A Reconsideration: Italian-American Writers: Notes For a Wider Categorization

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There is no question that an Italian-American literature exists, although an accurate critical classification is yet to come. Can we say that Christopher Columbus’ journals and diaries, are — at least paradoxically — an early achievement of that literature?

From the very first moment of its discovery, actually beginning with Columbus’ journals, America has inspired some form of literature; and through the centuries it has developed a certain power of attraction for Italians. To mention just a few names, the eighteenth century dramatist Vittorio Alfieri celebrated American independence and the heroic feats of General Washington (whose name he wrote as “Vasinton”) in five odes grouped under the title L’America libera. The first and never published work of Giovanni Verga, Amore e Patria (1857), is an historical novel set in colonial America during the time of the Revolution; and in 1894 Cesare Pascarella wrote a grotesque epic in Roman dialect about Columbus’ enterprise: La scoperta dell’ America. Can these Italian writers, because of their interest in America, be considered somehow already Italian-American writers?

Indeed, at first Italian culture was concerned with America mostly as an “idea,” if not an ideal, rather than as a concrete notion. Only with the age of mass emigration and the appearance of Italian-American communities did a few Italian authors notice an unexpected, more realistic facet of the New World, and begin to represent it. Their writings might very well be considered the starting point of Italian-American literature.

Italian-American studies have never received much attention in Italy. In that country, emigration doesn’t belong to “official” culture, whose policemen, of course, do not drink on duty. Even in terms of politics, an emigrant is just a non-voter. Only recently, in 1983, was a conference on Italian-Americans held in Catania, followed in 1984 by a conference on

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Italian-Canadian writers in Rome. An American scholar, William Boelhower, published *Immigrant Autobiographies in the United States: Four Versions of the Italian-American Self* in 1982, and the journal of American Studies of the University of Rome dedicated a special issue to Italian emigrant literature in 1981. However, Boelhower’s book, although published in Verona, is in English, and the special issue includes South American documents as well. Other than that, just a few anthologies are available, mostly dealing with poetry. Too many good Italian-American novels are totally unknown or untranslated in Italy, and one of the best Italian books about Italian-Americans, Prezzolini’s *I trapiantati* (1963), is out of print.¹

But if there is so much empty space about Italian-American literature in Italy, even in the United States the quest to give order to such effervescent material and to identify its major components is still alive. In her valuable book, *The Italian-American Novel* (1974), Rose Basile Green has outlined the theory of five different stages through which Italian-American fiction has gone. These five stages are identified as: 1) The early impact; 2) The need for assimilation; 3) Revulsion; 4) Counter-revulsion; 5) Rooting. Rose Green gives examples for each of these categories. Lately, Remigio Pane at the International Conference held in 1985 at Columbia University said that “the time has come at our conferences when we must consider not only Italian-Americans who have written of the Italian Experience in America, but also those who have achieved success in the writing profession regardless of their subject matter.” (Pane in Tomasi 222). Starting from this assumption, Pane indicates a larger frame of categories that, along with narrators of the Italian-American experience, includes: Journalists, Recent Italian Immigrant Writers, Main Stream Novelists, Mass Production Writers (in the fields of Sociology, Psychiatry, Religion, Politics, Literary or Film Criticism) and finally Poets and Dramatists.

It is clear that Green’s historical point of view strictly refers to chronologically ordered “novels,” while Pane’s more recent classification relies on the concept of literary genres. A different perspective has been adopted by Samuel Patti in “Autobiography: The Root of the Italian-American Narrative” (1986). In that article, Patti stresses that “in Italian-American literature, the controlling narrative pattern, from the earliest texts to those published most recently, is that of the immigrant autobiography” (242). However, there is an even more comprehensive point of view from which to identify various degrees of interconnection between “Italian” and “American” in the world of literature. What follows is an attempt, from a very peculiarly Italian point of view, to categorize Italian-American writers and their works.

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ITALIAN WRITERS

As previously stated, a first category of Italian-American writers has been given by a few Italian writers. If we read literature as social history, only a small number of Italian books provides a record of mass emigration. Italian writers could take notice of the phenomenon without even going to the United States. There were enough emigrants, relatives of emigrants, or Italian-Americans at home in Italy.

