SPEAKING ITALIAN, DREAMING IN ENGLISH

In the previous chapter I tried to describe the lingo, the language-by-necessity, used for a long time by Italian immigrants in the United States. That language is slowly disappearing. The second and third-generation descendants of those immigrants grew up speaking English while the new immigrants who arrive from Italy today have a better knowledge of the Italian language and tend to learn English rather quickly. One of the interesting aspects of this lingo was that it comprised only few words, mostly nouns, with a small amount of verbs and almost no adjectives. Generally the words were formed from English terms with a vowel attached at the end. The English phonemes were approximated to the corresponding inventory of Italian sounds. Sometimes the words were assimilated into existing Italian words changing the latter's meaning. In a way this language was forced onto the immigrants rather than being the product of their creativity. In 1889 Edmondo de Amicis, in the short essay *Sull'oceano*, noticed this phenomenon among the immigrants who had moved to Argentina:

> What a strange vocabulary! I heard a sample of the strange language spoken by our folks in Argentina after they had mixed with the local population and with other Italians from different parts of the country. Almost all of them had lost a chunk of their dialects, acquired a bit of Italian and mixed Italian and dialect with the local language, adding vernacular suffixes to Spanish words and vice versa, with literal translation of idiomatic expressions from the two languages. As a result, in the new language these words and expressions took on a new meaning, so that these people ended up speaking what feels like four languages in

> one sentence simultaneously, jumping from language to language as if they were insane.

Similar descriptions also come from North America with an abundance of examples reported by Italian journalists and writers who observed and wrote about the immigrants. From this coarse, incomplete, totally concrete language no important literary works emerged. Those who had received some education in Italy before emigrating continued to write the way they had been taught, as if they had been kept in a glass cabinet in a museum. Their language style was taken directly from the late-romantic period, steeped in sentimentality and vacuity. The tradition, by the way, alas, is still alive and well and present to these days in the schools where Italian is taught. (At the latest poetry-reading competition at *Casa Italiana* two of the readers chose poems by Aleardo Aleardi!) They were using this dusty, sap-dripping language at the same time as they were looking down on the new choppy dialect, mocking it at every possible occasion and targeting it with ridicule, thus perpetuating the other eternal Italian tradition, that of making fun of peasants. More about this later.

Meanwhile, the new generations—the American children of Italians—began communicating and expressing themselves in English, both in poetry and prose. Some of these writers, in addition to using the Italian American dialect to give local color to childhood memories, became aware of the linguistic contrast that existed between themselves, fluent English speakers, and their parents who, due to a total lack of cultural consciousness about their language, were losing the original dialect and were not able to acquire English, with the sad result that they were uneasy and embarrassed in both languages. There are accounts of this stage

that are worthy of examination. Jerre Mangione,[1] a second generation American, born in Rochester, NY, in 1909, is one of them. His major work is *Mount Allegro*,[2] the name of one of the Italian neighborhoods in Rochester thus named by a large community of Sicilians, many of whom still live in the area. It probably is the name of some hill in one of the hometowns[3] on the native island. The volume is autobiographical, a rather common genre among American writers growing up in ethnic communities who turned to the folkloric material that could capture the interest of American readers. The memoirs of the Swedish-origin poet Carl Sandburg[4] are another typical example of this genre. This kind of works should be analyzed from this perspective.

As soon as he entered school, Mangione realized he was living a "double existence": he had to speak English in school and Sicilian at home. Like in many other cases, his mother was the agent of conservation of language and old traditions. Mangione had to hide when he wanted to read books because his parents believed that too much reading could be harmful to the child's brain. More than once have I read about the hostility of Italian parents toward educating their children. They preferred that the children started working as early as possible to earn money. My analysis isn't based on the details of Mangione's experience, however, it is interesting to read that the first time he went to Sicily, the mythical land described with vivid and fascinating images by his parents, he was struck by two visions: the poverty of the people and the nakedness of the landscape (I understand him so well!) Moreover, he was struck by the fact that the Sicilian language he was speaking could not be understood

[1] Jerre Mangione (1909-1998). Writer of the Italian American experience.

[2] *Mount Allegro.* Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1943. The publisher decided to market the book as fiction rather than as an autobiography.

[3] *Montallegro* is a small town in the province of Agrigento in Sicily.

[4] Carl Sandburg (1878-1967). Child of poor Swedish immigrants, poet and historian. He won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1951 and again in 1959 for history.

by Sicilians. The words that were coming out of his mouth, taught by his mother, were not Sicilian. They were Italian American. At home Mangione was not allowed to speak English. His younger sister, Maria, in her dreams would speak English but she was excused because dreaming was not a conscious act. His mother had learned unconsciously a basic vocabulary of English words with Italian endings that had become some kind of family lingo. As a boy, Mangione realized that when fellow Sicilians met for the first time, they would start communicating in Italian, but, as soon as they learned their respective origins, would instantly switch to Sicilian. Someone who insisted on speaking Italian would be considered pretentious or "a socialist." From early on, Mangione had a very fine ear. He realized, for instance, that Sicilian language has no unity, in that there are many intonations and dialects depending on the area.

