

NOSTALGIA FOR THE PAST: GIUSEPPE INCALICCHIO

This name jumped to my eyes twice in the last few days. It appeared below of a bunch of poetry lines in a local newspaper that is allegedly written in Italian. Just around that time, the same newspaper reported the arrival in New York of Giuseppe Ungaretti¹ with an interview and a photo. To be noticed: that newspaper had never previously published even a single poem by Ungaretti or any kind of articles about him. As far as I can tell, its readers know about Ungaretti just as much as I knew about Incalicchio² until that moment. Such was the situation when I opened my column for the November 15, 1959, issue of the weekly *Il Borghese*³ with an ironic observation that stated: “I was shown an Italian-language newspaper with the photo of Ungaretti visiting New York. I wonder who told the newspaper that quenches⁴ its readers’ thirst for poetry with Giuseppe Incalicchio’s verses that Ungaretti is a poet.”

On January 5, 1960, poet Incalicchio wrote to the *Borghese* and the editor forwarded his letter to me asking if I wanted to reply. I answered that they should publish it without changing a single comma because that would be the best possible reply to himself. And so it goes that it appeared in the section *Small Mail* in the January 28, 1960 issue.

Dear Editor,

I am an occasional reader of Your magazine. In the number 48 issue, in the column *New York Diary*, Giuseppe Prezzolini mentioned my name. I shall premise that I don’t know the above-mentioned individual, who, from what I can surmise, must be your correspondent in New York. In his column my name is mentioned in a comparison

1 Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888–1970). One of the most celebrated Italian poets of the twentieth century, representative of the movement called *ermetismo*.

2 Giuseppe Incalicchio (1889-1971). Poet.

3 *Il Borghese* (1950-1993). Political periodical with center-right leanings, founded by Leo Longanesi.

4 In the original: “*abbevera i lettori*.” In Italian the verb *abbeverare* [to water] is primarily used in association with animals. For plants, the verb is *innaffiare*. For humans, *dissetare*.

with the poets Giuseppe Ungaretti and Salvatore Quasimodo.⁵ It doesn't take a genius to notice the sarcasm contained in the note about me. Most likely your Italian readers wondered: "Who is this guy, anyway?"

The answer is easy. I am one of the millions of immigrants who fifty years ago left Italy because in Italy there were no opportunities for us. And if in these fifty years I have been naïve and idealistic enough to cultivate, as best I could, Italian poetry, could you in all honesty say that this was a crime? (In reality, there is nothing worse and also more stupid than cultivating Italian poetry in this country.) Certainly, I never had the hubris to expect that my name would be glorified in the literary anthologies of my motherland. Frankly, believe me, I can do without such honor (?) Consequently, it is very hard for me to comprehend the obscure reasons that motivated your correspondent to mention my name. In any case, let's just forget about it.

In conclusion, dear Editor, please heed my curiosity. Isn't it true that the so-called hermetic poets represent a literary current that, when it's not conscious mystification of art, is nothing more than a manifestation of mental unbalance?

Sincerely,

Giuseppe Incalicchio

Staren Island, January 5, 1960

P.S. With reference to the Nobel Prize awarded to Salvatore Quasimodo, I have a question: did the Swedish government award the prize to an Italian poet because of the sinking of the ship *Andrea Doria*?⁶ If that were the case, it wouldn't be the first time Italians are made fools of.

However, on January 27, 1960, ignoring that his first letter would appear in a later issue of the magazine, Incalicchio wrote again. I am publishing his second letter here for the first time.

5 Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968), Italian author and poet, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, 1959.

6 The writer refers to the Italian ocean liner *Andrea Doria* that sunk on July 25, 1956, off Nantucket Island, after a collision with the Swedish ocean liner *Stockholm*. Forty-six passengers of the *Andrea Doria* and five of the *Stockholm* died in the collision. International investigations attributed the responsibility of the collision to the Swedish ship. The writer insinuates that the Nobel Prize for literature to Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo was awarded by the Royal Swedish Academy as a sort of compensation for the maritime disaster.

Illustrious Editor:

As you know, Italians in America, in addition to reading almost all the publications that arrive from Italy, also read the magazine you so wisely edit, *Il Borghese*, which is probably more eloquent than others for its strictly literary content that eschews images and flashiness, two things that in these days are overused. I am one of those who read with interest *Il Borghese*, which, since I am not a subscriber, I purchase every week at one of New York's newsstands. Having said so, I want to share with you my surprise when I read in the issue number 48 a column by Professor Giuseppe Prezzolini that mentions my name directly, and more specifically: "I was shown an Italian language newspaper with the photograph of Ungaretti visiting New York. I wonder who told the newspaper that waters its readers with Giuseppe Incalicchio's verses that Ungaretti is a poet." With these words Eminent Professor Prezzolini obviously wanted to offend me because the term "to water" is used for animals when they are taken to the watering tank; and this definition does not bring honor to the pedagogue Prezzolini. The newspaper he alluded to is read not only by educated Italians but also by scholars of other nationalities who love our language; and is read by Prezzolini himself, who, otherwise, couldn't have found out about my poems; which, maybe, are not appreciated by him if he thinks he should compare them with those of his great friend Giuseppe Ungaretti with whom he had lunch, as he wrote in the first part of the same article. As to the newspaper in question, I am not the only one whose poems have been published there. The works of many other Italian Americans have also been published, and Prezzolini knows this very well. Why did he choose only me as his target to water his readers? Isn't this an obvious insult? Let him continue to write his overblown columns but tell him to leave me alone. My poems have nothing to be ashamed of when compared to those of Ungaretti and they would have nothing to be ashamed of compared to those of Prezzolini if he were a poet.

I would be grateful, dear Editor, if you should make public my complaint that objects to the arbitrary and less-than-noble utterances of the illustrious Professor Giuseppe Prezzolini.⁷

⁷ The translation attempts to faithfully reproduce the style and syntax of the original Italian text.

In the period between the first and the second letter, Incalicchio's mood and attitude changed. In the first letter, to him I was an "unknown," presumably "a correspondent for *Il Borghese*." In the second I became "Professor," indeed, "Eminent Professor." In his first letter, Incalicchio is an occasional reader of the magazine; in the second we learn that he buys it regularly at newsstands, although he is not a subscriber. To demonstrate his knowledge of the magazine, Incalicchio qualifies it as outstanding in term of its "strictly literary content" (!) In his second letter, Incalicchio asks how come I chose him as a target, and "only him" instead of the many Italian Americans whose poems are published in that newspaper.

I am more than happy to answer his questions. The meaning of my first note in the column was: there is a huge gap between Ungaretti's poetry and the poems that appear regularly in said newspaper. Given those standards, it is evident that Ungaretti's poems for the editors are worth zero; exactly as Incalicchio himself stated when he wrote that in his opinion hermetic poetry is the stuff of nuts or crooks. There is nothing offensive against Incalicchio in my words. Incalicchio's poems and the poems of many other people like him that appear in those sheets are regular poems, written in the poetic language we have been accustomed to for centuries. There are no dangerous innovations, there are no images that make one jump up and they require no effort to understand what they mean. Their meaning can only elicit approval on the part of the good and proper people who read them. The verses follow an order, metric rules are applied, all the words can be found in an Italian dictionary and they are always used with their conventional meaning. Incalicchio's verses, as well as those of his friends, march on like soldiers in a platoon at the orders of a corporal. In short, Ungaretti's poetry is the opposite of Incalicchio's. My note was not directed at Incalicchio. Rather, I was pointing out a contradiction in the newspaper that publishes his poems but had never mentioned Ungaretti even once before, and only became aware of him the day when he showed up in New York. Now Incalicchio asks me why I chose his name instead of that of another poet's whose verses appear in the same publication. Here is the reason why: in those days his name appeared twice in the newspaper. And I also liked

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the musicality of that name. I didn't know who he was and not even now do I have any idea who he may be. I chose him because of the frequency of his apparitions.

Not yet satisfied with the two letters I am publishing here, Incalichio wrote yet another letter to a different magazine that had mentioned my column. And, to top it off, he wrote a poem about me, a poem that I really want to share with my readers. Here it is:

COMPARISON

(dedicated to an illustrious pedagogue)

You are a brilliant and wise mentor

And I believe you were a student of Carducci;

You are a good writer and this brings you honor

And you enjoy the autumn sky.

