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# Narrative and Nothing: The Enterprise of Italian American Writing

Robert Viscusi

Early in 1990,<sup>1</sup> at a reception for a group of Italian American educators, I overheard a high-school principal boasting to a journalist, "We are the heirs of the Renaissance."

"No," I thought, "we are the orphans of the Renaissance."

I kept this wisecrack to myself, but the actual question it implied has continued to trouble me: what can we say about the relationship of Italian Americans to the glorious Italian past?

Seeking an answer, I looked where a literary historian would look—in that art which a people uses to connect its present to its past: the art of narrative.

## 1. *NARRATIVE*

Narrative art serves a people in many ways. Above all, it models social structure, making it possible for ordinary persons to see themselves in relation to other persons, as well as to other

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places and times. All narratives do this to some degree, but migration narratives—the narrative art of migrant populations and of their posterity—bear this function as an especially heavy weight. Migration narratives not only reflect a structure, they not only reinforce a structure that already exists, but they also have a basic role in creating a structure. For migrant groups with low literacy rates, such as United States Blacks and Hispanics and such as the mass migration from Southern Italy, the social function of narrative doubles in weight yet again. For these narratives must not only do all that other migration narratives do, but they must also somehow supply the very ground for the literary institution which can support and give rise to their own existence. So heavy and so circular, indeed, is this task that we need not marvel at how long such traditions have required even to begin the progress towards a full literary existence.<sup>2</sup>

To investigate the progress of a migrant narrative tradition means, then, to consider its relations to the social structure that it means to repeat, to interrupt, and to bend to its own needs. In discussing the enterprise of Italian American writing, we need to begin by discovering what we can about this structure. Fortunately, we have an excellent document written out of the intersection of forces that produced the mass departures from Italy—a document written in the moment when the forces of large profiteers were desperately frustrating the millennial desire for land that had made Italian peasants hopeful of the Risorgimento and resentful of its outcome. This is a document written, too, out of the cauldron of twentieth-century Italian social thinking, out of that intersection of Lenin and San Francesco which rises, at its best moments, to a genuine revisioning of Italy itself, of its long history as the heavy palace of prestige and the granite paradise of princelings. I refer to the groundbreaking work of the Abruzzese novelist Ignazio Silone.

## 2. UNDER THE SIGN OF NOTHING

In the opening chapter of his first novel, *Fontamara*, Silone inserts into the dialogue a small poem in the form of a peasant or *cafone* cosmology.<sup>3</sup> A young official speaks to the peasants of the hill town of Fontamara in the opening chapter. He is appalled that they do not know the meaning of the Fascist buzzword *gerarchia* (hierarchy). He tries to explain it to them. Then the peasant Michele returns the favor by instructing the official in how the

cafoni see the arrangement of things in general:

In capo a tutti c'è Dio, padrone del cielo. Questo ognuno lo sa.  
 Poi viene il Principe Torlonia, padrone della terra.  
 Poi vengono le guardie del principe.  
 Poi vengono i cani delle guardie del principe.  
 Poi, nulla.  
 Poi, ancora nulla.  
 Poi, ancora nulla.  
 Poi vengono i cafoni.  
 E si può dire ch'è finito. (47-48)

At the head of everything, there is God, Lord of Heaven.  
 Everyone knows this.  
 Then comes Prince Torlonia, Lord of the Earth.  
 Then come the guards of the prince.  
 Then come the dogs of the guards of the prince.  
 Then, nothing.  
 Then, again nothing.  
 Then, again nothing.  
 Then come the *cafoni*.  
 And that's the end of it.

This summary cosmology effectively refutes most of the "great chain of being" arguments so much in vogue in the early twentieth century. Its effectiveness does not rest only in its brevity, however. Rather, its compact form has deep roots in the ancient narrative practice of chiasmus, or ring composition.<sup>4</sup> A ring composition sets forth a series of events or images and then repeats it, usually in reverse order, so that the end meets the beginning. Silone's cosmology sets forth the series "God, Prince Torlonia, Guards, Dogs." Its second or reflecting series runs "nothing, nothing, nothing, *cafoni*." Reading this second series as an inverse repetition of the first yields a sharp commentary on the orders of society. In this ring, the *cafoni* at the end connect directly with God at the beginning. This is a double-edged notion, as we shall see a bit later. The two series set forth a map of the social world of the small, small landholders of Italy—those men and women who ascend the stage of history owning nothing but little half-hectare plots where the rocks always seem more abundant than the grapes—not so much landowners as landwishers, always hoping to put some cash aside to buy the next little fraction of a field, and then the next. These people made the mass migration to the Americas.<sup>5</sup> Silone's folk poem displays a social geography that Italian migrants carried in their collective mind and repeated in

their discursive practices.

The key element in these discursive practices is the universal presence of the reflecting Nothing. In this Nothing, Silone portrays the absolute break that occurred in the lives of the *cafoni*. The Nothing, rich with implications, gave a distinct angle to the version of this social world that they reproduced in their new home. We shall follow how this reproduction occurs—both generally, in the social style of the migrants, and particularly, in their literary history.

### 3. THE COSMOLOGY OF NOTHING

Let us begin, then, by examining the features of this foundational cosmology. First, God and the Prince are instituted above discussion, the guarantee of all else—the Lord of Heaven is the roof of the edifice, as it were, and Prince Torlonia, the Lord of the Earth, is the keystone of the great arch that holds the roof aloft. For the *cafoni*, these exalted persons exist outside question. Indeed, the rest of the structure appears to work to guarantee the exclusion of these preconditionals from discussion or doubt.

