! *"Dice: Orre for America!" lo tuosto: "Orre for Italy!" Un ato* fait. *"Dice: Orre for America!" "Orre for Italy!" N'ato* fait *e n'ato* fait, *fino a che me facetteno addurmentare; ma pero, orre for American nun o dicette!*

Quanno me scietaie, me trovale ncoppa lu marciapiedi cu nu pulizio *vicino che diceva: "Ghiroppe bomma!" lo ancora stunato alluccaie: "America nun gudde! Orre for Italy!" Sapete li* pulizio *che facette? Mi arresto!*

Quanno fu la mattina, lu giorge *mi dicette: "Wazzo maro laste naite?" lo risponette: "No* tocche *ngles." "No? Tenne dollari." E quello porco dello* giorge *nun scherzava, perche le diece pezze se le piggliae!. . . .*

One evening in an American bar where the owner was American, the whisky was American, the beer was American, there was a gang of loafers—all of them Americans. Only I was not American. All of a sudden they surrounded me and asked me: "Hello, Spaghetti, are you an American man?"

"No! No! I'm an Italian man!" "Are you a black hand?" "No! No!" "You like this country?" "No! No! I like my country! I like Italy!" At this point they gave me the first punch! "Say: Hurray for America!" I said instead: "Hurray for Italy!" Another punch. "Say: Hurray for America!" "Hurray for Italy." Another punch, then another punch, until they knocked me out; but I never said, "Hurray for America!"

When I came to, I found myself on the sidewalk with a policeman nearby who said: "Get up, you bum!" I was still stunned: "America no good! Hurray for Italy!" Do you know what the policeman did? He arrested me.

When morning came, the judge asked me: "What was the matter last night?" I responded: "I don't speak English!" "No? Ten dollars." And that pig of a judge wasn't joking, because he took ten bucks from me!

Of course, the humor at play in this sketch intended for the immigrant audience lies in the use of "Italglish," the spoken language of the immigrants which, as Michael La Sorte has emphasized, was essentially an insider's language. ("Italglish" was coined by La Sorte in 1985 in *La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience,* the definitive work on the immigrant idiom.) Italglish was at once a carnivalizing language through which the immigrants accommodated themselves to English and the idiom that opened them to stigmatization. The sketch is about linguistic identity: The American "loafers" attempt to coerce Farfariello to say "Hurray for America" while he staunchly refuses, a refusal already embedded in his use of a broken language, a language inbetween Italian and English. The event culminates

in the typical immigrant's loophole phrase addressed to the judge, "No tocche ngles!"—all too ironically, for the sketch is about the immigrant's experience of verbal hatred ("Hello, Spaghetti"; "Are you a black hand?") and his refusal to perform an "American" speech act, to "tocche ngles."

The linguistic history of the Italian American involves moving beyond this double estrangement from language and the silence that issues from it. Overcoming this estrangement has involved the appropriation of a monolingual American linguistic identity and, given that the Italian immigration preceded the late-twentieth-century pedagogy that seeks to engender bilingualism and biculturalism, a certain stripping away of the Italian linguistic identity. The problem for contemporary Italian Americans is the maintaining or, in many cases, the constructing of an Italian linguistic identity from scratch by formal study. This leads to another one of those typical Italian American double binds: the contemporary Italian American whose grandparents belonged to the world of the dialectic now learns to speak what Albert Innaurato calls "Harvard Italian." It is interesting to note that Innaurato in his play *Gemini* (1977) voices through the character Fran the deprecatory attitude toward the dialectic typical of second-generation Italian Americans: "You see dear, that's Harvard Italian. We don't speak that. . . . You see, my people over there was the niggers. The farm hands, they worked the land. We're abbruzzese; so we speak a kinda nigger Italian." Here the dialect is seen as the stigmatizing language of outsiders, its sense as an insider's language having been completely lost. It is important to point out that the dialect was a site of a rich cultural production in Italy: Some of Italy's greatest literary creations, such as the Roman poetry of Belli and the Neapolitan plays of Eduardo De Filippo, and its various local repertories of popular songs were written in the dialect. Furthermore, the dialect served as the visceral language of the skin, of blood: the deep language of identity in which its speakers lived out their familial and tribal scenarios. As Italy entered the Age of Mass Media, standard Italian has almost come to obliterate the subcultural worlds of the dialect. As *parole abbandonate* (abandoned words), certain dialectical terms, including those still employed by Italian Americans as part of their passional language, remain souvenirs of a receding past, ethnic signifiers that curiously enough maintain their primordial force, as in the previously discussed case of *sfaccimma,* because they enact the return of the repressed, bringing into play the effective remainder that standard speech has suppressed. All of this is to say the obvious: The linguistic side of the project of Becoming Italian involves constructing a strong linguistic identity in both languages, including awareness of the *parole abbandonate.*

The history of the Italian American linguistic identity can be seen to pass from the Italglish of the immigrants to Mario Cuomo's keynote address, "A Tale

of Two Cities," delivered at the Democratic National Convention on 16 July 1984. In that galvanizing speech the Voice of Italian America became one with the Voice of America for the first time. Cuomo presented the immigrant experience as a model of democratization and projected the strong Italian American family into a political paradigm for the "shining city." In that speech, St. Francis of Assisi became the "world's most sincerest Democrat," and the Italian American became a figure of political and linguistic "normalcy." A measure of how far that normalization has come can be found in the notorious comment by then President Richard Nixon who, unable to brook his nemesis Judge John Sirica, said in the early 1970s during Watergate: "He's Italian and I don't deal with them. They're not like us." The line is "White" enough to merit inclusion in Emile De Antonio's documentary *Millhouse: A White Comedy* (1971), and it is too bad that De Antonio (1920–1989), one of America's most provocative documentarists and another of Nixon's Italian American nemeses, assembled his *humour-noir-et-blanc* documentary before Nixon uttered it.

Overcoming the silence, on the other hand, has involved the forging of a scriptural self, the great epic of which is Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete,* in whose English the syntax and the grain of the immigrant's voice is registered. Whereas the deterritorialization of the first immigrants was expressed in the jargon of the greenhorn—broken English/broken Italian—di Donato's deterritorialization is expressed in English: He cannot write in Italian, which is no longer his language; he cannot write in English, which is not his language; nevertheless, he cannot write in any language other than English. Out of this linguistic double bind comes the destabilized language of *Christ in Concrete* in which that strategy of hybridity, to use the cultural critic Homi Bhabha's term, is employed, but rather than producing a polyphonic writing (for example, one in which the narrator speaks standard English and then assumes, whether through dialogue or free indirect style, the dialectic of his immigrant subjects), the entire novel is written in the language of the Other—a hybrid English, a palimpsestic writing in English through which Italian speaks. Di Donato raises the question of writing as an American Italian and Italian American for the first time. For the writers who come after him and who no longer write from the same linguistically hybrid position, the problem becomes that of writing as either an Italian American or an ~~Italian American~~. It is precisely this question of *writing as an Italian American* that the essays in this volume dedicated to literature seek to address. The problem of forging a scriptural self is always there as a subtext to Italian American writing: It appears in its negative form in Gay Talese's notorious query: "Where Are the Italian American Novelists?"; in Helen Barolini's assessment, in the Preface to *The Dream Book,* of the loneliness of Italian American woman writers: "We stand alone, seem-

ingly unconnected to any body of literature or group of writers—anomalies, freak occurrences, non repeaters, ephemera"; in Camille Paglia's triumphant assertion: ". . . look within one generation you get: *Sexual Personae.* One generation! I write English better than the English!"; in Frank Lentricchia's scriptural agon: "A sentence, a sentence, my family for a sentence."

Being-Becoming Italian American

We now leave the project of Being-Becoming Italian American in the hands of our readers. As the strong contribution by women writers to this volume will make clear, that project must be conceived in terms of a new dialogue between *donne* and *uomini.* Given the new multicultural terrain, it must also be forged in terms of a bordercrossing dialogue with other ethnicities and races, a model of which will be established by the publication of the succeeding volumes of *New Ethnic American Literature and Arts.* Perhaps most crucial, such a dialogue must address the common culture in such a way that strategies of selfhood and communal representations may be elaborated and that the "Italian cultural difference" may be maintained both through the ongoing process of assimilation and through a deeper commitment to acculturation—that is, to translating the heritage of Prospero's books, and what they omit, into contemporary terms and bringing it to bear on the fashioning of selfhood in the postmodern world. To our non-Italian readers: Know that our attempt to "translate" ourselves and to articulate the signs of our cultural difference is effectively addressed to you, for it is through the process of "translation" that the cultural self is most fully defined.

Again, I want to thank George J. Leonard for providing us with this forum and for his enlightened view of what constitutes the writing of ethnicity.

