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# From Italophilia to Italophobia: Representations of Italian Americans in the Early Gilded Age

John Paul Russo

"Never before or since has American writing been so absorbed with the Italian as it is during the Gilded Age," writes Richard Brodhead.<sup>1</sup> The larger part of this American fascination expressed the desire for high culture and gentility, or what Brodhead calls the "aesthetic-touristic" attitude towards Italy; it resulted in a flood of travelogues, guidebooks, antiquarian studies, historical novels and poems, peaking at the turn of the century and declining sharply after World War I. America's golden age of travel writing lasted from 1880 to 1914, and for many Americans the richest treasure of all was Italy.

This essay, however, focuses upon Brodhead's other category, the Italian immigrant as "alien-intruder": travel writing's golden age corresponded exactly with the period of greatest Italian immigration to the United States. The causes of this negative attitude go back several generations before the arrival of the mass of Italian immigrants: "economic transformations that had been under way at least since the 1830s had produced, by the mid-

1880s, a sense of widespread crisis in America . . . the new, more 'foreign' immigrant of the 1880s could easily be read as the cause of the painful changes of the present."<sup>2</sup> After the Civil War Italian immigrants begin to appear on the margins of American fiction and their representation changes dramatically with each passing decade.<sup>3</sup>

Among American writers William Dean Howells was well suited to treat the Italian immigrant. He possessed broad social sympathies, a midwesterner's interest in the burgeoning cities on the eastern seaboard, and a realist orientation in fiction. For having written a campaign biography on Lincoln, he was rewarded with a consulship in Venice (1861-64).<sup>4</sup> Subsequently he wrote *Venetian Life* (1866) and *Italian Journeys* (1867), which earned high praise from James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton.<sup>5</sup> Strongly sympathetic towards the Risorgimento and its literature, Howells delivered the Lowell Lectures in 1870 in Boston on "Modern Italian Poets" (pub. 1887), taught at Harvard on the same subject, and reviewed Italian literature. His Italian was so good (better than that of most Cambridge italophiles) that one of his fictional immigrants, "as if too zealous for the honor of his beautiful language to endure a hurt to it," politely corrects the narrator's Italian: "Morde, non morsica, signore!"<sup>6</sup> When in 1871 Howells could not attend a celebration of Italian unification in New York, he expressed his regrets: "The liberation of Italy is a fact that all real Americans will celebrate with you . . . since the citizen of every free country loves Italy next to his own land, and feels her prosperous fortune to be to the advantage of civilization."<sup>7</sup> While living in Venice he became engrossed in Goldoni's realist drama with its middle-class and working-class characters; Goldoni, he wrote, is "almost English, almost American, indeed, in his observance of the proprieties."<sup>8</sup> James L. Woodress only slightly exaggerates when he claims that Goldoni, "more than any other writer, turned him from Romantic poet into prose Realist."<sup>9</sup> Altogether four of Howells's ten travel books are on Italy and five of his three dozen novels have an Italian setting, while many characters in other novels have visited it, discuss it, and extol or criticize it. Numerous Italian immigrants appear in his first book of fiction, *Suburban Sketches* (1871), and in five of his novels.<sup>10</sup> His knowledge of Italy and the Italian language gave him an ideal vantage from which to view the immigrants and their interactions with Americans and other ethnic groups.

Set a few miles from Boston in the fictional suburb of



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"Charlesbridge"—Cambridge, where Howells lived from 1866 to 1877—*Suburban Sketches* consists of ten chapters on the urban sprawl and social dislocation following the Civil War. Charlesbridge is a place of mixing, between city and country, upper and lower classes, Yankee and immigrant, one ethnic type and another. The chapter "Flitting" is about moving house, and the title captures the gist of so many of the sketches: that the "fundamental reality of modern American life was its impermanency."<sup>11</sup> "Doorstep Acquaintance," another sketch, conveys the sense of transience and "pseudo-intimacies."<sup>12</sup> The building of the suburbs, their ethnic quarters, slums and street life, their public transportation such as horse cars to Boston, their festivals, these provide the background and in some cases the subject matter for the sketches. (The narrator's study of horse car passengers anticipates Basil March's unsettling meditations on the elevated train to the Lower East Side in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.) In examining immigrant behavior for the American public of the *Nation* and the *Atlantic*, however, Howells gives the Italians space out of proportion to their numbers in the late 1860s. This reflects his own familiarity with and his fondness for Italians, and his willingness to defend and excuse them. Besides, it was only a step from writing about Italians in their own country to writing about them in the United States.<sup>13</sup> James Russell Lowell, Howells's fellow Cambridge Italophile, reacted so favorably to one of the sketches that he wrote Howells, "I am not quite sure whether Cambridge is in Italy—though now I think of it, I know Italy is sometimes in Cambridge."<sup>14</sup>

Closely modeled on Howells himself, the narrator of *Suburban Sketches* has "had the fortune to serve his country in an Italian city" (91) and is setting up house in a new section of a suburb. He knows Italian well and speaks to the Italian immigrants with ease; dialects never present a problem.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, as with Washington Irving's Geoffrey Crayon, Howells distances himself from his narrator, and this distance enables him to deposit his foibles and prejudices which can then be examined and gently satirized.

"It was winter even there in Ferry Street" (36). Howells's sketch of Ferry Street in "Doorstep Acquaintance" is among the first portraits of an Italian neighborhood in American fiction.<sup>16</sup> Ferries cross bodies of water: Italians have crossed over, yet one of Howells's recurrent themes is the Italian desire to return to Italy. Because they had immigrated mainly for economic reasons, not



on account of religious or political persecution, repatriation was very common among Italian immigrants and it distinguished them from all other immigrant groups. (As many as half of the Italians at the height of immigration repatriated.<sup>17</sup>) Ferry Street is situated in the North End by the wharves, Boston's future Little Italy, but in 1869 a "street" suffices to contain them.<sup>18</sup> The winter setting emphasizes the displacement of the Italians "born to a happier clime" (37) and balances any tendency to romance by imagery with a realist bite. It was winter "even there," that is, even the collective Italian presence cannot dispel the New England chill:

[in Ferry Street] in which so many Italians live that one might think to find it under a softer sky and in a gentler air, and which I had always figured in a wide unlikeness to all other streets in Boston,—with houses stuccoed outside, and with gratings at their ground-floor windows; with mouldering archways between the buildings, and at the corners feeble lamps glimmering before pictures of the Madonna; with weather-beaten shutters flapping overhead, and many balconies from which hung the linen swathings of young infants, and love-making maidens furtively lured the velvet-jacketed, leisurely youth below: a place haunted by windy voices of blessing and cursing, with the perpetual clack of wooden-heeled shoes upon the stones, and what perfume from the blossom of vines and almond-trees, mingling with less delicate smells, the travelled reader pleases to imagine. I do not say that I found Ferry Street actually different from this vision in most respects; but as for the vines and almond-trees, they were not in bloom . . . the snow fell as heavily and thickly around us as elsewhere in Boston. (37)

While the Italians make Ferry Street look like any street in an Italian town, the narrator has a "vision" overturning Puritan Boston in the very site of its origins by the wharves. The Italians have their public religious imagery in this quintessential Puritan town (with its distaste for religious icons), the Madonna (the feminine goddess as opposed to the Calvinistic Father-God), noise-making (instead of bourgeois quiet) and cursing (potential violence), clutter (and by implication dirtiness), perfume (sensuousness) and "less delicate" odors (smells of urine, strong cooking, as of primitive encampments), their leisure (laziness), and the Romeo and Juliet figures (almost figurines) as symbols of art and breakaway sexuality. The passage ends abruptly with a second winter image, thus enclosing the "vision" within a realist frame. Though the negatives lurk just beneath the surface and give a disturbing tension to the "vision," the general impression is that

Italians, despite their "wide unlikeness" to Americans, strive to make themselves at home, and this creates a touristic scene.

No immigrant emerges from *Suburban Sketches* as a fully formed, complex character and many are merely picturesque stereotypes. Nonetheless Howells conceives of some immigrants with sufficient imaginative force to establish a point of human contact, and many are given dialogue, which is facilitated by the Italian-speaking narrator, and thereby upholding a canon of realist fiction.<sup>19</sup> In "Doorstep Acquaintance" Italian immigrants come from the entire length of the peninsula and are typically associated with peddling, vagabondage, street entertainments, childlike joy, and uncomplicated pleasures. Howells does not complain of immigrant panhandling, but Americans in Italy complained unceasingly of the *lazzaroni* and nasty beggars. Although these "children of the summer" (35) protest that their lack of English prevents their "practicing some mechanical trade"—" 'What work could be harder,' they ask, 'than carrying this organ about all day?' " (35)—the narrator feels that they protest too much and really love their open-air life. Howells seems to refer not to the landscape but the streets, for he understands that Italians are an essentially town-oriented people, even if their town had been a southern Italian village. The narrator calls them "friends" ironically; they are not even "acquaintances" because he does not expect to see them again. They are a displaced instance of the picturesque, a "vision" constantly undercut by their being out of place, and this opposition between romance and realism is intensified by the Italians' apparent capacity to take pleasure wherever they are.