Second, the other orders of society are systematically ungrounded. The guard, the dogs, and the *cafoni*—that is, the leaders, the officials, and the poor are subject to a double separation:

Le autorità si dividono tra il terzo posto e il quarto posto. Secondo la paga. Il quarto posto (quello dei cani) è immenso. Ognuno lo sa.  
(48)

The authorities are divided between the third and the fourth places. According to the pay. The fourth place—that of the dogs—is immense. Everyone knows this.

That is, the authorities are divided among themselves by money (*secondo la paga*): theirs is the usual war of each against all, the monetarized enumerate struggle of bureaucracy and of *mercatura*. The fourth place calls to mind the opulent agon of Italian cities since the middle ages, that alternation of sides and parts that we recognize in the chessboard piazza of Marostica and in the Black-and-White Guelf politics that forced Dante Alighieri to spend most of his adult life climbing the narrow staircases of other people's houses. Guelf against Ghibelline, Lombard against Florentine, Doge against Pope, North against South—large themes of Italian history reflect this deep instability within the

administrative classes, which define themselves through fraternal struggle and continue to hail their originators as the murdering twins Romulus and Remus.<sup>6</sup> Such divisions make for a remarkably stable symmetry. Forces divided into opposing sides stand like two pillars that keep the overarching principles (God & Prince) securely in place.

The interplay between the self-division of the administrative classes, on the one hand, and the security of patriarchal order, on the other, is a foundational paradox of Italian culture, providing it with its splendid contrasts of brightly colored warfare between tribes and cities—its reckless fury, let us call it, so deeply resembling the emotional fountains of a revolution, on the lower or bourgeois end, while on the upper, the Doges and Dukes, Popes and Princes of the Church enjoy long seasons of undisturbed dinners in the *piano nobile*.

The *cafoni*, unlike the authorities, do not need to be divided among themselves in order to be rendered harmless. Their separation is of a different kind. They are removed from the drama of power by three layers of Nothing.

And even these are precise. At the top, under the guards and dogs, there is that Nothing closest to the rich and powerful. Let us call this **The Nothing of the Deaf**: in *Fontamara*, the rich systematically misinterpret what the *cafoni* say, insisting that every request for help is an act of transgression, and treating a desperate plea for water as if it were an act of revolutionary terrorism. At the bottom, just above the *cafoni*, there is the Nothing of those who cannot represent themselves. Let us call this **The Nothing of the Mute**: the *cafoni* do not know what to say even when they say it. They arrive at the festival carrying the wrong flag, their clothes are laughable, their accent is sidesplittingly awkward. After all, they *cannot*, actually cannot, speak the language of the nation, but only the local tongue belonging to their narrow little crevasse in the primeval hills—what is called a dialect but has in practice the effect of a visible stigma. They speak with a wordlist and a *cantilena* that mark them out as simply not worth listening to, mark them out no less vividly than a bright red tattoo across the mouth.

Then there is the middle Nothing. It stands for that which cannot even attempt to speak or to hear. This is **The Nothing of the Dead**: it represents that which ought to be there but is not. It represents those who have so totally failed to claim a right to existence that they have either died or emigrated, or both:

Ci fermammo a riposarci un momento all'ombra del muro del

cimitero. Addossati al muro sporgevano alcuni mausolei dei *cafoni* arricchiti in America; non si erano arricchiti abbastanza per comprarsi una casa e una terra e per vivere meglio, ma abbastanza per una tomba che dopo morte li eguagliasse ai galantuomini. (56)

We stopped to rest for a bit in the shade of the cemetery wall. Against that wall there stood a few mausoleums belonging to peasants who had grown rich in America. Not rich enough to buy a house and land and to live better, but enough for a tomb that after death would make them equal with the gentry.

This middle earth of Nothing, this **Nothing of the Dead**, is the ground-zero of Italian American writing—the name and address, as it were, of the predicament that children of the speechless must inherit. In confronting this heritage, so intimately a part of their condition, it is not surprising that writers in Italian America have frequently had recourse to such methods as their tradition offers.

For it has always been the case that much writing in Italy must assert itself against a coercion to silence. In *Fontamara*, the *cafoni* deal with the Fascist form of this coercion in the end by attempting to publish a clandestine newspaper, *The Cafone's Bugle*. This is a desperate venture in Fascist Italy. Some of them die as a consequence, while others must leave the country. Their situation is as extreme as Michele's ring composition, where the *cafoni* can perhaps speak—not across the Nothing to other humans, however, but only to God, only on the other side of death, exile, and Nothing.

#### 4. ITALIAN LITERATURE AND THE VOID

And the imposition of silence is a much older problem than this. One could, indeed, trace through the center of Italian literary history the continual struggle to invent and sustain those fundamental literary institutions that make it possible to employ as a means of expression the same language in all parts of the country. By literary institutions, I do not mean academies and prize committees. Italy has never lacked for pediments and cornices. I mean instead the foundations of a genuinely national literature—a long series of entitlements that would run from the right to use a library without first obtaining some potentate's permission, down to the right to speak one's native tongue—the so-called dialect—in public without raising a laugh. Italy has never been rich in such freedoms. A standard topic in literary histories of

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Italy, *la questione della lingua*, the struggle over a language, does not so much pertain to the creation of a national language as it does to the degree and character of stylistic and historical exclusions that ought to go into the makeup of such a language. Should it include sixteenth-century locutions or should it restrict itself to pure Petrarchan? Can there be regionalisms in a naturalist novel? What status can poetry have when it is written in the local language of the Veneto? Problems of this character have arisen continually.<sup>7</sup>

The struggle over language implies, almost always, a struggle with the Deaf, the Dead, or the Mute. In Italy, after all, antique ideological engines such as the Roman Catholic Church and the hereditary nobilities have held power continuously, effectively, and practically forever. Like the leisured philologists and pompous rhetoricians with whom they have held in common so many interests, the landed abbots, bishops, cardinals, and popes have sustained in Italy the prestige of the Dead. This hierarchic policy has defended the Deaf against the appeals of the Mute. Thus the *cafoni* in *Fontamara* confront a Nothing that is both central and structural in the literary history of Italy.