I also want to thank Garland Publishing for their strong and enabling support of this volume. We are particularly indebted to our editors Marianne Lown, Carol Buell, Adrienne Makowski, and Anne Vinnicombe, who have guided us in transforming a complicated and idiosyncratic manuscript into a well-wrought text. To our brave copyeditor and first reader Mary K. Cooney goes our profound gratitude: Never have we found an editor more skilled and exacting, nor one who has been more faithful to the process of readying a text for publication.

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Part I

Identity

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The Contradictions of Italian American Identity

An Anthropologist's Personal View

THOMAS BELMONTE

In 1914, as Italian immigration into this country was close to peaking, the eminent sociologist E.A. Ross advised his readers to observe immigrants, not in their workclothes, but "washed, combed, and in their Sunday best. . . . Not that they suggest evil," he was careful to write, "they simply look out of place in black clothes and stiff collars, since clearly they belong in skins. . . . These oxlike men are descendants of those who always stayed behind."[1]

I am the son of the son of one of these "oxlike men." I have been more fortunate than he. Perhaps because I have encountered so little ethnic prejudice in my life, I have never become inured to it. I have never taken it for granted.

I don't remember my grandfather's hands, but my father does. My grandfather died when I was two years old. My father tells me how he bounced me on his lap and toasted his wife, whom he revered always as his bride. He praised the greatness, not of warriors, but of poets, and even composed verses of his own. My grandfather was a man of the Puglian earth, although he never owned even a small parcel of it. His index and middle fingernails were split from wielding a scythe that was so sharp it cut through the clothespins he used as makeshift guards.

Of America my grandfather also sang, of his pride in being a citizen, and in having the right to vote.

I can still see my father's hands. Even in old age, they are as powerful as a champion boxer's but capable of the finest precision. My father is a master mechanic, five years retired. The creases of his hands are still stained with black engine grease. His palm may not tell you his future, but from its lines you can read the story of his life. He labored.

In south Italy and in the cities of America, the children were early work-

Boldface terms are defined in the Cultural Lexicon which starts on p. 703.

ers, sent out into the city to forage or get a menial job. The early insistence that the child contribute to the family was to have portentous consequences in a society where the mastery of high literacy was the only legitimate means by which an immigrant might gain access to the corridors of power. So my father, who was the son of a peasant-poet, a bard, spent his youth gathering coal in rail yards and worked in a German American delicatessen. He never did earn a high school diploma.

After serving in the Pacific during World War II, my father worked, through the 1950s and 1960s, ten hours a day, six days a week, fifty-one weeks a year. Like so many Italian American men of his generation, he was a working man more than he was any other kind of man. He took great pride in his much sought after skills as a diagnostician of car engines. But the professional notion of "gratifying" work would have been alien to him. Like the gasoline he rinsed his hands with at the close of every day, the work saturated his pores and burned away at the nerve endings of his fingers.

As a child I took the full measure of my father's hands, but somehow I always knew that these overworked hands were possessed of a rage of their own and that he, himself, was a tender man, whose sense of grief and beauty was too great to ever be fully acknowledged. On Sundays and holidays he would tell vivid tales of the war, of New Guinea and Japan. Indeed, Kyoto was a place better known to me than Rome. My father never accompanied the rest of us to church. Our formica table was his altar. Italian bread and cheap California wine were sacred enough for him.

I recall many Easter Sundays, but one in particular stays in my mind, that of 11 April 1971. I was two years married. My daughter Christina was four months old.

The linen tablecloth that my mother had so carefully unfolded and spread out was interwoven with silken crowns and diadems that caught the sunlight in mauve and amber tints. What covers a table is important to Italian Americans.

On that day we began with ***antipasto,*** sliced eggs and anchovies and provolone cheese, oven-roasted red peppers, olives, and marinated shallots, known in Italian as *cipolline* (baby onions), but, in the far more expressive Pugliese dialect, referred to as *bombascione:* literally, bombs that split the air like an ax! We ate artichokes stuffed with garlic, bread crumbs, parsley, and cheese. We drank red wine and champagne. We didn't always eat pasta. That day, we ate roast turkey and baked ham, buttered asparagus, broccoli, salad, plenty of stuffing, and hot rolls.

For dessert there was ***espresso*** (Italian coffee) in decorous little cups that

belonged to my grandmother. My mother put out trays of pastries, egg biscuits covered with pink glaze, languishing in a sweet aura of anisette. She set down, ever so gently, a lemon meringue pie my sister made. (At Italian American meals you always credit the cook.) Finally, in the table's center, she placed a round, ruffled, milk-glass bowl, arranged with oranges, red grapes, and a lemon that shone with an April Sunday's lemon-yellow light. For Italian Americans the presentation, arrangement, and even the serving of foods is an art form that hides behind the appearance of spontaneity. To end the meal my mom poured out a heap of nuts directly onto the tablecloth, and we cracked them without regard for the mess.

We argued politics that day, my father and I. We talked unions, and music, and wine. And I heard, behind our boisterous voices, a lively, exuberant song, the voice of Lou Monte, singing "*Eh Cumpare!*" (literally, "Hey, co-father!" from the relationship of ***comparaggio***, a ritualized fictive kin tie between a child, her parents, and her baptismal sponsor). Later, as the afternoon wore into dusk, the sounds of Puccini's "bel sogno di Doretta," from his opera *La rondine* drifted like a stream of liquid crystal to my ears, smooth and warm as a rich golden liqueur. You see, my father, the rough mechanic, was also a connoisseur.

I was reared in the multiethnic working-class suburbs of Long Island, far from the mean city streets that had been the testing ground of my father's manhood. Whereas, for centuries and perhaps millenia, my ancestral fathers had worked *beside* their fathers in wheatfields, vineyards, and olive groves to one day *become* their fathers, my father was the first to have a life radically torn from its paternal roots. My own Icarus-like ambition to fly upward and past the peasant and working-class origins of my ancestral grandfathers was not without peril. Like so many upwardly mobile Italian American men of my generation, I ran the risk of soul-loss and rigidity that comes to all of us when we lose all memory of our roots and of our fathers.

My father still has a jagged white scar above his heart. It is not a war wound. While he was seated in the immense and fantastically ornate Valencia Theater on Jamaica Avenue (in Jamaica, Queens), a gang enemy crept up behind him and plunged the dagger deep, with intent to kill.

As Americans have fled to the suburbs, it is easy to underestimate the role that demarcated and defended city neighborhoods played in amplifying the already fierce Mediterranean masculinity of the immigrant males and their sons. This fierce masculinity is often caricatured by the media and by Italian Americans themselves, who are eager to embrace a *mythos* that would bestow, if not dignity, at least brute strength.

Southern Italian men had always defended their honor through the concept of female inviolability.[2] As long as the women of the natal group had ***vergogna*** (shame), the men retained their ***onore*** (honor as self-respect, and the respect and fear of other men). Indeed, the word ***rispetto*** (respect) still has deep emotional resonances in Italian American life.

But in the years leading up to the Great Depression and beyond, on sidewalks and brownstone stoops, in tenement corridors and shared hallway bathrooms, they were confronted with the challenge of ethnic alien male suitors of their daughters and sisters, suitors who knew nothing of their ancient Mediterranean honor code and cared not to know.

A second factor that pressured toward a rigid and heavily armored masculinity among Italian American men was the emergent contradiction between the mother-centered and oral-commensal values of the home and the more Darwinian, male-dominated world of the street.[3] The cultural estrangement of second-generation sons from the austere world of their peasant fathers (a world that did not include baseball, boxing, and Coney Island) led them to redefine and readjust their code of manhood in terms that would compensate for the strong emotional hold that their mothers retained on their sexuality and that would also serve to keep outsiders out of local networks of illegal commerce and exchange. No wonder then that the favored American image of the Italian American male is still that of the prelinguistic tough guy. Toughness, more than the mere mastery of language, allowed a man to venture outside the home to a place other than church. Toughness could not be faked but was forged and tested in bloody combats of Homeric scale.

Gang wars of murderous ferocity were waged among Italian, Irish, Polish, and, to a lesser extent, African American and Hispanic youth on a weekly basis from the early years of the Great Migration (1880–1920) through the late twentieth century. *West Side Story* (1957), the Broadway musical by Leonard Bernstein, uses the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* to dramatize the severity of these interethnic tensions. More recently the 1987 film *China Girl,* by the Italian American director Abel Ferrara, documents, in terms again reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet,* the love of a pizza boy in New York's Little Italy for the sister of a young Chinese gang leader. The tendency of all humans to "pseudospeciate," to treat members of another group as though they were members of an inferior, animal species, is portrayed through images that are both raw and poetic.

In September 1990 a young African American man named Yusuf Hawkins wandered into the Italian American neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, looking to buy a used car. He was brutally chased and murdered in cold blood by a

gang of Italian American youths who thought he was the African American lover of a local Italian American woman.