One "friend" is a coal-heaver in winter and an organ-grinding "troubadour" in summer: the opposition of the paleotechnic drudge and the carefree gypsy singer of love songs corresponds to the seasons. His "lazy," "soft-eyed" boy, who collects money with his tambourine, informs the narrator that the family has made enough money to return to Italy. His mother is an "invalid" and "must be taken home" (37), as if to die. In fact most of the immigrants are "sick" for home. With one exception they say nothing of economic necessities that have driven them across the sea, nor does Howells question them on the matter. The exception is a journalist from Trieste, then under Austrian rule. He voices mild, unspecified criticism but he wants to return as much as the others.

Another "friend" is a chestnut-roaster from Tuscany who



sells twice as many chestnuts for the same money as could be bought from an English-speaking merchant: in other words, Italians lack business sense, at least in America where language is for them a problem. Many Italians failed to learn English because they lived in the hope of speedy repatriation. Yet they paid dearly for their failure as they could not get higher-paying jobs that would enable them to hasten their return. This disincentive for learning English had another untoward consequence: "their cultural and physical isolation from Boston's Yankee culture made them particularly unsuitable American citizens."<sup>20</sup> Howells depicts the immigrants as clinging tenaciously to their native language. The chestnut-roaster addresses the narrator in Tuscan, as if unaware that "Tuscan is not the dialect of Charlesbridge" (38). The Italians' tacit assumption that "there is no other tongue in the world but Italian . . . makes all the earth and air Italian for the time" (39). This at-home-in-the-world theme recurs frequently in Howells's treatment of Italians. The "swarthy fruiterer" in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is "not surprised when he is addressed in his native tongue" by a Boston Brahmin Italophile.<sup>21</sup> Howells enjoys speaking in Italian because it "flatters with an illusion" of being in Italy; if he stood and stared in astonishment, even a moment, at the chestnut-roaster's addressing him in a foreign language, the pleasing illusion would vanish and their exchange would shrink to "vulgar reality" (39).

With his wares before him on the ground, an "image-dealer" from Lucca reclines before a meeting house and answers questions, at his own speed, as he drops morsels of food into his mouth. He barely notices the busy life that goes on around him. Although the narrator is amused, his Yankee neighbors would probably have disdained the Italian's lack of ambition and industry. The narrator himself becomes a dealer of illusion as he imagines the peddler "doing his best" to transform the local meeting house into a "cathedral" in Lucca, the piazza of which "probably has a fountain and statuary" and is "not like our square, with a pump and horse-trough in the midst" (40). In order to balance romance and realism, the Cambridge square is given a "magnificent" elm tree, for its horse trough and pump are no match for fountain and statuary. If Italy has art, America has nature. The Italian peddles plaster statuettes of Apollo, classical deities, and "Canovan dancers": paganism and Dionysian life. As the narrator thinks, the Puritans in their nearby graves would start if they saw such pagan and erotic images in their midst.



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Among the other immigrants is an old Lombard scissors-grinder, "very red in his sympathies" (42), who had worked in Naples and Athens before coming to America. He too wants to return to Italy "*per goder un po' di clima prima di morire*" (41). The narrator is embarrassed that the immigrant knows more than he himself about American history, mainly from having read Carlo Giuseppe Botta's famous *History of the War of the Independence of the United States of America* (1809).<sup>22</sup> The aforementioned "cynical" journalist has come to believe that fortune is the only providence and leaves singing a Venetian barcarole at the thought of going home. A "little old Genoese lady" with the face of a child sells "pins, needles, thread, tape and the like *roba*" (45) but does not even count the money paid her. Her face expresses "kindliness" and "sympathy," and she has the most delicate manners. Wondering how she manages to eke out a living from her small basket, the narrator recalls the simplicity and economy of the Italians from his days abroad. The lady will not end the conversation before she presents one, two, even three small gifts from her seemingly boundless basket, which takes on a magical quality. "The truth is, we Northern and New World folk cannot help but cast a little romance about whatever comes to us from Italy, whether we have actually known the beauty and charm of that land or not" (45).

Despite having been cheated of his wages and left destitute in *South America*,<sup>23</sup> the "swarthiest" organ-grinder possesses "that lightness of temper which seems proper to most northern Italians, whereas those from the south are usually dark-mooded, sad-faced men" (50). Stack observes that "Brahmins distinguished between Northern and Southern Italians from the very beginning of the Southern Italian invasion of Boston in the 1880s. Consequently, Brahmins viewed those Italians from Northern Italy as a part of Western civilization." According to the Brahmins, the "Germanic blood" and "artistic achievements" of the northern Italians "sharply distinguished them from the ignorant peasants of Southern Italy."<sup>24</sup> While *Suburban Sketches* shows this distinction already in place a decade earlier, the narrator's stereotyping of the Neapolitans as sad and sullen contradicts their reputation for cheerfulness and volatility. "Nothing surpasses for unstudied misanthropy of expression the visages of different Neapolitan harpers who have visited us; but they have some right to their dejected countenances as being of a yet half-civilized stock, and as real artists and men of genius" (50). Again, Howells indulges in

romantic primitivism, though he is having some fun at their expense in calling them "men of genius." At the same time Howells is not deceived by appearances: however rough in look, the narrator adds, they are "not so surly at heart as they look" (50). In the late 1860s and early 1870s, when probably under a thousand Italians were living in Boston, there was not yet the preponderance of southern Italians among the immigrant population, so they do not dominate Howells's panoramic sweep. His Italians come rather evenly from the whole peninsula.

As if to subvert the defensive pose implied by "doorstep acquaintance," the narrator remarks that he invited his "first Italian acquaintance" (37) into his home. Glad "but not . . . surprised" (38) to be greeted in Italian, she is the widow of a "Vesuvian lunatic" who kept setting fire to their houses until he finally perished in a blaze, another pejorative allusion to the allegedly fiery southern temperament. Yet the widow whose "object in coming to America was to get money to go back to Italy" is a model of "tranquil courtesy" (37). She is raising a subscription to which the narrator has made a pledge, but when he invites her to dinner, she answers with an "insurpassably flattering" compliment that "she had just dined—in another palace." Quite likely she had not—but she is being polite. Obviously the word *palazzo* was spoken. Saying it without the slightest envy, she touches his house "with the exquisite politeness of her race." Together the word and the gesture have a talismanic quality because the real house, a "little box of pine and paper," suddenly becomes "a lordly mansion, standing on the Chiaja, or the Via Nuovissima, or the Canalazzo" (38). The word and gesture express the longing for a home, her husband having burned down her own; his act is terrifying because of the sense of the sacral with which Italians invest the *domus*.<sup>25</sup> In his fiction Howells attaches great significance to the house as a symbol both of the individual and his social status, Silas Lapham's new Back Bay house being a prominent example.<sup>26</sup> The narrator concludes that "we had made a little Italy together" (38). Howells obviously does not mean a "Little Italy" in the sense of an urban neighborhood—too early for that—but the enchantment of being in Italy. With its diminutive, affectionate wording and with the inner rhyme of "little" and "Italy," the phrase suggests the pleasing, the precious, the gracious, at once concrete and yet seen by the light of imagination.

But is this a false communion? Is the narrator indulging in



cozy, romantic sentimentalism? It could be that the woman's plight has given this bourgeois a sense of aristocratic exclusivity with a palace on the Bay of Naples. There may be an undercurrent of condescension in "little" Italy, a belittling phrase. Perhaps, too, the woman is faking it a bit; Italians are masters of playing up to foreign travellers in their land and participating in the fantasy in an ingratiating way—one of their less attractive qualities. Questioning Howells's "self-satisfied exercises in multiculturalism," Brodhead comments that "speaking their language verbally may only conceal how little Howells 'speaks their language' in any other sense."<sup>27</sup>

Charlesbridge, then, is a place of mixing; but where distinctions are threatened or lost, as René Girard has shown, scapegoating is sure to follow. In the Boston of the 1860s and 1870s this role had been filled by the Irish, far more numerous than Italians.<sup>28</sup> On Irish and Italian street life, for example, the narrator says the comparison "does not hold good in any way or at any time, except upon the surface." He proceeds to "explain" that "there is beneath all this resemblance the difference that must exist between a race immemorally civilized and one which has lately emerged from barbarism 'after six centuries of oppression' " (66). Yet southern Italians had just been described as only "half-civilized" (50). Howells is caught in a typical contradiction, the Italians being polite but not fully civilized, not fully but still *immemorally* civilized. Possibly Howells means that they are civilized in comparison to the Irish, an instance of his favoring the Italians.<sup>29</sup> Venting his prejudice, the narrator employs the Italian as a stick to beat the Irish by the carefully built-up theme of *cortesía*. "You are likely to find a polite pagan under the mask of the modern Italian; you feel pretty sure that any of his race would with a little washing and skillful manipulation, *restore*, like a neglected painting, into something genuinely graceful and pleasing; but if one of these Yankee-fied Celts were scraped, it is but too possible that you might find a kern, a Whiteboy, or a Pikeman" (66-67). The painting may refer to the "neglected" Italian as an image that can be fixed and controlled.