Italian literature itself arose from a similar void. In its origins, Italian literary history aimed to penetrate the web of Latin hegemony that had rendered the popes all-powerful in European politics. The Papal Chancery in the middle ages maintained the master-archive of European entitlements. This material power had its clear projection in the shadow palaces of ideology: Papal processional language retained the ontological power to define all reality, from the confines of nature to the purposes of eternity.

During the first three centuries of the present millennium, Italian lay culture developed three separate but interacting discourses in order to breach the wall of exclusionary shibboleth constituted by the Latin clerisy. These discourses were the codes of the Warriors or Knights, those of the Visionaries or Saints, and those of the Bankers or Merchants, who occupied a sort of moral and rhetorical middle ground between the other two. In the play of Italian literary history, these types recur and intermingle. Dante, who intends to write an Italian that is courtly and curial, illustrious and cardinal, nonetheless struggles against the deafness of high rank, opening his lines to vulgar utterances never found in Virgil and Boethius. Boccaccio, the Merchant, tells tales of bankers and gravediggers, writing a bourgeois epic that breathes life back into men broken and emptied by the divisions



of money. Boccaccio and Dante both play at the Saint, but naturally no one can compete with the author of the "Cantico di Frate Sole":

*Altissimu, omnipotente, bon Signore,  
tue so' le laude, la gloria e l'honore et onne benedictione.  
Ad te solo, Altissimo, se konfano,  
e nullu homo ène dignu te mentovare.*<sup>8</sup>

San Francesco endows with a voice even the sufferings of beasts of burden, and he endows with a compassion for the *cafone's* suffering even their majesties the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars. This astonishing performance, the birthmark of Italian poetry, has guaranteed it the strength to struggle with the cruelty of its social inheritance.

These three figures and their characteristic musics interweave in Italian literary history, so that the same poet may speak with all three voices, though we recognize the knightly power that sustains an epic tradition down to the ironic returns of Italo Calvino, the Merchant's acuity that reinstalls antiquity along the splendid corridors of Poliziano's line no less than among the collections of his patrons in the house of the Medici, and the Saint's capacity to give voice to the suffering and the speechless—what gleams across the centuries behind the great skeins of logology in the *Paradiso* and what drives the linguistic liberty of Pier Paolo Pasolini's or Andrea Zanzotto's powerful verse.

Naturally, these figures do not amount to a comprehensive *dramatis personae* for Italian literary history, which has developed, during the centuries of its evolution, an infinitely varied repertory. But this trio of heroic masks returns us to the primitive exigencies which produced Italian literature to begin with, exigencies still urgently present in *Fontamara*, where the three ranks of prince, guards, and dogs still imply the three Nothings they confront in Silone's cosmology, and where this articulated void, as allegorically precise as a hellscape composed by Dante Alighieri, still calls forth the similarly articulated energies of Warrior, Visionary, and Merchant.

We can turn now to how these figures and the discourses that produce them have dominated the history of the enterprise of writing in the Italian United States. Basic pillars of the social world of the *cafoni*, it is no surprise that these medieval modes have made early appearances in the process of collective reconstruction which constitutes the work of making a literary history.

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5. THE WARRIOR

Dante exemplifies the Warrior in Italian literature, not because he represents primarily the knightly caste, but because he worked at a period when the attainment of liberties of expression still needed to be carried on under the protection of a *condottiere* like Can Grande della Scala. In the trecento, freedoms like those of Dante represented an act of force. Dante's achievements in this struggle are foundational. They include not only the articulation of a project for a national literary language, but, more important, Dante's insistence upon using extremely coarse language when it was dramatically appropriate. This was strong enough a move to require, two centuries later, the priestly recuperation of Cardinal Bembo, who proposed the verse of Petrarca for a model of verse diction in Italy, as being much closer than Dante's to the Latin purity which has always worked so well to protect the literary *salotto buono*. Dante's Ghibelline politics, which allowed him to take considerable liberties in his *Commedia* with the destinies of various popes, finally, exemplify a certain anticlerical ferocity the need for which can sometimes still be critical.

In this reading, we are accepting that Nothing is not so much a void as it is the sign of what has been excluded or what might be included—a visible absence, then, inviting the re/presentation of what has been omitted. Thus, the Warrior in writing addresses the Nothing of the Deaf, assumes the task of revealing this Nothing as precisely the shameful marker of all that has not been admitted to understanding.

*The Warrior in literature addresses the absence of all those signs of substance that give a people the right to be heard.* Dante's enterprise has proven itself absolutely heroic for the needs of Italian politics down through the succeeding centuries. In the case of Silone's peasants, the problems are more drastic than any recourse to established literary history is likely to illuminate. Poverty, for these people, has meant a foreclosure of every license to be heard. For them, it is impossible to see how there can be a literature at all, if the writers are not rich.

