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ALL THE WORDS THAT ARE NOT FIT TO PRINT. NOTES ON THE “ILLITERATURE” OF ITALIAN EMIGRATION

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It is a truism that we are defined by our culture (whatever, precisely, “our” might mean in this predicament) as much as a, or “our”, culture needs us to represent it. And language is a fundamental, genetic component of that deep relationship. Using, and one might even say creating, the Italian language for the first time in recorded history, the “poet” Dante (creationist metaphors and etymologies abound here) gave a highly personalized account and interpretation of this knot. In his mind (an erstwhile Italian mind) it was, after all, a family matter, ultimately having to do with love, or rather, with the *fiery* passion pulling a man and a woman together. Our physical existence is the effect of an union that is set up by spoken words, i.e. by language. Language figures pre-eminently as a cause of our bodily being: «This vernacular of mine was what brought my parents together, for they conversed in it, just as it is fire that prepares the iron for the smith who makes the knife; and so it is evident that it has contributed to my generation, and so was one cause of my being»².

I am struck by the similarity of this medieval approach – at the same time physical and philosophical (one might say, in other words, aptly Aristotelian) – to another poetical definition, couched toward the end of Salvatore Scibona’s intense and plurivocal *The End* (2008). An old Italian woman, who emigrated “for love” from the Roman countryside to Ohio in the 1890s, seals this epic with a stream of consciousness which reads like a letter to her beloved. Many things and thoughts pass through her mind, including the following: «Here is what we call a mother tongue. Think of the physical tongue of your mother. Think of your father’s kisses on that tongue and how the kisses precede you into the world./ My dear, I have never heard spoken since a word in my mother’s tongue. My darling, I forsook it for the promise of you»³.

Tongues, kisses, spoken words cut through a mighty knife belonging to the extra-linguistic dimension of mass-migration. A *tsunami* sweeping away people’s lives, transporting them elsewhere, metamorphosing their culture and inner being with the energy of a centrifugal force. Local histories, global economics, wars and persecutions, risks and dreams, poverty and opportunity, uprooting, distance, crushing toil, circadian

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² Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio / The Banquet*, trans. by Richard Lansing (New York: Garland, 1990: 31 [I XIII 4]). Here is the original: «Questo mio volgare fu congiungitore dell’ miei generanti, che con esso parlavano, si come ’l fuoco è disponitore del ferro al fabro che fa lo coltello: per che manifesto è lui essere concorso alla mia generazione, e così essere alcuna cagione del mio essere» (Dante Alighieri, *Convivio. 2. Testo*, edited by Franca Brambilla Agno [Firenze: Le Lettere, 1995: 56-57]).

³ Quotation from Salvatore Scibona, *The End* (New York: Riverhead, 2009: 308).

cycles of hope and despair – and language, “our” language, caught in the midst, clenched to as if it were a raft, a complex system of cyberlogic daily dismembered and benumbed, striving to somehow reconfigure itself. From the rather abstract plane of linguistic research, scholars ask themselves such endlessly stimulating questions as «How Languages Are Born – or Made», «How Languages Disappear»⁴. But real life and real spoken words, precede – at least from the point of view of personal histories – the cultural landscape rapidly refashioned by the Italian American communities over the other side of the ocean. Understandably, it is also very much a matter of power and politics; and yet, at a grass-root level, it is a matter of leaves of grass: a poetics of language demise which we could even see as “comical” in Dante’s terms, i.e. at the same time tragic and earthly common and alive, enacting a drama of death and rebirth. Arturo Giovannitti, the first great bilingual poet of the Italian American community, poignantly called *The Cage* (eloquent title) «a poem of rotting tradition and living men»⁵. He had composed it on a Sunday, in 1912, unjustly detained in Salem Jail. But his was, to all effects, a result, in some way a success. Printed matters, be they more or less utilitarian or artistic, already testify to an admirable degree of organization and of social recognition.