Edmondo De Amicis, while crossing the ocean in 1889, found them on the docks and in vessels. He then published the chronicle of his journey with the title Sull’Oceano (1889). Maria Messina wept for those left at home: forgotten mothers, abandoned wives and deserted houses. Her short stories, Piccoli gorghi (1910), underscore the initial drama of separation. Also Giovanni Capuana, the theorist of “verismo,” describes Gli americani di Rabbato (1909). In his story a boy from the Sicilian village of Rabbato “makes” America in search of his elder brother. The young hero is obviously imaginary, but Rabbato’s “Americans,” like those in Levi’s Cristo si è fermato a Eboli (1945), are clearly not.2

In this category we should include Giovanni Pascoli’s “Italy” (1904), the famous poem written in Italian-American jargon. We could mention Enrico Corradini’s La patria lontana (1910) as an example of a nationalism novel;3 and also Carolina Invernizzi’s I drammi degli emigrati (1910) as an example of maudlin, popular fiction.

All of these works deal with emigrants or Italian-Americans, but they are considered part of Italian literature. Following this line, it would be easy to go from mass emigration times to contemporary writers: after all, the hero of Pavese’s La Luna e i falò (1950) is a repatriated immigrant from California; and one of the many Zii di Sicilia (1958) by Sciascia is an obnoxious Italian-American aunt from Brooklyn.4

EXPERIENCED WRITERS

A second category may include the experienced writers; they represent a small group of Italians who attempted the American adventure by actually crossing the ocean. They are Italian writers who knew America first-hand and whose works are, at least in content, deeply “American.” Some of them were travellers, who wrote journey notebooks, diaries, studies or reportages. Among this large group we find journalists, social or political observers, and even a dramatist such as Giuseppe Giacosa.5

Other experienced writers were actually failed emigrants: highly educated people who entered the immigrant communities with the real
intention of staying, but didn't. Whereas the most famous of their books is Mario Soldati's *America primo amore* (1935), Fausto Maria Martini's *Sibarca a New York* (1930) gives an unexpected closer look at New York's Little Italy lifestyle.

A third type of experienced writers is represented by those authors who, especially in contemporary times, use their American experience and stay as a theme of fiction. Guido Piovene's *Romanzo americano* (1979) and Alberto Lecco's *I racconti di New York* (1982) are just two of the many possible examples in which autobiographical data are fictionalized.6

"COLONIAL" WRITERS

A third category is comprised of the "colonial" writers: those Italian-born writers who immigrated permanently to America, lived in the Italian communities or — as they said — "colonies" in the early part of this century, and published their works mostly in this country. A certain level of education and a certain control of the Italian language enabled them to read and write in Italian. Their writings, however, stem from an Italian immigrant urban working environment: even if indebted to Italian literature, they no longer belong to it. Prezzolini speaks about these writers, mainly poets, as a sort of freakish "literary cyst" surviving the death of the late Italian Romanticism.7 In response to this, Joseph Tusiani — a poet himself — points out that it was not a crime to have the word "nato" (born) rhyme with "emigrato," nor was it a crime to express one's broken feelings, even if in a distant, forgotten dialect.8

Some of these colonial works, like Arturo Giovannitti's Italian poems, or Antonio Calitri's poem "Il cantoniere" (1925), or Camillo Cianfarra's *Diario di un emigrante* (1904), or even the patchwork dramas of Bernardino Ciambelli, deserve a deeper critical look.