The furor surrounding this tragedy was attributed entirely to the undeniable racist hatred that these young men bore for members of other ethnic and racial groups. Hatred, after all, holds people together, roots them to a neighborhood, and keeps invaders at bay. But the deeper issue revolved around the ancient code of female inviolability as sacred and unassailable by *any* outsider on pain of death. The homicidal rage that led to Hawkins' murder was spurred by a young woman's willingness to relinquish her *vergogna* and the consequent diminution in the group's limited and vulnerable fund of male honor. Frank Pugliese's prophetic play *The Avenue U Boys* (1993) documents some of these same intergroup conflicts from the inside out.

It was in such inward-looking neighborhoods as Bensonhurst, Little Italy, and Italian Harlem that the American **Mafia** was born. As in Sicily, the Mafia spread in the manner of an opportunistic social infection. Because there was a break in the connective tissues of the local civil society—the apparatus of police and courts that was supposed to regulate immigrant life—the Mafia was able to germinate in the empty spaces in the body politic where legitimate power should have been.

In Sicily the absenteeism of the aristocratic estate owners (who preferred lives of luxury in Palermo and Paris to the gritty details of agricultural enterprise) gave rise to a new class of gun-toting estate managers and tax collectors, known as ***gabellotti***. It was this intermediary class of entrepreneurs, many of them shepherds by derivation (with no ties to the soil), who forged the complex system of alliances and cultural codes that became, in Sicily and, to a lesser extent, in Naples and Calabria, a vast but invisible edifice of power and influence that rose parallel to that of the official state.

There is scant historical evidence to support the notion that the American Mafia was transplanted to the cities of America by settler-founders with a clear organizational mission. In the cities of America (as Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale have emphasized), the Mafia probably began as an Italian variant of the gang and gangster subculture that had long been dominated by earlier ethnic arrivals.[4] Just as in America's contemporary urban war zones, two moralities contended for the hearts and minds of the community—one based on the "decent" values of the home; the other, on the code of the streets with its adulation of the power both to defend and to take. In the early part of the twentieth century, brutal but unstable gangs of extortionists (the most notorious of which was known as *The Black Hand*) attempted to intimidate local entrepreneurs and to control the food and retail trade within the ethnic enclave. During the Prohibition years,

these criminal gangs expanded their operations. If the Italian gangs were unique, it was in the way they were able to appropriate the "decent" code of the family and subvert it to the purposes of the street. Thus did the most brutal and parasitic of thugs gain renown as benificent neighborhood patriarchs. By skillfully utilizing both the substance and the symbolism of the ancient ***famiglia***, Italian gangsters could more effectively consolidate control over an expanding resource base.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, Mafia extended "families" made inroads into the construction trades, into the rigging of unions and bids, and into liquor delivery and garbage hauling. More recently, they have moved their considerable wealth into legitimate family-run enterprises that both process the profits and serve to mask the illegal side of the business empire. As in the corporate organizations of Japan and northern Italy (both latecomers to capitalism), the evolving core of the mature Mafia corporation (so well described by anthropologist Frances Ianni) was a dynastic lineage of patrilineal kin—a father, his brothers, his sons, and their sons—who adhered to a strict code of obedience, vendetta, and silence.[5]

If the American Mafia can be said to have achieved anything positive, it was to demonstrate to the rest of American society the utility of kinship as a force for synchronizing behavior in the early phase of a business's growth. The popularity of the Mafia as a theme for the mass media testifies to a fascination with an exotic but highly successful form of high-risk entrepreneurship, operating on the economic and moral frontier. In both America and contemporary Italy, the Mafia represents the historical survival of a pre-Christian and even actively anti-Christian ethos. The Mafia ethos privileges males over females, greed over charity, deception, trickery, and blood vengeance over honesty, reparation, and forgiveness. It revels in terror and sadistic cruelty over healing and compassion. Italian American lives are destined to fall under its regressive shadow until Italian Americans themselves repudiate its creed as a violation of their humanistic, Christian, and American heritages.

Italians and Italian Americans are social beings. They would never understand the Kierkegaardian concept of identity as a sorrowful outgrowth of somehow "going it alone." Identity is the fruit of intense participation in relationships and groups. For males, especially, the capacity for daily and lively conversation with other males in the local ***caffè*** is one of the defining signs of manhood. The Italian never contemplates the philosopher's stone by himself but takes a ***passeggiata*** (a walk, usually arm in arm, with a close friend) in order to discover truth. Understanding is a Socratic process that unfolds before two people arguing and reasoning. Insight is achieved, not through a linear process but rather by going round and round the ***piazza*** (plaza), block, or neighborhood park and noting, step by step, previously un-

seen aspects of the truth. The south Italian word for a child who cannot yet speak is *una creatura* (meaning animal or creature). The implication is that selfhood and full membership in the social group are possible only in discourse.

Likewise, birth, marriage, and death are social occasions in Italian American life. These events assemble and unite a large group of kinfolk, co-godparents, friends, and neighbors around both the individual in transition and the symbolic, gustatory, and aesthetic accessories to that transition. Throughout the life cycle, and especially when one departs, one travels *in compagnia* (in the company of others).

I recall a funeral that I attended as a child for my aunt, a beautiful young woman, dead of breast cancer at age twenty-eight, leaving her husband and recently widowed father, and two small children (my cousins Jeannie and Guy), behind.

Great sprays of blood-red roses depicting a bleeding heart formed a rich canopy and fell to the floor like an expensive brocade around my aunt's coffin. The coffin was of dark, lacquered wood. Polished to gleaming, it seemed to catch and preserve within itself the fires of the myriad candles flickering about the room.

That day of her burial my aunt wore a dress I had never seen before, of stiff white lace and lavender silk. Apparently this had been a gift from my uncle, in the hope that she would wear it upon recovering. The rosary beads of mother of pearl, the ones she kept in a box on her vanity, were entwined around her wrists. I watched her lips intently to see if they moved in prayer.

Everyone wept loudly when they took my aunt to the cemetery in a shiny black Cadillac and buried her. As they lowered the casket into the earth, my grandfather dropped to his knees and beat his chest violently with his fists. He cried out in Italian, "*Gesù! Gesù! Perchè? Perchè?*" (Why Jesus? Why?). When the old man collapsed at the grave site, my widowed uncle, who was what they called an ***uomo di pazienza***, (a man of patience), put his hand on grandpa's quaking shoulder and said in a voice infinitely stoical and sad, "C'mon, Pop. Time to go, Pop. Time to go." Only when I saw this proud, white-haired old man sprawled thus in the wet May grass, thrashing about, utterly ravaged by grief, did I truly realize that my aunt was dead, and joined in weeping with the others. Afterward we returned to my deceased aunt's home in Middle Village, Queens, where a lavish but solemn feast awaited.

Americans might be either repelled or amused by such open displays of emotion, but Italian Americans behave as if they believe that emotions themselves possess inalienable rights. The pounding fists and raucous shouts of anger, the spasms and high hoots of belly laughter, and the hard claw-like sobs of grief are heard, at some time or other, in most Italian American homes.

Children learn early that corporal punishment, taken at times to excess by middle-class American standards, is an outlet for parental frustration. Thus they also learn at a very early age that their parents are all-too-human and that the parable-ridden morality of the parental generation is compromised by outbursts of explosive passional feeling that clearly take priority over whatever lesson is supposed to be conveyed by this or that spanking. Life inside Italian American families tends to cut close to the bone, to expose the nerve in the marrow. The playwright Albert Innaurato has accurately captured the emotional drama and boisterous tones of Italian American family life in his play *The Transfiguration of Benno Blimpie* (1973). His more successful and famous work, however, the Broadway hit *Gemini* (1977), was a proletarian puppet show that, with its scatological language and depictions of hurled food and poor hygiene, confirmed for its predominantly upper-middle-class audiences every cliche that they ever wanted to believe about Italian Americans in particular and working people in general. In my own family, powerful emotions of love and anger found a nightly outlet at our table, but there were unspoken rules that reminded all of the essential sacredness of food and of the language that was appropriate in one's mother's presence. The emotion was raw, but the rules were strict.

Whether this propensity to accept the display of real feeling as the inevitable price of staying human has served those Italian Americans who want to join the upper-middle-class stratum of American life is doubtful. Adaptation at this level requires that genuine emotions be denied, restrained, or held in. Italian American childhoods simply do not prepare for these dubious skills.

It is not possible to comprehend the role that the family and family feeling play in Italian American life without returning to its origins in south Italy. So strong is the commitment to family values in south Italy that one American sociologist, Edward Banfield, coined the rather ethnocentric term "amoral familism" to describe it.[6] During his sojourn in a south Italian town, Banfield was appalled at the relative absence of volunteer-based civic and community organizations. The family seemed to be the omega point of social evolution.

Banfield interpreted family loyalty in negative terms, as a cramped pathological response to the failures of public institutions, but, when placed in the contexts of history and anthropology, unquestioned loyalty to the family begins to make good sense. Nor is it the only form of loyalty of which the peasants were capable.

