

AMERICA AT THE TIME OF CHARLESTON
AS SEEN FROM A EUROPEAN FEMALE ARISTOCRAT

Approximately twenty years after Amy A. Bernardy wrote two passionate books, full of direct impressions, on the United States, another woman, Irene di Robilant,¹ a descendent from an ancient Piedmontese family, published a volume about life in America. It was not a book of memoirs, impressions, observations or portraits of things seen, despite the fact that she had seen a lot in her position of secretary (in reality, founder) of the *Italy-America Society*.² Her book was full of information, notions, facts, figures and quotations. It was the first book of its kind meant for the general public: with a wide panorama on many aspects of American civilization and complete with a bibliography after each chapter; witnessing the author's impartiality and seriousness. It was a survey on the economic situation, the educational system, the primitive peoples of North America and other practical issues. It included accounts by other competent Italians who had traveled through the continent and saw it useful to report back what they had learned. Nothing similar had ever been published in Italy: di Robilant was the first and she did a great job. Let's begin with an important fact that until today could be easily missed, namely the evolution of approaches in the books by European travelers to America in the decades straddling the last two centuries. Between 1880 and 1900, the main purpose appeared to be the need to report about this very distant land, a semi-barbaric country with plenty of unusual things that, to the observers, stood out as oddities. In di Robilant's book we see the tendency to discover patterns of similarities and differences between Europe and America, even in terms of culture. For instance, in a little book with impressions of America published in 1897 [sic], the famous composer Jacques Offenbach focused on the strident differences between the two cultures

1 Irene di Robilant (1895-?). Author, economist and translator. *Vita americana (Stati Uniti del Nord-America)*. Torino, Fratelli Bocca, 1929.

2 The *Italy-America Society* was founded in New York in 1918 by a group of prominent Americans from the fields of finance, media and politics. Coincidentally (?), it was housed in the same building at 25 West 43rd Street in New York where the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute is presently located.

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in the volume *Orpheus in America*.³ He mentioned, for instance, the fact that orchestra members in America would rehearse in shirt sleeves. It isn't my intention to compare the two books: their goals are completely different, but I must add that they are both completely different *and* diametrically opposed. Di Robilant took pleasure in discussing the state of higher education; the press and journalism; publishers and magazines; music and the art scene; novelists, short-story writers and playwrights. Additionally, she wrote about *cultural* America, something that must have surprised many Italians (and Europeans); revealing for the first time the force, progress and successes of this country in fields where many would not have expected to find anything valuable. The *many* who didn't know about the American cultural scene, by the way, also included people of higher status who had just immigrated to America but had no idea what was going on. Thus, despite the fact that most of the information is now obsolete, this *catalog* is a good document of those times. The other observation I want to make is di Robilant's generally optimistic tone, and her favorable disposition toward America. This could be a consequence of the new relations that Europe and American developed after World War I in 1918. (In the same period, the genius of Giraudoux published a book whose title aptly expressed the mood of the time: *Amica America*.)

Di Robilant's book belongs in the honeymoon-like atmosphere created by American intervention against Germany (1917). Unlike Giraudoux's, though, her feelings are not expressed in dewy and mythical terms but rather with the lucidity and accuracy of a report. This intelligent, highly educated, curious and dedicated woman was a rare case in the Italy of old. Today, after World War II, things are different, but back then it was really unusual for the daughter of an aristocratic family to leave her home and country to end up working abroad as a secretary. This position put her in contact with the rich, sophisticated, artistic and powerful New York society: from Otto Kahn, protector of the Metropolitan Museum, to the Morgan family—the

3 Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880). German composer and cellist, naturalized French citizen.

• *Orpheus in America: Notes of a Traveling Musician*. New York: G. W. Carleton & Co.; Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1877.

top international bankers—and their lawyer, Paul Cravath,⁴ whose Wall Street office was open day and night. She considered herself a bit like an unofficial ambassador of the newer and better post-war [WWII] Italy and she conceived her book as part of her responsibilities and duties as an Italian abroad. Who knows how many times, hanging out with Italian diplomats or with *nonneau-riche* Italian immigrants, in her humble position of secretary of an organization—small compared to the greatness of the official and social New York—she felt a revulsion against the superficiality of the former and the vanity of the latter? But her book gives no hints of this. As a woman, she must have had strong inclinations for some of those people and personalities, but not for others. However, she controlled her pen very tightly to the point where her impartiality is almost excessive; at the cost of reducing essential differences to naught; swallowed by a sense of fairness that becomes injustice when she put on the same level both the great and the mediocre. She was a keen observer of reality and always referred to it in the background. After World War I, American democracy, maybe for the first time since 1779, became the inspirational model for European masses (while the harsher realities were hidden away).