A MEDIATOR

A writer, poet and essayist such as Emanuel Carnevali occupies a special category of his own within Italian-American literature. This author stands as a case of double literary identity. He is not to be considered an Italian writer because he only wrote in English and his writings have been published in Italy in translation. He is not a "classic" Italian-American writer, since his refined cosmopolitan background can hardly be related to the Italian-American community he was living in. And he is not "American," since his frame of reference, while encompassing William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound and the Chicago Renaissance, also includes the Italian literary magazines of the early century and deeply relates to the works of Giovanni Papini. From the pages of *Poetry,*
the Chicago magazine edited by Harriet Monroe, Carnevali performed his self-imposed task of mediation between the Italian literature of his times and contemporary American literature, remaining as the only example of such a high level work.9

ITALIAN-AMERICAN "CLASSICS"

The largest group, the one fully and unequivocally forming the main body of Italian-American literature, consists of those writers in whom the Italian-American community finds its collective voices. It is to these voices, and to the peculiar compound culture they express, that scholars from different fields turn: literary critics, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, economists and demographers. There is a well-established list of books which we might appropriately define as Italian-American "classics": these books are written in English and, being related to Dreiser's realism rather than to Verga's "verismo" (as Prezzolini indicates), belong to American literature. But their authors, such as Constantine M. Panunzio, Pascal D'Angelo, Garibaldi Marto Lapolla, Jo Pagano, Guido D'Agostino, Jerre Mangione, Pietro Di Donato, John Fante, Angelo M. Pellegrini, Mario Puzo, all come from non-Anglo-Saxon traditions: they are aware of it and they show it. Some are proud of their heritage; some are troubled by it. Some describe an urban environment, some depict a rural one. They have a positive or negative experience to tell. But what seems to be an almost general attitude is their deliberate choice of titles. Going through the titles of Italian-American novels we find what could be seen as a record of different consequences of the Italian impact on the United States. To give a few examples: a title such as Son of Italy clearly indicates the pride of one's origin, a firm sense of belonging; while Dago Red, stressing the importance of difficulties and suffered contempt, is already shattering as an insult. Olives on the Apple Tree sounds, in itself, like a strong declaration of estrangement: the problem of integrating Mediterranean people into an Anglo-Saxon society is no less a task than forcing an apple tree to bear olives. Christ in Concrete even points to a tragedy with biblical connotations. On the other hand, The Fortunate Pilgrim seems to imply a more optimistic attitude and a successful outcome.

Most of these books were published during the Forties: the necessary time for the first generation to "make" America or for the second to grow up. Discussing that growth, Rose Basile Green sees these novels developing from plain autobiographies to complex works of fiction, and from a limited local perspective to a wider national overview.

A definition of the Italian-American narrative has been recently given by Samuel Patti as "a text in which the story concerns the universal
human condition (our basic drives, hopes, fears, anxieties, etc.) seen through the perspective of Italian heritage in America” (242). As a more specific definition of this particular category, we can remember the one proposed by Rudolph Vecoli at the American Italian Historical Association conference in 1969: an Italian-American writer “is a writer of Italian origin who utilizes Italian-American themes in his writings” (Vecoli 6). To be a “classic,” we must add, he or she also must write in English and be well rooted in the old-fashioned (turn and first half of the century) Italian-American community. This definition, thus, implies that whenever one of these writers gets involved in an other-than Italian-American theme, as Mario Puzo does in Dark Arena (1955), his book should be considered mainstream American literature.

ASSIMILATED WRITERS

Writers who do not, as we do, take into any consideration the final vowel of their last name belong to an improper category of “Italian-American” literature. Better than “assimilated,” or integrated, these writers are simply American writers. Their works do not deal with Italian-American themes, sometime due to an intentional refusal. Francesca Vinciguerra even Americanized her name into Frances Winwar, but writers such as Paul Gallico, Don DeLillo, George Cuomo might well have been named Paul Gaul, Don Lile, and George Comb, since their works in no way evince real ethnicity.

From a literary point of view, therefore, this group which inevitably transcends the monochromatic Italian-American world, presents all the different facets of a fully American scene. Charlie “Angelo” Siringo, who wrote about his years as A Texas Cowboy in the 1880’s, was surely one of the first “assimilated” ones (what could be more “American” than a cowboy?). The novels by Francis Pollini are rooted in the classical American theme of good and evil in the American society, and Alex Trocchi, with his Cain’s Book (1960), proves himself an excellent literary disciple of the so-called Beat Generation. But from an Italian point of view, the idea of assimilation (being made similar, being absorbed into a system, or being digested) is an act of erasure of one’s italianità.