You are famous for a book

About that Florentine secretary;⁸

We all know about your renowned acumen

And your vigorous Latin spirit.

Yet sometimes from so high up

You come down here and cast into a bad light

Those you don't believe are at your height

Of knowledge and you reduce them to nothing.

And if you are proud to be Tuscan

And as such you feel superior

You should know I am from Latium,⁹ I am a Roman

And I have of Horace¹⁰ the strength and good humor.

There was a time when your words didn't fail

To advise the love of poetry

The time when you were schoolmaster

And spoke about art and philosophy;

Now, I don't know why it came to you

To put my name in the note

You sent to the Italian people

Who, with reason, notice the beautiful and the ugly.

8 The reference is to Prezzolini's *Vita di Niccolò Machiavelli, fiorentino*. Milano: Mondadori, 1927.

9 Latium. Region of Italy with capital Rome.

10 Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65 BCE-8 BCE). He was the most acclaimed poet at the time of Emperor Augustus. His work *Odes* was considered the highest form of lyrical poetry.

That newspaper does not water people
 With my flowing and exciting rhymes;
 If anything, it delights them. That is the error
 That you made: the first mistake
 Of a Titan that is slowly dropping
 From open hills toward the highplains¹¹
 And it seems indeed that in you is disappearing
 Into vain dreams the genius of your early years.

CONFRONTI -- Tu sei brillante e savio precettore/ e credo del
 Carducci fosti alunno:/ tu scrivi bene, e ciò ti rende onore./ E ti
 diltera il cielo de l'aurunno./ Già sei famoso per quel tuo volume/
 intorno al segretario fiorentino:/ tutti sappiam del tuo provato
 acume./ del tuo vigore e spirito latino./ Ma qualche volta pur da
 tanta altezza/ scendi un pò giù mettendo in scarsa luce/ chi tu non
 credi essere a l'altezza/ del tuo saper e a nulla si riduce./ Pur se tu
 vanti d'essere toscano./ e come tal ti senti superiore./ sappi ch'io
 son del Lazio, son romano/ ed ho d'Orazio forza e buon umore./
 Un tempo non mancò la tua parola/ a consigliar d'amar la poesia/
 e questo quando a capo della scuola/ d'arte parlasti e di filosofia./
 Or, io non so perché ti venne in mente/ d'apportre il mio nome in
 quella nota/ mandata a quella nostra itala gente/ che con ragione
 il brutto e il bello annota/ quel foglio non abbevera il lettore/ delle
 fluenti e fervide mie rime:/ si diltera, se mai. Questo è l'errore/
 da te commesso, e son le pecche prime/ d'un tiano che lento va
 scendendo/ dai colli aprichi giù pei falsi piani:/ e sembra inver che
 in te va scomparando/ l'ingegno giovanil fra sogni vani.]

I probably overdid it with the narration of this colonial episode but I thought my readers would find it useful to understand certain phenomena of Italian immigration directly from written documents. I don't believe it is possible to fake letters and poems like those of Incalichio. For this reason alone their value is incalculable.

I want to add that Mr. Incalichio is wrong when he demands to be “left alone.” Writing verses, good or bad, is private business when one keeps them in a drawer. Once they are published everybody has

11 In the original: *falsi piani*. Play on words: *falsopiano* (singular) means high plains. The compound word is composed of *falso* [false, fake, phony] and *piano* [plain.] By separating the two words the writer stresses the allusion to dishonesty. The correct morphology of the plural word is *falsopiani*.

the right to critique them. By the way, I didn't even characterize them negatively. I only observed that a newspaper that publishes his verses most likely will ignore Ungaretti's. I didn't say that Mr. Incalcechio is a bigamous or a forger. I didn't even say that he writes poems identical to those that fifty years ago used to appear in *La Farfalla illustrata*. I just limited myself to comparing him with another poet. To conclude: I gave him the gratification of publishing his polemical prose and his satirical verses for a public that would have never read him. I did not change even a single comma. The readers will pass their own personal judgements.

New York, April 21, 1960

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF
IL PROGRESSO ITALO-AMERICANO

To the Editor:

I was shown an article you wrote on October 23, 1958, about Columbia University's *Casa Italiana* where I served as director from 1930 to 1940. I know well its history and I am one of the few who has the courage to talk about it without fears. Your article is like a *corbello* [basket] full of a variety of inaccuracies and outright fabrications, which, according to the Italian dictionary, can be also defined as a bunch of *corbellerie* [howlers]. Allow me please to provide some examples. If you so wish, I could follow up with more, or, as the old saying goes, I could "tackle on to the foodstuff shipment."

You stated, for instance, that the *Società Dante Alighieri* was housed in its quarters during the Fascist period and that the *Casa* degenerated into a propaganda agency. Now, the *Dante Alighieri* was never housed in *Casa Italiana*; it never even had an office on its premises, nor I believe it ever held a meeting of its board in those rooms. At most, it organized lectures, concerts and dances the same way as many other associations did, not only Italian and American, but, for instance, even Irish. In one occasion, during the colonial war in Ethiopia,² the *Dante Alighieri* had the gall to organize a lecture supporting the war, with an audience of about forty people. I personally threw them out and they never set foot in the *Casa* again. You should know these things because in those days the *Dante Alighieri* was directed by Dr. Italo Falbo³ who is currently managing editor of the newspaper you are working for, which is also the same publication you were also working for at that time. Moreover, in those very days the *Dante Alighieri Society's* headquarters

1 *Società Dante Alighieri*. Founded in 1889, it received a royal charter in 1893 with the mission of promoting Italian culture abroad. The Fascist regime turned it into a propaganda outlet. The United States government banned it during the WWII years.

2 Second Italian-Ethiopian War (also known as Abyssinian War), 1935-1936. Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia deposing its emperor and imposing colonial rule.

3 Italo Falbo (1876-1946). Journalist. He was editor in chief of the Rome newspaper *Il Messaggero*. After moving to the United States he became editor of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*.

was in Dr. Falbo's office, that it to say, right where your newspaper is. The *Dante Alighieri* had no official status as an association: it had no by-laws and no registered fee-paying members. It was basically Dr. Falbo's private business. What you wrote is even more bizarre since at that time the *Progresso Italo-Americano* openly supported the Ethiopia campaign and was a source of the kind of propaganda for which you blame *Casa Italiana!*

You also stated that at the beginning of World War II Italians were excluded from *Casa Italiana* ("The *Casa* was closed to Italians.") I can assure you that this is not true. I could give you a long list of witnesses to back me up. *Casa Italiana* remained open to everyone. Italians and non-Italians, and even to Black people. And how could *Casa Italiana* sort out Italians from Americans or people of other nationalities? After all, thank god, Italians aren't black or yellow. Were Italians required to hang a bell around their necks, like lepers in the Middle Ages? Or, maybe, should have they worn a yellow ribbon like Jews in Rome? Where did you see the edict that shut Italians out of the *Casa*? In case you were tempted to change the terminology stating that you meant to say "Italian Americans," not "Italians," that would be even worse. All Italian Americans always found open doors at *Casa Italiana*.

You also state that *Casa Italiana* "has finally reopened its doors" just because it has recently hosted the musical company of a friend of yours that performed *La Wally*.⁴ Again, I can assure you that those doors were always open, except during the university-scheduled academic vacations. Since it looks like you wrote a couple of articles full of inaccuracies, I beg you to look up an Italian dictionary and choose an adjective that fits your work. You have also neglected to mention the main goal of *Casa Italiana*. First of all, the *Casa* was not "donated to Columbia University to host people looking for an oasis of peace, to nourish the spirit with the most beautiful things and elevate the soul toward the mystery of art, poetry and music," as you wrote. I have no idea where you found those swooning, cutesy words. Its goal is much more serious and, most of all, very clearly defined. *Casa Italiana* was donated to Columbia University by a number of donors in order to

⁴ *La Wally*. Opera by Alfredo Catalani (1854–1893). The opera had its premiere in 1892.

make available to the university a venue where the language, literature and history of Italy could be taught in a supporting environment. It was not created for singers, dancers and people in search of an oasis of peace. Rather, it was created for students who wanted to study, and, as a matter of fact, hundreds of students have gone through those halls. Some of them now teach Italian in American universities and colleges. Hundreds of dissertations on literature and philosophy have been drafted in those rooms. Here the *Repertorio bibliografico della storia e della critica della letteratura italiana*⁵ was born, a work that is owned by the most important libraries in the world, and that you, I bet, so busy contemplating the “mystery of art,” never looked up even once.