The world of the south Italian was a world forged amid the ruins of the Roman Empire and the hierarchical feudal edifices and institutions that were built out of Roman rubble. The landscapes of south Italy still appear as they did in the

fifteenth century. The forests have long been cut down (for the navies of Venice, Genoa, and Naples), but the castles and defended hilltop towns, which seem from a distance to have been hewn from one block of chalk-white stone, remain. To the annoyance of speeding motorists, the mules remain. The sun-beaten faces of the mature and older women (the "women of the shadows," whose lives the writer Ann Cornelisen has spent a lifetime documenting) remain, to stare down and repel the hundreds of social scientific interrogators who have descended on their villages.[7] The respect-as-fear accorded the ruthless baronial strongman remains. Blood feud, and the rule of manly honor (known to Sicilians as ***omertà***) that effectively seals this closed world off from the probing curiosity of all outsiders—these also remain.

Daily life in this world of ancient stones and plodding mules propagated its own theory of human nature and its own perspectives on the unalterable frameworks of existence. The historical demographer Rudolph Bell has shown why the concepts of fate, honor, family, and village made more sense to the peasants than their modern counterparts—knowledge, law, the individual and the nation.[8] At the heart of this worldview was the inability of either the individual or the society to control death.

Deaths peaked in August and December. The summer took the young, and the winter took the old. Rates of infant and child mortality in the Italian south were as high as 40 percent in the early years of the twentieth century. Babies died when their mothers left them in order to do the work of survival in the fields. They died from being fed *la pappa,* a nonsterile mixture of grain and animal's milk. They died of endemic typhoid, malaria, diphtheria, and meningitis. The death of a small child was so common that it was referred to as *un dolore accettato,* a pain that could be accepted. If the wail of the mourner pierced and echoed through the night, people only nodded, because wailing was the sound that honor made when it was under death's dominion and was no more avoidable than the horrid squealing that rips forth from the throat of the pig on the autumn morning of its inevitable slaughter.

It was sights such as these, endlessly repeated across lifetimes and generations, that created the perspectives on existence with which the immigrants viewed their experience of the great industrial hubs of America. Theirs was a tragic sense of life and a defended one, both ancient and wise. It was not optimistic or in any way utopian. It assumed that human beings were easily corrupted, easily self-deluded, easily selfish and cruel, and easily given over to madness. I remember my Pugliese grandmother's metaphor for the human mind. It was as fragile and as delicate, she once told me, as the golden and sheer silken skin that is first peeled off from the onion.

Not that the culture of the southern peasant was entirely circumscribed by these pessimistic, if tacit, understandings. If an ethos of cunning (***la furbizia***) was central to the worldview, so also were the prestige and approval accorded to any manifestation of generosity. In fact, generosity of spirit (and of one's table) is a hallmark of the Italian temperament. For example, the traditional strict taboo on May weddings in southern Italy is, according to Rudolph Bell, comprehensible in terms of the insufficiency of food for a feast in that month. If you can't feast, you can't marry.

Precisely because the arenas of economic survival were so harsh and unregulated in an essentially medieval society, where, *de facto,* might was right, the Italian immigrant sacralized the values of family loyalty and mutual help between close kinsmen. The primary human bond of Madonna and child was etherealized and symbolized in the figure of the *Pietà* as the highest manifestation of human love because, up to age twenty, sons did often die in their mother's arms, and because throughout the life cycle, for those ever-cognizant of its contingency and finitude, this bond, forged of nature and culture, was the most steady and reliable.

The word the peasants used for the hunger that came with famine was *la lupa* (the she-wolf). The word they used for the insect pests that devoured an entire crop in a matter of days was also *la lupa.* The peasants knew that men and locusts, when hungry, behave the same. Their view of all social forms was conditioned by their awareness of the depths to which human life could sink in a society without faith in the fairness of law. Southern Italians are only too aware of the impotence of mere morality in the face of hunger and want, envy, jealousy, and rage. So for the immigrant the bonds of blood and the organic sense of oneness that could be shared with parents, sisters, brothers, cousins, and perhaps spouses were the only real guarantees of human warmth and goodness in a fallen world. True friendship is a poorly developed concept in the Italian south, often confounded with hospitality. The category of the volunteer does not exist.

The world beyond the family might be civil or it might be barbaric, hostile or inviting, but the point was not to trust it or pledge one's allegiance to it, because in the worst-case scenario—of anarchy, chaos, and greed—the rabid wolves that are chained up in every human heart would run amok. Such terrible scenarios—of famine, conquest, plunder, earthquake, and disease—are part of the historical experience of south Italy and are, therefore, to be found at the center as opposed to the periphery of every Italian American's "sociological imagination."

But if the culture was feudal, the communal frameworks that contained it were not. The great mass of struggling ***contadini*** and ***braccianti,*** the small holders

and landless farm laborers who were hired by the day on the great ranch-like estates, known as ***latifundia,*** shared a class consciousness and worldview that were certainly as proletarian as they were rustic and provincial. The *contadino* also shared much in common with city folk, including a pattern of land tenure, settlement, and work that brought thousands of people together in a large densely populated town called a ***paese***. Each *paese* gave birth to a distinctive local tradition and had its own madonna or protective patron saint. To be someone's ***paesano,*** coresident in the same *paese,* meant that you shared local lore and values as well as more general cultural understandings, even if you did not know that person directly. Thus, Banfield's designation of familistic devotion as "amoral" needs to be seen in the context of a wider sphere of collective sentiment referred to by the peasants themselves as ***campanilismo,*** from the word *campanile,* meaning the village church bell tower. To feel *campanilismo* meant you shared common feelings of both identity and pride for all who lived within the territory where the ringing of your village's church bells could still be heard.

The ***festa*** (communal feast), brought all of the *paesani* together in a procession of collective adoration in which the patron saint or madonna was carried to the altar of the church. After the celebration of the Roman Catholic Mass, the townfolk indulged in a bounteous feast and then gave themselves over to a night of impassioned song as they danced furiously to the clash of cymbals and ancient shepherd's pipes and to the tinny, outdated popular music of the amateur local band.

In the Italian American slums of America's booming industrial cities, the tradition of the *festa* was retained and adapted to express in ritual terms the responsibilities of both men and women to meet, with *onore,* the great spiritual challenges and tasks that were imposed by the trauma of immigration. The sociologist Robert Orsi has described the feast of the Madonna of 115th Street in Italian Harlem, where a woman, her tongue licking the cold stone floor and steps, was ritually dragged by her menfolk up the aisle of the church to the feet of the madonna's statue. This ritual, since banned by the Catholic Church, enacted the commandments of servitude, chastity, self-sacrifice, and resignation to suffering that were graven into the Italian female soul. Lest she forget.

By way of counterpoint, in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, the Feast of the Giglio (the lily) is held every summer in July.[9] The feast memorializes a fifth-century miracle in the town of Nola, near Naples, the plot of which includes Turkish invaders, a saintly bishop, and a good sultan. Thus the feast poses questions about the humanity of one's enemies and reaffirms the power of a universalistic ethos. But this message is certainly secondary to that communicated by a giant tower, six stories high, representing a lily, that is carried, or rather "danced,"

about the neighborhood on the brawny backs of the local men. Perhaps this imposing, monumental flower (as the local priests will tell you) is only a reproduction of the lilies waved at the saintly bishop by the original celebrants. But to a psychoanalyst or a pagan they recall the regenerative powers of Priapus and Dionysius as well as the family's right to tame and harness them. Each tower weighs four tons, and the men of the *paranza,* or team of bearers, must achieve near-perfect synchrony with one another. The lead singer enjoins the *giglio* bearers to meditate well upon the awesome weight that sends jolts of hot pain shooting through their shoulders. Lest they forget.

In collective rites and celebrations such as these, both penitential and carnivalesque, the individual immigrant was vouchsafed the gift of identity. Men and women reaffirmed their membership in a new kind of urban *paese* and testified to their fellow immigrants of the wrenching agony and also the shared sense of achievement that come from bearing a new world on the ancient world's shoulders. But as the old neighborhoods are emptied by suburban flight and refilled with new Asian and Hispanic hopefuls, Italian Americans find themselves caught between the heavy gravitational pull of the past and the exhilarating moral weightlessness of contemporary (call it "postmodern") American life. At worst, the psychic management of these polarities can lead to a conservative rigidity that is anachronistic and insular. At best, Italian American innovators in politics, business, education, and the arts invent unusual creative syntheses that increase the vitality and resilience of American culture and its core institutions.

The pain of these internal contradictions for second- and third-generation Italian Americans can be more severe and debilitating than all of the contempt and prejudice that the first generation encountered on a foreign shore. The insults, the epithets, and the sneers—these were easy to deflect by comparison with the spiritual suffering that accompanies the realization that one is a stranger in two lands, so that wherever one dies it will be far from home.

Most Italian Americans mediate their existence in American society through a series of uneasy and shifting cultural compromises. But the hyphen that frequently joins the two words *Italian* and *American* is a link made of iron that is a potential source of power, knowledge, and strength. Look to the center, to the composition of the hyphen, when seeking an understanding of any ethnic American group.

