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Writer between Two Worlds: Italian Writing in the United States Today

Paolo Valesio

*Certo è un azzardo un po' forte
scrivere delle cose così
che ci son professori, oggi,di,
a tutte le porte.*

—Aldo Palazzeschi, "Lasciatemi
divertire (Canzonetta)"

[To be sure it's a risky enterprise
to follow, in writing, this track,
with so many professors on the rise,
ready to attack.]

Once, a serious young man (whose name was, of course, Ernest) posed a question to Gilbert, his older friend and a professional esthete: "But what is the difference between literature and journalism?" To which Gilbert quickly responded: "Oh! Journalism is unreadable, and literature is not read. That is all."¹

This is more than a witty remark. It is, rather, the fragmentar-

[Translated from the Italian by Graziella Sidoli]

ily organic part of a certain turn-of-the-century philosophy—what I call a parched philosophy [*filosofia bruciata*]¹—to which we still owe so many ideas which today are merely rehashed.

We could say that what takes place in crossing from literature to journalism is a transition from a deeper to a more superficial form of *unreadability*. What is at stake in both cases is, of course, something much more complex than an impossibility, or even just a difficulty, in the reading experience. In literature, unreadability means a densely elaborated writing that makes reading difficult. In journalism, unreadability means a watered-down writing that makes it difficult for the reader to be persuaded of the need to continue reading. It becomes clear, then, that in crossing from one genre to the other the term *unreadability* reverses its meaning: it shifts from one extreme to the other.

Literary criticism is located between these poles. We might say, then, that the main function of literary criticism is to make *moderately readable* what, in its essence, remains unreadable. What does this really mean? Or rather: *How* does it mean? To express things in a particular way is akin to framing a hypothesis on the nature of such things. The parched philosophy that appears at the threshold of this century² is still the best introduction to such a problem, because it is an amethodical and anti-institutional philosophy. It is, above all, a way of undertaking once more the entire esthetic venture—a venture that humbly challenges (the oxymoron is not a whim) the moralistic and ideological positions of the left as well as those of the right. What I am developing is a thinking in which the term *theory* regains its ancient etymon, alluding to a “procession,” that is a succession or procession of concrete images as opposed to a series of abstract statements. The evocation of specific images or small tableaux is not ornamental but indispensable, not anecdotal but crucial.

For example, I will ask the reader to cast his or her imagination back for a moment to what Chaucer—with a geographic indication which is as vague as it is suggestive (personifying the region’s name with the name of a woman)—at the beginning of the *Clerk’s Tale* calls “To Emele-ward, to Ferrare, and Venyse.” (*Emele*, which is Emily in modern English, personifies more vividly the region of Emilia in Italy).

Let us now go to the historical Piazza Maggiore in the heart of Bologna (which, in turn, is the heart of the “red” Emilia region). It is a hot July night in the year (1977) which will mark the quasi-official beginning of terrorist violence in Italy. Of course, there is nothing terroristic about the rally now in progress. On the platform

decked with flags (red, white and green flags, solid red flags), facing and defacing a beautiful Renaissance portico, an important politician is speaking. He is a representative of that party which (using a semi-Mexican terminology) I would call the Institutional Revolutionary Party. The usual list of clichés rolls out, and one listens, nodding in a not unpleasant sleepiness, as if hearing an old familiar tune. But suddenly something leaps out of the predictable litany—an unexpected thought is expressed: the speaker launches himself against certain “esthetes” not clearly identified who are accused of being the enemies of the “marvelous progressive forces.”

One of the listeners in the audience—a person committed to esthetics—responds at this point to the original move of the speaker with esthetic appreciation (even if, as in the present case, such a move is directed against something close to him). In fact, it is with a subtle but clear emotion that he hears the vernacular, which (beyond all ideological differences) unites him and the speaker as sons of the same land (sons of Emilia). What strikes him is the regional, nonstandard pronunciation of the word *estéeta* (as opposed to *estèta*, where the stressed vowel is pronounced as open). This, how shall I say, sweetly anti-esthetic pronunciation of the word concerning esthetics draws both the speaker and the listener back to the depth of common roots.³

Among other things, this image has to do with Italian literature. It has to do with the difficulty of presenting this literature in a country other than Italy. Esthetics does full justice to what is peculiar in literature. But how? It is an esthetics developed with “singleness of heart,” to borrow a beautiful liturgical phrase. Furthermore, it is esthetics seen as an undertaking that embraces a continuous and delicate attention toward moralities—in the sense of appreciating various *mores* or customs (and not, of course, morality as some sort of mortifying legislation). *Esthetics* embraces *ethics*: *e(s)th(et)ics*. I noted this elsewhere,⁴ but at the time I had not stressed that it is esthetics which embraces ethics, and not vice versa. This is not just a game of graphemes and phonemes. The concept of esthetics (a revision of Plato?) appears in this perspective as a vaster concept than that of ethics.