Howells's prejudice towards the Irish was common after the Civil War among Brahmins and the Yankee middle class of shopkeepers, tradesmen, and bureaucrats. Both Oscar Handlin and Stack comment on the increasingly bitter edge given to anti-Irish prejudice. Though identified by common ancestry and religion with the Brahmins, unlike them the Yankees had never tolerated



the immigrants who were competitors in the labor market and whose Roman Catholicism was anathema. More idealistic and far more insulated economically and socially from the immigrants, the Brahmins had "deplored the excesses of anti-Catholic and anti-Irish hysteria during the 1840s and 1850s." "The Irish assault on Boston did not provoke xenophobia and nativism until after 1860," writes Stack, "the egalitarianism of the Adamses and of Hancock and Emerson persisted in spite of the unpleasant burdens that Irish immigration presented to the Brahmins." But when the Irish population of Boston jumped from 3,936 in 1840 to over 50,000 in 1855, and when they began to form a political bloc opposed to the Brahmin program of reform, the Brahmins joined ranks with their Yankee brethren. "At that moment," notes Oscar Handlin, "the tradition of tolerance was breached and long repressed hostilities found highly inflammable expression."<sup>30</sup> The Italian immigration would take place against this backdrop.<sup>31</sup>

In another sketch Neapolitan boys play the violin and the harp, while the Yankee children stand around with "impassive" faces, "warily guarding against the faintest expression of enjoyment" (51).<sup>32</sup> At a certain point the "minstrels played a brisk measure, and the music began to work in the blood of the boys"; one boy shuffles his "reluctant" feet and breaks into "a sudden and resistless dance," as if caught up by a life-force. However, the boy dances "only from the hips down": the music has only taken over half his body. The split between mind and body makes him dance "in an uncoordinated way" and with "no expression"; dancing neither comes naturally nor gives pleasure. The Yankee is ungainly, his gestures stiff and awkward. Is this in contrast to the common stereotype of the Italian as having fluid gestures and graceful comportment?<sup>33</sup> None of the other boys is "infected" and the narrator turns away: "The spectacle became too sad for contemplation" (51). The musical Italian also appears in "Jubilee Days," based on the National Peace Jubilee in Boston in June 1869. The diva Parepa-Rosa sings arias and "The Star-Spangled Banner" in the "Coliseum" set up in Back Bay (203). In a rendition of the Anvil Chorus from *Il Trovatore* a hundred "fairies in red shirts" played on "invisible anvils" while a hundred firemen beat on anvils with sledgehammers, a thousand musicians played, and ten thousand people sang.<sup>34</sup> Later an immigrant tells the narrator "never in my life, neither at Torino, nor at Milano, nor even at Genoa, never did I see such a crowd or hear such a noise, as at that Colosseo" (212). American gigantism and vulgarity combine

to make a public "event." The immigrant seems wowed by the American demographic muscle, but the narrator prefers to listen to the chorus of birds in the tree outside his window.

Just as Italians were immigrating to Boston, doubling their numbers between 1865 to 1880, during the same time the blacks arrived from the upper South and doubled their number.<sup>35</sup> Howells's comparison of blacks and Italians is more oblique and complex than the one with the Irish. Like the Italians' Ferry Street in Boston, the black quarter of Charlesbridge has a "ragged gaety" which he traces to "summer in the blood" (20), which is one of the Italian's putative attributes as well. Like the Italian quarter too, the black district is contrasted with the "aggressive and impudent squalor" of the Irish section and with the "surly wickedness" of a "low American street" (20). Walking in the black neighborhood, the narrator has the pleasing illusion that an "orange-peel" in the street might have come from an orange tree growing "in the soft atmosphere of those back courts" (20), but the orange is also a totemic fruit of the Italians. The blacks have "supple cunning" and "abundant amiability" (28); the Italians are "wily and amiable" (39). The blacks possess an "inward music" (20); music is often linked to the Italians (though Richard Gambino points out significant differences between black and Italian music, the one emphasizing rhythm, the other melody<sup>36</sup>). Lynn observes that the narrator's part black, part native American Indian servant Mrs. Johnson is a "turbaned, pipe-smoking, black equivalent of an Italian servant."<sup>37</sup> Howells refers to skin color, Mrs. Johnson's being "coffee soothed with the richest cream" (20, 26); Italians are often "swarthy," one of Howells's ethnic code-words (here the representation and reality match, as Italians are in many cases swarthy<sup>38</sup>). Mrs. Johnson is so "full of guile" and "goodness," the same odd pairing of qualities found among the Italians, and she reminds him "pleasantly of lowly folk in elder lands" (30). What other "elder" land did Howells know better than Italy? Like the Italians, she has a "lawless" (21) side, a "child-like simplicity" (22), and manners marked by "tranquillity and grace" (20). Not having been bourgeoisified, again like the Italians, Mrs. Johnson only works when she wishes. She is noted for having learned how to cook Italian dishes: soon "visions of the great white cathedral, the Coliseum, and the 'dome of Brunelleschi' floated before us in the exhalations of the Milanese *risotto*, Roman *stufadino*, and Florentine *stracotto* that smoked upon our board" (22). Finally, in unspoken sympathy, she learns a



Garibaldi liberation song, "Camicia rossa . . ." (28), which she sings in Italian.

The type of the mysterious, uncanny Italian is explored in the sketch "By Horse-Car to Boston," in which Howells describes an Italian woman on a trolley. Tall and dressed in black, she has arms which "showed through the black gauze of her dress with an exquisite roundness and *morbidezza*" (93) or the softness, realistic flesh tones, and chiaroscuro-like qualities of a painting. She wears bracelets of "dead gold" "fashioned after some Etruscan device," gold Etruscan earrings that touch her "white columnar neck" (the column as symbol of Italy), and a "massive" Etruscan necklace, and "a multitude of rings." The hand was "very expressive, and took a principal part in the talk which the lady held with her companion, and was as alert and quick as if trained in the gesticulation of Southern or Latin life somewhere" (93). Her eyes are "liquid" and her complexion had a "mortal pallor": death-like, she kills with her looks. She was "altogether so startling an apparition, that all of us jaded, commonplace spectres turned and fastened our weary, lack-lustre eyes upon her looks, with an utter inability to remove them" (93). This Medusa-like figure is in the vein of the Romantic Fatal Woman analyzed by Mario Praz: beautiful, exotic, pallid (the color of death), often innocent and therefore more enticing, having an uncanny, dreamlike gaze, and possessing a vampire wisdom.<sup>39</sup> When she departs the spell is broken and she never "appears" again.

While Howells's Italians receive the benefit of every doubt, he reserves harsh criticism for a Yankee vagrant. A veteran of the Civil War, "American, pure blood" (56), he has fallen so low on the social scale as to have been employed by an Irishman, a descent in social status that the narrator considers especially disconcerting. The vagrant refuses to work hard and, like some immigrants, prefers panhandling and an occasional day job. Without friends or family he expresses the essential plea of the immigrant: "What I want is a home" (59). The narrator's patience has been exhausted and he callously responds, "Why don't you get married?" The narrator dismisses him cruelly, telling the Yankee, "Do you know now, I shouldn't care if I never saw you again" (59). What for an Italian immigrant is acceptable behavior in the new country is considered outrageous and humiliating in an American.

By the mid-1880s it became evident that many Italian immigrants were not returning home, that they were arriving each year



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in greater numbers, and that their district had begun to assume weight and density in the city. The geographical triangle of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) consists of the lower-class North End with its growing Italian population, the South End (Yankees and Irish middle class, the Lapham's house), and patrician Beacon Hill with its recent adjunct Back Bay ("New Land") reclaimed from the Charles River (Lapham's riverfront house under construction). As Arthur Mann writes, "Its first streets thrown open in 1872, the present Back Bay filled up in the next thirty years, and became equal to Beacon Hill in the status it conferred on inhabitants. Its air of Victorian prosperity and gentility made the North End appear even more squalid and the South End even more dreary."<sup>40</sup> Lapham builds his house on Beacon Street, Back Bay, facing the river, "the clean, fresh smell of the mortar in the walls mingling with the pungent fragrance of the pine shavings neutralized the Venetian odor that drew in over the water" (906). The morbid "odor" of Venice is thus contrasted with the "fragrance" of the New England pine. Also, like Venice, Back Bay was reclaimed from swampy waters and tidal lagoons. Three of Howells's five Italian novels have a Venetian setting and in every case the city has an aura of decadence and stands for the "demoralizing influences" of Italy.<sup>41</sup> Lapham's unfinished house goes up in flames, bringing him to near ruin.