This book also examined the problem of the historical experiences stored inside the various racial groups. In particular it examines the vicissitudes of people of color; of Jews and Irish; explaining what kind of treatment they had received upon arrival; always keeping the tone of an impartial observer. One chapter, of course, is devoted to Italian immigration, without the enthusiasms or the despair of Bernardy. She fully understood that the so-called inassimilable foreigners that Bernardy observed as prisoners of the ghettos—Chinatown or Little Italies—would be replaced by a second generation that would be fully American and often even more patriotic than the descendants of the Mayflower.⁵ Here we don't run into visions of shantytowns, miserable

⁴ Otto Kahn (1867-1934), Banker, philanthropist and patron of the arts.

• Descendants of the financier, banker and philanthropist John Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913).

• Paul Cravath (1861-1940). New York lawyer and founding partner of the law firm known today as Cravath, Swaine & Moore.

⁵ In the original (p. 444) a footnote explains: "The first ship that in 1620 brought Anglo Saxons to North America."

jobs, horrible cohabitation with other races, cruel labor conditions and contagious diseases⁵ as told in the stories by other visitors, from Adolfo Rossi to Giuseppe Giacosa. What she offered, instead, is a short chapter that defined the framework and guidelines for an analysis of the place of Italian immigration in the context of American history. It's like focusing the lens of a camera and the perspective, in its general outline, is still valid today.

Thirty years later, after World War II, the ties between the United States and Europe have been strengthened. The third generation of Italian Americans is now coming to age and a new chapter needs to be added. However, in terms of an analysis of Italian immigration within the context of American history, the book maintains its validity. The chapter in question does not indulge in useless national pride or acrimony toward America. Here and in other parts of the book, di Robilant ignored or omitted the tragic aspects of the conflicts in a nation that was formed artificially from powerful but abstract ideals, born from and reflected in the hopes of the ruling class. These were also ideals that derived from social, racial and economic realities in conflict with one another that often ended up squeezing out and mutilating those who got caught in the middle, whether they wanted or not, whether they knew it or not.

Since the end of World War II America has been the subject of many books. These are generally lively portraits and snapshots, colorful, impressionistic and full of anecdotes. However, none of them is grounded in the perspective of America's history like this one. Rather than *Vita Americana*⁶ the title should have been *La cultura Americana*. At the time of her writing, in 1929, the author of the introduction already noticed the *Americanization* of European culture, a phenomenon that involved customs, mentality, and forms of industrial and political organization; a phenomenon that has continued to grow to the point that it is now one of the essential traits of our time. One of the least predictable developments of this process is American influence on European literature and philosophy. One of the merits of the book I just described is the chapter on American Philosophy, which is certainly one of the first times American philosophy is even mentioned at all.

6 *Vita americana (Stati Uniti del Nord-America)*. Torino, Fratelli Bocca, 1929.

The author did not foresee the popularity that pragmatism and John Dewey's pedagogy would eventually reach in Europe, although some hints had already begun to appear. This is a typical example of the merits and demerits of this book: sensibility about new things but not always a good judgment about them.

New York, October 23, 1960

AFTERWORD
Why Italian Americans Are Oversensitive

It was no surprise that an article I wrote about *Mafia mentality* among Italian Americans, (something different from Mafia proper), caused a reaction by one of the surviving tabloids still published in semi-Italian in the United States. The comments to my piece are a fabric woven with insults and falsities. The majority of Italian American press still has learned nothing from America; namely that public disputes require the precise, verbatim citation of words actually uttered by the antagonist. In abiding to this commandment, I would like to explain now why Italian Americans are so touchy as not to be able to argue without getting angry. And I will show how it is done with facts and arguments, without nasty words.

Emigration was an enormous tragedy for all the peoples that were forced to solve their economic problems by moving to a foreign country with a foreign language and foreign traditions. All experts in psychology recognize that uprooting human beings from the society where they grew up is one of the greatest hindrances to normal development. In one of the most recent books about the foundation of American civilization, I read the following statements about immigrants and the process of adaptation, here called *alienation*.¹

¹ A footnote contains the following information: Max Lerner, *America as a civilization*, pp. 86-87. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1957).