What concerns us here is the peculiar *morality* that is intrinsic to esthetics. The ethics of esthetics is above all an ethics of solitude. The esthetic person stands alone insofar as he or she possesses none of those edifying props that concern community support and acceptance, or the solemnity of official speeches, or complacency and reciprocal congratulations, and so forth. The esthete’s

struggle to construct values has—in spite of deceiving appearances—a solitary harshness of its own. He must accept the sacrifice of solidarity implicit in each form of solitariness.

But where, in the midst of all this, is literary criticism? It is located between the two extremes described before: between unreadability as a transcending effort (literature) and unreadability as an excessive relaxation of tension (journalism). Literary criticism is thus a technique that makes moderately readable what is ontologically unreadable (literature) or phenomenologically unreadable (journalism).

And what about the literature professors? When Benedetto Croce wrote the witty remark, which he probably would have liked on his epitaph—“He took philosophy and literature away from university professors”⁵—one feels, on first reading, a freshness and an exhilaration.

But one look at the history of Italian academic criticism shows us that this liberator of philosophy and literature did indeed end up imposing a cultural dictatorship upon Italian universities—a dictatorship whose effects have not yet disappeared. One could object that this has very little to do with Croce, and that it has perhaps everything to do with a certain diabolically professorial ability in absorbing, filing and explaining away even the most radically and adversely alien messages. However, if we take a close look at the spirit and general strategy of Crocean criticism, we see how it is indeed eminently professorial. There is an irony in this, which is of course not confined to the quoted case.

For example, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf speaks ironically of a type of professor “with a measuring rod up his sleeve.”⁶ But this declaration, and similarly irreverent ones, have been caught by the most strictly professorial critics—who have measured with their rods this book as well as all of Virginia Woolf's books. And how many others (unlike Virginia Woolf, who managed to impose her personal terms for viewing things), how many others were punished, blocked and definitively discouraged? The sad truth is that a continuous and debilitating battle must be fought by the true professor in order for him or her to keep smiling in the face of pedantry. It is François Rabelais' smile—and also the smile of his Italian models and predecessors, such as Teofilo Folengo and Pietro Aretino—a smile that, even then, had very little to do with a general gladness (Rabelais is not Rabelaisian), and instead everything to do with the struggle against academic terrorism.

We inhabit a time in which assertive ideologies are declining,

even though they are fighting the tide. The assertive ideology of the professors is one that claims to communicate the essence of literature. But this is not what the professor does, nor do we profess, here, to define the nature of literature. Literature—whatever the specific nature of its mechanisms—is a way of expressing things in the world; or rather, it is a way of shedding light (by glimmers) upon the things concealed within the folds of things.

Let us take the case of attributing literary value to a text at the point when such gesture becomes the highest attribution: we usually qualify this place with the adjective “poetic.” And let us strip the attribute “poetic” of several deforming layers (especially the many strata imposed by capriciously restrictive codes and, at the opposite end, by excessively narrow moralism). What is left? The designation of a turbulent force that shapes and reshapes. What? It is not clear. Reality or our perceptions of reality? The distinctive feature of major poetic ideas is precisely that of making such a choice meaningless. The act of bringing to light the things concealed within the folds of things is an act by which literature inextricably confuses creation and perception.

The professor as such has nothing to do with this turbulent and decisive action. His function is different: he rescues literature from oblivion. The moment one becomes truly a professor is the one in which, for the very first time, he or she holds in his hands an unpublished manuscript, whose destiny depends largely on his or her evaluation. The text could be a few centuries old, but I shall limit myself to contemporary texts: the ones being engendered all around us at this very moment.

It is literally (not only literarily) a matter of life and death. As modest as the value of the text placed on the desk under our eyes may be, it is only by touching it that we are able to touch the life force of literature—which, as any form of life, is born under the shadow of death. . . . The disappearance of this or that unpublished piece of literature can at times be well deserved. But what about the undeserved death of so many other texts? So much intensity, so many rich implications of e(s)th(et)ic choices are present in the phrase I used above, a phrase that might even seem trite: to rescue literature from oblivion.