The Italian immigrant as an "explosive" element is a topic of conversation at an elegant Beacon Hill dinner party at the home of Bromfield Corey. This italo-philic Brahmin dabbled in art studies as a young man in Rome and, though he may have not have fought in the American Civil War, he boasts "a little amateur red-shirting" (1047) with Garibaldi in 1848. His tastes are described as "simple as an Italian's" (948), and his amiable nature, if shallow and ineffectual, is put down to "Italianized sympatheticism" (1186)—the phrase alone shows Howells in command of this subject. During the party Corey proposes a scheme to help the Italian immigrants with their severe housing problem: "The occupation, by deserving poor of neat habits, of all the beautiful, airy, wholesome houses that stand empty the whole summer long, while their owners are away in their lowly cots beside the sea" (1040). The Beacon Hill ladies immediately disapprove of the proposal, finding it impractical and unhelpful. Stung to the quick, Corey teases his guests: "nothing but the surveillance of the local policemen prevents me from applying dynamite to those long rows of close-shuttered, handsome, brutally insensible houses. If I were a

poor man, with a sick child pining in some garret or cellar at the North End, I should break into one of them, and camp out on the grand piano" (1041). The image combines italophilic and italo-phobic elements, the grand piano denoting high culture and music preeminent among the Italians, "camping out" referring to the desperate plight of the immigrants. (The middle-class Lapham's daughters take dancing lessons "at Papanti's" [883] in the public classes.<sup>42</sup>) When one of the matrons finally asks about the fate of the furniture, Corey withdraws his proposal. A minister adds, "It's wonderful how patient they [the Italians] are" (1041)—southern Italian fatalism—and the subject is dropped. But Howells's British editor Richard Watson Gilder insisted that he remove the word "dynamite": "Not but a crank would misinterpret your allusion, but it is the crank who does the deed." His British publisher Roswell Smith wrote that the reference to dynamite "suggests nihilism, destructiveness—revenge." Fearing a legal ban, Howells removed the passage, restored by later editors.<sup>43</sup>

In the North End Corey buys an apple from a "swarthy fruiterer" (993) and enjoys exercising his Italian. Later Howells satirizes Corey's "sympatheticism" to the point where the proper Bostonian loses some of his dignity—significantly, over fruit. Corey eats his breakfast orange "in the Neapolitan fashion" (1184), a habit probably picked up as an art student in Rome. His morning orange reminds him both of his carefree days and the warm south. Eating an orange this way means to cut it in quarters, and to tear and suck out the pulp with one's teeth<sup>44</sup>: voracious, full of gusto, but in upper Boston a trifle *volgare*.

Howells's *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* was written around 1906-7 and published posthumously in 1920. Its setting in New England of 1876 places it in the pre-immigration period, and its view of Italian immigrants is accordingly mild and suffused with nostalgia. The main character Parthenope Brook was born in Naples of American artist parents who named her after the siren protectress of the city, died of fever in Rome, and left her to be raised in rural New England. In Parthenope's wistful remembrance of the land Nathalia Wright reads Howells's poignant memories of his youth in Italy, as Howells says, "in those simple days when living in Italy was almost a brevet of genius."<sup>45</sup> He praises the manners of an itinerant Italian family of organ-grinders who pass by a New Hampshire vacation house:

There were two men—an older man who sat silently apart in



the shade and a young man who came forward and offered to play. He had the sardonic eyes of a goat, but the baby in the arms of a young mother had a Napoleonic face, classic and mature. She herself was beautiful, and she said they were all from the mountains near Genoa and were presently on their way to the next town. They were peasants, but they had a grace which made Parthenope sigh aloud in her thought of the contrast they offered to the mannerless uncouthness of the Yankee country-folks. (151)

From the "goat" (and scapegoat) to "Napoleon," Italians in Howells have come full circle. To their credit, they appear courteous, sincere, individualistic, quick-witted, and artistic. On the debit side, they are noisy, anarchic, unable to adapt to American commercial society, weakened by their lack of English. Wright contends that Howells's Italian immigrants are "representative less of their own country than of the American melting pot," but close reading tells otherwise.<sup>46</sup> They have not melted, nor are they exactly "representative" of "their own country." They do, however, resemble the stereotype of the Italian as noble savage in northern European and American Romantic literature. This stereotype has been examined by Camillo von Klenze, Herbert Barrows, and (most notably) Andrew M. Canepa, who demonstrates the necessity of following the changes in these stereotypes at the micro-historical level.<sup>47</sup>

The representation of Italian Americans alters for the worse when, like the Irish, the Italians were perceived to be in America to stay. At worst an occasional nuisance, Howells's kindly Italians of the 60s and 70s in *Suburban Sketches* plan to repatriate; yet their growing numbers pose a nagging social problem in the 80s in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. By the 1890s Howells wonders by what "malign chance" the Italians have metamorphosed from the "friendly folk" they are "at home" in Italy to the "surly race they mostly show themselves here: shrewd for their advancement in material things, which seem the only good things to the Americanized aliens of all races, and fierce for their full share of the political pottage" (*Impressions and Experiences* [1896]).<sup>48</sup> From "friendly" to "surly," from carefree to "shrewd" and materialistic, Italians are being "Americanized" into—what else?—Italian Americans and have begun to claim their social and political rights.

Let us remain in the 80s, the transitional decade, in examining the American representation of Italians. In 1884 Arlo Bates published *The Pagans*, the first of a series of novels known (if at all) for their brisk satire on Bostonian art circles. The italophilic

theme is present in two of the central characters having studied in Rome, where one of them became betrothed to an Italian. The novel also contains an italophobic scene in the North End and what only a decade earlier seemed picturesque was now disturbing. But though Bates's Little Italy has none of the simple charm of Ferry Street, his immigrants are not just a huddled mass. Hitherto Italian immigrants appeared on the margins of American fiction. As their presence grew in Boston, the point was to find some way of bringing them forward into the central plot, of mixing the Americans and the Italian immigrants in a convincing manner. This too was the task of *The Pagans* and its sequel *The Philistines*,<sup>49</sup> which Bates accomplished by means of a character who moves between both worlds: a southern Italian peasant female art model. In this way ideological and social conflict between italophilia and italophobia comes to life in the narrative.

In the circle of George Whitefield Chadwick, who may figure in *The Pagans* as the "musician," Bates (1850-1918) was the son of a surgeon from East Machias, Maine, and was graduated from Bowdoin College in 1876. Like Howells, he pursued a literary career as a journalist and novelist in Boston, becoming editor-in-chief of the Boston *Sunday Courier* in 1880 and professor of English at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1893. But the rise of Arlo Bates was neither as fast nor as high as the rise of William Dean Howells. Howells came from an upper-class Ohio family and on arriving in Boston he was invited to attend Dante Club meetings with Longfellow, Norton, and Lowell; he subsequently became editor of the *Atlantic*, taught at Harvard, and was asked to succeed Lowell in the Smith Professorship of Modern Languages there. He was the friend of Presidents Hayes and Garfield, two fellow Ohioans. Bates was a Sunday magazine editor and taught in the English department of a new technical school. Nonetheless he was a respected member of the Boston community and, like Howells, gave a set of Lowell Lectures.<sup>50</sup>

The "Pagans" are a club of seven Bostonian artists who stand for "the protest of the artistic soul against shams," profess an "unformulated although by no means unexpressed antagonism against Philistinism," and believe truth is "that which one sincerely believes." For them, Puritanism is the "preliminary rottenness of New England" while Philistinism is the "substitution of convention for conviction."<sup>51</sup> In surroundings that are not inimical to artists—rather, too hospitable, for Bostonians champion their artists into dull submission<sup>52</sup>—the Pagans endeavor to open a



space between the Puritanism of their ancestors and the Philistinism of their contemporaries, as they hover between gentility and bohemia. Theirs is an altogether precarious situation: drifting beyond this space spells disaster, and the space ultimately proves too small to produce genuine art. To hear them talk, it is hard to say whether Philistinism or Puritanism is the greater threat. Arthur Fenton, a Pagan with a penchant for making epigrams, sells out to Philistia and becomes a society portrait-artist.<sup>53</sup> Another Pagan complains that "Emerson lacked the loftiness of vice" and knew "only half of life" (80); the decadence, beginning to show itself in Boston, is another outlet. In *The Philistines* Bates extends his critique: even if individuals have liberated themselves from Puritan dogma, its lasting imprint is on conduct. The "essence" of Puritanism is "its strenuous earnestness, its exaltation of self-denial, and its distrust of the guidance of the senses."<sup>54</sup> Santayana and Van Wyck Brooks have been anticipated.

In *The Pagans* Bates connects the two Italies of high culture and the impoverished immigrants by means of the peasant girl Ninitta, whom Grant Herman, a Boston sculptor, encountered on an excursion to Capri and "induced" to come to Rome and be a model (37). "Induced" is one of many vague words employed to excuse Herman, Bates's ideal artist, whenever his conduct is scrutinized. "Black-haired" (159), Ninitta has a "dark, homely face, only redeemed from positive ugliness by her deep, expressive eyes" (34). Perhaps her ugly face is not at issue because Herman is a sculptor and initially is attracted by her body: "rather slender, lithe and sinewy," long limbed "like Diana," "superb" (34). In terms of the novel's thematic conflict, the division between beauty and ugliness expresses the split response to the Italian: italophilic and italophobic.