> Relatives whose origins were from Sicilian cities on the coast, like my father, spoke as if they were shooting their words against the wind or through fog, with a sharp singing accent. People from the center of the island spoke as if they had never heard happy music. Their language was heavy with funereal and massive sounds.

This is a very beautiful musical description. His parents did not have serious problems living their lives in America, despite the fact that his father spoke barely-comprehensible English and his mother had learned only a few words from her children. Except for the *bosso* (boss) who was an English speaker, all their co-workers were Italian and Italian was the language spoken in the stores. It so happened that one day the *bosso* figured out what Mangione's father was saying in Italian about him and fired him. An uncle of his who knew even less English used to tell a story from his first days in Rochester when he had to deal

with non-Italian storekeepers who could not understand a word he was saying. Nobody wanted to sell to Italians and nobody wanted to rent rooms to them. One day, after having lost all patience, his uncle gathered a group of people and, brandishing pickaxes, engaged in a demonstration in front of the shop, explaining with gestures that they were hungry and wanted a place to sleep. The demonstration, supported by the presence of pickaxes, impressed the locals. The storekeepers changed policy and town hall provided Italian workers with some rooms. As I was reading these true stories about immigration—the kind of stories one does not hear during today's colonial banquets—I thought about the philosopher Gianbattista Vico[5] and his theory according to which, before developing an oral language, humans were communicating with a gestural language. The Italian American word that struck Mangione most deeply was *baccauso* (backhouse), one of the words that are rapidly disappearing because backhouses no longer exists, replaced by bathrooms built inside living quarters.

The word that struck Anthony Turano the most was *morgheggio*. Born in 1894 in Calabria, he was a lawyer and writer of social and juridical essays.[6] He ran into this word when a judge asked for his help in translating a letter written by a poor immigrant. Turano took his time and finally figured out that the word meant mortgage, the English word for the Italian *ipoteca*.[7] This brings back to my memory the confusion of a court interpreter in New York who, during a murder trial, had to translate the testimony of a witness who was testifying that he had seen the criminal near a *sciocchezza*. The word in standard Italian means foolishness, but the witness meant showcase, as in store window. Turano observed correctly that the large majority of Italian immigrants were peasants

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[5] Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). Philosopher, historian and jurist.

[6] Based on an online research, the 1940 U.S. Census lists one Anthony Turano —born in 1894 in Italy —as living in Reno, Nevada.

[7] Modern Italian now uses *mutuo*.

who had to face an industrial reality. Ignorant of the Italian terminology, they were forced to use English terms in order to express their needs. But, for the words to fit in the flow of their language, first they had to be converted phonetically into the closest thing that sounded like their language. Turano divided the English words that had been transliterated into three categories. The first refers to things outside the immediate realm of reality, terms such as *sexa* or *sescia* (section), referring in particulars to railroad rails. Other words of this kind would be *rancio* (ranch), *rodomastro* (road master), and so forth. The second category covered words referring to entities unknown before the immigration, things such as the *morgheggio* or *lista* (lease) and *fensa* (picket fence.) The third, finally, listed words the immigrants were hearing constantly around them, despite the fact that Italian words for those entities did exist and they were rather common: *stritto* instead of *strada* (street), *carro* instead of *automobile* (car), *denso* instead of *danza* (dance). He observed that, once the word had been formed and accepted, it would follow Italian grammatical rules. If it were a verb, it would be conjugated, as in the case of *faitàre* (to fight). All these observations, interesting as they may be, are rather empirical and approximated, particularly for what pertains to the semantic analysis. Probably it has to do to the fact that Turano was an Italian American who fist went through the lingo phase and only later acquired English. Some of the examples are not exactly correct, as is the case of *tomate* (tomatoes). The adoption probably was facilitated by the presence of immigrants from some regions of northern Italy where tomatoes (in Italian *pomodoro*) are called *tomati*. In 1932, the year of his writing, it wasn't difficult to realize that, as a consequence of the reduced immigration flux, the Italian American lingo was destined to undergo further bastardization and Americanization. Turano, correctly, predicted that it would eventually disappear. No Italian American writer has felt the compelling urge to write an entire book

in the language of his/her youth. Despite the fact that probably they still remember it quite well, they only use it in their narratives as tiles of realism. Interestingly, there is only one poetry book written in a language that wants to reproduce the Italian American lingo without turning its speakers into caricatures, as was instead the case with Neapolitan singers when they came to perform in New York theaters. Even more interesting is the fact that that the book was written by an Irish.

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