I had begun to develop these thoughts (in a rather preliminary form, which was more like thinking out loud) at the *Circolo Italiano* of an important city in New England. A professor of Italian literature in the audience asked me one of those questions that have a humble appearance but actually constitute an ironic objection: “What then should we do [she asked], those of us who are ordinary

professors, who never receive manuscripts?" This objection communicated a denial: it denied the very existence of all the texts that *attempt* to become literature, which are everywhere around those of us who teach literature. The objection expressed the expectation of a sanction from higher up and outside.

But there is no sanction that can resolve the problem of encouragement at the proper moment. The moment in which a person (usually, but not necessarily, young) wavers between total acceptance (which could mark a vocation, or at least a professional commitment) of what he or she has just written, or a personal rejection which can destroy—along with the specific text—a whole mode of approaching the things folded within things. It is the moment when the author can no longer read what he or she has written. It is as if he or she were temporarily blinded and needs the eyes of another. Someone who will take his or her hand and force it, force the author's hand, to touch once again the same page, to run through it (slowly), following each line with the tip of a finger.

This rescuing from oblivion is the highest duty of the professor. But it unfolds in the context of a more quotidian activity, whose conditions have been essentially described already. Literary criticism (as I mentioned) makes moderately readable texts otherwise unreadable. In this manner, the professor applies to the turbulence of literature a mixture, a delicate measuring, of morality (not moralism) and mythology. It is upon this mixture, in the end, that our quotidian life depends—not only our life as single (and sometimes singular) individuals, but also our life as members of society.

In short, the professor rationalizes in descriptive forms the wild mythologies and moralities that radiate from literary texts. Or rather—returning to the initial terms of my analysis—the professor domesticates esthetic turbulence, widening and clarifying the ethical component enclosed in the esthetic embrace: e(s)th(et)ics. But if this is so, it follows that, in a given community, literary criticism can never be stronger than the fabric of social morality (that is, the local domestication of mythologies, or rather, the *genius loci* which determines the e(s)th(et)ic element) in the community from which the critic writes. This is the origin of that contrast (subtle from tangible—and often painful) experienced by all who teach Italian literature in the United States—and who reflect on it as they do. It is a contrast with the culture that surrounds and envelops them.

American literary criticism responds to a community that is

self-assured. It therefore expresses a solid web of paramythological moralities. Consequently, American literature (and, *mutatis mutandis*, English literature as well) can be authoritatively taught and exported. Italy, instead, is a country where the fabric of quotidian morality is deeply uncertain, causing enormous damage. One of these is the uncertainty embedded in the endeavor to transmit Italian literature abroad (and specifically, for the reasons mentioned above, in the United States). Let me be more precise. I am not saying that the United States is a moral country and that Italy is an immoral land—far from it. This would mean bringing back one of the most dangerous ghosts of nineteenth-century Anglo-American letters. It is a cliché which haunts even the greatest writers, casting a shadow over some of their very best works. (One example is the most beautiful novel written about Rome by a non-Italian author: *The Marble Faun, or, the Romance of Monte Beni*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Even here we find heavy traces of moralistic prejudice.) No—I am not speaking of ontological distinctions but rather of the greater or lesser solidity of a *communis opinio*.

American literary culture is born—indirectly yet unequivocally—out of that crucible (where all the ideas and forms of morality were tested, reshaped and refined) known as the Reformation. This is certainly not a new idea. But it is necessary to restate it. Especially since what is relevant here is to note that this confrontation among faiths has been recently renewed in the United States, in the form of various minoritarian communities (particularly the black one) and religions (above all Judaism) living side by side. Historical and political judgments about these “confrontations” with the majority are, indeed, very different and often quite divergent.

However, we are not concerned with explicating the problem in exactly these terms. The literary issue is, regardless of appearances, much simpler: in the long run, all these comparisons and confrontations among faiths and moralities reinforce the moral fabric. Even, and perhaps especially, when they tear the fabric of the community. We are once again facing the peculiar ethical dimension contained in the esthetic embrace: an ethic of perception rather than discrimination (therefore: this perceptive ethic recuperates the etymon of the word *aesthetics*, which involves, in fact, perception). In short, such comparisons/confrontations are the lifeblood of that *applied discourse on mores* which is literary criticism.