As a historian of the literature of Italian immigrants to the U.S. and elsewhere, I have read and come across many thousand pages of material published under the most different circumstances. Taken collectively, they represent a gigantic monument to Italian immigrant culture. Linguistically speaking, they entertain a dynamic relationship with the surrounding territory of the language spoken in a context of emigration. It is almost a cliché, among certain scholars, to consider immigrant cultures as imbued with the characteristics of orality; my position is somewhat more questioning. I do not necessarily see these two dimensions as communicating vessels; sometimes they operate as such, but in my view they refer to distinct domains of individual and social experience. Moreover, the actual and obvious weight of the oral dimension can by and large be inferred from written sources, so that if and when we discuss orality, it is as if its improvisational dynamism has been muffled and has already long gone. Nevertheless, its vitality shines through even whichever written documents we have available. These are fragile sources, which would be better conveyed by some form of sound recording and/or visual reproduction. Some of the shrewdest early observers of the Italian “colonies” worldwide (Amy A. Bernardy, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Renzo Nissim, etc.) concur in their keen attention to the fleeting traces of the pliable, unheard-of, innovative use of the venerable Italian language in new contexts of immigration. The language of Dante combusts with the different materials of the many distinct Italian dialects, and the languages of arrival – be that English, but also Spanish and Portuguese (in Latin America), French (in and all around Paris and the French Midi), and later German. Bernardy even fantasized, as early as 1911, about the day when future historians would have a full catalogue of colonial written documents at his or her disposal – a *corpus inscriptionum* (much like the one that scholars of ancient Rome religiously leaf through) made of street signs, posters, flyers, commercial advertisements, and the like. In years that are foreseeably ushering us into a predominantly digital reconfiguration of the

⁴ These are the titles of, respectively, chapters 10 and 11 of Tore Janson’s *Speak. A Short History of Languages* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵ See unnumbered colophon of Arturo Giovannitti’s *The Cage* (Riverside, Conn.: Hillacre, 1914).

public word, we might be better equipped to consider its – no matter how precious – relativity, vis-à-vis the lived multiplicity, the ever-shifting adaptability, the idiosyncratic expressiveness of the actual tongues of immigrants.

My research has led me close to some instances of such expressiveness. Almost always I have found that, invariably, they let me glimpse into a world of emotional, human forces which is at once raw and irreplaceable. Those are words actually transmitted through the medium of writing (usually in private correspondence), and yet which retain much of the spontaneous immediacy of their real accents. They were – are – more than witnesses of a rhetoric of popular letter-writing.

The study of emigration invites us, by definition, to cross borders. European languages are often viewed as coextensive with national states, and therefore vehicles of national identity. Migratory dynamism challenges such a view at its root. For instance, even before the proclamation of the Italian Kingdom in 1861, a consistent part of the Italian-speaking, rural population of neighbouring Switzerland looked for a better living in other parts of Europe and in North America. The West Coast of the U.S. became a major pole of attraction for these Alpine laborers, whose future looked grim due to limited agricultural opportunities, insufficient cattle, the restrictions of too closely-knit family networks, and the general hardship of a life spent in a forbidding mountainous environment.

Sometimes, even a simple alphabetical character can suffice. That's where *littera*-ture comes from, after all: letters and any written document, either mailed back to the motherland, or just plainly and carefully composed in longhand. Two examples. Giuseppe Leoni's simple and elegant big painted sign on the wall of his stone house in the small village of Verscio, less than 10 kilometers inland to the North of Lake Maggiore [ILL. 1], marked his proud homecoming. Giuseppe, a return immigrant, limited himself to writing down his full name in big capital letters, adding only his arrival

ILL. 1.



point, and the source of his acquired wealth. The painted sign on the entrance wall of his house is a strong proclamation of success, attached to its tangible result, and a self-evident declaration of an identity that is spatially and chronologically defined by his migratory experience. The phonetics highlights the Italianness of his American dream: despite the supposedly intense period spent in the remote West, and the equally committed effort at establishing the geography of his *nostos*, he adopts with the utmost clarity the grapheme *gn* commonly used in Italian for the palatal sound /ɲ/: «Califorgna», that is something in between the reproduction of the actual sound and a writing that could be labelled as hypercorrect. That «gn» sign is a sort of minimal cultural and linguistic slip: it visualizes in a way acceptable to an Italian-speaking person the foreign-ness of a not familiar name.

To be sure, not all and everything can be reduced to such an elementary level. In the 1922 *Memories* by a fellow countryman, Dante Righetti, one finds the transcription of a poem by his older brother Pompeo, also active in California. His *Canzone del mungivacche* (*The Milker's Song*), composed sometime around 1900, is an example of personal and creative popular poetry which probably never made it to the page and was thus confined to a small group of relatives and assorted acquaintances⁶. It is overflowing both in its illustrative and in its metaliterary and metalinguistic capacity. So much for the naïveté of popular culture.