In the Italian magazine *Il Borghese*, Vol. 7, n. 47, I showed how *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* is written in an Italian language that is often ridiculous and false. I also exposed its poor quality: it’s full of typos, layout mistakes, history and geography blunders. It’s a slapdash job. Not long ago, I read the announcement of a banquet sponsored by an Italian American society in honor of an Italian general who “having enlisted as a private in 1915”⁶ later became “commander of the Third and Fourth Army Corps.” Apparently none of the editors realized that this was simply impossible. In reality the poor sap was a modest colonel who, as is customary, on the day of his retirement was promoted to the rank of general, but who never had the intention to steal the job from the duke of Aosta.⁷

This is the kind of disinformation you perpetrate against your readers in the belief that they must be much more ignorant than they really are. In the meantime you serve to the public swoony speeches like the one on *Casa Italiana* about whose past and present you know very little. On top of that, the little you know is all wrong. I am not going to lower myself by asking that my letter be published in your

5 Giuseppe Prezzolini: Columbia University. Council for Research in the Humanities. Columbia University. Casa italiana. *Repertorio bibliografico della storia e della critica della letteratura italiana dal 1902 al 1932*. Roma: Edizioni Roma, 1937-1939.

6 In 1915 Italy entered the war (WWI) that had started the previous year.

7 Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia-Aosta (1869-1931). Member of the royal house of Savoy, he was commander of the Third Army Corps in WWI.

paper as would be my right. I really don't care about what you write
and I can live happily without a correction.

Devotedly yours,

New York, November 12, 1956

THE NEW LANGUAGE INVENTED
BY ITALIAN IMMIGRANTS IN AMERICA

Italians who visit the United States, when they come in contact with the second or third generation immigrants' descendants, are often puzzled and sometimes horrified by the language used by people they consider Italian like themselves. It is the same reaction experienced by ~~the~~ visitors, journalists and consular employees who arrived here decades ago. The language they heard was not Italian; it was not a dialect of Italian and certainly it was not English; but a hodge-podge that contained a bit of Italian and a bit of dialect (which varied with the geographical origin of the individual) ~~built~~ over a foundation of English pronounced the Italian way, with a rounded vowel at the end of each word. Examples: *contrattore* [contractor], *tracca* [track], *picco* [pick], *grosseria* [grocery], *bordante* [boarder]. Their surprise grew when they found the written version of this lingo¹ (often with many variations) in restaurant menus, classified ads in newspapers and even in official documents drafted by American authorities who wanted to make sure they were understood by Italian immigrants. A couple of examples are *scaloppini* [it should be *scaloppine*] and *tailors of conti* [coats]. The language of Italian Americans, therefore, is composed of a series of distortions of English rather than the Anglicization of Italian. This was clearly the result of an effort by a mass of poor, ignorant peasants who wanted to communicate with foreign-language workmates and ~~the~~ bosses their livelihood depended on. It wasn't a spontaneous, poetic language that individuals developed for themselves. It was a form of forced communication, similar—if I may use this comparison—to cooking food in a pressure cooker that readies a meal in a few minutes instead of hours.

An analysis of the words of this lingo easily reveals that it contains

¹ The author uses the word *gergo* which normally is translated with *jargon*. As linguistics and in particular dialectology have evolved in the last fifty years, the definitions of these technical terms have also changed. In English *lingo* reflects the casual nature of a language used for every-day informal exchanges, while *jargon* is used to describe a highly specialized language dense with technical terms with fixed value used in a particular sector of human activity.

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mostly nouns. A small percentage of adjectives are also present but with much lower frequency than in Italian or English. In shaping this language the immigrants satisfied the urgency of their communicative needs. We find: *pezze* [pieces, meaning dollars], *bosso* [boss] and *olivetta* [elevated railroad]. But we don't find words for *good*, *beautiful*, *true*, *false*, *right*, *wrong*. At most we see *onze* [hurray], a cry heard in theaters or stadiums to express emotional admiration; and *naise* [nice], a positive evaluation. The need to find and keep a job and the pressure to earn money explain the structure, dictionary and intonation of this *interlingua*.² The lexicon is functional and pragmatic containing just a list of nouns. There are no adaptations or transformations of words that convey emotions or subjective evaluation. Those who hear it, after a while can pick up a certain tone of disdain, spite, rancor and revolt: the Italian ear doesn't respond favorably to it because the words contain something harsh and broken and, often, forcibly hard-pushed. Even love is presented as a physical function: different from the role it has in Italian dialects where it occupies a preeminent position in popular poetry to express emotions even deeper than those of the literary language. Here it becomes less spiritual and more materialistic, betraying a sense of hostility toward non-Italian women who are described as mocking and taking advantage of immigrant males. The *ghella* is far removed from the concept of *girl* and even more from that of *nagazza*. To be noted is also the linguistic phenomenon called *phonetic adaptation* whereby, when a foreign word enters a language, the speakers find in their own language a word with a similar sound. The speakers' native words lose their original meaning and adopt those of the foreign words, thus changing the former original meaning. This is how *shovel* became *sciabola* [in Italian it means saber] and the worker that uses it is a *sciabolate* [in the sport of fencing *sciabolate*

² *Interlingua*. The author uses this term to describe the phenomenon of an intermediate language in which elements of the source language and the target language are present simultaneously, as in a sort of linguistic purgatory. A more precise term, depending on the state of refinement of this intermediate language would be *Pidgin* or *Creole*. In strictly technical and linguistic terms, *Interlingua* refers to an artificial language, similar to Esperanto, based on Romance languages, whose development began in the 1920s.

is *sabreur*, a swordsman with a saber.] *Elevated railroads* became *olivetta* [little olive], *tunnel* became *tonno* [tuna fish], later replaced by *tubo* [tube]. *Mulberry Street*, the center of New York's Little Italy became *Morbida*, with obvious phonetic assonance with *morbida* [soft]. The town of Hoboken, in New Jersey, morphed into *Obocchino*, resonant of *boccino* [cigarette holder]. At the top of them all is *Broccolino*, that transforms *Brooklyn* into a vegetable [small broccoli.]

A curious phenomenon, albeit rare, is the imitation of English words such as *officer* that, converted into the immigrants' language, became *ufficiale*. Presently, in Italian the noun *ufficiale* is used only to define the highest range of military ranks. Interestingly, by extending the meaning to cover functionaries and elected office-holders, the word reverted back to the original Italian meaning, with a semantic value similar to that of contemporary English. It thus has the appearance of a thirteen century Tuscan term rather than a nineteenth century foreign borrowing: instead of being lifted from the pages of the *Progresso Italo-Americano*, it looks like it was taken from Dino Compagni's *Cronica*.³ Not to be mistaken: the members of Italian associations that use this term are unaware of its history and evolution. They saw it in English-language newspapers or in the bylaws of American associations and they copied it as it was.

At times the marriage of Italian and English is steeped in dialect, as in the case of *coppetane* [‘*incup* + town]: *incup* literally means on top, above, over; and it designates the section of town that is *up*. Thus, *coppetane* designates New York's *Uptown*. This, at least, is the Neapolitan version. Sicilians say *oppitani*, with a different phonetic rendition of *up*. Regardless of the version, it all feels chopped up, stuttered, maltreated and minced. Another noticeable phenomenon is the disappearance from the lingo of words that are no longer needed. For example, since sanitary conditions have improved over the years and new buildings have indoor plumbing and bathrooms; the word

3. Dino Compagni (ca. 1255–1324), Florentine historian and politician. He wrote *Cronica delle cose occorrenti ne' tempi suoi* [Chronicle of Events Occurring in His Own Times] between 1310 and 1312. He never published his work in fear it would bring retaliation for his provocative and sharp opinions about contemporary Florentine political figures. The manuscript remained hidden until the late fifteenth century.

baccano [backhouse, outdoors latrines in the back of the house] has disappeared.