The Italian difference is flagrant: first the mild Catholic or-

thodoxy, then the secular-laboristic orthodoxy (varnished with Marxism), both share the effort (unfortunately largely successful) of masking what is basically an uncertainty. From this basic discomfort springs the persistent difficulty which, notwithstanding brilliant individual exceptions, Italian literary criticism still experiences in speaking with a voice of its own. (In one of the richest and most up-to-date university bookstores in the United States, the French section is divided into two large shelves, one dedicated to "Theory" and the other to "Texts." In the Italian section, such division does not exist: it is filled only with literary texts and anthologies. I consider this something more than an anecdote.)

In the United States, professorial discussions are rescued from aridity thanks to those highly profiled differences among faiths and traditions that were mentioned before. In fact, it is not difficult at all to discern the various religious matrices among the major strong voices of American contemporary criticism. In Italy, on the other hand . . . but in Italy one cannot *parlar male di Garibaldi* [speak badly of Garibaldi] as the motto says—and the red shirt of the Hero of the Two Worlds has now become an oppressive cape:

Elli avean cappe con cappucci bassi

. . .

Di fuor dorate son, si ch'elli abbaglia,
ma dentro tutte piombo, e gravi tanto,
che Federigo le mettea di paglia.

(*Inferno* XXIII 61, 64-66)

They had cloaks with cowls down

. . .

so gilded outside that they were dazzling,
but within all lead and so heavy
that those Frederick imposed were of straw.

(trans. John D. Sinclair)

Conformity generates uncertainty—something not easy to perceive, since the superficial effect of conformism is precisely the opposite: it offers a misleading impression of security, a set of assertive declarations. The uncertainty generated by conformism leads, in turn, to a painful mixture of despair and cynicism. Let us re-read the following description:

Si beveva un *whisky* con soda, si fumavano sigarette Muratti, si discorreva dell'invasione in Rumania o dei misteri di Russia, va-

gliando volta a volta le diverse ipotesi senza respingerne *a priori* nessuna, con quello strano spirito con cui gli italiani, mentre facevano la guerra, volevano pure contemplarla da un osservatorio spiritualmente neutrale e fuori tiro.

"L'Italia" diceva Rubé "somiglia a uno che si batte in un duello a morte, e fra una ripresa e l'altra si diverte a scommettere al totalizzatore sulla sua pelle. E' un fenomeno di cultura strafatta."

They drank whisky and soda, they smoked Muratti cigarettes, they talked of the invasion of Rumania or the mysteries of Russia, examining in turn the different hypotheses without rejecting any one of them out of hand, with that strange attitude with which Italians, while they were fighting the war, still wanted to contemplate it from a spiritually neutral observatory outside the battlefield.

"Italy," said Rubé, "resembles someone fighting a deadly duel, and who, between one bout and another, amuses himself by placing bets on the possibility of his own survival. It is a phenomenon of overripe culture."

This "overripe culture" [*cultura strafatta*] may not be a very elegant expression—and it belongs to that discontinuity of style perceivable in what is still one of the most beautiful novels of our twentieth century: Borgese's *Rubé*.⁷ Nevertheless, this description, which appeared in 1921 and therefore refers to World War I, seems (to repeat an academic cliché) to be written today. It may well symbolize the problem that I have been sketching.

Some time ago I happened to hear a young man describe his own cultural context as a "ghost culture." He was a writer from Quebec, speaking in English (the unavoidable contradictions and crossroads of international dialogue). The impending danger is thus the following: an overripe culture can quickly become a ghost culture.

I do not have, clearly, any recipes to offer. But if we look closer, a general hint does arise from the preceding pages: and it points towards ethics within esthetics.

Decisive steps in the field I am discussing require an art which is apparently outdated: the cultivation of the individual. (Italian criticism had a distinct theoretical voice at the time in which it was elaborated by personalities conscious of being personalities. These individuals did not hide behind institutions or bureaucratism: I am thinking of Croce, Gentile, Gramsci, Michelstaedter, Serra—even though, obviously, each had a very different intellectual style.) We have thus returned to an ethics of solitude as the esthete's duty. It is not a passive solitude but the elaboration of a discourse that, if at times it challenges the community, does so

only because its final goal is to speak to humanity.