That belief easily crossed the Atlantic. "At the age of sixteen," Mario Puzo writes, "when I let everybody know that I was going to be a great writer, my friends and family took the news quite calmly, my mother included. She did not become angry. She quite simply assumed that I had gone off my nut. She was illiterate, and her peasant life in Italy made her believe that only a son

of the nobility could possibly be a writer.<sup>9</sup>

Puzo resisted this way of thinking as a young man, struggling to produce literary work to the most elegant standard he knew. His results amounted to works that gained him solid esteem—that is, small recognition and very little money. But Puzo tired of this attempt to write as if he were *un galantuomo*. In effect, he came to accept his mother's reasoning, writing a novel that would make him rich. This motive for *The Godfather* greets us when we turn the title page and read the epigraph Puzo has chosen to introduce the narrative: "Behind every great fortune there is a crime." The novel represents—it *enacts*—both the crime and the fortune. It presents the necessity for writing a criminal text—not just a text about crime, but a text which *itself* is a crime—in order to gain the capacity to be heard. Literature is war. Money is not so much a form of power as it is a sign of struggle.

Puzo to an imaginary interviewer from *Paris Review*:

I'm just sensitive about money. How come you people never ask writers about money? You ask them if they use a typewriter or a pen, how many pages they write a day, all kinds of personal sex things. How come you never ask them how much they got for their paperback rights?<sup>10</sup>

His preoccupation is not surprising when we read Puzo's reaction to learning that the paperback rights to his blockbuster had paid him \$400,000:

I went down to my workroom to call my brothers and sisters. The reason for this was because every Italian family has a 'chooch,' a donkey. That is, a family idiot everybody agrees will never be able to make a living and so has to be helped without rancor or reproach. I was the family 'chooch' and I just wanted to tell them I was abdicating the family role.<sup>11</sup>

Among early paladins of Italian American culture, Puzo is still the best known, though literary history may award equal rank to his coeval Helen Barolini. Both writers engage—they write about, and they write within—the struggle to achieve not merely a place in the world but a voice that will be audible to the *prominenti*. They attack the Nothing of the Deaf with a strategy of accumulation. This accumulation is always warlike, if not always violent. It is to be distinguished from the poetry of mercantile accumulation, which emphasizes growth rather than conquest. The warrior speaks with a voice of determination. Puzo's Lucia

Santa in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* has the force of a Roman matron, urging her sons to battle in the hard world, herself the figure of a great leader (emphatically not the lugubrious neurotic Sophia Loren invented for the television movie based on this novel). Barolini's immigrant heroine in *Umbertina* embodies millennial determination, a woman as tough as a chestnut, a goat-girl who becomes a granite matriarch. Her family makes a figure in America, thanks to her relentless alertness, her war for substance, for security.

The Warrior in literature makes it possible for others to speak and to act. But she herself, in this case, does not enjoy the freedoms she wins for others. *Umbertina*, at the end of her life, thinking of the well-to-do dynasty she has founded, surveys her vast achievement this way:

She had seven living children and twenty-seven grandchildren, but to none of them could she really speak. There wasn't much to say anymore, anyway. At the end of her life, she was much alone, and when her eyes fell on the little tin heart, she would think of the quiet of the hills she had come from.<sup>12</sup>

*Umbertina's* posterity includes the heroines Marguerite and Tina, women who marry like certain heroines in Jane Austen, as a form of conquest—Marguerite to acquire an Italy denied her grandmother *Umbertina*, and Tina to enter the order of Anglo-Saxon America, where the descendants of the founding fathers still keep their summer houses along the shores of Cape Cod.

##### 5. *THE SAINT*

At the other extreme of the empty landscape lies the Nothing of the Mute. We place this void directly above the *cafoni* themselves. It rests on them, the mark of their silence. This Nothing, more clearly than the others, suggests the nature of the semiotic marker Nothing, which works not as a signifier but as a metasignifier, bursting with the implications of all the alternative realities it forestalls, the mark of a code that systematically dismantles all possible self-representations.<sup>13</sup>

In the Italian scheme of things, this Nothing carries the greatest oppressive weight. To oppose it means to risk death. None but fools and martyrs—Saints—enter here of their own free will.

The first exemplar here is Silone himself, who approaches the dilemma of the powerless and the speechless with what

amounts to a lifelong meditation on the *via negativa*, answering the Nothing he describes with a praxis of silence and refusal, the wordless solidarity of a herd of sheep obstructing traffic.

This Nothing, in the second generation of the migration, became the land of Zen Italian America, where the tonguelessness of the violated and the whisper of the homeless acquire a Beatnik eloquence, their own figure against the ground of what is not there. For example, the following passage from Diane di Prima's first book *Dinners and Nightmares* occurs in a story entitled "Prevailing Foods at Times":

fall 1956—hopping john, which is brown rice and beans and wine and ham hocks; or else lentils and chicken gizzards with wine; or garbage soup which was everything cheap thrown in a pot cooked in a four gallon kettle, enough for everybody, payment was always you brought up some wood for the fireplace. Food was warm all night, you just took a bowl and sat down, nobody ever talked much, we looked at the fire.<sup>14</sup>

Such antiheroic catalogues of simple meals and simple survival lower the price of entry into the ranks of people with something to offer. Here, even the poorest can offer gifts that will be acknowledged, things worth eating or touching or hearing or understanding. They can achieve the first level of what we call discourse, authorized communication.<sup>15</sup> The straightforward necessities of improvised lives, set down in this undecorated manner, constitute the practice of an eloquence no less sensual than it is political, and no less mystical than it is sensual. In her more recent work, di Prima can subsume even the warrior into her visionary fullness:

You cannot write a single line w/out a cosmology  
a cosmogony  
laid out, before all eyes

there is no part of yourself you can separate out  
saying, this is memory, this is sensation  
this is the work I care about, this is how I  
make a living

it is whole, it is a whole, it always was whole  
you do not "make" it so  
there is nothing to integrate, you are a presence  
you are an appendage of the work, the work stems from  
hangs from the heaven you create  
every man/every woman carries a firmament inside



laughing for Whitman  
and crying for Rome.<sup>17</sup>

That is, he has assimilated the devastation of what was left behind in Europe and has soberly recorded the devastation that was imported here: "We are all exiles," he writes. "As strangers we raped the Americas. There is the question of homeland, and we left our homes to usurp the homes of the natives." He has attempted to generalize the experience of our restless forbears, writing, for example, that the flaw in the American experiment is that "nothing is the law of the land" and that "the mayor of heaven is blind."<sup>18</sup>