In a few generations this entire terminology will be gone as the few new immigrants who are still arriving face different conditions. In Italy they learned the grammatical foundations of Italian and here, as soon as they go to school and learn English (adults included), they are the first ones to be horrified by the rough linguistic mixture used by the old immigrants. This difference in linguistic sensibility first appeared between two groups of immigrants separated by the historical landmark of World War II: those who arrived before 1940 and those who emigrated after 1945. This also marks the abyss that exists between these generations. The fact that these two don't speak the same language represents one of the most important phenomena in the history of Italian immigration.

It is also important to notice that in the field of journalism two different trends developed after a protracted struggle. At the very beginning, Italian-language dailies and periodicals were written and edited by professionals who came from Italy and who knew Italian quite well. Approximately after 1900 the innovation of classified ads was introduced and it became impossible for editors to hide or translate into proper Italian the lingo created by Italian American workers. Learning through the newspaper *Bollettino della Sera* of 1917, I found classified ads containing words like *giobbisti* [jobbers], *pressatori* and *sottopressatori* [pressers, pressers' helpers], *operatori* [operators] and *scoperi* [garment shapers]. I also found announcements for a *mezzo-giovane*,⁴ *mezzo-sciantore* and *mezzo-barista*. *Mezzo* [half] stands for part-time; and the jobs respectively refer shop helper, shoeshine and bartender. A farmhouse is always a *farma*; the trolley is the *carro elettrico* [electric wagon] and heat is *sirina* [scream], whence the frequent and involuntarily ironic announcements about houses for sale *without sirina*, i.e. without appreciable value.⁵

4 *Giovane* literally means young. The full context of this word is *giovane di bottega*, shop apprentice, usually the youngest person in an artisan's shop who is still learning the trade.

5 *Sirina* in Italian means appraisal, estimate, but also good reputation and admiring respect.

Today the situation is quite different. In the classified ads of the *Progresso Italo-Americano* those expressions are almost gone. The old generation that still uses them has retired with nice pensions and their children—comfortable and secure in society—no longer need to look for jobs in the pages of Italian-language newspapers. The most recent immigrants from Italy looking for jobs speak a decent Italian and don't need to read the announcements translated into the old lingo. Nobody looks anymore to buy or lease a *fruttisteme* [fruit stand]. At the same time words like *bar* and *barista*⁶ are now commonly used in Italy. Even the newly-arrived *grignolla* [green horn] knows them.

The ignorance of English words assimilated into Italian created a doubling of the meaning as, for instance, in the case observed by linguists of the word *canabulog*. This word reproduces the Italian duplication in *canè bulldog* [dog bulldog].⁷ By the way, because of phonetic preferences, Florentines call it *canè busdroghe*. The same phenomenon appeared in Sicily during the Arabic domination of the island,⁸ with the creation of the toponymies *Mongibello* (in Arabic *Gebel* means mount, therefore *Mongibello*, crasis of *Monte Gebel*, means *Mount Mount*); and *Porto di Marsala* (*Marsala* means *Allah's port*: the literal meaning is *Port of Allah's port*). The most recent repetition/duplication⁹ that has spread all over America is *pizza-pie*, which, translated into Italian, means *pizza-pizza*. This term is not having much success in advertisement or in store signs, although it is very common in everyday language. It should also be noted that in the last

6 Curiously, the word *barista*, an Italian neologism created on the root of the American word *bar*, has crossed the ocean in the opposite direction and is now used in the U.S. to identify a person working in an Italian-style coffee shop.

7 My personal opinion is that the term *canabulog* results from the crasis of different lemmas, namely *canè a bulldog*. The preposition *di* in Italian indicates the distinctive property of an otherwise generic entity. For instance, Italian uses "*barra a remi*" [*barra a motore*] to indicate respectively *row boat* and *motor boat*. The same applies to flavored foods or particular styles to indicate "in the manner of." In these cases the preposition *di* is followed by a definite article. We thus have: "gelato *al limone*" [lemon-flavored ice-cream], "pasta *alla putanesca*" (no need for translation here.) (Translator's note.)

8 The Arabs invaded Sicily in 652 CE. Sicily was an emirate (state) with capital Palermo from 831 to 1072.

9 The technical term in linguistics is "pleonasm."

in it lies
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 in it lies
 delete
 delete and replace with
 <Translator's note>

decade, starting around 1950, Italy's improved economical conditions and the stream of American tourists who visit Italy along with the considerable amount of imported Italian products to the United States, from craft to advanced manufacture have injected new genuine Italian words into English. For instance, the word *pizza* is winning the battle against *pizza-pie* and stands by itself against the English duplication.

delete <;> insert <>

And now it is time to ask: what kind of footprints will be left by this half-a-century-long linguistic torment? I have reported only a fragment of the information that was collected by linguists like Arthur Livingston, Alberto Menarini and Samuel Scalia; or by observers like Dario Papa, Adolfo Rossi, Amy Bernardy¹⁰ and other visitors to the United States who became familiar with Italian immigrants. From the literary standpoint maybe the only traces left by the lingo will be the ironic intonation, the caricature and parody by a few who "stooped down" to listen to that "horrendous speech" and took a look at the "monsters"¹¹ generated by cross-breeding the English language with Italian dialects. The scions of Italian bourgeoisie educated in Italian lycceums, practiced their satirical vein by making fun of the ignorant *cafoni* and their primitive language, thus following in the wake of a long tradition of writers from the beginning of Italian poetry to this very day, from Ciullo d'Alcamo to Renato Fucini.¹² The Italian America

correct quotation marks

correct quotation marks

correct quotation marks

10 Arthur Livingston (1883-1944). Professor of Romance Languages at Columbia University, translator and curator of several works from Italian. He investigated the language of immigrants.

11 Alberto Menarini (1904-1984). Linguist and author, he was awarded the Laurea Honoris Causa from the Università di Bologna in 1984

12 Samuel Eugene Scalia (1900-1986). Professor of Italian at Brooklyn College and father of the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia).

• Dario Papa (1846-1897). Journalist, author of *New-York* (Milano, Galli, 1884); *La donna in America* (Milano, Aliprandi, 1889).

• Adolfo Rossi (1857-1921). Journalist, author of *Un italiano in America* (Milano, Treves, 1894).

• Amy Bernardy (1880-1959). Author of several books on Italy and Italians, among which *Italia randagia attraverso gli Stati Uniti* (Torino, Bocca, 1913).

delete and replace as follows:
"Horrendous speech,"
"monsters";

"stooped down,"
"monsters";

11 Stooped down. Horrendous speech. Monsters; these terms are direct citation of comments by the above-mentioned authors.

12 Cielo d'Alcamo, also known as Ciullo d'Alcamo. Thirteenth century Sicilian poet and satirist. Only one poem remains: *Rosa fresca aulentissima* [Most Fresh and Scented Rose].

lingo was not even adopted by Italian American novelists who staged their works in the milieu of family life. At most, the lingo appears in bits and pieces only as a device to add local color to the stories.

P.S. Mr. Angelo Ricaldone from Biella, Italy, wrote to tell me about his experience in Australia. As I suspected, he confirmed that Italian immigrants in Australia did the same thing by creating a new lingo. He supplied the following examples. A mother yells at her daughter who is running on the front yard: “*Non andare lì che spogli la grassa.*” [Meaning: Don’t go there or you will spoil the grass. Literal translation of *spogli la grassa*: you will undress the fat woman.] Two friends are talking and one describes his relax activities: “*Siedo in giardino e rido il buco.*” [Meaning: I sit in the backyard and I read a book. Literal translation of *rido il buco*: I laugh at the hole.] The old Italian immigration to America didn’t even have *rido il buco* since they were illiterate, unlike the immigration to Australia that took place after World War II.

• Renato Fucini (1843–1921). Poet, essayist and novelist he is best known for short stories set in rural Tuscany.