The organizing premises of the American society that received the immigrants were fundamentally alien to the unwritten laws that the *contadino* lived by. Consider the contrasts. If ***la miseria,*** the chronic sense of impending disaster, was axiomatic to the south Italian's concept of the future, America was a frontier

culture on the move, glad at heart and confident in the bounty that lay in the fruited plains and broad vistas ahead.

But if America, as philosopher Allan Bloom has emphasized,[10] was the world's newest viable culture (albeit with the longest uninterrupted political tradition), the civilization of the Italian south embodies one of the world's most ancient continuous cultural traditions, going back to the Greek colonization of Sicily 1,000 years before Christ. The historical situation, the powerful presence of the past—as something that shapes the present and future moment—reminds one of India and China more than of other European societies. Here is a world where history is recorded and expressed not so much in libraries and museums as in dialect and slang, in folk music and architecture, in gestures, in food, in etiquettes, in magical rites and incantations.

America, by contrast, is a civilization committed to endless experiment and bold change, claiming continuity with no traditions other than its own. The American vision of how to construct a society and how to create a culture derives not so much from a seasoned historical tradition as from the Age of Enlightenment, with its faith in human reason and its conviction that laws, carefully and constitutionally framed, could provide a setting for the pursuit of a genuine and nearly universal human happiness. The Enlightenment was a repudiation and dismantling of the feudal worldview, with its emphasis on corporate and collective identities, as lord, monk, guild member, or serf, as mother, son, husband, or godfather. Blind loyalty, blind faith, and blind force cemented the various elements of feudal culture into a solid impregnable tower. If southern Italy in the early twentieth century was (with the possible exception of Russia) the most feudal society in Europe, America was the negation of everything that feudalism held sacred and inviolable. Into the funnel of this negation, millions of immigrant lives were poured.

The change in perspective could not have been more striking. The problems of adjustment experienced by Italians were not, as some writers suggest, the result of an agricultural people trying to find their way in a grimy, machine- and clock-driven urban-industrial society. At a much deeper level, Italians becoming Italian Americans were compelled to go to war with their own inner selves.

Certainly, they were in awe of America, in awe of the forces of nature, earthly and human, that the rational American mind had harnessed. Even as humble bricklayers, ditchdiggers, and railroad workers, they eagerly embraced the Protestant American ethic of work and success as no mere moral platitude and palliative but as a useful ideological formula for real economic improvement.

The predicament of the Italian American was a predicament of loss. How

to relinquish the medieval mind, with its sensuousness, its wisdom, its religious devotions, its oaths, its belief in envy-motivated magic and the power of incantation? How to become a "modern American" and condemn the old country's traditions of blood feud and vengeance? How to downplay its emphasis on virginal chastity and maternal sacrifice? How to renounce the fierce and noble manhood of the *barone?* How to understand and enact America's emphasis on the knowable and the rational and its recourse to law as the only legitimate source of justice? How to comprehend its strict separation of church and state, its mistrust of spontaneous emotional release, and its tendency to liberate all of the primordial forms of human identity, including "woman" and "mother," from their embedment and enslavement in outmoded tradition?[11]

America liberates. But when it liberates the Italian American, it creates a self that is painfully divided, between family and career, between reason and God, between the ancient containers of sexuality and the new forms of partnership and marriage that are based on the obliteration of gender boundaries rather than their clear and unmistakable outlining.

Unable to make the peace between these two cultures that war incessantly within him and her, between the feudal culture and the "Enlightened," the Italian American too often turns away from the work of forging a vigorous hybrid that might draw strength from such contradictions. Religion and family have been, and still are, important to Italian Americans, but their defensive loyalty to the family, and to the neighborhood as a transplanted *paese,* can seem provincial and xenophobic in American urban and suburban contexts. Their devotion to masculine and charismatic forms of leadership can appear as a naive romanticization of the opportunistic criminal mind. Finally, their protective and reverent attitude toward womankind, as virgin, wife, and mother, can seem oppressive and confining in a civil and affluent society that is secure enough to begin the work of dismantling its patriarchal foundations.[12]

Threatened with culture shock, drowning in a torrent of radically alien beliefs, the immigrant *contadini* swam, not toward the goddess of liberty but rather toward the beacon of the Church. But they embraced a Roman Catholicism that was mediated through ascetic Irish monastic culture and the Vatican-American bureaucracy. One might dare to assert that the *contadini* converted en masse to a new religion, based not on the polytheistic and polychrome figures of the madonna and the saints (whose pagan origins have been traced by the Italian American art historian Camille Paglia) but on the more austere vision of the dying son of God, writhing and pinioned to the opposed crossbeams of spirit and flesh.

Italian Americans have been able to mediate these various contradictions

because of an essential "heartiness" that is also part of the legacy of the peasant's world. They are a tough-minded, down-to-earth people, whose metaphysical convictions as to the essence of the good are closely linked to the essence of physical health. To an Italian American, the health of individuals and institutions is to be found first and foremost in a warm and spontaneous relatedness to others, in a suffused, tactile, almost erotic openness and frankness in interaction, and in a suspicious attitude toward the mind–body dualism of northern Christendom. To an Italian American, the soul is fused to belly and groin. *Festa* and *carnevale* are special occasions for stylized excess and for the worship of pre-Christian gods, both dark and whimsical. One's daily food and one's daily love, like Communion bread and Eucharistic wine, have spiritual implications.

For all of the resources of wisdom, humanism, and warmth that Italian Americans have contributed to American life, they have evidenced a certain reluctance to analyze and express in literature—and especially through the medium of the novel—the cultural and psychological forces that have shaped the Italian American concept of self. Italian Americans are not (to recall a controversial 1993 essay in the *New York Times Book Review* by Gay Talese) a people of the book.[13] Books do not line the walls of their homes, and the bookish child is a pariah in both the family and the peer group. The knowledge that such a child acquires is regarded as subversive, especially if it cannot help feed, house, and clothe a family. Moreover, Talese emphasizes, Italian American students are not expected by their teachers to evince literary ability. He accuses publishers of being dismissive of manuscripts submitted by writers with Italian American surnames.

But to attribute the thin literary canon of Italian Americans primarily to prejudice and stereotyping is to oversimplify the issue. Their relationship to their language (which is English) is ambivalent and complex, easily misunderstood because of its reliance on the expressive modes of the storyteller speaking dialect—rather than the writer, who has achieved command of the vernacular of the educated elite.

The storyteller offers counsel and useful, practical wisdom. He or she affirms, in the words of Walter Benjamin, faith in "the communicability of experience."[14] Storytellers are *with* people. Novelists and their readers are alone. To savor the sensuous, close-to-the-earth language of the peasantry it is necessary *to hear.* It may be that the novel, as the art form of the perplexed and isolated modern self, is incapable of encoding the Italian American's lingering sense of belonging to mystical and primal forms of human and divine association.

The novel was invented to plot a course for an uprooted self that no longer belonged anywhere. Unlike the folktale and the saga, which lend themselves

readily to the media of film and television, the novel demands that both author and reader develop a critical attitude toward the primordial and the unconscious dimensions of identity and personality. This critical, analytical attitude strikes at the heart of the cherished, often idealized memories and the unquestioned loyalties by which Italian Americans seek to insulate themselves from the challenges posed and the injuries inflicted on their values by a pluralistic democratic society—one that begins with the building block of the single citizen-atom, as opposed to the father-ruled lineage, and that privileges rights over duties. (It may be that only a woman can write the first truly autocritical, Italian American novel—in fury about and in love for—the phallocratic patriarchy.)[15]

Is it any wonder then that works of art that might document this clash of cultures and the possible points of fusion between them are rare indeed? The most popular Italian American novels and films, the works of Pietro di Donato and Mario Puzo, of Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro, reveal the hidden figures of virgin, martyr, and knight (set always against a backdrop of lush Roman Catholic pageantry) as mythic anomalies that still manage to survive on American soil. But there is no work of literary art yet created by an Italian American Melville that can function as a therapeutic tool that might enable this people to both retell and criticize their most cherished myths and thus obtain a fuller awareness of the suffering and the joy that have attended their long journey across the seas of mythic and historical time. Such a work of art would enable Italian Americans to more fully appreciate their achievement, which has been to hold this history within their hearts and not consign it to oblivion. Electrical worker, labor organizer, and urban primitivist painter Ralph Fasanella points the way.[16] In his paintings entitled *Family Supper* (1972) and *Iceman Crucified* (1958), he portrays his own father, nailed and raised on a cross before his family—his head decorated with a crown of ice tongs! Where the word *I.N.R.I.* is, at the head of the cross, Fasanella has written, "Lest we forget."