This is just what the *cafoni* think in *Fontamara*. Stefanile knows as much, and he wonders whether the specifics of immigrant life are "capable of generalization." "Can our community-less communities forge a vision that works for most of us? Have my poems asked these questions? Are they notes for a kind of epic? I don't know."<sup>19</sup> In his self-denial, in his hesitation, in his rhetoric of erasures and fragments, Stefanile makes of his limitations a discipline, accepting and even glorifying the gratuitous guilt imposed upon him by history—the guilt, that is, for a glorious conquest in which he himself never took part.

One reason this epic is not achieved, one suspects, is the still-unresolved psychological knot here implied: when the *cafone* pretends to be guilty of the crimes of Columbus or Verrazzano, he may be indulging in a megalomania that allows him to avoid confronting the guilt—justified or not—that he actually feels. Such guilt is likely to have its own intensity and yet work on a far more modest scale, implicating fathers and mothers and daughters and sons far more often than emperors and conquistadors.<sup>20</sup> How is one to deal with this kind of guilt? If it is indeed a psychological, or even an historiographical, problem, one may seek to resolve such a conundrum through analytic criticism. But whatever it may be, certainly Italian culture itself has always treated such a dilemma not as an intellectual puzzle but as an economic problem. In this cultural system, one imposes a limit upon unmerited and unjustified guilt not through analysis so much as through symmetry and balance. The sign of the double-entry bookkeeper. The sign of the merchant. We can turn now to this balance.

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## 6. THE MERCHANT

The central category of Merchant, like that of the dogs, is immense. It answers to the central Nothing, itself an immensity, the Nothing of the Dead, the ground-zero of Italian American writing, and the place where literature answers the imperative to put *something*, to make a figure against the blankness.

As the Warrior breaks the deafness of the rich and as the Saint gives voice to the mute emotions of the poor, the merchant fills the emptiness left by the dead. Patience, calculation, division and redivision, accumulation, growth: these powers belong to the Merchant. Balance signifies *mercatura*—balance between the rapacity of the nobles and the guilt of their victims. In Italian literary history, this character stands at the center, and very few are the writers with nothing of the *mercatura* in their arts of amplification. Not only Boccaccio and Lorenzo de' Medici in their differing ways enact this figure, but the entire city-culture of the years between 1300 and 1650, the long flowering of trade, acquisition, venture, and invention that goes by the name *Rinascimento*: splendors of tenure and display construct Italy the Desired.<sup>21</sup> Its attraction has steadily accompanied those energetic and determined men and women who have poured out into all the corners of Europe and the Americas, more often than not in the vain search to accumulate the power to buy into what they have left behind. Mercantile culture forever reasserts itself in Italy. Even after the loss of its leading role in world trade, Italy continued to develop artists like Lorenzo da Ponte, for whom it was all one whether he wrote masterpieces as libretti for Mozart or managed the opera house in London or sold books in New York City or coal in Pennsylvania.<sup>22</sup> The *Risorgimento*, which could present itself to itself as an Hegelian apocalypse, has left no more sincere monument than the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milano, the most glorious shopping mall in Europe.<sup>23</sup>

The Merchant appears everywhere in Italian American literary history as well. He may both repeat and pay for the crimes of the entire bourgeoisie, as is the case with Gennaro Accuci, the hero of Garibaldi La Polla's *The Grand Gennaro*.<sup>24</sup> Or else the mercantile mind may be the object of intense introspection, as in the contemporary novels of Carole Maso, where an achieved *imborghesimento* is taken as a given: instead of focusing upon processes of growth or accumulation, the novelist's enterprise examines the arts of display, of arrangement, of consumption—a world where



everyone reads the food pages in the *New York Times*, where an exquisite taste, a knowing consumption, offers itself as a spiritual path, where it fails and is supplanted by a series of fashionable causes—ecology, AIDS research—that appear in their most severe guises as questions of survival. Maso's is an epic intention, that aims to dramatize consumption not as shopping but as eating the planet.<sup>25</sup>

The Merchant may be the hero of a lifelong prudential autobiography, as is the case with Jerre Mangione, a successful journalist who became later in his career professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. Mangione's polymorphic self-portrayal throughout his many books carries as a theme his balanced, effective self-management, his satisfactions as a man of letters and his discrete achievements as *un homme moyen sensuel*—a character well placed in the city of Benjamin Franklin.<sup>26</sup>

The most articulate dramatization of Italian American Merchant Writer is the self-reflexive enterprise of John Fante, who wishes to write, wishes to sell his writing, wishes to earn money and is willing to work for Hollywood studios in order to do so, but at the same time cherishes a sense of writing as sacred and of money as profane. This ambivalence lies exactly at the heart of Italian notions of *mercatura*, always redeemed by saints, always less worthy than warriors, always divided against itself, but almost always faithful, in the end, to its needs for substance, for accumulation, for credit. Fante's long correspondence with H. L. Mencken is mostly about his writing as an enterprise, a venture, and it often reveals his mixed feelings. August 15, 1934, he writes to Mencken on the stationery of the Warner Brothers West Coast Studios in Burbank: "Here I sit, laughing and laughing," he begins. "I have a secretary and a great big office and a lot of people bow low when I pass, all of them hating my Dago guts." Thus he announces his new job. Then he turns to describing his success in selling a story to Warner's. "I not only made these folks accept that bilge-water but I did it to the tune of \$1500, plus \$250 a week for an indefinite period. Whoops! I never had so much money in the offing in my life. . . ."<sup>27</sup> The balance between desire and self-disgust, between warrior of acquisition and saint of self-distancing, gives a surprisingly well-sustained tension to Fante's work.