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*,¹ 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 dialect, 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

¹ *Sull'oceano*. Milano, Fratelli Treves, 1889.

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 Alcardo Alcardi!) 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 speakers¹ 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, 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 hometowns³ 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 Sandburg⁴ are

2 Jerre Mangione (1909-1998). Writer of the Italian American experience.

• *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). Poet and historian. The child of poor Swedish immigrants, he won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1951 and again in 1959 for history.

delete (;) insert (< ; >)
 delete (;) insert (< ; >)

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 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 funeral and massive sounds.

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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 *boss* [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 *boss* 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, 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 habitations. 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 Vico⁵ 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 *baccuso* [backhouse], one of the words that are rapidly disappearing because backhouses no longer exist, replaced by bathrooms built inside living quarters.

The word that struck Anthony Turano the most was *morgheggio* [mortgage]. 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

5 Gianbattista Vico (1668-1744). Philosopher, historian and jurist.

6 The 1940 U.S. Census lists one Anthony Turano—born in 1894 in Italy—as living in Reno, Nevada.

7 Modern Italian now uses the word *mutuo*.

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 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 *sesta* [section], referring in particulars to railroad rails. Other words of this kind would be *nancio* [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 *fenza* [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 *faitare* [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 first 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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New York, April 29, 1962

CARNEVALI AND OTHER ITALIANS WHO WROTE IN AMERICANO

The group of people who gathered around my journal *La Voce*, myself included, had a friend in Emanuele Carnevali,¹ despite the fact that we didn't know he existed. I first found out about him in 1950 when I happened to get my hands on a rare publication of his critical writings and poems. The volumes, strangely, were not published in the United States but in Paris, around 1925, by a small house, Contact Editions,² located in one of the most beautiful spots in the French capital, the Isle Saint Louis on the Quai d'Anjou. This was the time of the expatriates, a small group of American intellectuals who ran away rather than facing the materialism of their country and ended up living in Paris. Here they basked in the illusion of the false liberation of American prose; with the promises of the phony *Bobeme* of the *Rive Gauche*,³ where they set camp; protected by the fistful of dollars they, for better or for worse, were getting from the materialistic motherland.

The little volume that collects whatever is left of Carnevali's production is 268 pages long and was edited by Dorothy Dudley.⁴ Her meritorious work exempts us from having to rummage through the pages of small journals like *Poetry*, *The Little Review*, *Others*, *The Lyric*, *Youth*, *The Modern Review* and so forth. Carnevali, the introduction tells us, was a very smart child who grew up without a mother and an indifferent, absent father. After leaving Italy, he lived in New York and Chicago for eight years, leading a miserable and rudderless existence,

1 Emanuele Carnevali (1897–1942). Emigrated to the United States at 16, he started writing poetry and became very well known in avant-garde circles. He wrote exclusively in English.

2 Contact Editions (1923–1929). Founded by an American expatriate in Paris, it published volumes by some of the greatest authors of the period, such as Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway and William Carlos Williams.

3 *Rive Gauche* [Left Bank]. The left bank of river Seine was the cradle of avant-garde movements in the first decades of the twentieth century. In the original Prezolini calls it "*Riva sinistra*" and adds in parenthesis: "sometimes really *sinistra*," playing on the *triple entendre* of the term which in Italian also means both "sinister" and politically "left-leaning."

4 Dorothy Dudley (1884–1962). Poet and literary critic.

in italics

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working a variety of jobs: dishwasher in restaurants and private clubs; extemporaneous translator; teacher of Italian language; secretary etc. He always maintained the sense of urgency and entitlement of someone who is forced to do things below his stature but is not sufficiently coward, nor courageous enough, to resign to it. He died in Italy where he had returned after falling ill with tuberculosis. He held Arthur Rimbaud's as his life model and, like Rimbaud, was enamored of poetic greatness.

Born in Florence in 1898 he died in Italy in 1925 [sic].⁶ After his death Carlo Linati⁷ wrote an article in the Sept. 1, 1934, issue of *Nuova Antologia*: "A very promising rising star (...). He was admired by the latest American poets, the most demanding and critical, the most *avant-garde* in experimental techniques (....) and received an award from the journal *Poetry*."⁸ Any American with an average culture who happened to read this article in 1934 would have asked: "How come I have never heard of this person? Who is he? I want to find out more and read more of his stuff." But his research soon would end up in a blind alley: The American *Who's Who*,⁹ with a list of thousands of American personages, does not have an entry for Carnevali. The catalogue of the New York Public Library (four million volumes) does not have his book. And it doesn't appear in the catalogue of the famous Library of Congress either: Our American reader could look up Stanley Kunitz's *Authors Today and Yesterday*; nothing; or Alberta Chamberlain Lawrence's *Who is Who among Living Authors*: same result. He could grab the Cambridge history of American literature: no mention. If he called even the best bookstore in town, the clerks wouldn't know where to look. After a long and patient investigation he would find five lines hidden in the three hundred pages of a recent history book

5 Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891). French poet precursor of modernism. He had with a very precocious literary career and stopped writing at age 21.

6 The correct year of his death is 1942. Carnevali returned to Italy in 1925 and spent the rest of his life battling a mental illness that required frequent hospitalizations.

7 Carlo Linati (1878-1949). Writer and literary critic.

8 *Poetry*. Founded in 1912. The extant website claims: "The oldest monthly devoted to verse in the English-speaking world."

9 *Who's Who in America* is a directory published by Marquis Who's Who Ventures. The directory contains short biographies of individuals deemed worthy of mention.

Transposed and place after <have>.
Should read <How come have I not heard>

delete and replace with <twenty-one>

on American literature by Alfred Kreyenborg.¹⁰ In the general index of American periodicals finally he would locate a bibliographical note that would bring him to the obscure journal *Poetry* with a few of his poems. I don't mean with this to diminish his value nor dismiss the rare case (or, as Linati puts it, unique) of a young Italian who lived for a short time in America and was able to take possession of the secrets of its language to the point where he could write both original prose and poetry. His fame and success, however, were limited. His works in prose or in free verse have a thin yet lyrical vein, except when they focus on notations of facts and sensations: in these case images tend to appear and, with them, the hint of a rhythm. It was easier for Carnevali to find a niche in contemporary lyricism which does not protect itself behind the moats of prosody and the defensive walls of metric. The samples I read clearly demonstrate it. From a social standpoint, both Carnevali and our immigrants in general did not have a vision of America as a sweet friend or a gentle host. Speaking metaphorically about the boarding rooms where he lived, Carnevali wrote:

I brought you illness and illness you gave back to me; I brought you poverty and poverty you returned. I brought you joy and you returned disgust, a disgust so powerful I would have broken up in thousand pieces had I left myself be led by it.

As a person he must have been rather difficult, both by nature and by purpose. In America he made lots of friends of both sexes, he fought with them and then made up. Some American writers of the period gave him positive reviews, some with reservations. I am afraid

¹⁰ The New York Public Library currently owns a copy of *A Hungry Man*, Paris: Contact Editions, 1925.

• The Library of Congress holds four books, three of them essays about him and an "autobiography." The earliest was published in 1967.

• Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006). Poet Laureate. *Authors Today and Yesterday: A Companion Volume to Living Authors*. Kunitz, Hadden, Hayward, ed. New York, The H. W. Wilson Company, 1933.

• Alberta Chamberlain Lawrence (1875-1956). *Who's Who Among Living Authors of Older Nations*. Los Angeles, Golden Syndicate Publishing Company, 1931.

• Alfred Kreyenborg (1883-1966). Poet, novelist, playwright. He is best known as literary editor and anthologist.

he expected to obtain from his genius more than it could actually produce. However, it is a miracle that in such a brief time he was able to immerse himself so deeply into the language. In one of his first poems, dedicated to clichés, he wrote:

The headwaiter says: "Such nice weather today!"
And flashes a sentimental smile...
But I haven't slept and have been waiting for sunrise.
One day I would like to be born
With a trumpet as powerful as the wind
To announce to the world
That wonderful cliché, "such nice weather today."