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LIST OF REAL PERSONS

Abbruzzo
Accardi, Sam (born Accardi
Serimo)
Adonis, Joe (born Giuseppe
Antonio Doro)
Aleardi, Aleardo
Alighieri, Dante
Allen, Frank
Altrocchi, Rudolph
Amaruzza, Nicola
Anastasia, Albert (born Umberto)
Anastasia, Antonio (a.k.a. Tony)
Anastasia, Gerardo
Anniello, Ercole
Annis, George
Aosta, Emanuele Filiberto
Arcoleo, Giorgio
Ario, Flamma
Ariosto, Ludovico
Aristophanes
Bagnetto, Antonio
Bandiera, Artilio
Bandiera, Emilio
Barbara, Joseph
Barolini, Antonio
Barsotti, Carlo
Bartók, Béla
Barzini, Luigi, Jr.
Barzini, Luigi, Sr.
Beatrice (Beatrice Portinari)
Belli, Gioacchino
Bellino, Joe
Benelli, Sandro
Benelli, Sem
Berchet, Giovanni
Berenson, Bernard
Bernardy, Amy A.
Berreri, Canillo
Bernhardt, Sarah
Bethlen, István
Blome, Anna
Bonaparte, Napoleon
Borgese, Giuseppe
Borra, Carlo
Bourbon
Bovio, Giovanni
Bradford, William
Brady, Morris
Brancato, Francesco
Brosio, Manlio
Bruno, Giordano
Buchalter, Louis
Bunker, Ellsworth
Buonarroti, Michelangiolo
Butler, Nicholas
Caesar (Gaius Julius Caesar)
Caerani di Sermoneta, Gelasio
Caerani Lovarelli, Ersilia
Caerani, Onorato
Cairoli, Adelaide
Calamandrei, Pietro
Calò, Giovanni
Capone, Al (born Alphonse)
Capote, Truman
Carducci, Giosué
Carnevali, Emanuele
Caruso, Enrico
Caruso, James
Cassini, Igor (a.k.a. Cholly)
Cavalcaselle, Giovanni Battista
Cecchetti, Giovanni
Cecchi, Emilio
Cechov, Anton
Celebrezze, Anthony
Cellini, Benvenuto
Chamberlain, Alberta
Chaplin, Charles
Charlemagne

- Chiochi, Sofia
 Chiofalo, Gaetano
 Cicero (Marcus Tullius Cicero)
 Ciullo d'Alcamo
 Clay, Henry
 Cleveland, Grover
 Colletti, Victor
 Columbus, Christopher
 Comitzi, Loretto
 Compagni, Dino
 Coppola, Antonio
 Coppola, Frank
 Corazzini, Sergio
 Cordiferno, Riccardo (born.
 Alessandro Sica)
 Corsi, Edward
 Corsini, Maria Vera
 Costello, Frank
 Covello, Leonard
 Cravath, Paul
 Croce, Benedetto
 Crosby, John
 Cutley, James

 De Sica, Vittorio
 De Tocqueville, Alexis
 Dewey, John
 Dewey, Thomas
 Di Dio
 Di Robilant, Irene
 Di Rudini, Antonio Starabba
 Di Salle, Michael
 Dompè, Giovanna
 Donnarumma, James
 Dreiser, Theodore
 Dudley, Dorothy
 Duffy
 Dulles, John Foster

 Einaudi, Luigi
 Einstein, Albert
 Eisenhower, Dwight
 Epstein, Izhac
 Errigo, Joseph
 Esposito, Giovanni

 Falbo, Italo Carlo
 Fanfani, Amintore
 Fante, John
 Farfariello (stage name of Eduardo
 Migliaccio)
 Farrar, E.H.
 Ferdinand, Gregorovius
 Ferrazzano, Carlo
 Ferrer
 Ferrucci, Francesco
 Ferrugia, Luigia
 Finletter, Thomas
 Fiore, Frank
 Flamma, Ario
 Flower
 Fogazzaro, Antonio
 Fontana, Ferdinando
 Forti, Fiorella
 Francis of Assis
 Fucilla, Joseph