All the many strands in Fante's complex enterprise come together in his novel *Full of Life*.<sup>28</sup> He ruthlessly records his own struggle to write his way into the suburban middle class. He returns, as in most of his novels, to his tortured relationship with

his bricklayer father. And running through every scene is the deep mercantile desire to replace the empty with the full and the dead with the living. These typical preoccupations run counter to the purposes of his wife Joyce, who wishes that her act of motherhood be not only useful but sacred and insists on taking instructions to become a Catholic. In church, the merchant writer muses,

I sat beside her and enjoyed the sensation of a new kind of thinking. For one's thoughts were different here. Outside, beyond the heavy oak doors, you thought of taxes and insurance, of fade-outs and dissolves, you weighed the matter of Manhattans and Martinis, you suspected your agent of treachery, your friend of disloyalty, your neighbor of stupidity. And yet I could sit beside her before the altar, her small hands exquisite in green kid gloves, and I could adore her for the beauty of her effort, the striving of her heart, the mighty force that prompted her to be a good woman, humble and grateful before God. I could sit beside her, my own lips dry for lack of words, I, the phrasemaker, and the pages of my soul were blank and unlettered, and I turned them one after another, seeking a rhyme, a few scattered words to articulate the fact that in this place I thought not of taxes and insurance, and my agent, my neighbor and friend were somehow disembodied, they assumed a spirituality, a beauty; they were entities and not beings, they were souls and not swine. (99-100)

The commercial soul. If he does not think of taxes and insurance, intrigue, treachery, he can only light upon the image of his wife as "exquisite in green kid gloves." But if he contemplates the fullness of her purpose—figured as the fullness of life itself in the system of this novel—then he is brought once again to the motive in his enterprise, and he can only think of Nothing: "the pages of my soul were blank and unlettered." Fante—admirably, I think—never pretends that this emptiness is not there. This emptiness which he meets in the churches and in the deserts of California is what his father brought with him from the stony heart of Abruzzi.

#### 8. *THE CAFONE*

What does it mean, a narrative founded upon Nothing? Nothing begins as the name of an absence, but soon enough it merges with the formula of creation. It becomes, in the generation of history, the sign of beginning and ending, the zero of the zero-balance in the Venetian accounting systems, the *creatio ex nihilo* of the visionaries—the point-of-view implied in the vanishing-point,

let us say, the origin of a subjectivity that can give retrospectively a new shape and purpose to a well-known chronicle of achievements, reinventing it as the narrative of this destiny.

In the historiography of Italian American writing, the name of this subjectivity is precisely that of the *cafone*. Who is this person? First of all, the point-of-view constituted by the Nothing that interrupts the order of things in Italy, the foreclosure of expression and even of escape. That is, Italian American writing as a distinct subject only emerges at the moment of *Fontamara*, when the rise of Fascism in Italy and the rise of nativism in the United States together conspire to put an end to circuits of return that Silone describes quite elegantly:

Una volta almeno riusciva ai montanari di fuggire in America. Perfino alcuni Fontamaresi, prima della guerra, tentarono la sorte in Argentina e in Brasile. Ma quelli di essi che poterano mettere assieme, tra il corpetto e la camicia, dalla parte del cuore, alcuni biglietti di banca, e tornarono a *Fontamara*, in pochi anni perdettero sui terreni aridi e sterili della contrada nativa i pochi risparmi e ricaddero presto nell'antico letargo, conservando come un ricordo di paradiso perduto l'immagine della vita intravista oltremare. (26)

Once upon a time the mountaineers could escape to America. Some Fontamaresi, before the war, took their chances in Argentina and Brazil. But those who were able to put together a few banknotes between their vests and their shirts, right over their hearts, and then came back to *Fontamara*, lost it all within a few years on the dry sterile soil of their native place, and soon enough fell back into the same old lethargy—preserving, like the memory of some lost paradise, the image of the life they had once glimpsed beyond the sea.

*Fontamara* was written after the closing of even this illusory circle. Now the *cafoni* were back in their primitive state in Italy, where there had never been any way out, and the *cafoni* in the United States found themselves effectively closed off from any way back, lost in paradise.

This paradise belongs to capitalism, and it is not quite the same one that their Italian traditions had prepared them for. The *mercatura*, or early capital culture, of Italy made a social landscape that has reappeared, no doubt, in various forms all over the world. But these forms changed perpetually. They had become something substantially new by the time that capitalism had erected the dizzy metropolises of collapsing imperialisms that have formed the immediate backdrop of Italian American life for the

past sixty years. Thus, the instruments of mercantile culture—its discourses that achieved self-representation in Italy—have not fully functioned in post-mercantile, post-monopolist, and post-imperial America, which has gradually been instructing Italian American writers in its famous severe disciplines.

Of these, perhaps the most severe has been the final capitalization of the one something remaining to the *cafoni* who had given up their lands, their houses, their families, and their languages. This was their very bodies, which became their one asset, in the ferocious labor market that awaited them in the United States. What happened at this moment?

“When the magic moment comes,” according to Marx, “surplus value becomes invisible capital and has all the charms of creation out of nothing.”<sup>29</sup>

Creation, we may say, through Nothing. Let us follow this process as it is outlined in the classic work of the young Abruzzese American novelist Pietro di Donato, *Christ in Concrete*:

Job loomed up damp, shivery gray. Its giant members waiting.  
Builders donned their coarse robes, and waited.