There were many other days, however, when he was so desperate he wanted to cry and wanted to announce "It's going to rain today," to every old lady, every young couple, every scoundrel who came to the flophouse where he lived.

After discovering his poetry I wrote about it in a Turin newspaper. Yet, only in 1950 did I become aware of his work as a critic. He had written in a penetrating way about *La Voce* and the writers whose works were published in this journal. His observations were much deeper than those of many academics. This means he had the talent to discover new values and not simply accept and analyze them. Far away from Italy, with a modest education (it seems he briefly attended school in Venice,) he discovered the poets of *La Voce* and *Lacerba*. Here are some of his notes.

Aldo Palazzeschi: "Simple and naive like a modern Saint Francis of Assisi. A rascal with eyes full of wonder, a quick and luminous artist."

Giovanni Papini: "After great suffering we all have lots of remedies we can recommend. Yet, after age 20, often after a defeat, most of us shrivel up, become humble. But Papini fulfilled his vow when he was 20 and did not shrivel up (...). He could be 16-20 or 60. He was born with "Genesis" and spoke in the "Apocalypse."

Scipio Slapater: "Hard, strong, clean young man."

Corrado Govoni: "Delicate like a young girl, he sings about the filthiest, most obscene affairs of an old Italian city, always with his delicate voice."

replace with <twenty>
replace with <twenty>
replace with <sixteen, twenty>
replace with <sixty>

Piero Jahier: "Too many scruples in this man. He must believe that every man perturbed by a punishing conscience is a poet. He works in an office for a living. No dictionary, no grammar book are enough for him. They must expand and stretch in order to contain him. Jahier knows that the poet makes the dictionary and the grammar and many other things."

Ardengo Soffici: "He is the most avant-garde and, through French influences, he has achieved a jagged form of poetry; free words and lyrical simultaneity, which are accidental like life itself."

Clemente Rebora:¹¹ "Very serious, very rich, he overflows with images with an orgy of cold emotions and he consumes himself in a unanimity that is too emotional and vague."

Now, these critical judgments are not always extraordinary or profound and would benefit from some fine tuning. In my opinion, they also need the support of a cultural background and knowledge that Carnevali did not possess. Yet, if one considers the time when they were written, they are certainly noteworthy. He also talks about me and I wasn't sure whether I should quote it here or not, mostly because I thought my neighbors would think I would do it out of vanity. I hope for myself, however, that at my age there were more important things than other people's opinions. Therefore, here it is:

Prezzolini: "Amiable critic(!),¹² clean and forceful, he put Marinetti and his gang back in their place with the only intelligent articles on Futurism¹³ ever to appear in an Italian journal, where dull and

delete (!) replace with <>>

¹¹ *Lacerba* (1913-1915). Political intellectual journal founded by Giovanni Papini and Ardengo Soffici.

• Giovanni Papini (1881-1956). Writer and poet, active in the avant-garde movement. He converted to Catholicism and took progressively more conservative positions.

• Scipio Slataper (1888-1915). Writer and supporter of the intervention of Italy in WWI

• Corrado Govoni (1884-1965). Poet in the Futurist movement.

• Piero Jahier (1884-1966). Writer and poet. He edited *La Voce* with Prezzolini.

• Ardengo Soffici (1879-1964). Writer, poet and painter.

• Clemente Rebora (1885-1957). Poet of the avant-garde. He later took the vows as a Catholic priest.

¹² In the original "*amabile*."

¹³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944). Poet and editor, founder of the

hard-headed academicians waged war against it and disgusting, ignorant Young Turks defended it.”

Certainly I didn't deserve the adjective *ambible*, and if it came from another source I would consider it sarcastic. I am very committed, though, to “critical cleanliness” and I am happy Carnevali noticed it. Poor Carnevali! I wanted to write this piece because I don't want anyone to say that I am like one of those critics who keep a notebook with the list of reviews received on one page and, on the opposite page, the list of reviews returned. When one of their creditors dies, they cross out the debt with a deep sigh of relief. I was attracted to writing about him because I thought he was a man who, in many ways, could talk to me; but he was already dying the very moment I set foot in America.

Carnevali is not the only Italian who came here as a teenager and learned English to the point of handling it like a native born. I will mention the cases of Pascal d'Angelo and Arturo Giovannitti. Giovannitti too, like Carnevali, learned political and social hate and rebellion, but went beyond the literary realm. His poetry today feels long on eloquence but short on sensibility, based on rhetorical cardboard cut-outs of “Judges and Accused,” “Rich and Poor,” “Rebels and Wardens,” all generic and abstract. His verses, collected in the 1914 volume *Arrows in the Gale*,¹⁴ go back to the traditional models of Walt

Futurism movement.

• Futurism: artistic, poetic and social avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century. It emphasized modernity and technology against tradition and academic conformism. It was very influential in figurative arts.

¹⁴ Pascal d'Angelo (1894-1932). Author of *Son of Italy* (New York, McMillan, 1924); one of the most compelling autobiographies written by an Italian immigrant. Functionally illiterate when he arrived in the United States at age sixteen, D'Angelo learned the language as an autodidact and published poetry in several important journals. *Son of Italy* is currently in print, published by Guernica Editions, Toronto, Canada.

• Arturo Giovannitti (1884-1959). Socialist political activist and union organizer. He was accused of murder after violent incidents during the Bread and Roses labor strike of 1912 in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He defended himself in court with a memorable closing argument and was acquitted, thus escaping a death sentence.

• *Arrows in the Gale*. Riverside, Connecticut, Hillacre Bookhouse, 1914.

Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe and Oscar Wilde.¹⁵ His language is rich but contrived, like an exercise in oratorical scales that reaches the climax with a sonorous conclusion, like a political speech.¹⁶

New York, September 13, 1954

¹⁵ Walter Whitman (1819-1892). American poet and essayist.

• Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). American writer, editor and literary critic.

• Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). Irish playwright, novelist, essayist and poet.

¹⁶ Prezzolini returned to Giovanni in an article published in the newspaper *Il Tempo*: "Elogio di un 'trapiantato' molisano bardo della libertà negli Stati Uniti." Anno XXI, N. 128, 10 Maggio 1964, 3. (Translator's note.)

THE ITALIAN AMERICAN CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICA

Foreign words tend to appear in a literary text and even more in poetry primarily to render the local color or the national identity of a given character. It is a touch of realism. It is true, though, that Manzoni does not let Renzo speak dialect and Petrarca does not need French words to add local color to Laura. Many other artists took other routes. Dante, for instance, used Latin and Provençal. Manzoni himself made the Spanish governor of Milan speak in his native tongue in addressing his driver. In the nineteenth century the use of foreign words increased. Sixty years ago Antonio Fogazzaro used Venetian dialect to better define some of his characters, and today, novelists like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Emilio Gadda, think directly in dialect even before they make their characters speak it. At times, artists with a satirical bent enjoy themselves with difficult rhymes, like Luigi Pulci who rhymed *salamelet* with *Melchisedec*.¹ In this case the excitement for this ingenious trick must have surpassed the intention to create local color. A rapid example of this local color is in Giuseppe Parini's *Il giorno*,² where

1 Renzo Tramaglino is one of the main characters in Alessandro Manzoni's novel *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*]. The character is from Lecco, at the southern tip of Lake Como's eastern branch.

• Laura was Petrarca's muse. They met while living in Avignon, France.

• Antonio Fogazzaro (1842-1911). Poet and novelist. His most famous novel is *Piccolo mondo antico* (Milano: Galli, 1895).

• Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975). Poet, novelist, essayist and public intellectual. He wrote poetry in his native Friulan language. His novels take place in working class neighborhoods in Rome.

• Carlo Emilio Gadda (1893-1973). Novelist. He used the dialects of Rome and Milan in his works.

• Luigi Pulci (1432-1484). Writer of *Morgante*, a satirical parody of chivalric poems, published in 1478. *Salamelet* is the Italian distortion of Arabic *salām al-ikrām* ("May peace be upon you.") In Italian the word *salameletto* means insincere, excessively effusive greetings or salutations (such as deep bows or hand kissing). The rhyme appears in *Morgante*, XVIII, 194.