- Fucini, Renato
 Furcolo, Governor
 Furst, Henry
 Gadda, Emilio
 Garbaldi, Anita
 Garbaldi, Giuseppe
 Gelasius II
 Gentile, Nicola
 Geraci, Rocco
 Gerosa, Lawrence
 Ghibelline
 Giacosa, Giuseppe
 Giannini, Amadeo
 Giannini, Eugenio
 Gioia, Flavio
 Giolitti, Giovanni
 Giotto da Bondone
 Giovannitti, Arturo
 Girardoux, Jean
 Giusti, Giuseppe
 Golden, Herbert
 Golino, Charles
 Govoni, Corrado
 Grande
 Grandi, Dino
 Grenough, Horatio
 Gregorian, Alexander
 Grillo, Giacomo
 Gronchi, Giovanni
 Grosso, Arturo
 Guerin
 Guicciardini, Francesco
 Guido d'Arezzo
 Harriman, Averell
 Hayes, Alfred
 Hemingway, Ernest
 Hennessy, David
 Hoover, Herbert
 Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus)
- Hourin, Albert
 Hughes, James
 Hugo, Victor
 Icardi, Aldo
 Imparato, Nicolò
 Impellitteri, Vincent
 Incalichio, Giuseppe
 Incardona, Bastian
 Jahier, Piero
 Jefferson, Thomas
 Janssen, Dorothy
 Jesus
 Johnson, Lyndon B.
 Joseph (saint)
- Kahn, Otto
 Kefauver, Estes
 Kennedy, John F.
 Kino, Eusebio
 Kreyrnborg, Alfred
 Kunitz, Stanley
 La Guardia, Fiorello
 Lansky, Meyer
 Lanza, Giuseppe
 Lapolla, Garibaldi
 Lauder, Harry
 Lefkowitz, Louis
 Lehman, Herbert
 Leonardo da Vinci
 Leopardi, Giacomo
 Levi, Carlo
 Levitt, Arthur
 Liguori, Raffaele
 Linati, Carlo
 Livingston, Arthur
 229, Lo Curro, Giuseppe
 Locatelli [sic], Ersilia (Lovarelli)
 Lofurbo, Tony
 Longhi, Roberto

- Lorenzo the Magnificent (Lorenzo de' Medici)
 Luciano, "Lucky" (born Salvatore Lucania)
 Luzzatti, Luigi
- Macheca, Joseph
 Machiavelli, Niccolò
 Malaparte, Curzio (born Curt Erich Sucker)
 Maldacea, Nicola
 Mangione, Jerre
 Mangione, Maria
 Manzoni, Alessandro
 Maramaldo, Fabrizio
 Marazzini, Renato
 Marcantonio, Vito
 Marcello, Carlos (a.k.a. Calogero Minacari or Minacore)
 Marchese, Antonio Jr.
 Marchese, Antonio Sr.
 Marconi, Guglielmo
 Marcus Aurelius
 Marinetti, Alfred
 Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso
 Marrazzini, Renato
 Martino, Gaetano
 Masseria, Giuseppe
 Matranga, Carlo
 Mayor des Planches, Edmondo
 Mathews, Herbert
 Mazzini, Giuseppe
 McCarran, Patrick
 McCormack, Muriel
 McGrannery, James
 McLeod, Scott
 Menarini, Alberto
 Menotti, Gian Carlo
 Mercantini, Luigi
 Messina
 Meucci, Antonio
 Michels, Robert
- Middaugh, Minnie
 Migliaccio, Eduardo (stage name: Farfariello)
 Minacari or Minacore, Calogero (a.k.a. Carlos Marcello)
 Minacore, Giuseppe
 Miranti, Mike
 Miranti, Louis
 Modica, Caspar Donald
 Molière (born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin)
 Monastero, Pietro
 Monroe, Marilyn (born Norma Jeane Mortenson)
 Morse, Samuel
 Mosca, Gaetano
 Murni, Paul
 Muntbe, Axel
 Mussolini, Benito
- Nannini [sic], Sam (Nanini)
 Nardi, Frank
 Necker, Louis
 Nitri, Francesco Saverio
- O'Dwyer, William
 O'Malley, Dominic
 Offenbach, Jacques
 Oriani, Alfredo
- Paca, William
 Paganini, Niccolò
 Pagano, Jo
 Palazzeschi, Aldo
 Panunzio, Constantine
 Papa, Dario
 Papini, Giovanni
 Pareto, Vilfredo
 Parini, Giuseppe
 Parini, Pietro
 Parke, George
 Pascoli, Giovanni

- Pasolini, Pier Paolo
 Paterno, Charles
 Paterno, Charles
 Pearson, Andrew
 Pecora, Ferdinand
 Pecorini, Alberto
 Pellegrini, Angelo M.
 Peragallo, Olga
 Perera
 Perfetto, Rudy (a.k.a. Perfetto)
 Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca)
 Piazzesi, Gianfranco
 Pici, Joe
 Pisani, Lawrence Frank
 Poe, Edgar Allan
 Poliziano (born Agnolo
 Ambrogini)
 Polizzi, Emanuele
 Pope, Fortune
 Pope, Generoso
 Portinari, Beatrice
 Powell, Adam Clayton, Jr.
 Prampolini, Camillo
 Prati, Giovanni
 Profaci, Giuseppe
 Provenzano (family)
 Puccini, Giacomo
 Pulci, Luigi