Notes

1. See E.A. Ross, *The Old World in the New* (New York: Century, 1914): 285–286. For an analysis of Ross's thought in the context of the vast apparatus of academic racist theory that was constructed in response to the Great Immigration, see Thomas F. Gossett's meticulous historical study *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

2. The southern Italian code of honor involved the murder not only of the encroacher but also of the sullied female. Sociologist Pino Arlacchi writes of the Calabrian variant: ". . . blood-vendetta was the obligatory recourse; the father or brother must first kill his own daughter or sister, and then her violator or lover. A husband, in the same way, must kill first his unfaithful wife and then her lover. Not to pursue the vendetta was to forfeit beyond recovery any claim to social standing. . . ." See Pino Arlacchi, *Mafia Business: The Mafia Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso Editions, 1986).

3. See William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1955). For a detailed and nuanced analysis of the conflicts that arose between the world of the home and that of the street, extending to the larger society, see Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). For a discussion of a convergent ethical duality (decent vs. street) that increasingly divides African American families in the inner city, see Elijah Anderson's "The Code of the Streets," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1994): 81–94.

4. See Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian-American Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

5. See Francis A. J. Ianni, with Elizabeth Reuss-Ianni, *A Family Business: Kinship and Social Control in Organized Crime* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972).

6. See Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

7. See Ann Cornelisen, *Women of the Shadows* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976).

8. My discussion of the south Italian peasantry is greatly indebted to the scholarship of Rudolph Bell. See his *Fate and Honor, Family and Village: Demographic and Cultural Change in Rural Italy Since 1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

9. On the Feast of the Giglio, see Guy Trebay, "Our Local Correspondents: The Giglio," *New Yorker* 66 (4 June 1990): 78–89. Joseph Sciorra, a candidate for a Ph.D. in folklore at Pennsylvania State University, has done firsthand field research on this feast, but his work is not yet published.

10. See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), especially chapter 1.

11. See Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

12. For an excellent discussion of the traits of the Italian American family that serve as resources for the individual but can also predispose him or her to neurosis, see Marie Rotunno and Monica McGoldrick, "Italian Families," in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy,* ed. Monica McGoldrick, John K. Pearce, and Joseph Giordano (New York: Guilford Press, 1982).

13. See Gay Talese, "Where Are the Italian-American Novelists?" *New York Times Book Review,* 14 March 1993: 1, 23, 25, 29. Talese might be accused of overstating the case against the existence of an Italian-American literary tradition. Certainly, the early work of Pietro di Donato (*Christ in Concrete*) and Mario Puzo (*The Fortunate Pilgrim*) ranks with the best of Richard Wright and Bernard Malamud. But the fact that neither di Donato nor Puzo fulfilled their early promise as "great" writers is not without cultural significance.

14. Walter Benjamin's classic essay "The Storyteller" appears in his *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). Italian American poet and storyteller Gioia Timpanelli has revived and restored the fading ancestral voices of the first immigrants for countless audiences. Consider also the centrality of the folktale in Jerre Mangione's memoir of an Italian American enclave in Rochester, New York. See *Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian-American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

15. The gender code of the immigrants (with its dismissal of the value of *any* education for females) placed formidable obstacles in the path of the potential or aspiring female writer (as opposed to the vernacular female storyteller). On the often ignored, but vital, contributions of women to the Italian American literary tradition, see Helen Barolini, *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987).

16. On Fasanella's work, see the illustrated volume by Patrick Watson, *Fasanella's City* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

Further Reading

Banfield, Edward C. *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958). Banfield's controversial thesis that economic progress in southern Italy is obstructed by an ethos of "amoral familism" spurred intense debate and stimulated research.

Barzini, Luigi. *The Italians* (New York: Athenaeum, 1964). Still the best introduction to the mysteries of Italian national character.

Bell, Rudolph M. *Fate and Honor, Family and Village: Demographic and Cultural Change in Rural Italy Since 1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). A careful scholarly study of four communities in rural Italy that shows profound insight into the traditional mentality of the peasantry.

Belmonte, Thomas. *The Broken Fountain.* 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). One of the few firsthand ethnographic accounts of life and society in the back streets of Naples, Italy.

Blok, Anton. *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860–1960* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975). A detailed study of the origins of Mafia dominance in western Sicily.

Cornelisen, Ann. *Women of the Shadows* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976). A moving collection of narratives that reveals the crucial role of women in the maintenance of *contadino* society.

Gans, Herbert J. *The Urban Villagers* (New York: Free Press, 1962). A rigorous but highly readable sociological study of the Italians of Boston's West End.

Ianni, Francis A.J., with Elizabeth Reuss-Ianni. *A Family Business: Kinship and Social Control in Organized Crime* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972). A compelling study, based on firsthand research of an anonymous but powerful Mafia family.

Mangione, Jerre. *Mount Allegro: A Memoir of Italian-American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). A much-acclaimed literary portrait of life within the Italian American community of Rochester, New York.

Orsi, Robert. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). A penetrating study of the role of Madonna worship as a bulwark against the cultural and intergenerational divisions that emerged in Italian Harlem.

Ross, E.A. *The Old World in the New* (New York: Century, 1914). Ross was one of the first sociological popularizers. He was regarded as anti-conservative, and his racist views tell much about the attitudes held by the "liberal" elite toward the immigrants.

Trebay, Guy. "Our Local Correspondents: The Giglio," *New Yorker* 66 (4 June 1990): 78–89. A beautiful evocation, by a journalist who knows what questions to ask, of the feast of the Giglio in Brooklyn.

Watson, Patrick. *Fasanella's City* (New York: Knopf, 1973). A visually striking biographical retrospective of the life and work of the painter Ralph Fasanella.

The Genealogy of Ice

FRANK LENTRICCHIA

Even you don't know what you meant by you.

—*Raging Bull*

Christmas season 1987, give or take a year. I can't remember exactly. Hillsborough, North Carolina. A kitchen. Three real people, who must not be called characters, though that's what they, along with all the other real people, must become. A woman, about seventy; her son, her son-the-author, late forties; his wife, late thirties. The older woman (the mother, the visiting mother-in-law) speaks, directing most of it to the non–Italian American daughter-in-law, but all the time keeping the son in view, occasionally shooting him a challenging glance or remark. Her mood is better than you think; her mood is better than she thinks. She speaks as if the conversation has been rolling for some time. In fact, her words inaugurate it:

"But what I want to know is why are we so involved, because they'll never change. Change? With us? Change my ass. I have to ask you something. What kind of a look do you call that on my son's face? He's just like his father. And his father is just like *his* father, that's where it all comes from, but my husband's father was the worst. He's the one who scared me. With their friends they're different, then they change in a hurry. My father-in-law was so cold you don't even know what I mean by 'cold.' I was ashamed to smoke, he never said a word and I was ashamed. You think I don't notice your husband when you smoke? I notice everything. And what are you looking at? What is he looking at? Naturally your husband is not as bad as my husband, but after all what do you expect me to say? With his friends I bet he's different, then all of a sudden they're warm, then they become warm, because their friends, the men especially, make them happy, let's face it, not us,

Reprinted from *The Edge of Night* by Frank Lentricchia (New York: Random House, 1994).

and not their kids. Don't look at me like that, you don't scare me. I changed your diapers. He looks at his mother and his wife with that face. *Che faccia brutta!* The Lentricchia men, they're all the same, believe me, except for one of my brother-in-laws who went to the other extreme. At least our husbands didn't do that, but maybe they should have, maybe they did that, too. Because let's face it, sex is another joke. What do you want me to say? *Why* are they like that around us? You went to college, you tell me. To be honest, I don't think even they know, and I don't care anymore, because in their own homes they don't want involvement, they go inside themselves. What are they doing in there? If they didn't want involvement, who told them to get married in the first place, if they didn't want involvement. What I want to know is how long are you going to kid yourself? If you have the answer, don't think I want to hear it, because I don't want to hear it, but if you have to, you can tell me."

I can't remember the words, I can't remember the context, maybe there wasn't one, because she doesn't need a context, but that's how I remember it now, five or six years later, my father in another room watching TV, my mother right in front of us, and I don't have to remind you who "us" is. She probably had a context; I just couldn't see it.

It should be mentioned that my mother is prone to opera. She talks in arias. Any and all disturbances presage apocalypse. Her enemies ought to croak, the bastards. All wounds are fatal, and anything can cause a wound, even nothing can cause a wound. It should also be mentioned that I've heard it said that I'm nothing like my father, who I'm not saying is what my mother says he is. According to him, I'm very like my mother. We're the same. "What do you expect? He exaggerates. He exaggerates everything. He gets it from his mother. He gets excited, don't you, Frank?" Arias without discernible context; emotions for which I can find no matching circumstances. Apocalypse twice a week. Wounds that cannot be healed, not even by affection. Affection, in fact, makes them much worse, opens them right up again.

About a year ago, in New York, an editor at a major publishing house said to me that I ought, up front, tell my readers who I am. Otherwise readers would have to crawl inside my head. She said "crawl inside." She felt that in order to understand the chunk she had just read, she would need to crawl inside my head, in order to find out who I am. When she told me that, I felt a strong urge to find out who she was. I wanted to open up her head. I should have said, "If I knew who the fuck I was, do you think I'd be writing this?" Or I should have said, "If I knew what the fuck I was doing, do you think I'd be writing this?" I was about to revise out "fuck," but if I did you might think that I was talking metaphorically

when I said I wanted to open up her head. In order to see what was under the skull, what was actually in there.