In this respect, having criticized without apologies my first language-and-literature, let me point out a dangerous tendency that has emerged in my second (acquired) language-and-literature, Anglo-American. It is a danger that I have defined elsewhere⁸ as "new tribalism." With this term, I am addressing the tendency to restrict the privilege of describing certain groups and layers of American society to only the members of such groups or layers. This is a retreat from the advanced position of confrontation, that juxtaposing and comparing within American society which I described above; it is a sad retreat, since it is disguised by the cloak of progressive ideologies. It is being suggested—and without much subtlety or discretion—that only blacks can write about blacks, Christians about Christians, Jews about Jews, women about women, homosexuals about homosexuals, and so on. If we continue this way, we could end up with a kind of folkloristic literary diplomacy, in which every writer becomes a mouthpiece confined within a group too distinctly defined. But the image which to me seems to best represent the work of a writer at the point of his highest commitment is that of a threshold. The true writer moves continuously back and forth (trans-gressing), across one or the other thresholds that separate the different languages or cultures or mentalities or states of consciousness. ("Chi restituirà alle soglie la loro santità spajentosa?"—Who shall restore to thresholds their frightening sacredness? asks D'Annunzio in his *Venturiero Senza Ventura*.) Not all threshold transgressions have, naturally, the desperate tension evoked by Gérard de Nerval: "Et j'ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l'Achéron." But all, even the most modest, have their mystery; all involve a risk and a commitment. Every writer has, sooner or later, the experience of that vision that Shelley, in the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*, attributes to Zoroaster, who "met his own image walking in the garden":

For know there are two worlds of life and death:
 One that which thou beholdest; but the other
 Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
 The shadows of all forms that think and live
 Till death unite them and they part no more;
 Dreams and the light imaginings of men,
 And all that faith creates or love desires,
 Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes. (191-202)⁹

One of the paradoxes of imaginative writing is its frequently vertiginous combination of maximum interiorization and maximal dependence on external factors. This happens because writing exercises itself on language, or rather, it exercises language: which combines a high degree of abstraction (as a sign system) and an extreme adherence (the anthropological aspect) to the concreteness of a specific place. Language, in contrast to other sign systems, is territorial. I am speaking, of course, of the natural languages, the means of expression of literature, not the artificial languages used in logic, mathematics and the like. The other systems of signs either work with physical substances (such is the use of painting, sculpture, and architecture), or control sensorial perceptions (such is the power of music), or are performed directly on the human body (as in the various kinds of acting and performances, in particular dance and mime). Here lies another paradox: the sign systems most directly connected to the resources of the earth and the body are also those most directly translated or rather transported across national frontiers; whereas the most abstract or ethereal (the linguistic-literary forms) are those most strictly bound to a given territory.

It is for this reason that writing is perhaps the most solitary of all esthetic activities, which are all generally characterized by a strong solitude. Writing is particularly solitary, not out of vaguely sociological reasons (the artist pacing an attic like a starving wolf could also be a musician or a painter), but because its nature is marked by *mediation*. The directly sensuous (even sensual) echo of the fine arts and music creates the possibility of immediate communication, a solidarity among human beings, as they take pleasure in the world. Writing, on the other hand, is nourished by distance; in fact, it exists thanks to a continuous process of mediation, of in-direction. In this sense, even the slightest literary text is more akin to philosophy than, for example, the most programmatic and allegoric painting. But then the writer can only be (no matter how progressive and internationalistic his or her ideology may be) a *nationalist*: the only way for him or her to confer concrete attractive power upon his or her symbolic work—a very mediated and abstract undertaking—is to connect this work to a symbol that will attract solidarity. If language is the most direct and comprehensive emblem of a nation, literary writing is, in turn, the most prestigious emblem of the character of a language.

There was a time when the exiled German writers, running away from their Hitlerized country, found in the German language

a fundamental means to preserve their self-respect and dignity as Germans. There are many discussions of this issue (Adorno's and others') which are not relevant to our present purposes. I would just like to recall the brief but intense words of nostalgia for the German language and poetry that I heard a few years ago from an elderly Jewish intellectual in New York—a man who, as a young journalist in Germany, had heard and taken notes of Hitler's first speeches. To my knowledge, a similar intensely linguistic vindication on the part of the anti-fascist exiles to the United States and elsewhere did not occur. However, even if it did exist, it would not be directly pertinent to the situation in which I and others (few but in growing numbers), writing prose and poetry in Italian in the United States today, find ourselves. We are not exiles, we are expatriates—even though it would not be inappropriate to use the word "exile" in a very broad sense (I am thinking about James Joyce's small drama, *Exiles*), in order to refer to the political aspect of expatriation. But the politics I am discussing are neither the macropolitics of the state and electoral machines nor the politics of established parties [*partiti presi*] but rather the micropolitics of the quotidian, of the microscopic strategies, of the *mores* which, in the final analysis, decide the shape and color of the life of each one of us.¹⁰ I am thus looking at this territoriality of Italian writing from the perspective of the expatriate.

