

Introduction

Flying high on the wings of his sophisticated magazine *Pègaso*, Ugo Ojetti—a Brahmin of the Italian cultural élite of the early twentieth century—remarked, in 1930, that “Our arch-literary literature ignores them—in fact, it has always ignored them.” He was referring to all the Italians living “from Melbourne to Rio, from San Francisco to Marseille, from Lima to Tunis.”

Enter Antonio Gramsci, laboriously elaborating his Machiavellian discourse on culture, politics, and hegemony. In his sixth prison notebook he culled Ojetti’s observation and added his usually incisive comments. Emigration as a “socio-economic phenomenon”—wrote Gramsci—has “always” (offhandedly, the same adverb) produced “an impressive array of publications.” And yet this did not translate into a creative, “artistic literature” (*una letteratura artistica*), despite the fact that “every immigrant—even before leaving Italy—bears within himself a tragedy” (*racchiude in sé un dramma*). Such a lack of attention is not surprising—continued Gramsci—, because literati disregard the immigrants’ actual conditions, precisely, prior to their departure.¹ Noteworthy is the fact that neither Ojetti nor Gramsci considered the possibility of creative works produced by the immigrants themselves, or in any case coming from abroad.

Read today, this silent dialogue between two protagonists of Italian culture sounds, if not completely outdated, certainly superseded. In the last half century—if we adopt as authoritative point of departure Rose Basile Green’s 1974 *The Italian-American Novel*²—scholarship showed a keen attention to the multifarious dimensions of immigrant culture. When it comes to the various symbolic and material modes of production of immigration, we are not confronted with an interpretive void anymore. Of course, there are always (again!) new findings, new approaches, new

voices. What I find as crucial today as it was in Gramsci's time is to problematize, pointing to what he used to call the *nesso*—the connection, the relationship—, that nexus between phenomena that is grounded historically, culturally, and—paying homage to a son of immigrants, Henry Miller—existentially. Such connections fall often beyond the scope of a certified and transmissible scholarship, whose actual encounters are exorcised by dint of increasingly more intradisciplinary scholarship, in a magic circle of abstraction.

Relations, instead, figure largely at the center of the immigrant condition, which expresses itself in an unrelenting and trying dynamic between the present and the past, here and there, novelty and tradition: the dynamism of change, with its crushing challenges as well as its elating renewals. Elsewhere in the notebooks, discussing “nationalism and particularism,” Gramsci offers that “explanations are perhaps coordinated.”³ I take it as a precious indication.

To an Italian intellectual, one of the huge questions ignited by an almost century-long exodus of approximately twenty-six million people toward various destinations revolves around its significance, its weight, vis-à-vis the painful and long process that brought over and then molded Italy's nation-building, the so-called *Risorgimento* and Unification, which covered, at least, the period stretching from the Congress of Vienna to the end of WWI. In another essay, I proposed to read this interplay between national formation, demographic hemorrhage, and cultural adaptation as a foundational instance of “Italexit.”⁴ Recognizing and appreciating the existence of societies and cultures feeding themselves on multiple belongings means reckoning with realities which we are all familiar with, but which a sobering “methodological nationalism” (Gabaccia)⁵ keeps finding pragmatically inadequate to the parthenogenesis of higher learning. Such a pedagogical unease reflects the hierarchical setup whereby values are allotted according to defined borders. Forms of expression that refer to constitutive acts of movement and transformation demand, on the contrary, for the acknowledgement of an intrinsic shuttling principle, for the coordination—as it were—of explanations.