I was talking to the NewYork editor in my favorite Italian pastry shop, way over on the East Side, near the East Village, a place I liked to frequent because any time I went in there I saw an elegantly dressed elderly man, utterly manicured, a shave every four hours, a haircut every five days, who would occasionally walk outside to talk to youngish guys built like bulls in flowered shirts, with envelopes in their hands who kissed him on the cheek when they left. It was a movie, post–*Godfather*. They knew they were in a movie; they were enjoying themselves in the movie.

The elegantly dressed elderly man scared me. I had to look at him out of the corner of my eye, which I became very good at, because I didn't want to be in his movie in the wrong role. I've never seen a face that brutal when he thought no one was looking at the face. It was the best brutal face I'd ever seen. I liked to look at it. Maybe a plastic surgeon could give me a duplicate. They say anything can be arranged in NewYork.

It would have been nice to call him over, to introduce him to the NewYork editor at a major house. Then I could have said, "Now say the words 'crawl inside your head' to this man." If only she could have coffee with this man every day, if only she could, she would become more sensitive in her relations with writers, she would become a good woman. Because if she didn't, with his demitasse spoon, and his little pinky sticking way out, he'd eat what was under her skull. I don't like questions about who I am or what I'm doing. If you wish to know who I am, ask my parents; they know. Or my friends, with whom it is said I'm different.

I'll tell you what I like about writing. When I'm doing it, there's only the doing, the movement of my pen across the paper, the shaping of rhythms as I go, myself the rhythm, the surprises that jump up out of the words, from heaven, and I *am* doing this, and I am this doing, there is no other "I am" except for this doing across the paper, and I never existed except in this doing.

I'll tell you what I hate about writing. Finishing it. It comes to an end. You can't come forever. When I'm finished, I can't remember what it was like inside the doing. I can't remember. When I'm not writing, I want to become the man with the brutal face.

A sentence, a sentence, my family for a sentence.

This time it's only a few months back that I'm trying to remember, so I'm fairly confident about the words. A telephone call to my parents, for the purpose

of conducting research on a word famous in second-generation Italian American households, who get it from the first generation, and then pass it on to the third, where I am, dead end of tradition. Forget the fourth, where my kids are. I was writing about this word. Once I heard this word spoken by Robert De Niro in Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (I like to write out those names) and felt secretly addressed, even thrilled, a member of a community. Its pronunciation varied startlingly in my family, according to affective context: *c*'s become *g*'s; final vowels could disappear. It all depended. The word was deeply rooted, yet flexible. It gave what was needed. A genial word, from the unprinted lexicon of Italian American. I pose the question of its meaning to my mother, who says immediately, "Pecker, your pecker." She's totally confident, so I don't mention that the interesting word takes the feminine definite article, because some part of me, maybe most of me, wants her to be right, with the feminine definite article, yes. My father only says, "Ann." That's all, you can hear him. My mother is not intimidated. She comes back: "I know that word." My father: "It's the woman's, *he* knows it's the woman's." He's totally confident. He tells her that I'm kidding around. He knows that, if asked, which I wasn't (because they don't do that), I'd side with him. After such phone calls, what knowledge?

I am an Italian American, one of whose favorite words bears his grandparents, his parents, his neighborhood, his favorite movie director, but not his children, not his colleagues, not where he lives now, and not most of his friends. I'm not telling you that I'm alienated from my ethnic background. I'm not alienated from it, and I'm not unalienated from it. It's an issue that doesn't much preoccupy me anymore.

This word dancing in my head cannot tell the difference between the man's and the woman's. The New York editor, who is an Italian American, thinks it important to tell you that I'm an Italian American. Are you glad to know that? Am I becoming clearer to you by the sentence? I know a word that means the man's and the woman's. Do you want to know my secret word? Shall we play with it together? You starting to crawl in?

I have a friend who lives in a good place, in South Carolina. His name is Leonard Cunningham. Leonard once said to me, in full knowledge that I am a married man: "You still a grumpy old bachelor?" One time I called the place where Leonard lives. The person at the other end, who was not Leonard, said something that I must have misheard, because I replied, "Am I Father Aelred?" I must have misheard. The person best in a position to know reminds me of a nightmare that I can't remember, king of the roof-rattlers, a full-

throated screamer. It seems that I looked into my wallet for my driver's license, found it, it was mine all right, definitely mine, but it bore someone else's name and picture. It was definitely mine all right. Feel free, don't worry about it. Crawl in.

I said nothing when the New York editor said that I ought to tell my reader that I'm a literary scholar, a literary theorist, a professor of English, a critic, and I was rendered speechless when she whipped out a copy of the paperback edition of one of my books—bent and underlined—and quoted some sentences about my favorite philosopher, William James, which I didn't remember writing, then offered a commentary on those sentences (critic of a critic of a philosopher), which I couldn't understand, sipping my decaf cappuccino, then declared that *that* very passage, and others like it in my critical books, would help my readers to understand who I am. Tell them you're a literary critic.

At which point, in a tone as dead flat as I could manage, I should have said, "I've concluded, after much consultation with experts in the field, and much reflection, that, in spite of all the obvious resemblances, I'm nothing at all like T.S. Eliot." That's what I should have told the New York editor when we were sitting there in that pastry shop way down on First Avenue. "For example," I should have said, "what are the chances that Eliot ever ate" (*academic, very dry, hands about the coffee cup*) "three cannoli in one sitting, even as I do now?" I can tell she needs to think I'm funny, rather than something else. She'd prefer not to think of me and something else. I'd prefer that she think of me and something else. I say, "You think I'm funny? What's so funny? You want to be edited?" She is trying to smile, but she cannot do it. I'm winning. At which point I call over the wonderful brutal face and say (*leaning in, with concern*), "Which one of us would you prefer to ride home with on the deserted subway at 1:00 A.M., to the end of the line in Brooklyn, just one of us and you in the car? Which one? Be careful, don't answer too fast, and don't say both because we're not kinky. Don't even suggest kinky. You got a gun? Which one? Choose, I'll count to five, then I'll tell him" (*broad winning grin*) "to do that thing with his demitasse spoon, which I imagined eight minutes ago, which I haven't told you about, because I want you to be surprised and tickled pink. You want to taste my cannoli? I'm Al Pacino in *Godfather II*. Who are you? All work and no play makes Frank a dull boy. Name that movie with Jack Nicholson!"

I teach English in a distinguished university. In my distinguished department, which is like all English departments I have known or heard about, we have virtually nothing in common, not even literature.

For the last two years I've been writing about T.S. Eliot, I'd better say trying to write about him. All work and no play. He is a fascination and a crisis. Honey, I'm home. The job of the literary critic is to explain, whatever else he may do, but Eliot's poetry is beyond explanation, though it has been explained ad nauseam. I get nauseous. His poetry, and I say this with total admiration, is unreasonable. Not unreasonably difficult, just unreasonable, which is why I find it fascinating. I'm also drawn to his explanations of the writing process. He means the process of writing a poem. I mean the process of writing anything, including a letter, or this, maybe especially this. What is this? I hate that question. Make me happy and hate it too, hate it too.

Eliot is responding to a German writer, Gottfried Benn, Eliot is always responding to some other writer, building, ripping off, making something new. Theft and the individual talent. Eliot says that writing begins with an "obscure impulse" (in other words, you don't know what you're doing). Or, he says, you're haunted by a demon "with no face, no name, nothing" (in other words, you don't know who you are, you don't have a face). Benn says, says Eliot, that we start with an "inert embryo," a "creative germ." Plus the language. "He has something germinating in him for which he must find words, but he cannot know what words he wants until he has found the words." When you have found the right words (which you can't know are right in advance) then the thing for which the words have to be found disappears. You have a poem. Writing is a journey in and through language; writing is discovery. That's Benn. Here's Eliot's twist: the writer "is oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief." Eventually, the writer gains "relief from acute discomfort" (sounds like an ad for something) and experiences "a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable." Benn never mentioned acute discomfort; Benn maybe likes the process. Eliot feels labor pains, or maybe a sharp gas pain in the lower intestinal tract. The pain gives no pleasure. What gives pleasure is the end, when relief is obtained, and the poem is fully born. The last *t* has been crossed, *then* Eliot is satisfied.

Coleridge is better than either Benn or Eliot on the writing process. He says readers "should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution" (we know who you are, you're under arrest), "but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself." He's talking about readers who almost don't exist, who don't ask questions that make me unhappy, who do not seek the final solution. No reader could possibly experience what Coleridge wants readers to experience unless (Coleridge is not talking now, it's me) there were

writers who wanted to feel the same thing, "the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself." The meandering adventure through language (writing as drafting as revising as improvising), not the thing at the end but the unfolding process itself, the journey, the ride, every step of the way, never sure what's unfolding, never caring that much, happy to go off the track, screw the track. Outside the process, the demon has no name. The process names the demon and you are the demon, the demon *in* and *of* and *as* the process, and you like the demon. For once, you like yourself. The annihilation you experience is indescribably good, because it is the death of everything you were outside the process. The opaque burdens of your self-consciousness are lifted. When the process ends, you go back—the opacity, the weight, the stasis, and other things best not to mention, that's what you are. There you are, on the track.