 Quasimodo, Salvatore

 Radano, Gene
 Re, Edward
 Rebola, Clemente
 Reles, Abe
 Ricaldone, Angelo
 Rimbaud, Arthur
 Rizzo, Anna
 Rizzo, Oberdan
 Robinson, Edward G. (born
 Emanuel Goldenberg)
 Rockefeller, Nelson

 Rodino, Peter
 Rohstein, Arnold
 Romero, Frank
 Ronjat, Giulio
 Roosevelt, Eleanor
 Roosevelt, Franklyn, D.
 Roosevelt, Theodore
 Rose (Rev.)
 Rosmini, Antonio
 Rossellini, Roberto
 Rossi, Adolfo
 Rossini, Gioacchino
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques

 Sacchetti, Franco
 Saer, Frank
 Salgari, Emilio
 Salmi, Mario
 Salvemini, Gaetano
 Sandburg, Carl
 Savoia-Aosta, Emanuele Filiberto
 Savoy (dynasty)
 Sbarbaro, Camillo
 Sbarbaro, Pietro
 Scaffidi, Antonio
 Scalia, Samuel Eugene
 Scelba, Mario
 Schiavo, Giovanni
 Scipio (Publius Cornelius Scipio
 Africanus)
 Scoffetti, Antonio
 Segni, Antonio
 Seligman
 Seneca, Pasquale
 Sequenzia, Venerando
 Shakspeare, Joseph
 Silone, Ignazio
 Sinatra, Frank
 Sinclair, Upton
 Siragusa, Carlo
 Slapater, Scipio
 Smith, John

Soffici, Ardengo	Ventresca, Francesco
Sondern, Frederic	Verdi, Giuseppe
Sorel, Georges	Verga, Giovanni
Soresi, Carl	Verne, Jules
Spellman, Francis	Vespucci, Amerigo
Spinella, Michele	Vico, Gianbattista
Stevenson, Adlai	Victor Emmanuel II of Savoy
Stromberg	Vidia, Carlo
Sturzo, Luigi	Vigo, Francesco
Sunseri (a.k.a. Salvatore Sinceri)	Villari, Pasquale
Symington, Stuart	Volter
	Volpe, John
	Volpicelli, Luigi
Tarchiani, Alberto	
Tasso, Torquato	Wagner, Robert
Tawes, Millard	Walker, James
Tobin, Maurice	Walter, Francis
Toscanini, Arturo	Washington, George
Traina, Charles	Weiss, Daniel
Trajan (Caesar Nerva Traianus)	Whitman, Walt
Treves (brothers)	Wilde, Oscar
Truman, Harry	Willie, Moretti
Tucci, Niccolo	Witzel, Godfrey
Tufarelli, Carmine	Wöllflin, Heinrich
Turano, Anthony	
Turati, Filippo	Xavier, del Bac (saint)
Tweed, William	
	Young, Loretta
Umberto I of Savoy	Zwillman, Abner
Ungaretti, Giuseppe	
Varney, Harold	

LIST OF FICTIONAL CHARACTERS
AND PSEUDONYMS OF UNIDENTIFIED PERSONS

Apollo
Beefsteak
Calliope
Castellucci V.A.
Don Basilio
Don Quixore
Dulcamara
Guccio Imbratta
Laura
Lustrri-Pungiglioni
Marquis of Forlimpopoli
Marquise Boninsegni
Passaguai Pasquale
Renzo (Renzo Tramaglino)
Professor Saliscia
Vandali

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GIUSEPPE PREZZOLINI, Professor in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at Florida State University, where he teaches courses in Italian Studies and where he served as Chair for sixteen years. He earned his degrees from UCLA (BA in English) and UC Berkeley (MA and PhD in Italian).

ABOUT THE EDITOR AND TRANSLATOR

FABIO GIRELLI CARASSI was Book Review Editor for the journal *Italica* for many years and now serves as one of its Associate Editors. He is also Associate Editor for the journal of the Italian American Studies Association. He is the author, editor, and translator of numerous books and articles on 20th century Italian literature and culture, translation studies, post war Italian narrative, and Italian American studies. His books include *Beppe Fenoglio and English Literature: The Study of the Writer as Translator* (1987; also in Italian), P.B. Shelley's *Prometeo slegato*, translated by Cesare Pavese (1997), *Quaderno di Traduzioni di Beppe Fenoglio* (2000), *Cesare Pavese e Anthony Chiunniatto: Their Correspondence* (2007), and *Cesare Pavese's Long Journey: A Critical Analytical Study* by Giose Rimanelli (2019). In 2019, he was the recipient of the American Association Teachers of Italian (AATI) Distinguished Service Award in recognition of his achievements in teaching and research, together with a strong commitment to service, in the fields of Italian language, literature, and civilization.

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