This is not to say that nations do not count, let alone the cultural structures that in a variety of ways flower and are produced within their confines. Further below, Donna Gabaccia aptly reminds us that “high levels of international migration have historically not much impeded nation-building. They may even have encouraged it.”⁶ Very shrewdly, Yiorgos Anagnostou puts it otherwise: “How does one dismantle identity

when identity still mobilizes the public?”⁷ When bowing to the diasporic trend that has been in vogue for at least the last twenty years, we should not overlook the fact that such a discourse mirrors the trajectories of the global hegemony and functions as a homoeopathic critique of Western (and prevailingly Anglo-American) power, thus consolidating, in fact, what it purports to be critically analyzing. If anything, one ought to recognize that oxymora, complexity, and even contradictions are essential tenets of the humanities borne out of a decisive condition of cultural reinvention through space and different sociopolitical entities.

My concern, in the following chapters, has been to primarily focus on a cultural—and mostly literary—panorama that operates, grows, and legitimizes itself through a constant weaving of interrelations between given traditions. These last, in turn, caught in the process, renovate themselves, put on new dresses. It is what I indicate as a *changing culture*, a metamorphic paradigm that invests both the subjects (authors and their public) and their products. Culture changes while its protagonists undergo substantial modifications.

Likewise, the changing and shuttling principle should apply to the methodology of research and to its style of presentation. To make better sense of that intrinsically movable condition, to retrieve and vindicate the “disappearance” that Kafka, in his grand American novel, marks as the defining sign of the immigrant, one might have to adopt the point of view of the periscope, bringing to focus the new through the old, and reframing the old through the unforeseeable outcomes of the new conditions. Expanding the nation(s), expanding our sense of ethnicity. Abdelmalek Sayad poignantly defined immigrant cultures in terms of the “double absence” that they inhabit;⁸ I contend that, if creatively employed, a “changing culture” has the potential of reversing that void, suggesting the existence of a *double presence*, negotiating between its intense need of “homebound” traditional codes and the concurrent capacity of launching itself forward in an anticipatory mode. Especially when framed from the point of view of Old World tenets, the cultural modus operandi of ethnic cultures appears many-sided and multiverse. Lines of research that could be seen as moving along parallel paths—the dialectics among European popular cultures; the search for a usable past by American intellectuals and the rise of a distinctively modern and ethnic urban art; the exploration of Dante’s cultural power and its consequences; a constant analysis of Italian American forms, with special reference to their linguistic and expressive manifestations—all of this seemed to gain in consistency as

I realized that my own scholarship found an audience moving across borders—institutional and cultural. The two nuclei this volume consists of, then—the quintessential patrimony of the Italian tradition, and the Italian American civilization—became mutually attractive foci of an ellipse, or of a system, straddling different dimensions.

I always thought that a scholar is more trustworthy insofar as s/he attempts some form of identification with the object of study. And I understand now, at the fullest divide, that to fruitfully embark on my own sentimental journey of sorts, I needed not one, but two different sets of examples, two models of guidance. Thus I had the good fortune of finding the unbinding method—methods, really, given their plural nature—in the groundbreaking works of Robert Viscusi and Francesco Durante. Their unflagging indication of a necessary scrutiny of both sides of the Italian American experience, coupled with the sheer quantity of their analyses, expanded our understanding in this field and provided a blueprint.

Viscusi—in his essays and in his poetry—kept shining new lights and testing new ideas, while very strongly advocating for a larger sense of Italian Americanness—indeed, of Italianness—one that would engage not only in the exploration of the bona fide Italian roots of yore, but also in a confrontation with contemporary Italy (a country now transformed by its own influx of inbound mass migrations). And this, as the template of a fully formed New Yorker, a city dweller with roots and branches in close proximity with the myriad faces of the metropolis. His masterpiece, *Ellis Island*, not only marks an artistic zenith,⁹ but also—as it is the case—provides the most inspiring legacy through the force of its visions, rhythms, and somersaults.

Durante—as strange as it may sound—acted as the Schliemann of Italian culture outside the peninsula. He single-handedly discovered and explained the teeming world of the Italian “colonies” in the United States, thus not only giving visibility to a most articulate milieu, but in so doing also showing its “organic” quality, its structure and values, its daring stances, its creative “folly.”