Here it is, in a tentative translation.

The Milker's Song

Nowadays in this new century of ours,
What with so much industry, and progress
There's no job, and no profession,
Which cannot boast its song.
Even the tailors, the hairdressers,
Shoeshiners and waiters,
While they're busy working,
The glories of their art are singing.
And yet none I know, the noble
Milker's art ever sang!

When the cock's morning song
Across the valleys sends its echoes
Swearing and yawning do I
Get out of my poor pallet.
And while stumbling, in the dark,
I put my trousers on,
My worn boots, my hat,
Grinding my teeth, I chew the refrain:
«In this world, no job is worse
Than the milker's!»

La canzone del mungivacche

In questo nuovo secol, d'adesso
Con tanta industria, tanto progresso
Non c'è mestiere, nè professione
Che ancor non abbia la sua canzone.
Persino i sarti, i parrucchieri,
I lustrascarpe ed i camerieri
Mentr'occupati son nel lavoro
Cantan le glorie dell'arte loro.
Ma niun ch'io sappia, cantò sinor
La nobil arte del mungitor!

Quando echeggia per le convalli
Il mattutino canto de' galli
Fra una bestemmia ed un sbadiglio
Scendo dal povero mio giaciglio
E mentre al buio, tentoni
Mi vò infilando i pantaloni
Gli stivalacci ed il cappello
E fra i denti, mastico il ritornello:
«A questo mondo, mestier peggior,
Non v'è di quello del mungitor!»

⁶ Source: Giorgio Cheda (ed.), *L'emigrazione ticinese in California. Volume secondo. Epistolario II* (Locarno: Dadò, 1981: 664-665).

I get onto my horse, the sky freezing
My ears, nose, hands and face.
The North wind blows, the night's dark,
But hey! these are only trifles.
Into the woods, down by the hills
I push ahead, behind the cows.
Sometimes, as I'm passing under a branch,
New Iscariot, I get caught:
«A sadder life – then I shout –
Than a milker's there just ain't!»

When the one-legged stool I buckle,
It's like being a martyr for the Holy Faith;
Whether week-, or holidays,
Be there wind, rain or storm,
Let the thunder roar, and lightnings dart –
Never ever is there a truce for him who
[pulls the teats!
Like someone sentenced to jail,
Always he's on call, day and night.
In this world, no job is worse
Than the milker's!

Can't comfort me, a sip
Of old *grappa*, of a good wine –
A bit of water with tea, or coffee,
I'm ready to drink, when it's there.
I am forced into repentance
Into abstinence, without sin!
O well, cry I, in a few years' time
The bum's art will practice I.
But then, resigned, happy and serene
My muscly arms I wave.
And with the gurgling of the white humor
My milker's song is in tune.

But all things considered, this craft of mine
Is not indeed to trash away,
'Cause some cents shower down
In this crumpled purse of mine.
And when on my calloused worker's hands
Some yellow gloves I put,
With a nest-egg full of glitter
I sport the air of a boss
Even bankers and grand lords
To the milker raise their hats.

Monto a cavallo, il ciel m'agghiaccia
Orecchi, naso, mani e faccia.
Tira aquilone, la notte è oscura,
Eh! sono inezie.
Dentro a boscaglie, giù per le chine,
Mi spingo in traccia delle bovine.
Talvolta ad un ramo passando sotto
Resto impigliato, nuovo Iscariotto;
«Vita più triste, io grido allor
Non vè [sic] di quella del mungitor!»

Quando s'affibbia il monopede
È come un martire di Santa Fede;
Giorni feriali o di di festa,
Vi sia vento, pioggia, tempesta
Rimbombi il tuono guizzin saette
Mai, non c'è tregua pel tiratette!
Qual condannato alla galera
È sempre in ballo, da mane a sera.
A questo mondo, mestier peggior
Non v'è di quello del mungitor!

Non mi conforta, un sol bicchierino,
Di grappa vecchia nè di buon vino,
Acqua di thè o di caffè
Son pronto di berne, quando ce n'è.
Sono costretto coll'astinenza
Senza peccato, far penitenza!
Ma pazienza, esclamo, fra qualche annaccio
Farò il mestier del Michelaccio,
Ma poi, rassegnato, lieto e sereno
Le nerborute braccia dimeno.
E col gorgoglio del bianco humor
Accordo il canto del mungitor.