Geremio’s whistle rolled back into his pocket and the symphony of struggle began.

Trowel rang through brick and slashed mortar rivets were machine-gunned fast with angry grind Patsy number one check Patsy number two check the Lean three check Julio four steel bel-lowed back at hammer donkey engines coughed purple Ashes-ass Pietro fifteen chisel point intoned stone thin steel whirred and wailed through wood liquid stone flowed with dull rasp through iron veins and hoist screamed through space Rosario the Fat twenty-four and Giacomo Sangini check. . . . The multitudinous voices of a civilization rose from the surroundings and melted with the efforts of the Job.

The Lean as he fought his burden on looked forward to only one goal, the end. The barrow he pushed, he did not love. The stones that brutalized his pals, he did not love. The great God Job, he did not love. He felt a searing bitterness and a fathomless consternation at the queer consciousness that inflicted the ever mounting weight of structure that he had to! had to! raise above his shoulders! When, when and where would the last stone be? Never did he bear his toil with the rhythm of song! Never did his grasping heart knead heavy mortar with lilting melody! A voice within him spoke in wordless language.

The language of worn oppression and the despair of realizing that his life had been left on brick piles.<sup>30</sup>

In this passage, the great god Job systematically transforms everything remaining to these migrants. Their bodies, their sensoria, their pain, all fall into the jaws of a mechanical fury. Their very language, whose echoes one can easily hear in the rhythms of this prose and in the echoes of ancient peasant nicknames among the nouns, here enters the Babel of the transforming city, "The multitudinous voices of a civilization."<sup>31</sup>

What is left to the *cafoni*? Not love, not lilting melody. A wordless language of pain and dislocation. *Christ in Concrete* hovers as close to a wordless language as a language of words can come, constantly reminding the reader of its status as a sort of running translation into literary English of a nonliterary Italian—constantly, that is, by its very effort of words representing the destiny of its characters. Thus when the hero Paul sees his Godfather Nazone die, the man does not so much die as he recedes into the harsh necessity of his own historical condition:

The man Nazone rocketed away from Paul and the scaffold through deathèd nothing and smashed to the street bridge twenty floors below. (278)

*Deathèd nothing.* The *cafone* has found it again, it has sought him and found him as well, placing before him the real antagonist to an expression of what he remembers, what he knows, what he would transmit, what he might make understood, what he might have written, if only he knew how. The making of the literature of the *cafoni* has been, as might have been expected, a constant revisiting of this Nothing.

And what destiny has this amounted to? *Cafone*: in the dictionaries we read that the word means a bumpkin, a boor, sometimes a pretentious boor. But in Italy, bigots use the word to mean a boor who is also a Southerner. Thus it is a term—like many similar terms in the English language—that conveys at the same time all the forces of such multiple exclusions as can be practiced in the names all the forms that social geography can assume. Italian American writing has defined this character, *cafone*, as the possible Dante of Italian America, its speculative poet, its reminder that what some people remember as only the ocean—just as in Hell they remember it as only the river of oblivion—is in fact the void, the Nothing: a death no less real than the ones that the shades recite to the Pilgrim Dante in the *Inferno*.

Because it can remember its own death, Italian American literature, more than any other institution of the *cafoni*, will instruct

Italian Americans in the real order of things here in this *Novus Mundus*, this social and theoretical space invented by Renaissance Italians,<sup>32</sup> and developed as a vast network of Creole plantations to be worked by the disinherited of the earth, the rejected races among whom *cafoni* will never have trouble recognizing their own faces.

"The point of subjectification" in a given history, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "must display the characteristic traits of the subjective semiotic: the double turning away, betrayal, and existence under reprieve."<sup>33</sup> Subjectification, on this view, is a recursive state, continually reencountering the point of its initiation, and thus giving to its meditation on that question the huge historiographical force of a collective unrecoverable. Such a moment was, Deleuze and Guattari assert, the withdrawal of the face of God from Moses, which becomes the point for a line of flight that characterizes subsequent Jewish history. In the case of the *cafoni* this moment must be the eradication of the entire hieroglyphic monument of Italian history. This moment forecloses a vast social pyramid. It erases achievements before they have ever been tasted. It becomes the point of return for a line of questionable possession and discredited prestige.

Only a subject has choices. Statues of Liberty are perfectly safe icons to display before people who have no command of their own history and cannot read the traces of their own disqualifications. Thus the place of the *cafone* at the end of Silone's cosmology, like the place of *The Cafone's Bugle* at the beginning of literature, has a certain desperate importance. It offers to the history of Italian American writing the virtues of a clearly situated subject. This subject stands low along the horizon, close to the memory of its own extinction, well-equipped to look back with the clarifying power of a long, plain gaze.

1. Drafts of this essay were presented in Fall 1990 at the Romance Languages Conference, Purdue University; the American Italian Historical Association Conference, New Orleans; the Departments of Italian and of English at the State University of New York at Stony Brook; the Cultural Studies Program at the Graduate School of the City University of New York. I wish to thank participants at those meetings for helpful suggestions, particularly Felix Stefanile, Stanley Aronowitz, Anthony Tamburri, Fred Gardaphé, Peter Carravetta, and Rudolph Vecoli. I wish to thank the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of the City University of New York, which awarded me its Faculty Fellowship for the year 1990-1991, a grant that assisted the writing of this paper.

2. The effects of literacy rates upon the fortunes of two large migrant groups is a central theme in Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977). For comparative literacy figures, see 40-41.