The diminutive "Ninitta" conveys slightness, a ninny, a nonentity, a simpleton; we never learn her family name, as if she had none, having cut her ties in running off to Rome. With an "Italian's passionate nature" (110), "passionate southern heart" and "crude, simple emotions," Ninitta is the archetypal "undisciplined Italian" (171).<sup>55</sup> Lacking in drive-control, she is "tender, loving, pathetically submissive" one day, and jealous as a "fury" (116) on another. She is "superstitious" (114); jealous (109, 110, 114, 215); suspicious (120); impulsive (270) and theatrical (12, 139); but also "a good girl" (40, 119), "true and pure" (118) in her loyalty; unpredictable (the only unpredictable element in the novel) and dangerous: she holds her hair up with a "stiletto" (119) (which is

silly and melodramatic—Bates is descending<sup>56</sup>). One Pagan, using (and abusing) her as a model, “tried to kiss her,” and she “offered to stab him with some sort of a devilish dagger arrangement she carries about like an opera heroine” (12). When he hollers for help, other artists come rushing like a “chorus,” but she leaves “without a fuss” (13)—she can fight her own battles. Ninitta’s thought processes are a mystery, a “strange” amalgam of “simplicity” and “worldly wisdom” (75). She thus combines sincerity and violence: the noble savage.

Why is Ninitta from Capri? The island had associations of the touristic-italophilic and at the same time it is located in the South, the origin of an increasingly larger percent of the incoming “alien-intruders” (eventually almost eighty percent of Italian immigrants came from southern Italy).

In his Roman days Grant Herman either “loved or believed he loved” Ninitta and, “too honorable to betray her,” he asks her to marry him and gives her a ring (38). Then, believing mistakenly that Ninitta and his friend are having an affair, he leaves Rome without consulting either. Although he learns after his friend’s untimely death that Ninitta had been faithful all the time, he is not so honorable as to renew his pledge because he has fallen in love with a fellow sculptress, Helen Greyson, who is estranged from her husband. As the novel opens Ninitta has arrived in Boston after seeking Herman for seven years. Her presence on the scene throws the Pagans and even some of the Philistines into consternation. Neither they—nor Arlo Bates—understand that Ninitta is the true Pagan.

Unlike Bates’s Puritans, Ninitta is guided by her senses, or maybe “driven” is the better word. When she confronts Herman with his obligation, he is cool towards her, gives her a handshake, says he has a headache, and asks her to come back the following day (40). It is hard to think of a character who, in the eyes of the reader, has ever recovered from such an initial poor showing. Bates blames Ninitta for not understanding why, on having learned the truth of her honesty, Herman would still renege. But Ninitta is not at fault; it is Bates who appears never to have read *I Promessi Sposi* and who shows no comprehension of the southern Italian principle of *rispetto* involving “obligations and reciprocal arrangements” between the marital parties. Since Herman has given a ring and Ninitta has remained faithful, his personal feelings do not override the principle: “affection did not constitute an essential component of *rispetto*, even if its presence was desir-



able."<sup>57</sup> Yet Bates would have us believe that, coming from her background, she should accept Herman's change of heart. To understand the change, writes the patronizing Bates, "would have required not only a knowledge of facts of which she could have no cognizance, but far keener powers of reason than were centered in Ninitta's shapely head" (77). (Though this is badly written, "shapely" implies a sculptural quality—the *face* has a "positive ugliness.") The "facts" are seven years, cultural and social differences, a new country, and another woman. While the first three mean nothing to Ninitta, her "instinct" (77) leads her to suspect another woman. Herman's unfounded suspicion of Ninitta in Rome is passed over rather lightly; Ninitta's much better grounded suspicion of Herman manifests a glaring defect of character.

Embarrassed and seeking reconciliation, Herman visits Ninitta's threadbare attic room<sup>58</sup> and, for the first time, sees her as a person: "She was no longer simply the model, she was an Italian woman in her own home" (115). The sentence leaps off the page and raises hopes. She turns down Herman's renewed proposal because she detects insincerity and will not force him into a loveless marriage. If Bates understood *rispetto*, her behavior would be either contradictory or an extraordinary feat of self-transcendence. Soon after, having agreed to pose for a statue by Helen, Ninitta discovers that Helen is also sculpting a large work, *The Flight of the Seasons*, and that Herman is the model for the head of December (at thirty-five Herman is prematurely gray and complaining of his age). It is noteworthy that Helen is sculpting a head, with Herman as the model; with Ninitta, only the physical body (and head insofar as it is "shapely") is seen as beautiful. Ninitta goes to Helen's studio and smashes the head to bits. As Helen reports the scene, "She didn't make any attempt to conceal it. She came stalking melodramatically into his studio with the mallet and laid it down. 'There,' said she, 'now kill me. I have broken her work.' It was like a fashion magazine story" (139). Helen does not get angry; that would be bad behavior, the expression of the very histrionic emotion she mocks in Ninitta. But if her work meant more to her, she might not compare its destruction to cheap sensationalism.

If Ninitta's action has the immediate effect of freeing Herman from his obligation of being "Her Man," will he now be Helen's man? In the novel's chief moral crisis Herman's Puritan conscience does not let him off so easily with regard to Ninitta

and he has second thoughts. Meanwhile, ill and bereft, she grows despondent and wanders aimlessly towards the North End, her surrogate home country. Ferry Street has grown into a large neighborhood, which social workers at the time called "Boston's classic land of poverty":<sup>59</sup>

The poorer classes of foreigners in any city are led by similarity of language and occupations to gather into neighborhoods according to their nationality, and the Italians are especially clannish. The fruit-venders and organ-grinders form separate colonies, each distinguished by the peculiarities incident to the calling of its inhabitants, the crooked courts in the fruit-sellers' neighborhood being chiefly marked to outward observance by the number of two-wheeled hand-carts which, out of business hours, are crowded together there. (164)

An impoverished Italian immigrant family, recognizing her speech, takes pity on Ninitta and brings her home. She is eventually located in a North End tenement by Mrs. Edith Fenton, wife of the "Pagan" Arthur and an upper-class volunteer in social work.<sup>60</sup> Already involved in social service, many Brahmins and Yankees will soon embrace the settlement house movement (a notable settlement house will be the North End Union, founded in 1892 by the Benevolent Fraternity of Unitarian Churches<sup>61</sup>).

The interior of the tenement is presented through Mrs. Fenton's eyes: "The children have just been put into our schools, but they have not advanced very far as yet. Their teacher asked [the rector] to do something for them; they are wretchedly poor. I wish you could see the place, Mrs. Greyson. Eight people in a room not so large as this, and such poverty as you could hardly imagine. Yet these people had taken in another" (160). It was not uncommon for whole families to live in a single room, and the population density led frequently to health and sanitation problems.<sup>62</sup> Hoping to make conversions, Protestant churches set up "missions" in the slums, but with limited success. "They are Catholics, naturally," Mrs. Fenton says, "but they do not seem to have much religion of any kind, and keep clear of the priest for some reason" (161).<sup>63</sup> At least the latter seems to have been the case with many immigrants. According to Anna Maria Martellone, "even if [the immigrant] was a practicing, convinced Catholic, the conditions in which he found himself within the ambience of English-language parishes, governed by the Irish clerics, distanced him after a short time from the influence of the church."<sup>64</sup> But it was not long before the Italians had their own



priests. Italians in the West End, for example, made a point of having their children baptized by Italian priests in Sacred Heart Church in the North End.

After communicating Ninitta's whereabouts, Mrs. Fenton returns to the North End with Helen, whose knowledge of Italian will be helpful in persuading Ninitta to leave with them. Besides Italian charity, virtues mitigating the situation are thriftiness and cleanliness, seen as exceptional:

Ninitta was found in a room tolerably clean for that portion of the city, the old fruit woman who was its mistress having retained more of the tidiness of thrifty peasant ancestors than most of her class. One room was made to accommodate the mother and seven children, and during the absence of the former from home the premises were left in charge of a girl just entering her teens . . . engaged in preparing the family dinner. (165)

Why is there no mention of the father? In Bates's gender politics, is Italy being feminized? Here only women are helping other women, from Helen and Mrs. Fenton to the young Italian girl doing the cooking. If a woman is scapegoated as the cause of trouble, women are the only ones who are actively sympathetic.

After Ninitta goes back to "proper" Boston, Helen persuades Herman to honor his pledge and to marry Ninitta. Since Helen's husband has just committed suicide and she is free to marry, her self-sacrificing act is explained by a strong Puritan conscience. Similarly, Herman's temptation to marry Helen is great, and so his sacrifice in marrying Ninitta is made to seem the greater. Bates leaves the impression that the sacrifice is wrong, that the Puritan conscience is at fault. At the same time Ninitta represents dangerous sexual desire that must somehow be controlled or repressed. The novel ends with Helen's gloomy departure for Rome, Herman's reluctant marriage, and the disbanding of the Pagans.