Ma infin dei conti, quest'arte mia
Non è poi proprio da buttar via,
Poiché fà piovere qualche quattrino,
Nell'aggrinzato mio borsellino.
E quando copro con guanti gialli
Le mie manacce, piene di calli,
Con un gruzzolo di quel lucente
Assumo l'aria d'un prominente
Sino i banchieri ed i gran'signor
Fan da cappello al mungitor.

Even from the translation we can – I hope – recognize the solid structure of six stanzas made of ten lines each. The fifth stanza has an additional couplet. Each odd verse, in fact, rhymes with the following one, with the exception of lines 3-4 of the third

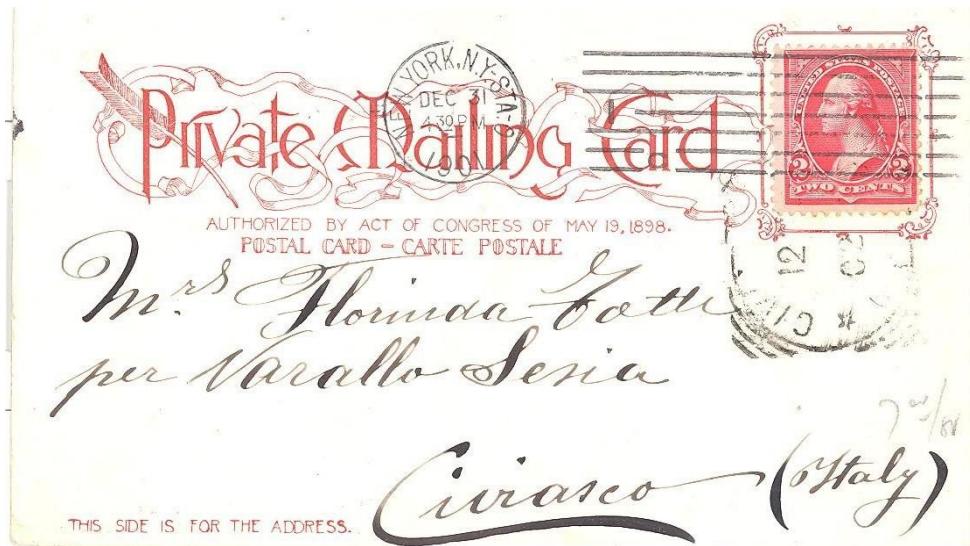
stanza. The rhymes get lost in the English version, as does the irregular succession of meters made of mostly 9, 10 or – classically, to an Italian ear – 11 syllables. Each final couplet in each stanza has a strong rhyme, stressed on the last syllable; in fact, stanzas 2-4 end with a refrain, and all stanzas, in the original, close on the thematic word – *milker* (*mungitor*).

Righetti deliberately mixes, sometimes juxtaposes, poetical, literary images and words, and elements that are far more realistic: *sbadiglio* (*yawn*) rhymes with *giaciglio* (*pallet*). But this happens at every level: with the use of phonetical details (*de' = of*), poetical forms (*niun; vò = none; I go* [instead of more common “nessun”, “vado”]), and the omnipresent, lyrical use of syntactical inversion. The hard plight of the milker’s life can be elegantly expressed through periphrases such as *bianco umor* (*white humor*, i.e. milk), or easy ellipses (*di quel lucente = full of glitter* – “money” implied). Certain passages (stanza 2 above all) remind of famous episodes of Italian poetry (Parini, Foscolo) – and one could perhaps even point out a direct quotation of Leopardi’s *dì di festa* (*holidays*, “festive days”); they coexist with clear traces of a Catholic culture and education (*New Iscariot, a martyr for the Holy Faith*), but also of popular folklore (*il mestier del Michelaccio* = *The bum’s art*). Overall, it is a great and cleverly crafted composition of self-assertion, dedicated to an unjustly vilified manual job. It draws a parable of hard labor and well-deserved wealth, adopting the liberating stance of a first-person narrative. Thus, the literary veneer does not risk being misunderstood as the awkward residue of the old bucolic genre. This is clearly neither Virgil, nor Robinson Jeffers. It’s a worker’s song, grittily harmonious – in such a way that might not have been possible on the steep Alpine pastures.