ACADEMICS

Another group of writers that needs specific recognition is comprised of those authors, Italian by birth and by culture, who, being mostly university professors, contribute a critical but also a first-hand literary production. They tend to publish in Italian in Italy, and in English in the United States. These professors have come to America endowed with
cultural and interpretative tools far more solid than those in the hands of the southern day-labourers.

Because of this reason, their experience as Italian-Americans is far from being less significant; on the contrary, high cultural tools may allow a better and faster settlement in the American society, but also can lead to emotional imbalance and deeper sense of estrangement. The oneiric, surrealistic and fundamentally evasive world of Giovanni Cecchetti's short stories _Danza nel deserto_ (1985) or Luigi Ballerini's challenging semantic crack-up in _Che figurato muore_ (1988) are two clear examples of such a condition.

In a way, these Italian scholars, living and writing in America, are the modern and professionalized side of the old "colonials." To this category, I would say, belong works such as: Pier Maria Pasinetti's novel _Il ponte dell 'Accademia_ (1968); Luigi Fontanella's poems; Paolo Valesio's novel _L'ospedale di Manhattan_ (1978); Niccolò Tucci's short stories _Il segreto_ (1956); Giose Rimanelli's essays _Tragica America_ (1968); and also older documents like the political writings of Giuseppe Borgese or the "transatlantic novellas" published in 1927 by Eugenio Camillo Branchi.

**EXPERTS**

So far only the creative or fictional side of Italian-American writing has been considered. But, since literature generates literature, there is also a large number of critical studies regarding Italian immigration to the States, Italian-Americans, or their literary works.

The authors of those studies are also, and not so much paradoxically, Italian-American authors: not only when their last name is Schiavo, Gambino, Basile, Pane, Iorizzo, La Gumina and so on, but even when they come from a different ethnic origin, like Whyte, Velikonja, Foerster. What is more, it is logical to widen this category in order to include experts from the other side of the ocean, such as Prezzolini himself, Alberto Giovannetti or Anna Maria Martellone. They all share, although in different ways, a common understanding of the topic.10

As Italian-American "experts," one must also consider editors of anthologies, such as Rodolfo Puccielli (_Anthology of Italian and Italo-American Poetry_, Boston, 1955), Ferdinando Alfonsi (_Italo-American Poets_, Catanzaro, 1985) and Helen Barolini, whose precious anthology _The Dream Book_ (New York, 1985) finally confirms the Italian-American woman as a writer.

A complete analysis regarding the various critical approaches of these works is yet to be done.
As a final possible category, we ought to consider those "American writers" who in their works actually portrayed Italian-Americans. This is also a quest that would deserve a new and deeper examination, and what is given here, far from being an exhaustive comment, is simply a sketch.

Arthur Miller’s Freudian tragedy *A View from the Bridge* (1955) can be an appropriate — and indicative — major example, as it depicts a forbidden and unconfessable sentiment between an Italian-American man and his niece. According to the author, the episode is taken from real life. The bridge is the Brooklyn Bridge, just above the immigrant Little Italy. But no less significant would appear another famous dramatic play dealing with Italian-Americans: *The Rose Tattoo* (1951) by Tennessee Williams.

Italian-Americans can be celebrated in stereotypes (as in a 1919 book titled *Mc Aroni Ballads*) or in complex characters (as in Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant*). Such characters are often portrayed in Nelson Algren’s, Donald Windham’s, or William Saroyan’s short stories. Yet, there might be hundreds of them, as virtually every American author dealt with this ethnic group. The most noticeable recent phenomenon, however, is commercial fiction: regrettably enough, it has discovered ethnicity, and we are nowadays enjoying a flood of passionate sagas bearing such titles as *The Italians*, *The Immigrants*, *Sons*, *Bloodbrothers*, *Fame and Fortune*, *Street of Paradise* or *Appassionato*.