After their sudden disappearance, Viscusi and Durante’s contribution looms large in terms of results and even more in its pathfinding nature. Taken together, their oeuvre makes clear that Italian American studies today is a privileged vantage point from which to engage in a comprehensive discussion of the “original” Old World heritage while recognizing, on the other hand, the global impact of mass migration. In particular, my

studies have convinced me that it is time to analyze Italian migrations as part of an even wider—and largely homogenous—European phenomenon. It is a trite and well-known fact that Italian popular culture and Italian immigrants had to coexist, and to some extent to suffer from, on both sides of the Atlantic, the double standard of “room with a view VS. steerage class,” against which *furbizia* and survival instinct pitted different strategies. Examining the encounters of actual nineteenth-century American intellectuals with the Italo-European rise of democratic demands around 1848 and beyond—like I venture to do in the first chapter—is intended to provide an antidote to such a skewed disposition.

It is also by now quite inaccurate to keep repeating that Italians scattered worldwide. What do we mean when we stress the diasporic, the transnational, the global? Emigration started in small towns and remote valleys. Italians went where there were sources of capital and jobs. And they didn't do it blindfolded. It's their lucidity that the Italian élite downplayed, resented, and fundamentally still resents. But it was one of their most precious assets, and one that it is imperative to acknowledge and confront. This awareness is precisely what distances us and our objects of study from the elaborate strategy of non sequitur that Italian literati reserved, at the height of the Great Migration, to their fellow citizens, expelling Italian migrants from memory, in obvious obedience to an isomorphism that tied together politics and sense of social standing along the lines of a self-fashioned scholarly dignity. Thus, in the masterly, acrid, dizzying historical novel *I vecchi e i giovani* (*The Old and the Young*, 1909–1913)¹⁰—now largely undervalued in favor of the smoother *Il Gattopardo*—Luigi Pirandello's narrator gapes with horror at a bloody massacre taking place in the town of Aragona, near Agrigento, during the revolt of the so-called *Fasci siciliani* in the 1890s. Aragona is where Pirandello's family owned the sulfur mine whose mismanagement determined the writer's lifelong financial difficulties; its netherworld was famously at the center of some of his—and of Giovanni Verga's—best short stories and—even more interestingly—of Booker T. Washington's indictment *The Man Farthest Down* (1912).¹¹ More to the point, Aragona being (today as a century and more years ago) a rural town with an extremely high ratio of outbound migration, it is telling that Pirandello never mentioned its outbound exodus; the same happens with nearby Milocca, both in the novel and in one of his most implacable *novelle*, *Le sorprese della scienza* (1905),¹² and later the focus of a classic study by Chicago-school anthropologist Charlotte Gower Chapman.¹³ In a way

this is an old story; fast forward and see how, instead, the bigger city of Ragusa and its socio-ideological slump figure positively at the center of the outbound feminist radicalism of Maria Occhipinti, the activist and writer who captured like few others the spirit of post-WWII emigration.¹⁴ Its history needed—to put it simply—to be told in her own words. You can't expect others—not even a Pirandello—to tell you who you are, where you come from, and where you're heading.

While distancing from, and reflecting on, their place of departure, Italian migrants were shaping *their own* culture in a complex, troubled, and fascinating interaction with the new, myriad variables around them—Italo-genic signs included. Indeed, and this—again—has often been remarked, the immigrant and ethnic *landscape* would better be defined as an eye-opening, multicultural *city-scape*. For instance, from another, culturally loaded, perceptual point of view, post-WWII migration met the new craze for Italian design and taste in the Zeitgeist exhibit *The new domestic landscape* at MoMA in 1972. From then on, willy-nilly and irrespective of any actual encounter, Italian America enters more decidedly a new phase as part of a wider Italo-semiosphere. The risk, to be sure, is diluting the thick density of experience that the immigrant condition epitomized, with its baggage of tradition and sociohistorical conflict. And yet—if I read correctly the great work done in recent decades by Joseph Sciorra and Simone Cinotto¹⁵—there is no turning back from this reconfiguration of the Italian American sign *within* the larger stage, demands, and even histrionics of a new, totalitarian, consumer culture.