More disposed towards Herman's opportunism than sympathetic with Ninitta's seven-year odyssey and social ostracism, Bates scarcely conceals his prejudices. His Yankee directness and narrow middle-class values betray him where a Brahmin, at least in public, would have been more detached and oblique. With an air of social superiority Helen says that Ninitta's behavior is like a magazine story, yet Bates's own writing rarely rises above the level of the Sunday papers. Whether he was shaping the moral perceptions of his audience or merely expressing them, crudity of presentation is altogether stronger in *The Philistines*, published in

1889. At the end of the first decade of large-scale Italian immigration to Boston, the expansion of their community has intensified nativist social prejudice.<sup>65</sup>

In *The Pagans*, virtually against the intentions of the novelist, Ninitta is a strong, if impractical, individual with a capacity for love and endurance; in *The Philistines* she commits a single indiscretion and pays with her life. Six years have passed and Herman and Ninitta have grown emotionally apart. He looks across the breakfast table and "continually tried to discover what process of reasoning led Ninitta to given results" (60). They have a "swarthy" (62) boy, appropriately named Nino after Ninitta who is also "swarthy" (388). Herman accuses his wife of spoiling him and is angry that the *bambino* (as she insists on calling him) is not at the breakfast table: "He has all the Italian laziness in him" (62), says Herman, who goes to rouse the boy and finds him lying "luxuriously" in his bed (62) (he is only five-years-old). Childlike themselves, the Italians infantilize their children, which is no way to prepare them for life. "He will be a bambino to you when he is as big as I am" (62).

"Lonely" (107) in Boston, Ninitta has made sacrifices to accommodate herself to her husband's society. "She used to have a few Italians come to see her; people she met that time she ran away, you remember, and we brought her home, but they don't come now" (108). Mrs. Fenton raises her eyebrows, "A question of caste." Ninitta told her Italian friends that "the *bambino* was born a gentleman" and "couldn't associate with them" (108). Yet when Ninitta is desperate, she goes to see "Italian friends of former days" (436), the only people to whom she can turn. Normally, Helen says with unbecoming candor, Ninitta is as out of place at an "afternoon tea" as "the pope at a dancing-party" (107), mocking both Ninitta and the papacy.

Herman's attempt to fathom his marital troubles and Ninitta's conduct is a study in rationalization and self-deception: "as the larger nature, it should be his place to make concessions, to master the situation, and to secure Ninitta's happiness, whatever came to him" (223). For her, he had made the "great sacrifice of his life":

But his patience, his delicacy, his steadfastness counted for little with Ninitta. She had been separated from him for long years of betrothal, during which he had developed and changed utterly . . . Even Ninitta, little given to analysis, could not fail to recognize that her husband was a very different being from the lover she had



known ten years before. One fervid blaze of the old lover would have appealed more strongly to her peasant soul than all the patience and tender forbearance of years. (223)

He has all the patience; she, all the passion; and Bates would have us think that, were it not for her "peasant soul," she should know better. Given her unfulfilled desire, Ninitta is tempted to model again, her work being an outlet for her sexuality. An opportunity is provided by the Pagan-turned-Philistine Arthur Fenton. Vice attracts itself and then feeds on itself: "the time came when her ardent Italian nature was so kindled that she became involuntarily the tempter in her turn" (223-24). While Herman had posed for the married Helen Greyson in *The Pagans* without a trace of shame, Ninitta's modeling for Fenton is seen as scandalous. Bates discovers Ninitta's failing in her peasant Italian background: "There was, too, who knows what trace of heredity in the readiness with which Ninitta tacitly adopted the idea that infidelity to a husband was rather a matter of discretion and secrecy; whereas faithfulness to her lover had been a point of the most rigorous honor" (223). Again, Bates misreads Ninitta because he does not comprehend *rispetto*.

Fenton's *Fatima* ("Shining One") portrays Ninitta as an oriental beauty "lying with long sleek limbs amid bright-hued cushions" (379), linking the Italian woman to oriental luxury and wantonness (a familiar stereotype: the Venetian courtesan, the *dama* of the *cicisbeo*). Fenton has tried to conceal Ninitta's "real" identity by only using her body—her face was not beautiful in any case—and by transposing the head from another model. The dichotomy between italophilia and italophobia, already present in Ninitta's person (ugly face, beautiful body), is now expressed by decapitation (a castration), carried from the person to the work of art. Helen's head of December modeled on Herman might also be read as a castration image, December being the month of death. Helen's last name "Greyson" also contains a deathly color, her first name being the mythical beauty: in her own way she, too, evokes the split response, of love and death. Helen and Herman are entering middle age typified by Helen's *The Flight of the Seasons*. The various doublings express fears of dwindling potency and a consequent arousal of sexuality. Bates himself was in his mid-thirties at the time of writing the novel and his wife had recently died, leaving him with a young son about Nino's age. The biographical relations cannot be coincidental, but more attention must first be given to Bates's life, and there is as yet no biography.

At the gallery show Herman recognizes his wife's body with its "sensuous enticement" and it "choked" him (382-83). Scandal has broken out over Ninitta, and it fills Herman with shame and anger. He goes to Ninitta, whose "swarthy passionate face was an image of terror" (388). The rhetoric is virulently racist and sexist:

She was not far enough away from her peasant ancestors not to be moved by the size and strength of her husband's large and vigorous frame. Many generations and much subtlety of refinement must lie between herself and savagery before a woman can learn instinctively to fear the soul of a man rather than his muscles in a crisis like this. (389)

This is a rather circumlocutionary way of saying that Italians are wife-beaters, an Anglo-American trope.<sup>66</sup> He asks her how she could have betrayed him, though whether she has ever sexually betrayed him is only insinuated and highly doubtful. Besides, an artist like Herman half-understands her desire to pursue her line of work in the studio instead of staying home. So he punishes her where it hurts most: what will Nino think of her when he is grown up? The question plunges her into deeper grief. "Could he have known what was passing in her heart; it would have moved him to a deeper respect and a keener pity than he had ever felt for her. No more than a dumb animal had she any language in which she could have made him understand her feelings had she tried" (391). Not Ninitta, Bates himself lacks the language of her feelings, for it is the gift of language that a novelist should bestow upon such a character, either directly through her speech and action, or indirectly through description and symbol.

Ninitta decides to flee Boston, leaving Nino with his father, and go back to Italy. Yet a second exile is not a sufficiently severe penalty for her transgression; she might return; and she is blocking the marriage of Herman and Helen. There is no other solution to the scandal but for the scapegoat to die. And the partner of the deed, Arthur Fenton, must die for "seducing" Ninitta and (it is another part of the plot) for trafficking in bad business ventures. On a steamer bound for New York she meets Fenton on his way to placate his creditors. In dense fog the steamer crashes into another ship and Ninitta and Fenton are drowned. He would have lived, explains Bates, were it not for the heroic gesture of trying to *save* her. If this is to grant him a measure of redemption, and if not to be worst stands in some rank of praise, Ninitta falls even lower. Since they believe that Boston will think they had run



off together, their deaths are spiritually as well as physically tormenting.

Herman and Helen marry and raise Nino in proper Boston.

The Italian Americans would have to wait before becoming the central focus of interest in serious works of art.<sup>67</sup>

1. Richard H. Brodhead, "The Double Dream of Italy in the American Gilded Age," a paper read at a conference entitled "America's Italy," sponsored by the Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Washington DC, 17-19 Sept. 1992, p. 11, forthcoming in the acts of the conference (by permission). Brodhead's title would have better referred to one dream and one nightmare.

2. Brodhead, "Double Dream of Italy in the American Gilded Age," p. 9.

3. There were Italian Americans in American literature before Italian Unification. This essay is concerned with their appearance in the post-bellum period. According to the 1850 census 3,645 Italians were living in the United States; in 1910 there were 1,343,125 (see Emiliana P. Noether, "As Others Saw Us," *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 50 [Sept. 1990]: 125).

4. He turned down a consulship to Rome because it came without a salary; the Venice consulship provided \$1500 a year.

5. *Italian Journeys* has been reprinted by the Marlboro Press, VT, and is reviewed by Giuseppe Gadda Conti in *Italian Americana*, 11 (1993). The masterpieces of American travel writing on Italy are by minor writers, including William Wetmore Story's *Roba di Roma* (1862), Francis Marion Crawford's *Ave Roma Immortalis* (1898), and Edwin and Evangeline Blashfield's *Italian Cities* (1900). These books bear comparison with the work of five eminent British travel writers during the period: George Dennis's *Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria* (1848), the forty essays on Italy by Vernon Lee (published between 1899 and 1925), Maurice Hewlett's *The Road in Tuscany* (1904), Norman Douglas's *Old Calabria* (1915), and the travel books of Edward Hutton. By comparison one learns less about persons or places in the travel writings of Henry James because he too frequently refuses to share the palm with his subject; he is either too fastidious, too self-absorbed, or (most of all) too general. James is profoundly interested in himself, and that self is profoundly interesting, but James is not as interesting as Italy. Whether it is the "wholesome tapioca" of Venice and Florence or "the great plum pudding of Rome" (he wrote infelicitously in 1869), Italy does not emerge as well in the travel writings as it does in the novels. He confirms William Johnston's observation that "skill in travel writing cannot be predicted from excellence in other genres" (*In Search of Italy: Foreign Writers in Northern Italy Since 1800* [University Park: Penn State UP, 1987], p. 5).