3. Silone uses the word *cafone* as a paradox and a provocation. "Io so bene che il nome di *cafone*, nel linguaggio corrente del mio paese, sia della campagna che della città, è ora termine di offesa e dileggio; ma io l'adopero in questo libro nella certezza che quando nel mio paese il dolore non sarà più vergogna, esso diventerà nome di rispetto, e forse anche di onore." Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* (1933; rpt. Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1971): 22-23. "I know well that the word *cafone*, in current usage, town or country, is a term of offense and derision; but I employ it in this book in the certainty that when in my country sorrow will no longer be shameful, this will become a name of respect, perhaps even of honor." Translation by the author.

4. See Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (1958; rpt. New York: Norton, 1965): R.G. Peterson, "Critical Calculations: Measure and Symmetry in Literature," *PMLA*, 91, 3 (May 1976), 367-75; Richard H. Lansing, "The Structure of Meaning in Lampedusa's *Il gattopardo*," *PMLA*, 93, 3 (May 1978), 409-22; R. Viscusi, "'A Great Catholic Pattern': The Allegory of Beauty," in *Max Beerbohm, Or the Dandy Dante: Rereading with Mirrors* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986), 159-184.

5. For an account of the relationship between landholding patterns in Italy and migration to the United States, see Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco: The Immigrant Experience* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1982): 59-65. "This seems to have been the general pattern in all Italy," Cinel writes (60): "emigration and return migration were far more frequent where land was for sale than where it was not."

6. See Michel Serres, *Rome, le livre des fondations* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1983).

7. Tullio de Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* (Bari: Laterza, 1976) is a standard introduction to this problematic. See also Paolo Zolli, ed., *Letteratura e questione della lingua* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1979), for a conspectus of particular problems in Italian literary historiography. Hermann W. Haller, *The Hidden Italy: A Bilingual Edition of Italian Dialect Poetry* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1986), presents these same issues from the point of view of dialect literatures.

8. Francesco d'Assisi, "Il cantico di frate sole," in Gianfranco Contini, *Poeti del Duecento*.

9. Mario Puzo, "Choosing a Dream: Italians in Hell's Kitchen," in *The Godfather Papers & Other Confessions* (New York: Putnam's, 1972): 15.

10. Mario Puzo, "Writers, Talent, Money, and Class: An Irreverent Interview," in *The Godfather Papers*, p. 82. This piece first appeared in *Book World*, October 29, 1967, as a review of *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, Third Series, introd. Alfred Kazin (New York: Viking Press, 1967). It states as clearly as possible the class motive embodied in *The Godfather*.

11. Mario Puzo, "The Making of *The Godfather*," in *The Godfather Papers*, 38.

12. Helen Barolini, *Umbertina* (New York, Seaview Books, 1979), 139.

13. For a wide discussion of the implications of nothing for the theory of signs, see Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

14. Diane di Prima, *Dinners and Nightmares* (New York: Corinth Books, 1961): 20.

15. Di Prima works out the narrative implications of this system of ethics in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969; rpt. San Francisco: Last Gasp of San Francisco, 1988). For the notion of discourse as authorized communication, see R. Viscusi, "Breaking the Silence: Strategic Imperatives for Italian American Culture," in

VIA: *Voices in Italian Americana*, I, 1 (Spring 1990): 1-13.

16. Diane di Prima, "Rant," in Anthony Julian Tamburri, Paolo A. Giordano, and Fred L. Gardaphé, edd. *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 1991): 154.

17. Felix Stefanile, "Hometown," in *East River Nocturne* (New Rochelle, New York: Elizabeth Press, 1976): 29.

18. Felix Stefanile, "From a Journal . . .," in *East River Nocturne*: 63.

19. "From a Journal . . .," 66.

20. For a comprehensive survey of the possible forms domestic guilt can assume among migrants, see Leon Grinberg and Rebeca Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, trans. Nancy Festinger (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989).

21. For a discussion of the Renaissance from this perspective see Fernand Braudel, *Out of Italy: 1450-1650* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), trans. Sian Reynolds.

22. This merchant adventurer tells his story in *Memorie*, ed. Cesare Pagnini (Milano: B.U.R. 1960), a work recently reconsidered by Sheila Hodges in *Lorenzo Da Ponte: The Life and Times of Mozart's Librettist* (London: Granada, 1985).

23. Constructed 1865-67, during the first flush of triumph in Unified Italy.

24. Garibaldi M. La Polla, *The Grand Gennaro* (New York: Viking Press, 1935).

25. Carole Maso, *Ghost Dance* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986) and *The Art Lover* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990).

26. For accounts of Mangione's literary self-portraits, see Fred L. Gardaphé, "My House Is Not Your House: Jerre Mangione and Italian-American Autobiography," in James Robert Payne, ed., *Multicultural Autobiography: American Lives* (Knoxville: Tennessee UP, 1992): 139-77; William Boelhower, *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States (Four Versions of the Italian American Self)* (Verona: Esedue, 1982); James Craig Holte, "Benjamin Franklin and Italian-American Narratives," *MELUS* 5, No. 4 (1978): 99-102.

27. John Fante to H. L. Mencken, August 15, 1934, *Fante / Mencken: John Fante and H. L. Mencken, A Personal Correspondence, 1930-1952*, ed. Michael Moreau, consulting ed. Joyce Fante (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989): 86-87.

28. John Fante, *Full of Life* (1952; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1953).

29. Cited in Rotman, 23.

30. Pietro di Donato, *Christ in Concrete* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1939): 9-10.

31. See R. Viscusi, "De vulgari eloquentia: An Approach to the Language of Italian American Fiction," *Yale Italian Studies*, I, 3 (Winter 1981): 21-38, for a fuller discussion of the language of this work.

32. See R. Viscusi, "A Literature Considering Itself: The Allegory of Italian America," in *From the Margin*, 263-281.

33. Gille Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: UP Minnesota, 1987): 129.