It would be possible, for example, to write a complete history of modern Italian writing (after the Risorgimento) by tracing the variations and diversifications of the relationship between literary discourse and the integrity of its territorial basis. With two distinctions: in the first place, the research I have in mind concerns symbolic rather than sociological relationships; and second, prose is preferable to poetry, at least as a first example and sample, since it reveals, in a more detailed and explicit way, certain connections. (Commenting on Poe's imagination, Gaston Bachelard observes that it is an aspect of his geography: "c'est-à-dire sa méthode de rêver la terre.") One of the essential differences that separate the great modern flourishing of the Italian novel from its contemporary impoverishment is the difference between a period in which Italian writing refers to an autonomous and well-defined territory and a time when the integrity and independence of the territory is being questioned. The first period (between the unification of Italy and the first postwar years) is the time of development of powerful imaginative affirmation: the narrative masterpieces of D'Annunzio (the writer most acutely aware of the *territoriality* of writing during this period); the great novels of

Verga, of Pirandello, of Fogazzaro; the accomplishments of Svevo, Capuana, Deledda, DeRoberto, Serao, De Marchi, etc.; the works of Tozzi, Bontempelli, Bacchelli.

And later? The integrity of the Italian territory is called into doubt. All of Italy (as a result of the collapse following World War II) becomes an open country, defenseless—it is the beginning of a crisis that we have not gotten over. This shows, among other things, that various degrees of nationality exist in a language and that the differences among them are crucial. National language is an expression that can initially sound unpleasant to pseudo-progressive rhetoric; however, it is much more exact than the expression “natural language” used by linguists to distinguish languages such as Italian, English and the like from artificial languages. It is quite evident that these languages are not natural creations, but communal elaborations. (“National,” therefore, should be read in a broad sense, to be applied also to small groups and not in a strictly legal sense—just as the term “nation” is traditionally used to refer to different groups of North American Indians.)

But what about the writer moving between two worlds—the one that belongs to the group of expatriates described above? Where is his or her experience to be placed against this general background? This experience consists, above all, in a re-discovery and re-evaluation of a spiritual community. The lack of immediate horizontal ties with other writers, with other Italian speakers, encourages the expatriate to concentrate on the vertical dimension—beginning with a renewed appreciation of the vitality of the entire Italian literary tradition, unfairly depicted (in the self-destructive clichés for which Italians appear to experience a masochistic pleasure) as too remote, too academic. Italian literature, on the contrary, has always been and is still very much alive. An atmosphere of relative isolation (and therefore of re-collection) allows for works of Italian writers to reappear with a particular vitality of features. Consequently, the type of dialogue that Machiavelli describes (in a letter so often quoted that we tend to take it for granted) becomes reality. At its deepest level, writing is one way of cultivating silence; and silence, which apparently causes isolation, often also ends up being a way to deepen the bonds among human beings. In fact, the chief component of mediation (which was mentioned above as a characteristic of writing) is silence. Silence is what nourishes literary mediation.¹¹

Naturally, this concept of silence should not be reduced to a superficial caricature, as if it were a matter of keeping your mouth shut. Quite the opposite is true. Because of the fact that Italian

writers in the United States have deepened and matured their writing experience, they have explored and continue to explore the silent roots of their mediation. As a result of this, they dialogue with the English language-and-culture that surrounds them; and they are hoping, in truth, to be heard a little better. One obstacle to such listening is nationalistic virulence. I hope it is clear that *this* type of nationalism (or more precisely, chauvinism) has little in common with the sense of nationality (discreet, mediated, played out among the symbols of the community and on smaller dimensions) indicated above as the basis of a writer's work. To avoid further misunderstandings, let me once again clarify what was mentioned before: the writer is, rather than nationally oriented, community-based. His or her word always takes off from a community (even if the community may be alive only in memory) and always addresses a community (even if it is only "a universal audience," as some scholars of rhetoric call it, referring to possible future readership).