6. *Suburban Sketches* (1871; Boston: Osgood, 1872), p. 45. Hereafter page numbers are cited in parentheses in the text and notes.

7. Qtd in James L. Woodress, Jr., *Howells and Italy* (Durham: Duke UP, 1952), p. 199.

8. Qtd in Nathalia Wright, *American Novelists in Italy: The Discoverers; Allston to James* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), p. 176. William L. Vance remarks on *Venetian Life* that Howells focuses on the middle and lower classes, on everyday work habits, foods, local customs, etc.: "his way of seeing Venice was transformed from one of exclusively visual externality to one of dramatic involvement, vision enlarged by language" (in Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., *The Lure of Italy: American Artists and the Italian Experience, 1760-1914* [Boston and New York: Museum of Fine Arts and Harry N. Abrams, 1992], p. 99).

9. Woodress, Jr., *Howells and Italy*, pp. 131-32.

10. Wright, *American Novelists in Italy*, pp. 195-96. Brodhead remarks that Howells's italophilia had a measure of shrewd self-interest given the fascination with Italy in Boston literary circles, then deeply immersed in Dante and Italian culture ("Double Dream of Italy in the American Gilded Age," p. 12). Such ambition does not preclude a genuine interest in Italy (cf. Woodress, Jr., *Howells and Italy*, pp. 102, 113, 186, 198, 200-01).

11. Kenneth S. Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 206. See also *Suburban Sketches* (21) and James Russell Lowell, "Italy," in *Fireside Travels* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), p. 194: "Coming from a country where everything seems shifting like a quicksand, where men shed their homes as snakes their skins. . . ."

12. Brodhead, "Double Dream of Italy in the American Gilded Age," pp. 13-14.

13. Lynn (*William Dean Howells*, p. 199) says that it was "comparatively easy" for Howells to make the transition, but the sketches show Howells grappling with American prejudices and that his narrator is in some sense his foil. This was not the case in his travelogues where he writes in his own character.

14. Lowell to Howells, 2 May 1869, qtd. in Lynn, *William Dean Howells*, p. 199. For the italophilic milieu in which Howells moved in Cambridge, see my "The Harvard Italophiles: Longfellow, Lowell, and Norton," in Joseph Cheyne and Lilla Maria Crisafulli Jones, eds., *L'Esilio romantico* (Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 1990), pp. 303-24.

15. Perhaps somewhat implausibly in view of the bewildering diversity of dialects. Yet Howells had spent four years in Italy and knew his way around the language.

16. "Doorstep Acquaintance" was published in the *Atlantic* in 1869 and reprinted in *Suburban Sketches* in 1871.

17. Italians ranked first among ethnic groups in repatriation between 1908 and 1931 (Betty Body Caroli, *Italian Repatriation from the United States, 1900-1914* [New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1973], p. 9; see tables on pp. 11 and 38 and the discussion of statistical problems, chaps. 1 and 2 passim) As. R. F. Foerster explained of the so-called "birds of passage" syndrome, "Between 1860 and 1880, as the fresh arrivals increased, the immigration assumed a much more definite character. Where before there had been individuals there were now types and classes. From small beginnings the contingent from South Italy had swelled to substantial proportions. After 1870, for the first time, it became evident that, following a somewhat indeterminate state, many repacked their chattels and went home again. No previous immigrants into this land of promise had done that" (*The Italian Emigration of Our Times* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1919], p. 324). Pino Arlacchi, who cites this passage, locates the reasons for return-migration in "balanced reciprocity," a social system in crisis after the Unification (*Mafia, Peasants and Great Estates* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983], chap. 1). For return-migration see also Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977), pp. 27-28.

18. This may be Ferry Way, off Prince St. in the North End, now absorbed into Commercial Street. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the ferry took people to and from Charlestown (Walter M. Whitehill, *Boston: A Topographical History* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1959], pp. 28-29). For the ethnic composition of the North End at this time, see Anna Maria Martellone, *Una Little Italy nell'Atene d'America: La comunità italiana di Boston dal 1880-1920* (Naples: Guida Editori, 1973), pp. 235-36.

19. James had criticized Howells's portrayal of Italians in *Italian Journeys* in the *North American Review*: Howells had not written about them "as from equal



to equal" (qtd. in Lynn, *William Dean Howells*, p. 198). Thirty-five years later James was to have a similar problem with immigrant Italians in *The American Scene*.

20. John F. Stack, Jr., *International Conflict in an American City: Boston's Irish, Italians, and Jews, 1935-1944* (Westport: Greenwood, 1979), p. 23.

21. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Library of America edition (New York: Viking Press, ca. 1982), p. 993.

22. Probably the most respected history of the United States until George Bancroft's multi-volume *History of the United States* began appearing in the 1830s. Harvard University adopted Botta for its course on the American Revolution in 1839 (Noether, "As Others Saw Us," in *Transactions*: 133).

23. "South" may connote trouble in Howells's text: South America, the U. S. South, southern Italy.

24. Stack, Jr., *International Conflict in an American City*, p. 24. This was the heyday of the Teutonic myth in Anglo-Saxon culture (see Edward N. Saveth, *American Historians and European Immigrants, 1875-1925* [New York: Columbia UP, 1948]).

25. Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th St.: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), pp. 75 ff.

26. Lynn, *William Dean Howells*, p. 110.

27. Brodhead, "Double Dream of Italy in the American Gilded Age," p. 14.

28. There were 35,287 Irish-born residents in Boston in 1850 compared to 134 Italians; by 1880 the number of Irish stood at 64,793 and Italians at 1,277 (Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation*, rev. ed. [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1959], pp. 243, 261). These figures may be compared with the 1875 Massachusetts census which lists 2,389 Italian residents in Boston (Stack, Jr., *International Conflict in an American City*, p. 23).

29. The norm was otherwise, the Italians usually being compared unfavorably. "The lowest Irish," said John Fiske, "are far above the level of these creatures" (John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* [New York: Atheneum, 1963], p. 65).

30. Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 191.

31. Stack, Jr. *International Conflict in an American City*, p. 21; Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, pp. 184, 189-92.

32. John E. Zucchi, *The Little Slaves of the Harp: Italian Child Street Musicians in Nineteenth-Century Paris, London, and New York* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1992).

33. Oddly, Richard Gambino does not see the Italian as particularly graceful. Commenting on black and Italian stereotypes, he remarks that black body language is "fluid, agile, graceful, easy, and seemingly relaxed and uninhibited," whereas the Italian American "stands and moves in a controlled, guarded way"; "his shoulders and hips remain locked even during the fastest dancing, in contrast to the focus on pelvic movement of black dance. It is a code of a self-contained rocklike body punctuated by deliberate staccato movements" (*Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian American* [New York: Doubleday, 1974], p. 303). One can only disagree, though this is not a case where one can find statistics. The words "controlled" and "guarded" do not spring to mind when one thinks of the *passeggiata*. Italians are known to be excellent dancers: the Italian dancing master is a common type from the eighteenth century (see n. 42 for an example). In Palermo in the early nineteenth century George Russell noted that "the deportment of these lovely women, their dancing, and their attitudes, are attractively elegant" (*A Tour Through Sicily in the Year 1815* [London, 1819], p. 48).

34. Martin Green, *The Problem of Boston: Some Readings in Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 103: "John S. Dwight, Boston's Yankee music critic, left town for the occasion."

35. Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 212.
36. Gambino, *Blood of My Blood*, pp. 302-03.
37. Lynn, *William Dean Howells*, p. 197.
38. Some examples: ' "You don't call . . . an Italian a white man?,' a West Coast construction boss was asked. 'No, sir,' he answered, 'an Italian is a Dago'; Ralph Waldo Emerson as "thankful that immigration brought 'the light complexion, the blue eyes of Europe,' 'the black eyes, the black drop, the Europe of Europe is left' " (Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, pp. 65, 66). As James Fenimore Cooper saw the *lazzaroni* in Naples, "Naked men, resemble Indians with breech cloths. Colour not very different" (*Letters and Journals*, ed. James Franklin Beard [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960], 1:380).
39. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1970), p. 207.
40. Arthur Mann, *Yankee Reformers in the Urban Age* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1954), p. 4.
41. Wright, *American Novelists in Italy*, p. 187.
42. "Lorenzo Papanti, an exiled Italian count, established the one 'proper Boston' dancing school of the century" (1214, note by Edwin H. Cady). Lapham's daughters take lessons in the public classes; the Brahmins presumably send their daughters to the private ones.
43. William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, ed. Walter J. Meserve (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971), pp. 385-86. The entire scene is an expression of the turmoil in Howells: "In the spring [of 1885, shortly before the novel was published] a sudden overwhelming sense of guilt – a Swedenborgian 'vastation' – turns Howells to Tolstoy and deeper, more radical social inquiries" (1205, note by Edwin H. Cady).
44. I owe this information to a private communication with Giuseppe Gadda Conti, author of *William Dean Howells* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1971). Gadda Conti claims an "intimate sympathy" between Howells and Bromfield Corey and notes that on occasion Howells chooses him as his mouthpiece (p. 182). Corey is likely what Howells may once in part have been (like the narrator in *Suburban Sketches*) and what he was attempting to exorcise.
45. *The Vacation of the Kelwyns* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), p. 51.
46. Wright, *American Novelists in Italy*, p. 195. In her chapter on Howells and Italy, Wright devotes one paragraph to the Italians in America (pp. 195-96), Woodress in his book-length study even less (*Howells and Italy*, p. 153).
47. Camillo von Klenze, *The Interpretation of Italy During the Last Two Centuries: A Contribution to the Study of Goethe's "Italienische Reise"* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1907); Herbert Barrows, "Convention and Novelty in the Romantic Generation's Experience of Italy," in *Literature as a Mode of Travel*, intro. by Warner G. Rice (New York: New York Public Library, 1963), pp. 69-84; and Andrew M. Canepa, "From Degenerate Scoundrel to Noble Savage: The Italian Stereotype in 18th-Century British Travel Literature," *English Miscellany*, 23 (1974): 107-46.
48. *Impressions and Experiences* (1896), qtd. in Wright, *American Novelists in Italy*, p. 196. Actually the Italians were not particularly "fierce" about political and social rights this early; it took longer for them to receive their share of the "pottage."
49. I will limit myself to these novels, though *The Puritans* (1898) has some of the same characters and themes.
50. *Talks on the Study of Literature* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1897).
51. Arlo Bates, *The Pagans* (New York: Henry Holt, 1884), pp. 211, 234-35 (hereafter page numbers are cited in parentheses in the text).
52. Green, *The Problem of Boston*, p. 136.