When we look at Italian America today, we operate from within this new condition of complexity, without any privileged roadmap, to scour a multidirectional network. A network determined by history, linguistically diverse, and yet identifiable, and above all, intensely experienced by real people. The point, then, is to always find new paths.

One moves forward and backward through trials and errors, but always open to new vistas; sociohistorical structures seep into one's conscience, affect the language, are transformed into acts of volition and sometimes creation that, in turn, renovate reality. Thus, landscapes and scenarios constantly move and shift—and so do the Italian American and the Italian signs, which—I think—appear now to us as demanding once more and again to pay close and sensible attention to its many voices, visions, and phenomena—especially today, in times of tedious academic conservatism, and of larger, coterminous, political exclusionary acts.

Obviously, it is not by chance that my own work on the culture of the Italian diaspora has developed, in recent decades, while Italy moved from being a point of massive departure to a “destination culture.”¹⁶ And yet literary studies (certainly Italian literary studies) by and large still show a considerable reluctance in addressing the question of the existence of a diasporic Italian culture. Instead, a full acceptance of the diasporic dimension within the literary canon should suggest new ways of looking at the Italian cultural identity, both in its historical and its present configuration. A pliable and dynamic identity characterized by cultural diversity, referring—sometimes tentatively, other times more “organically”—to a multicultural and transnational environment. A wider approach to a cultural study of things Italian challenges the conventional wisdom of an Italo-centric curriculum and opens up new perspectives in a variety of ways, while positing a more engaging cultural scenario, in light of the massive migrations presently affecting Italy, Europe, and the Americas.

If we consider the diverse and most stimulating horizons shown in the fiction of new Italian authors active in Italy and elsewhere—to name just a few, Elvira Dones, Amara Lakhous, Adrián Bravi, Helena Janeczek, Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, and Elvira Mujčić—one is struck not only by the writers’ perceptiveness, but also by the overall picture of Italy expressed in their works. A country certainly defined, by now, among other things by the incessant entanglement of different layers of arrivals. Needless to say, the creative disposition varies in accordance with the wide spectrum of interests that are given voice in every novel.

Reframed from the Italian coastline, the frontier is obviously not the old Turnerian (in the sense of 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner’s) banner of an accumulative and liberating push forward, but clearly a threshold marked by too many unspeakable tragedies, the main tangible avant-garde, the new *frontiera* (in the words of an acute, militant intellectual, Alessandro Leogrande) where the First World’s gloating opulence and injustice meet the new energetic thrust for liberty and stability of the dispossessed.¹⁷ A larger consideration of this changing culture—in the United States, Italy, and elsewhere—could hopefully contribute to a better assessment of what appears today a cultural identity caught between the unerasable nations and the much more fragile, but equally unquenchable, drives of the subject. A challenge for the humanities to be, because, ultimately, it is a matter of how we interpret our role of scholars and

educators in the field of cultural studies, with a strong orientation toward any product, sign, work of (artistic) creativity. A matter of whether we find soothing and somehow socially useful locking the discourse within the parameters of tradition, or instead whether we deem more congenial adopting “mobility” not as the last academic catchphrase but as an intellectual disposition corresponding to the current challenges of the global scenario.¹⁸ Being worthy—as scholars—of the daring and searching intelligence of the migrants of yesterday and today, and therefore being “mobile” in our own studies in order to deserve interpreting those cultural metamorphoses. Never turning away from reality, and recapturing before it is too late what risks being lost and forgotten.

Italian American studies represents, in my interpretation, a privileged point of observation of this historical and cultural condition, which is still with us signaling one of the most urgent questions of today. I try in the following chapters to outline some of its contours.