American writing takes off from a position of dominance—a concept I am using to designate symbolical or semiotic relationships, not a determinate politics (I am speaking of "dominance" rather than "domination"). American writing, in other words, has the capacity to define in literary terms not only its own territory, but also foreign territory—including, and I would add especially, Italy. This modern position of dominance in American writing has very little to do with the native tradition in the United States and with the political and military power of the country. Rather, the reason for this American dominance has much to do with England. This tradition is essentially established by the English Romantic poets (Shelley, Keats, Byron, and all their followers). These seemingly marginal intellectuals manage to impose together with not only their language also their own vision of Italy. They begin to trace the lines of the system of the Italian Imaginary. (It is interesting to consider the defensive manner in which a great Italian novelist such as Nievo attempts to exorcise Byron's apparition in his *Confessioni di un Italiano*.) In the final analysis, to understand why high school students of my generation read *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway, rather than the above quoted *Rubé*, to get an idea about the world at the time of the Great War, one must reconsider the poetic activity of the English Romantic poets and the way they created an Italian *imagerie* (as a French critic might say). In the end, even behind Pound's great poetic victory (energetically and paradoxically American) stands the English Romantic tradition. Is this why Pound succeeds in transmit-

ting a sense of the fascist tragedy which no other Italian poet or novelist has managed to do?

To conclude. What is the situation facing the writers between two worlds (those who write Italian literature in the United States), who belong to my generation and the one immediately following? What is the most pressing problem for us to face? These writers are addressing themselves simultaneously to three communities: the Italian, the American and the Italo-American. We have already spoken about the first two. As for the third (which requires and deserves, obviously, a longer discussion), let me just touch quickly upon some elements in order to avoid confusion.

Speaking about a phenomenon such as Italo-American culture, it is worth keeping in mind a motto from the Medieval Scholastics: *Distingue frequenter*. The confusing of codes, registers, genres (be they literary or cultural) often leads to reciprocal misunderstandings. In the case of a community such as those "with a hyphen" (Italo-American, Spanish-American, Afro-American, etc.) the risk is even greater. The danger lies in a growth of pseudo-problems (monstrously mushrooming) that slip into demagoguery. It becomes necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the following:

1. Not strictly literary autobiographical and memorial texts, whose collection and systematic analysis is, nonetheless, important for a dialectical understanding of the various components of literary history.¹²

2. Novels or short stories written in English by members of the Italo-American community, containing a predominance of themes that can be considered characteristic of such a community.¹³

3. Works by those that I have called writers between two worlds: the Italian expatriates in the United States who write exclusively or largely in Italian.

Each of these three groups (of authors, texts, or cultural situations) ought to be studied in their dialectical relationships with the others but should not be confused with them.¹⁴ Now, if we observe this general literary situation and the way it is articulated, we will notice a dramatic gap. The writers between two worlds in the United States tend to write novels or short stories that rarely¹⁵ thematize and describe either the Italo-American community or American society in general. Often the expatriate writes as if he were not living in the States. This country serves only as an elegiac counterpoint of Italian memories and sagas. The task ahead of us, therefore, is to widen horizons and themes.

It seems to me that in this area poetry—Italian poetry written today in the United States—can come to the aid of prose. It is true that in contemporary Italian literature we do not have symbolical texts we can refer back to (even if only to go beyond them) such as, to indicate only an example, Lorca's collection with *The Poet in New York*¹⁶ as protagonist. Nor do we have texts that could serve, how shall I say, as flags. But the overall production counts, in the long run, more than single works. The idea of an anthology of long and short poems written by foreign poets about New York still remains to be realized (or does it already exist?). . . . If such a collection were to be planned (or re-planned), I would nominate at least one candidate: the beautiful long short poem written in 1912, "Les Pâgues à New York," by Blaise Cendrars¹⁷:

Seigneur, la foule des pauvres pour qui vous fîtes le Sacrifice
Est ici, parquée, tassé, comme du bétail, dans les hospices.

D'immenses bateaux noirs viennent des horizons
Et les débarquent, pêle-mêle, sur les pontons.

Il y a des Italiens, des Grecs, des Espagnols
Des Russes, des Bulgares, des Persans, des Mongols.

My Lord, the masses of the poor for whom you sacrificed yourself
Are here, crowded together like animals, in the shelters.

Immense black ships arrive from all horizons
and disembark them, hurly-burly, on the platforms.

There are Italians, Greeks, Spaniards
Russians, Bulgarians, Persians, Mongolians.

Describing the moving and uprooting of human groups, poetry in turn transfers and transplants languages (here, for example, the poetic diction—so national—of Charles Péguy is transported to the New World). . . .

But before considering anthologies, the scope of exploration must be widened.¹⁸ The contemporary history of poetic production taking place in the United States is being enriched both by the poets whom we can begin to call Italo-American¹⁹ and by expatriates dealing with the theme of expatriation, digging deeper and deeper into it.