• *Melchisedec* is a biblical king mentioned in the Bible's *Book of Genesis*.

2 Giuseppe Parini (1729-1799). Poet and social critic, representative of the Italian Enlightenment.

• *Il giorno* (1763-1765). A satirical poem, it is Parini's most famous work.

the terms *monsieur* and *toilette* appear. Franco Sacchetti,³ who usually loved crazy and weird rhymes, never used foreign words, although he was well aware of many borrowings from French used by Florentine merchants who traded with Lyon, France. Machiavelli in his reports from France seemed to forget Italian and threw in several words taken from French, although he never used them in poetry. Verses with a mix of Italian and Spanish are in Ludovico Ariosto's *Satira II*:⁴

Ajora no se puede; etse mejoire
que vos torneis a la mañana; almeno
fate ch'io sappia, ch'io son qui di fuore.

[Right now it can't be done; it's best/ that you return tomorrow
morning; at least/ make sure that I know, since I am right outside.]

Each artist took a different approach. In examining Italian American writers who used the lingo of their families, it seems to me there are no conscious traces of the aesthetic value of those words. They used them only for the sake of realism to reproduce local color and, sometimes, for scorn of the uneducated. The same disdain and ridicule toward the ignorant peasant is present in the Italian theatrical tradition from its origin. The comical effect is emphasized by a poor saps' attempt to use difficult words to show off, as does a shepherd from Dalmatia in Poliziano's *Oryeo*.⁵ Giovanni Berchet⁶ mixed French and Italian for comical effect: *ma chère amietio creppo qui* [My dear girl friend/I will croak right here.]

³ Franco Sacchetti (1332-1400). Poet and writer. His most famous work is the collection of short stories *Il Trecentonovelle*.

⁴ Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533). Poet, author of *Orlando Furioso*, Italy's most famous epic poem.
• *Satira II* (1517).

⁵ Poliziano, born Agnolo Ambrogini (1454-1494). Poet, humanist and playwright. He was considered the most important poet at the court of Lorenzo de' Medici.

• *Oryeo*. Short dramatic composition in vernacular by Poliziano, based on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Composed in Mantua around 1480, it was published in 1555 ca.

⁶ Giovanni Berchet (1783-1851). Poet and patriot. He was the author of the Romanticism manifesto *Lettera seniscria di Grisostomo* (1816).

In all the fiction books in English by Italian Americans there was never sufficient artistic power to really penetrate the mainstream of American taste. I would submit that the authors didn't even try. The most important works of narrative, in terms of artistic merit and success (meaning, accepted by the American public) are *Son of Italy* by Pascal D'Angelo; *The Grand Genaro*, by Garibaldi Lapolla; *Dago Red*, by John Fante; *Mount Allegro*, by Jerre Mangione and *Maria*, by Michael De Capite.

All of these books are out of print and they can be simply considered as documentation.⁷ More or less, they all dealt with poverty and the poor according to the norms of *Verismo*.⁸ Except for Lapolla, none of them tried to create grand characters. They give the impression that the authors realized they had in their hands folkloric material that was both physically close and potentially interesting to the American public, although the same public was very distant in spiritual terms. Thus, they rendered this reality with nostalgic affection toward the past but also with rancor toward the present, using a tone that became more and more similar to that of a tour guide. "Here are the Italians" they seem to tell the American public, pointing to them as if they were animals in a zoo. "See...? They are not so bad... or stupid... at least not as much as they look. Really. Actually, you were a bit mean and a bit arrogant when you judged them." In the books of these pseudo-novelists the *story* basically does not exist. The structure is based on a series of scenes that follow sequentially and where autobiographical elements prevail. Often there is one canonic chapter dedicated to the

⁷ Garibaldi Lapolla (1930-1976). Educator and writer. *The Grand Genaro*. New York. Vanguard Press, 1935.

• *Dago Red*. New York, The Viking press, 1940.

• John Fante (1909-1983). Novelist, short-story writer and screenwriter. His best known work is *Ake the Deer*. New York, Sackpole, 1939.

• Michael De Capite (1915-1958). Novelist. Among his works is *Maria*. New York, The John Day Company, 1943.

• As of today all these works have been re-issued, with the exception of *Maria*.

⁸ *Verismo*. Literary movement between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Its goal was the objective representation of the lower class, with simple and direct language and dialogues. *Verismo* is sometimes rendered in English as *Verism* to distinguish it from *Realism*, name of the French current *Realisme*.

pranzo,⁹ which takes on an almost ideological dimension. The meal is always based on spaghetti and flasks of Chianti wrapped in straw. The abundance of the culinary feasts in these folkloric novels obviously has to do with the poverty endured by the families before the present success. One observation I read that can be applied to all of them is that hunger is always the main character. Hunger, first suffered then conquered, is defeated again and again by eating and drinking more than necessary.

Beside hunger, the most common theme of these novels is the conflict between the immigrants and America. This makes sense since the autobiographical nature of the texts leans toward the sociological essay. Conflicts abound: the first generation that came from Italy clashes with the second that grew up in America; person-to-person loans and unpaid debts; expenditures to bring relatives from the old country; rivalries between northerners and southerners; the dominance of family interest to which everything else must be subordinated; the patriarchal system imported from Italy; the festive spirit of social gatherings for funerals, weddings and baptisms. There are no real Christian feelings but there is a lot of superstition. No priest appears, similarly to Italian novels of the *Verismo* period, although it must be said that Italian American writers learned their lesson more from Theodore Dreiser than Giovanni Verga.¹⁰ The *Verismo* of these writers feels dry, conventional and detached. It's like reading a list of items in an inventory. Conflicts between immigrants and America are not represented by means of characters with a symbolic function. America appears as a sort of test tube, closed and immense; where a little colony of Italian insects is placed, destined to undergo mutations. At times America is embodied in the figures of a policeman, a judge or a teacher. Yet, they are fleeting apparitions that never manage to become symbols. The Italian groups described in these novels fall

9 The big Sunday lunch, traditional in Italian American (and Italian) households.

10 Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945). Writer and poet. He is considered the father of modern American novel and a representative of realism.

• Giovanni Verga (1840-1922). Novelist and short-stories writer. He is the major representative of *Verismo*. He depicted in particular the reality of his native Sicily. The famous melodrama *Canalleria nustriana* by Pietro Mascagni is ~~drawn from~~ one of his short stories ~~with the same title~~.

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apart in a couple of generations without even becoming aware of it. In order to be absorbed they have to renounce what they were. What else is assimilation? It is not the product of a law. It is not an exchange. It is not a federation of forces that remain intact while cooperating (like the French speaking community of Canada.) The notion of the contribution that Italians gave to America can only be heard in the in the speeches of those who made American assimilation a sort of profession, like Leonard Covello,¹¹ for instance. I am not denying that this contribution exists, but it resembles the sharp joke I heard from an Italian fruit merchant, who, by the way, was much smarter than the above-mentioned professional. The green grocer obtained the permit to position his cart in front of the house of a millionaire banker: "The banker and I signed an agreement. I will not compete with his bank and he promised he won't sell apples in this spot." The individual work of Italians has certainly contributed to America's success. In turn, America's economic progress and its imperial size and structure have elevated and multiplied the individual energies of Italian Americans. The Italian banker Giannini gave America a novel concept of a bank's national function. But this was not an Italian cultural contribution. It was his personal genius, awakened and magnified by American dynamism. Thousands of Italian Americans have become rich simply by buying a parcel of land to cultivate as a vegetable garden at the edge of the city. As cities expanded, the land would be rezoned for development and the value increased. Hundreds of Italian American doctors today have rich patients due to the fact that America got richer and distributed wealth among the middle and working classes. When in the course of the colonial banquets I hear that American railroads were made by Italians, I inevitably think that in reality the railroads were conceived, planned and designed—thus they were *made*—by engineers who were not Italian. Italians at most brought a contribution as beasts of burden, working here and there, without really understanding what

11 The reference is to Leonard Covello (1887-1982), one of the most admired figures in the Italian American community at large: educator, community leader, intellectual with a deep commitment to the advancement of Italian people. Among his other achievements was a Pulitzer scholarship that allowed him to enroll at Columbia University. He was the first Italian American principal of a high school and a founding member of the American Italian Historical Association (1966).