When I'm doing this, whatever "this" is, and that's not my problem, that's your problem, if you want that problem, which you don't have to have because nobody is holding a gun to your head and demanding that you tell us what this is, when I'm doing this, I like taking walks, driving, riding in airplanes (I have an extra ticket, you want it free?), sitting in the waiting lounge, doing it there in public, when will my flight board? I can't wait. Motion like the motion of my pen. I can write in airplanes now. I become a dangerous driver, things come into my head when I drive and walk, writing as motion sickness, I better walk more. I *am* writing; *l'écriture, c'est moi*.

In a letter—on this one he didn't go public—Eliot had something to say about bad writing. Bad writing is writing that repeats what you've already written. To avoid it, you must "defecate" the self that produced it, if it is possible (which it isn't) to say a "self" produces the kind of writing that Eliot has in mind. Defecate the self *of* that writing, that's better, my graduate students might like that, or run the risk of writing feces. To avoid it, void it. Birth and defecation, labor pains and gas pains, life and crap. Does Eliot know the difference? Does anybody? Flesh of my flesh, shit of my shit. Shit of my death. I'm a literary critic.

It was in the place where Leonard lives that I first read these lines from Psalm 144:

> *No ruined wall, no exile,*
> *No sound of weeping in our streets.*

"Flesh of my flesh": Eliot's poem, his metaphorical child. I have two children, not metaphorical. We, I risk speaking for the three of us (I mean the two

kids and me, Eliot has no part in this), we feel unrelieved, unappeased, not absolved, annihilated in quite specific ways, the details of which I'm never going to tell you. We are certainly exhausted. "Annihilated" is heavy, but I'm using it anyway. Eliot used it, why can't I? I'm not giving you the details because this isn't *People* magazine. The domestic details are banal, anyway. They don't explain. The opium of the middle class. You know the soap opera, so don't ask.

One weekend, a long time ago, about fifteen years back, when they were about five and six and a half, they were visiting us. You know who "us" is and you know why they were "visiting." While she was cooking dinner (no, I won't tell you her name, you don't need to know that, either), we played a game involving the stairs to the second floor. Daddy, you stand at the bottom. Daughter Number 1 climbs to the third stair. Daddy says, Amy Amy Amy. She jumps into his arms. Daughter Number 2. Rachel Rachel Rachel. Jumps into his arms. Daddy, let's do it again. Lots of giggling. We do it for the fourth stair. We do the fifth. Giggling becoming intense, hysteria creeping in, the little bodies flying, love-missiles right on target. Daddy Daddy Daddy. Amy Amy Amy. Rachel Rachel Rachel. Crash. The sixth is painful, gravity is beginning to talk tough. Daddy was not ready. The kids want the seventh. Daddy braces, the seventh is accomplished. Higher! Let's go higher! We do the eighth, my God. We do the ninety-eighth; we do the four hundred and fifty-eighth stair. Flesh of my flesh. We open up each other's heads. "I'll get you through our kids, you son of a bitch." *I'll get the kids through you, you son of a bitch, I'll put the kids through you, you son of a bitch, I'll put the son of a bitch through the kids, you son of a bitch, I'll put the son of a bitch through the son of a bitch, with the full cooperation of the son of a bitch, you son of a bitch.* What do you expect? I'm middle-class. I like soap opera too.

We didn't have a name for the game we played. I think I was saving them. It was the game of I Saved the Kids. "He exaggerates. He exaggerates everything." Like my mother, I'm prone to it, prone to the real thing, where they go all the way, all the time the four hundred and fifty-eighth stair. The real thing is Italian opera. Can this shit live? Can this shit sing?

"You need to tell us where you're from."
"I'm one hundred percent from literature."
"No, seriously."
"Okay. I'm one hundred percent from the movies."

A conversation that never took place, with the New York editor or with anyone else. No real conversation about my first place. Good thing, it would have

been too hard to explain in conversation, to say just what I mean. The first place, my so-called origins, the Hydrogen Bomb of explanation. Then everything becomes clear. Then everything becomes dead. In conversation with strangers I tend to be sloppy and anxious, sometimes with intimates, too, what an experience that is. Conversation is too hard. Better to write. Forget the telephone, forget talking altogether. Except after long, enforced absences, talking is overrated.

Yeats said that he was always discovering places where he wanted to spend his whole life. One of the places where I want to spend my whole life is in Yeats. Like Yeats, I don't know exactly where I'm supposed to be. Long after I left, long after it seemed to have drifted out of my mind for good, Yeats helped me to recover my first place, my grandfather's house on 1303 Mary Street, Utica, New York, where we lived on the second floor until I was a senior in college. But "recover" is misleading, suggesting I got something back that I used to possess. I used to sleep and eat there, but I never possessed it, it never possessed me (that's better), I never actually lived there until I imagined myself all the way back through the medium of some of Yeats's poems about the great country houses of Ireland, specifically Lady Gregory's, Augusta Gregory's (she had just the right first name), in the west of Ireland, Coole Park, where Yeats was taken in every summer, nurtured and sustained and respected for who he was, a writer. Coole Park was the place where he wrote well and about which, much later, he would write better than well, he would write magnificently, out of his memory of loving sustenance and respect, poems about the place itself, writing when he had a bitter hunch, and he was right, that the place would be leveled, imagining its and his own not being there, and the vines and the saplings winning, forcing themselves up through the broken stone, the rubble. He wrote *magnificently* because he was haunted.

Absurd to think of my grandfather's house—my mother's father's house—and Coole Park in tandem, neck and neck in my imagination, absurd to say that I possessed it as if for the first time, not as if but actually, reading poems about an aristocratic mansion, where my grandfather would have been employed to "shovel shit," which is what he would say whenever I asked him to tell me what he did in the old country, when he was young. He shoveled it for *il padrone,* the landlord, which he said in his dialect: *u padron.* He was speaking literally, and he said *u padron* with a tone perfectly mixed with resentment, awe, and desire.

He, my mother's father, Tomaso was his name, could have been one of Lady Gregory's writers, because he was the best storyteller I ever heard. He had an endless supply featuring surprising savage ironies, beautiful twists of revenge, twists of revenge are always beautiful, those stories were wonderful because people got what they had coming to them, the bastards. And the supply must have been

endless because he told them every night and he never repeated himself except by special request. I never heard of any of them before or since. I believe he made them up, I hope he did, as we sat there around the kitchen table, spurring him on just by showing him how happy we were because he was telling us stories. He could see we hung on his words and gestures. We were helping him to make them up, that's what we were doing, though nobody could have known that, much less said it. We were imagining together, that's what I believe. Of course, we could never have done what he did, and he was not born to listen to stories.

After supper, after the espresso, the anisette, and the Stella d'Oro cookies, and several of us there waiting for him to start, he would turn it on without warning. We would sometimes ask for repetitions, a story he told last month, and he would oblige, but on occasion he would balk (briefly) and display a flare of irritation (briefly), when my father or I (the main requesters) would ask for a certain story too soon, like four days later (at which point we became the main aggravations). He would look at us, say oh my Jesus Christ, then deliver it as if for the first time, as if for a virgin audience, as if he himself had heard it for the first time six minutes ago, he himself laughing hard in the funny moments. Later, my father and I would say some of the key lines and words to each other, going back upstairs, as if we never heard them before, doing some of his gestures, going to bed with his voice jumping in our heads. If I could tell you how good he was, I mean so that you knew the way we knew, you'd miss him even though you never experienced him in the flesh.

One night, we got out of hand, my father and I. We asked for the one we liked best too soon, we asked the night after he told it, and then we became worse than an aggravation. Tomaso said nothing. He just got up, walked over to the refrigerator, looked in for about twelve seconds (which in a situation like that you can imagine what it felt like), took nothing out, even though he must have needed something bad, shut the door, came back to the table, then told it ferociously. His fury made it new. When he was finished, he got up and went to bed. It was barely dusk. I wish that I could remember that one, I'd tell it to you right now. But maybe that's what you get for abusing the storyteller, you lose your memory of the story. He withdrew that night, and now the story is withdrawn forever.

His sons and sons-in-law referred to him openly as the King of Mary Street, without irony, with pride. His depressions were rare but deep, and if he happened to be suffering one when they addressed him as the King of Mary Street, he'd come back with, I am the King of Pig Street. Or he'd say, the King of the Pricks, I am the Prick of Mary Street, I am the King of the Pigs. I wonder if Lady Gregory ever thought of herself as the Cunt of Coole Park? You can't tell about those