In conclusion, the time has come for contacting and confronting (comforting: by switching a couple of letters, the hostile element of this word is eliminated to better render the meaning) the literary communities (Italian, American, and Italo-American). En-

rico Corradini, who is certainly not a negligible political thinker of the first decades of this century in Italy, noticed that the emigrant man or woman becomes a different person in America. He observed that this change takes place "not so much because there he finds more favorable external conditions, but because within him, as a result of the great voyage and of facing and experiencing the unknown, a crisis has occurred, the kind that can indeed be called dynamic and creative."²⁰ Under the banner of dynamism and creativity, we can begin to speak of an exchange of imaginations among these three literary communities.

1. It is, of course, from Oscar Wilde's 1891 essay "The Critic as Artist (With Some Remarks on the Importance of Discussing Everything)." See the volume *Intentions in The Writings of Oscar Wilde*, Uniform Edition (London-New York: A. R. Keller, 1907), 10: 105-237.

2. I might refer here to my article, "La fine del laicismo," *Forma di Parole* 8.4 (1987): 46-52.

3. For a further development of this "theory" of images, see my "Pax Italiae and the Literature of Politics," *Yale Italian Studies* 2.2 (1978): 143-68.

4. "Declensions: D'Annunzio after the Sublime," *New Literary History* 16.2 (1985): 401-15.

5. This sentence is quoted by Alberto Parente (in the Rome daily *Il Messaggero* of January 24, 1983) as belonging to a letter written by Croce on July 12, 1941.

6. "So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference of some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery, and the sacrifice of wealth and chastity which used to be said to be the greatest of human disasters, a mere flea-bite by comparison." Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), 110.

7. This is from Chapter X in the second part of G. A. Borgese, *Rubé* (Milano: Mondadori, 1921).

8. "Il nuovo tribalismo," *Alfabeta*, May 1987: 12-13.

9. *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford UP, 1912).

10. I spoke of this micro-politic in the "Pre-fazione" to my novel *L'ospedale di Manhattan* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1978).

11. I must refer here to my *Ascoltare il silenzio: La retorica come teoria* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986).

12. I am thinking of a text like the autobiographical memoir of Antonio Margariti, *America America!*, 2nd ed., with a prefatory note by Antonio Galzerano (Casalvelino Scala [Sa]: Galzerano Editore, 1980). (I thank F. Weinapple for having introduced me to this little book.) Such is the tradition behind more sophisticated contemporary instances like Joseph Tusiani, *La parola difficile* (Fasano: Schena Editore, 1988).

13. On some of the problems connected to this kind of literature, see for instance Robert Viscusi, "De Vulgari Eloquentia: An Approach to the Language of Italian American Fiction," *Yale Italian Studies*, New Series 1.3 (1981): 21-38. (To repeat: I am proceeding by quick sketches, not compiling a systematic bibliography.)

14. This confusion appears in some places of the useful and carefully documented book by Rose Basile Green, *The Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1980). The presence of the most important novelist between two worlds in the United States today, Pier Maria Pasinetti, in this book is perhaps the clearest example of the confusion I am speaking of (for Pasinetti's significance belongs to another context).

15. Here, however, I must refer to the novel already mentioned in note 10: certainly not for some sort of self-praise (no one more than I is aware of the limitations of that work), but to remind myself as well as others of how much longer is the way to be travelled.

16. See now the new American edition with facing Spanish text and copious annotations: Federico García Lorca, *Poeta en Nueva York*, trans. Greg Simon and Steven F. White, ed. Christopher Maurer (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988).

17. This text opens the first volume of his collected works: *Oeuvres complètes*, 8 volumes (Paris: Denoël, 1963-1968). See Blaise Cendrars, *Du monde entier au coeur du monde. Anthologie nègre* (Paris: Denoël, 1963), 1: 10-19.

18. For instance, in the case of writers between two worlds, see the collection of interviews *Mal d'America: Da mito a realtà*, ed. Ugo Rubeo (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1987).

19. Some recent anthologies are: *Poeti italo-americani/Italo-American Poets*, ed. Ferdinando Alfonsi (Catanzaro: Antonio Carello Editore, 1985); and *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana*, eds. A. J. Tamburri, P. A. Giordano, and F. L. Gardaphé (forthcoming from Purdue UP).

20. Quoted in Cecilia Mattii, *La 'Patria lontana' di Enrico Corradini: La lettura di un romanzo nazionalista*, forthcoming.