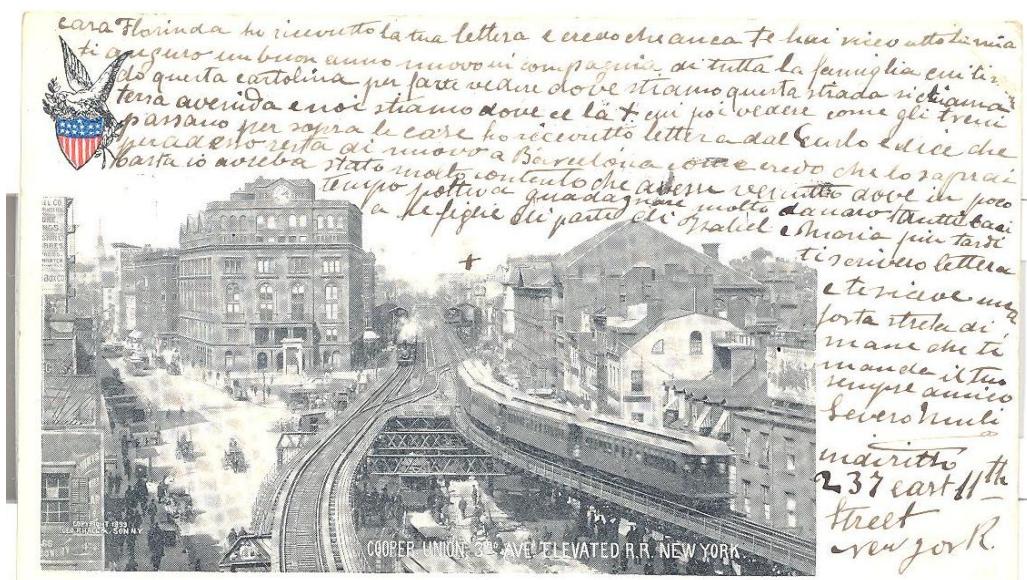
It is also, quite clearly, a superb exception. Nevertheless, even when used peremptorily, private correspondence across the Atlantic almost always ignites a drama of sorts, signalling a gesture of opening toward a longed-for dialogue that might, or might not, follow. The postal context, so to speak, often reveals further meanings; the recto is as important as the verso; the images on the postcards have as much significance as the written parts. When possible, the grammar of the salutation creates a montage of icon plus verbal message. Their interplay adds another layer of meaning to the idiosyncrasies of this epistolary Italian. Signs of tenderness, self-vindication, and mischief can also be extracted by a later third party (for instance, a contemporary reader) taking into consideration the distance between the sender and the addressee, and the imbalance between their different levels of knowledge.

Severo ***, a resident of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, mails a few lines to his friend Florinda Zatti in Civiasco, a village of North West Piedmont, on New Year’s Eve, 1901. The verso of the mailing card bears a touching photo of Third Avenue at Cooper Square, with Cooper Union to the left and the Elevated Railway in full motion, speeding North and South [ILL. 2A and ILL. 2B]. Underneath it, commerce and human traffic. Severo has marked a cross on the upper right of the Avenue, next to where he lives on East 11th Street. He refers to the «terza avenida», betraying a familiarity with Spanish: after all, a «Carlo» who is close to both correspondents has decided to «restare di nuovo a Barcelona» (= *stay again in Barcelona*), despite the fact that «io avreba stato molto contento che avesse venutto dove in poco tempo potteva guadagnare molto danaro» (= approx. *I wood had had very happy that he had cum where in a short time he cood earn much money*).

ILL. 2A



ILL. 2B



The orthography presents quite a few misspellings; there are also some mistakes (like in «avreba» [i.e. “avrebbe”] *stato*, instead of “*sarei stato*”), due to his recourse to the tricky conditional; some forms reproduce “correctly” the dialectal pronunciation and grammar (*anca te* = “anche tu”, i.e. *you too*; *poi* = “puoi”, i.e. *you can*); above all, it is fascinating to observe that there is not a single punctuation mark (but proper names are duly signalled with capital letters, except for the above mentioned «terza avenida»), as if the brief message meant mostly in its continuous entirety, almost like the prolonging in ink of a fast and fact-laden street conversation, and thus were not concerned with

internal prose rhythms and logical hierarchies⁷. Once it starts with the formulaic salute address «Cara Florinda», it proceeds in an uninterrupted flow all the way to Severo's signature and address, followed by the only, minuscule but visible period.