53. According to Van Wyck Brooks, Boston's general suspicion of the plastic arts excepted portrait-painting on account of its association with "the family pride, the wealth, the public spirit" (*The Flowering of New England* [New York: Dutton, 1936], p. 3).

54. Arlo Bates, *The Philistines* (Boston: Ticknor, 1889), p. 324. See also *Pagans* (234).

55. Helen Greyson's Roman art teacher is "Flammenti," another image of the fiery, passionate Italian (*Philistines* 107).

56. A common attribute of the southern Italian stereotype (Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, p. 90).

57. Arlacchi, *Mafia, Peasants and Great Estates*, p. 28.

58. Which Ninitta's flair has rescued "from the common-place. A bit of flimsy drapery, begged from some studio, hung over one of the windows; a rude print of the Madonna was pinned to the wall, and under it, on the wooden table, was a bunch of withered flowers" (114).

59. Mann, *Yankee Reformers in the Urban Age*, p. 4.

60. "While Italian women will receive an American visitor with a sweet smile, the next day they will tell the Italian pastor that they thought her somewhat crazy or at least very peculiar. There is such a chasm between the mentality of simple Italian women and that of the American lady visitor and there is such a strong tendency in the Anglo-Saxon race to enforce its views without much consideration for the views and traditions of the other race, that the results are not lasting" (Enrico C. Sartorio, *Social and Religious Life of Italians in America* [Boston: Christopher Publishing, 1918], republished [Clifton, NJ: A. M. Kelley, 1974], p. 123).

61. Martellone, *Una Little Italy nell'Atene d'America*, pp. 203n, 487-88. As Allen F. Davis notes, forty percent (33) of the total number of settlement houses in the United States in 1911 were in Boston (*Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* [New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1984], p. 268). According to T. J. Jackson Lears, "Among the educated bourgeoisie [at the turn of the century], this quest for 'real life' was the characteristic psychic project of the age. It energized the settlement house movement, as legions of sheltered young people searched in the slums for the intense experience they felt they had been denied at home" ("From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930," in Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears, *The Culture of Consumption* [New York: Pantheon, 1983], p. 10).

62. Martellone, *Una Little Italy nell'Atene d'America*, pp. 237-38.

63. Much of the social work was organized by the Protestant churches of Boston. See Francis D. De Bilio, *Protestant Mission Work Among Italians in Boston*, Diss., School of Theology, Boston University, 1949; Antonio Mangano, *Religious Work Among Italians in America: A Survey for the Home Missions Council* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada, 1917). De Bilio writes that "Our view of the American Christian world outside our slum was an extension of our experience with the solicitous American women who made up the Ladies Auxiliary, who were in turn the vital connection between the mission and the denomination. Christmas parties were a week or more after Christmas, so that the left-over or discarded Christmas gifts of parties in American churches could be collected and brought to the "poor mission children" (p. 165) (qtd. in Martellone, *Una Little Italy nell'Atene d'America*, p. 452). The Italians, not to be outdone, usually went along to get the presents for their children at Christmas and Easter, but did not change their religion.

64. Martellone, *Una Little Italy nell'Atene d'America*, p. 443.

65. The population of the North End went from 16,904 in 1880 (perhaps less than 1000 of them Italians) to 18,447 in 1890 and 30,546 in 1900 (when 13,738

were Italian). Altogether there were some twenty-five ethnic groups in the North End in 1900 (Martellone, *Una Little Italy nell'Atene d'America*, pp. 235-36).

66. There is an example of this trope in the film *Indiscretion of an American Wife (Stazione Termini)* (1954), where a Philadelphia married woman (Jennifer Jones) is tempted into an affair with an Italian (Montgomery Clift). She asks him whether, if she becomes his wife, he will beat her, and it appears that at some level the idea arouses her.

67. In two works of art just before World War I, Italian immigrants are the central interest, and it seems appropriate that those works should be in opera, a genre in which the Italians were closely associated: *The Padrone* (1912) by Bates's friend George Whitefield Chadwick, and *The Immigrants* (1914) by Frederick Shepherd Converse. Regrettably neither operatic work has been performed or even published. The publication of Victor Fell Yellin's excellent *Chadwick: Yankee Composer* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) raises hopes for some improvement in Chadwick's fortunes, particularly regarding his stage works. Yellin, professor of music at New York University, informs me that a portion of *The Padrone* was performed in a concert version in the 1960s.

Dean of American composers, Chadwick had grown up in a lower-middle-class district of Lowell and had witnessed firsthand the problems of the Irish immigrants in the mills. After study abroad he returned to Boston, established a career in teaching and composition, and became director of the New England Conservatory. *The Padrone* (1912) is a tragic tale of love, intrigue, and death among the Italian immigrants in Boston. He submitted it to the Metropolitan Opera whose managing director Giulio Gatti-Casazza had recently instituted the policy of staging one new opera by an American composer each season. Gatti-Casazza turned it down without explanation, the more unusual given the composer's eminence. After making inquiries, Chadwick later told a friend that the director "disliked the book because it was a drama of life among the humble Italians, – and probably too true to life" (Yellin, *Chadwick*, p. 211).

Set in Boston's North End in the "Summer of the Present Day," *The Padrone* capitalizes on the verismo style of Puccini and Mascagni, while painting a dark picture of social conditions, exploitation, immigration politics, and violence. With a plot almost as sensational as that of *The Godfather*, *The Padrone* tells the story of Marietta, a tambourine girl in the pay of a local padrone named Catani. She lives in hope of saving enough money to enable Marco, with whom she is in love, to join her in America. The opening scene is laid in a North End restaurant where Marietta rejects Catani's advances. Vowing revenge, Catani convinces Francesca, Marietta's elder sister who has been spurned by Marco, to denounce Marco to the immigration authorities on a trumped-up charge of abandonment. Marietta's savings thus going for naught, she would be forced to stay in Boston and marry Catani, while Francesca would be free to return to Italy with Marco. Act Two takes place at the Boston docks as Marco is about to land. Three choruses interact: wealthy Americans returning from a tour, the impoverished Italian immigrants, and the Italian Americans gathered dockside to welcome their countrymen and to celebrate the wedding. Marietta and Marco meet, but Francesca's denunciation is successful, and he is led back to the ship. In a rage Marietta stabs Catani to death.

Frederick Shepherd Converse (1871-1940) was another "Yankee" composer engrossed by the saga of the Italian immigrants. According to Robert Joseph Garafolo, Converse visited Naples in 1909 and was "moved by the plight of the Italians emigrating to America" ("*The Life and Works of Frederick Shepherd Converse, 1871-1940*," Diss., Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, 1969, pp. 66-68). Three years later he began composing *The Immigrants*, with a libretto by Percy MacKaye. Its original title appears to have been "*The Emigrants*"; the change indicates that Converse had decided to establish the



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viewpoint of the work in the United States rather than the land of departure. He finished the opera in 1914 and submitted it to the Los Angeles Prize Contest which it failed to win. Meanwhile, Henry Russell wrote Converse that he would arrange to have the work reviewed by Gatti-Casazza and Cleofonte Campanini at the Metropolitan. Gatti-Casazza had produced Converse's *The Pipe of Desire* in 1910 (the first opera by an American at the Metropolitan), but "it appears as though the Metropolitan Opera Company was unwilling to produce these works [*Beauty and the Beast* and *The Immigrants*]." The Boston Opera Company, with which Converse was connected, went into bankruptcy in 1914, thereby dashing any hopes that the opera would find an audience.