To conclude, we may establish that there might be other categories, such as "translators," "repatriated emigrants" or "American travellers in Italy"; or we could take a look at "contemporary authors" to see how writers of Italian descent deal with new themes such as the Vietnam trauma (e.g. John Del Vecchio, *The 13th Valley*, 1984) or the gay issue (e.g. Robert Ferro, *The Family of Max Desir*, 1984). This categorization, however, is not to be meant as a chronological classification, mainly because the sixth generation writer can be found in this country next to the new immigrant writer. Nor is it meant to be a "genres" classification, because chronology and genres seem to hold less significance than personal attitudes and cultural implications.

From my point of view, each book involving a connection between an "Italian" and an "American" component belongs, in a varying degree, to "Italian-American" literature. Perhaps even Christopher Columbus’ journals. Otherwise, how do we label the autobiography of an Italian emigrant who lives in America for 30 years and then goes back to Italy where he publishes the story of his emigrant life, as Antonio Margariti
did with his book *America! America!* (1979)? That emigrant writes an Italian-American document; and not only impulse and motivation of the work are to be considered, but its final destination and its public as well, because, in too many ways, it is finally a particular Italian-American audience or judgment that makes a book an Italian-American book.

Notes

1. The issue of the University of Rome journal I am referring to is: *Letterature d'America* 9/10, Tuttamerica “L'America degli Italiani,” Roma, Bulzoni, Anno II, Autunno 1981. A more recent issue dedicated to Italian-American literature is also: *Rivista di Studi Anglo-Americani*, Brescia, Paidea, 1984–1985; 3(4–5). Another conference (on emigration from Molise) was held in summer 1987. Puzo has been completely translated because of his commercial success, but Jerre Mangione has lately received some attention. Also, the use of Prezzolini’s bibliography would provide a rich source of books dealing with the United States.

2. Capuana’s plot seems to be indebted to what is probably one of the first fictionalized uses of the emigration phenomenon: “Dagli Appennini alle Ande,” an episode from De Amicis’ *Cuore*, published in 1886, in which a boy emigrates in search of his mother. If we also consider his book *In America* (Roma: Voghera, 1897), De Amicis seems to have been one of the most receptive writers about this problem: he is not very popular today, but *Sull’Oceano* has been recently republished. Messina’s *Piccoli gorghi* has also been newly reprinted in 1988. Note that events in Levi’s *Eoli* refer to 1935.

3. The story, however, takes place in Argentina.

4. But the list doesn’t end here: we find Italian-Americans in Livia De Stefanis’ *La Vigna di uve nere*, Milano: Mondadori, 1953 (Black Grapes, 1958). There is an emigrant who, looking for the golden-paved streets of America, doesn’t realize he has found a huge diamond, in a short story titled “Rubino,” from Corrado Alvaro’s *Gente in Aspromonte*, Firenze: Le Monnier, 1930. In a short story by Emilio Gadda, *L’incendio di via Keplero*, also appears a caricature of an Italian-American poet.


6. After his “failed emigration” and his cited book, Soldati also has used his experience to write fiction, such as in *La sposa americana*, Milano: Mondadori, 1977. On the other hand, Piovene was also a “traveller” in *De America*, Milano: Garzanti, 1953.

7. “While after 1900 Italy had assimilated the same experiences in thinking and style of many foreign countries, the patriotic taste, the provincial tone, the exhausted and frayed vocabulary of the late Italian Romanticism had endured, preserved as if inside a museum’s showcase. . . . That literature from the last . . . romantic sentimentality . . . had no relationship whatsoever to Italy’s body . . . That Festival of Italian Poetry, therefore, revealed to me the existence of a ‘literary cyst’. ” (Prezzolini 252–253; translation is mine).


10. There is no need to repeat here a well known American bibliography, but Italian “experts” might not be so familiar: Alberto Giovannetti published L’America degli italiani, Modena: Edizioni Paoline, 1975; Anna Maria Martellone is the author of Una Little Italy nell’Atene d’America: la comunità italiana di Boston dal 1880 al 1920, Napoli: Guida, 1973; and La questione dell’emigrazione negli Stati Uniti, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980.

11. In these memoirs, a weaker correct Italian version comes together with the original mispelt manuscript in dialect.

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