

standing of the range and diversity of Italian-American literary production; thus, in the process of constructing a canon in this field, it is important to consider these kinds of texts and not only those which have received the most scholarly attention and analysis.

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What Fodder for the Canon?

A poet, an artist, doesn't ask for permission to his or her public. He needs, first of all, to be true to himself: not to the reader, not to the critic; not to the existing, but invisible, structures of society. His life and his urge to fulfill it by recreating it come first. The more I make room, in my own research for the creative words of immigrants (Italians to the U.S., but more and more, Italians everywhere, and all men to Italy and to the Western world: see, for instance, the overwhelming and disrupting force of Nuruddin Farah's *Yesterday, Tomorrow*), the more I try to learn the difficult art of listening with respect to the unique and individual intelligence deposited at the core of one's wounded personality. Those wounds and that perceptiveness, however expressed, are not matters of historiography, nor can they be comfortably tailored into a predetermined pensum. I have always found it sad to reduce works of art into the patterns of a genre: it's a good way to abuse the enthusiasm of our students and to stifle their genuine interest. Of course, there are several bona fide narrative and poetical genres, patterns, and structures. They've always been around, and there's nothing wrong in detecting them or in pondering over their strategic relevance in a writer's expressive style. But there comes a point when we as scholars should also try to be true to ourselves and consider the heart of the matter.

The decisiveness behind the ultimate journey that is emigration shows there's no time to fiddle around and demands that we get to the point. It would be relatively easy to linger around the surface of our theme. The fact that a number of scholars are asked to test the emergence of a canon is by itself

a sign, if not proof, of its likelihood. The questions, then, more or less become: “Why is there a canon?”; “Why have we come to think in those terms?”; and “What is its existence telling us about our position?”

It is rather obvious, in my view, that a discourse on the canon (whatever its content) camouflages a desire to be accepted by the received wisdom of a majority. That has its perks. If you act accordingly, you’re recognized, you’re ushered in and given a candy. You’re being a good boy, all the more because you’ve looked up to something or someone. A canon – or rather, a canonical way of thinking – is the sweet harmony oozing out of the blissful spheres of *Order*. As any good altar boy knows, you sing in tune with someone else and acquiesce in the soothing sound of the organ. Call it the neo-Tomism of literary studies.

Take the mechanism a little further. Convince yourself. Not only that, but convince yourself of being able to see a canon, teach it, and pass it on. Now you’re on the way to turning into the chrysalis of an obedient scholar. You’ve learned to read the *Books* in their correct order. You’ll also be able to type in the correct order of your credit card numbers and book a flight and a room to the next conference where a job is being searched. The parthenogenesis of higher learning requires an accurate tuning of your intellectual disposition.

The canonical discourse, then, which is inescapable and by now shared among colleagues of Italian Americana, is also, more or less, an act of self-defense: be it Catholic, Machiavellian, or democratic in the American way. Inventing a tradition, a sign of distinction. Chanting the mantra in class, a proof of your reliability.

There’s nothing wrong in an unquenchable thirst for acceptance. In a way, it reduplicates the assimilating rituals of the defamed melting pot. And one should point out, to its credit, that the canonical discourse requires a fair share of abstraction, of inventiveness, as I just suggested. It’s binding in many ways, but it also has the thin elegance of an airy formation, mesmerizing only if you keep staring at it.

Let’s go back to earth. I feel I’ve done my share of historical research. Fashioning a philology of immigrant writing has meant, for me, trying to ground the analysis of an epical, gigantic, historical phenomenon on the only extant traces of which I am confident enough given my training: written words, *litterae*, or, the staple of littera-ture. One should here open a huge preamble

on the relationship, in many immigrant cultures, between written and oral. Orality always played an immense role, but an analysis of its interplay with the written dimension is forcibly problematic, since its literary products are documented – precisely – in written forms, which in turn allow us to infer, rather than observe, the actual weight of the oral dimension. If and when we read about orality, its improvisational dynamism is by then long gone already. I find the whole theme inescapable and fascinating, but at the same time methodologically frustrating.

Which brings me back to my usual heroes, the “unsung” heroes – as Rudy Vecoli taught us to call them – of the largely Italian- and dialect-speaking first generation. It’s hard for me to imagine if and how contemporary writers working in one or more of the new global “destination countries” (not only the Old New World of the U.S., but the New Old World of the peninsula, of the European Union, and the numerous other points of arrival and departure in Argentina, Brazil, Australia, etc.) can connect to the distinctly situated inspiration of the early demiurges, whose careers I cherished over the last two decades. I’m too biased in their favor. Their histories showed me a much larger picture of the birth of a nation, Italy; the more I learned from and through them, the more I learned about the suppressed and all-too-human aspects of the Italian recent past – a past that in so many ways is now unleashing a metaphorical nemesis with the force of a tsunami. Being better acquainted with the past doesn’t help us in figuring out the present, let alone the future, but it can at least disabuse us and warn us against ossifying categories. It can help us to be more open to possibilities.

There were, indeed, some great beams of light. As always, the “fathers” – however wild and irreproducible – did leave their imprints. Italian-American literature was born with a Tuscan storyteller, a dime-novelist, the pulp-fiction writer Bernardino Ciambelli: his stories are crazy, but the thrust of his prose is contagious, and the maps of his dramas, far from naive, are socially and ideologically revealing. Arturo Giovannitti was a giant soul, a poet divided, a cleft-poet of the proletariat; but when years ago we read aloud his *Sammite Cradle Song*, in its Italian version, in the icy hall of his abandoned hill-town in Molise, ravaged by another earthquake, both curse and blessing sent waves of recognition, and we knew that such a poet could not be denied. Add Farfariello and his skits; in his marvelous study, Bertellini has shown the semiotic and

cultural depth that permeates this mask's diabolical comic art. Migliaccio's scathing self-irony remains unsurpassed, linguistically and conceptually. And there were other, more occasional, instances: the rough-and-tumble fight of cop Fiaschetti against the *goodfellas*, fought with the weapons of irony. He defused and ridiculed Sopranos and sopranoology before the fact – enough for a seat at the Pantheon; and there was Carlo Tresca spitting against capitalism and military intervention, a radical enemy of prevailing, eternal sanctimony.

No gods and no masters. And yet, in some unacknowledged, tense way, around those and other voices the first communities of immigrants from Italy managed to express their divisions, contradictions, and their unremitting vitality. That literature, and its exponents, functioned as a public forum. They were the mouthpiece of a people. I have the impression that we've lost this collective, almost physical dimension.

I can't see all this as a lesson or as anything "empowering," but those writers used their language to the brim, they filled their time and helped their contemporaries experience a respite – which, I think, was the most harmony anyone could wrest under the circumstances. Unwitting canon-makers for their cushioned great-grandchildren, if you wish, delivering messages difficult to fully grasp, written as they were in another language. And here's an obvious but necessary rediscovery: the roots of the canon grow obliquely and point toward the stratified and complex Italian tradition. The canon works canonically, and its origins are also in some way self-reflective. So much for the illiteracy of the first generation. No people is ever without a culture.

EDVIGE GIUNTA

Memoir and the Italian-American Canon

The politics of recognition and the related discussion regarding the marginality of the field still permeate much of Italian-American scholarship. The ongoing concern to overcome the position of "emerging" literature makes the question of an emerging Italian-American canon fraught with complexity. We cannot