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they were working for. Until the latest generations—that is until the time students of Italian descent started coming out of medical schools or architecture schools—Italians had been only patients in hospitals and exploited tenants. They were not scientists, researchers, architects, designers or engineers. And, please, let's not talk about the arts, a field where we would expect Italians to bring a contribution. Suffices to say that about five million people came to America from Italy, more or less the entire population of Lombardy.¹² And what have they produced in terms of art? Let's make a comparison with that region between 1880 and 1940.¹³ Unfortunately, the majority of monuments that people with taste would like to destroy in New York and other places were built by able Italian artisans with zero genius who had worked in the quarries of Carrara¹⁴ or graduated from the Fine Arts academies of provincial Italian towns. In the field of music, in particular opera, things are a little different. However, we must remember that it wasn't Italian Americans who gave America the best singers, soloists and orchestra conductors. It was Italy: Toscanini, who in the colonial banquets is often mentioned with other great names in the list of debts America owes to Italians, never learned English well and never applied for American citizenship. He was the purest product of Italy's nineteenth century musical culture and technique. He resided in the United States for a few months a year for financial reasons, inside a cyst of Italian culture. The same thing can be said about the only other important Italian name in the contemporary music world, Gian Carlo Menotti,¹⁵ with the difference that Menotti's English is as good as his Italian.

12 ¹² The population of Lombardy, the Northern region whose capital is Milan, was 10 million in 2018 (most recent data available).

13 ¹³ Ambiguous statement: it probably suggests a comparison between the artistic production in Lombardy and in New York (following sentence) in the period 1880-1940, implicitly upholding the output in Italy as far superior.

14 ¹⁴ Carrara. City in Tuscany. In this area are quarries with the best quality white marble. It is the source of the marble used by Michelangelo and other major artists for their sculptures.

15 ¹⁵ Giancarlo Menotti (1911-2007). Musician, composer and entrepreneur. In 1958 he founded the *Festival dei Due Mondi* and in 1977 organized the American branch of the *Festival di Spoleto* in Charleston (South Carolina).

And now, back to our Italian American writers. First of all there aren't that many, they aren't great, and they haven't become part of the American literary tradition. For example, none of them has achieved the same relevance as the German Dreiser or the Swedish Sandburg. They are decent, average American writers who looked at their families and wrote about those environments with some detachment, sometimes with humor, sometimes treating them as anthropological specimens. The process of assimilation never encountered a resistance grounded in culture and consciousness, only in traditions and habits. Although the immigrants were in the large majority ignorant, they did have a moral and social structure based on centuries-old habits centered on the family; on religious rituals followed with reverence albeit with no profundity; and on a capital of common notions made of folkloric traditions and superstitions. The immigrants had to go from a culture limited in scope but sedimented over centuries of experience to the American culture, more complex and more volatile. It was a difficult transition. The reaction of first-generation immigrants was to insulate themselves inside the family and small groups of fellow *paisani* in the local Little Italies or in the countryside. The second generation created a rip: they felt American and even a bit anti-Italian. The rip took place right in the middle of an even more radical and faster transformation that took America from a predominantly agricultural country to a fully industrial one. This revolution had gigantic consequences at every level, with profoundly alienating effects on the human masses that had to endure it. All social relations that had existed up to that point were scrambled, and at the same time it became extremely difficult to create new ones. It was like jumping on a moving train to find out that all the seats were taken by passengers that barely bother to look up, and being forced to travel the entire distance standing up hanging from a strap. Starting from the crucial aspect of the difference between the languages of the two generations of Italian American immigrants, in her thesis at Columbia University, Fiorella Forti, wrote:

In the majority of Italian households, children were forced to speak Italian at home¹⁶ and to follow traditions and ideas even

16 Pezzolini comments in parentheses: "The correct term should be *dialect*."

when they were openly in conflict with the outside world. Like all other parents, and even more than the majority of parents, Italian immigrants forced their children to adopt the habits and social customs they had inherited. However, the children, due primarily to the education and the social environment in which they were present and active, and to the knowledge of English, wanted to act and be American. They realized that their parents' culture was not American and started sharing the opinion that the outside world had toward them. They also learned that their parents' behavior was considered inferior and, as a consequence, even [the children] were being kept at the margin because of their origin. For a certain period the children of Italian American immigrants went through hard times marked by severe internal conflicts. On the one hand they loved and respected their parents, yet they had no choice but to resist their authority if they wanted to become American, although they didn't really have a clear notion of what being American meant. On the other hand, they longed for acceptance as Americans by those who considered themselves such. Sadly, these attempts were not always successful.

When we look at individual achievements, Italian American immigrants were unquestionably successful. Millions of people from the peasant class improved their economic condition and saw their children become doctors, businesspeople, lawyers, builders, magistrates, politicians and more. Had they not come to the United States their children probably would still be fighting poverty. In contrast, here they now belong to the lower middle class, some to the solid middle class, and some to the upper middle class. [In the footnote: A list of economic and political successes of Italians, particularly those of the second and third generations, would be too long. I recommend two publications: *The Italians in Contemporary America*, by Harold Lord Varney.¹⁷ This pamphlet contains a directory of Italian Americans with important positions in politics and education in the United States. It also contains numerous entries for businesspeople.

The second is *The Italian in America: A Social Study and History*, by

17 Harold Lord Varney (1893-1984).

• *The Italians in Contemporary America*. Unknown binding. Published by the Italian Historical Society of New York, n. 10: 1931. This organization was later dissolved.

Lawrence Frank Pisani¹⁸ (New York: Exposition Press, 1957). Initially this was a dissertation defended at Yale University. A more recent revision contains many names, but it also contains errors, some of which concerns me directly. The author in a letter acknowledged them and accepted the corrections. I should also add the many biographical repertoires, such as the *Whos Who* published in several volumes by Giovanni Schiavo or Ario Flamma. Both works are inspired by the wish to please their readership.]

The contribution of Italian Americans to America was exclusively in terms of size and energy, rarely of quality, at least in proportion to the size of the community. When we give the word *contribution* the specific meaning of *influence on American life style*, we come up with very little. Millions of Italian American basically didn't bring anything Italian that has remained significantly so. The majority of immigrants had no distinct Italian taste and no Italian culture: they did not own a national patrimony but only local traditions.

No matter how we cut it, all we can say concretely about the contribution of Italians to their adoptive country is that it was physically important but with very limited intellectual value. It can be reduced to growing vegetables and the fact that they now appear on American tables. This was definitely a contribution and a merit of Italians: they taught Americans the vital force of artichokes, zucchini, salads and string beans even before dieticians discovered the importance of vitamins. These were real Italian novelties and imports. If the American diet changed from the traditional boiled-meat-with-cabbage; pork-and-beans; roast beef and steaks; and fish and oysters to make room for fruits and vegetables, it was because of the influence of Italians. It isn't much but it's a real contribution. All the rest is rhetoric good for the colonial banquets or political speeches.

The crowning achievement of Italian culinary influence in America was the word *spaghetti* that acquired the meaning of *pasta*. More recently we had the introduction of *pizza*. However, the American influence can be seen in dishes like *spaghetti with meat balls*, which is pasta with tomato sauce mixed with small globs of meat, an obvious derivation from German or Swedish cuisines. This hybrid dish surprises all the

18 Lawrence Frank Pisani (1921-?).

Italians who sit down in run-of-the-mill Italian restaurants in New York. Not even with wine were Italian immigrants able to impose their taste. Wine drinkers in America generally are descendants of Europeans, not Americans converted to wine. Or, if they converted, it's because they visited Italy or France; not because they tasted California wines.

One thing Italians contributed to was the growth of Catholicism in the United States. But even here their contribution was in terms of numbers, not quality. The Italian clergy had very little to do with it. The high echelons of Church hierarchy are inhabited by the Irish clergy. The literary and theological production in the United States does not have a single Italian name. There is an influence through Catholicism, but not by means of Italian Americans. Rome is filtered by way of Dublin and Munich, not Calabria or Sicily; nor by way of Italian seminaries in Naples and Palermo.