Is Severo, «il tuo sempre amico» (*your always friend*), Florinda's fiancé? It is tempting to think he might have been, although if he was, some sign of a stronger commitment would have probably leaked out. As it is, we know that he is ensconced downtown, bewildered by modern urban action, and that he is certainly very aware of the economic opportunities around him. He sends wishes on behalf of a couple of fellow countrymen, N*** and Maria; he keeps in touch and promises a letter in the future. He addresses his female friend with the intimate “you” form. He most probably left (after a stint in Barcelona?) for economic reasons, leaving his relationship with Florinda at an uncertain standstill. She needs to be reassured, but he can't (or doesn't feel he can) seriously commit himself. His card has an energetic pull, but manages to indulge in a typically masculine airiness. In the meantime, he is an atom in the very middle of American capitalism, at the beginning of the twentieth century. His shout back to his familiar hilltown⁸ must have been read with a mixture of puzzlement and pride, of hope and concern. What was this man actually saying? What was going on in his mind? Are we (and Florinda with us) witnessing the slow formation of a linguistic fault-line?

The spoken word is subject to interpretation just like any other. Examples like the above are not that dissimilar from the spirit of what scholars of Italian American history consider the master narrative of the Italian immigration to the U.S., the autobiographical account of Rosa Cassettari⁹, where the contagious alertness of this Milanese peasant, turned Chicagoan informer to the benefit of the local school of sociology, in many instances let us glimpse into a performative enactment of her bilingual identity. Rosa's words, no matter how filtered by the professorial editing of her interlocutor Marie Hall Ets, usually resort to Italian when at their most spontaneous or emotional. Whenever we hear her speaking the native language, albeit in a flash, we sense that we are entering a particularly charged territory of her memory. And above all, it is the interplay, the negotiation between the two codes, that really counts: it is the movement back and forth. There is not *one* language on one side, and *another* language on the other side; rather, there is a conscience which operates linguistically on a moving ground.

Back to California for a pair of messages, at the same time stripped to the bone and containing a fair degree of elusive, even deceiving imagination [ILL. 3A and 3B; ILL. 4A and ILL. 4B]. I found them in a flea market on the outskirts of Genoa, which, as it is well known, was historically, with Naples, the main port of departure for Italian immigrants. And «the train continued up, up, toward the north [...] until I was in Genoa» – remembers the woman at the end of Scibona's novel, shortly after elaborating on her mother tongue¹⁰. The postcards were part of a batch of letters, mostly from the 1920s and 1930s, addressed to various centres of Eastern Liguria. As a matter of fact, Ligurian communities are well documented in, say, Buenos Aires (La Boca), and San Francisco.

⁷ Lack of, and difficulty at dealing with, punctuation are not at all uncommon in the Italian popular correspondence of the time.

⁸ Not far from the birthplaces of the parents of such distinct Italian American personalities as novelist Mari Tomasi, or politician and military officer Charles Poletti.

⁹ Marie H. Ets, *Rosa. The Life of an Italian Immigrant* (Madison, Wisc.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999² [1970]).

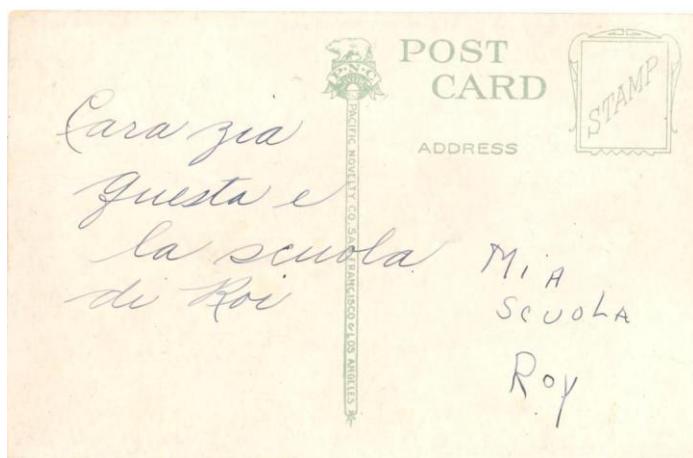
¹⁰ Salvatore Scibona, *The End* (New York: Riverhead, 2009: 309).

These two colored postcards – probably sent with other goods, being without any address whatsoever – claim to have been mailed from California. But given the overall circumstances of the communication, I would not swear by it. I think, though, that it is possible to accept it as a good working hypothesis.

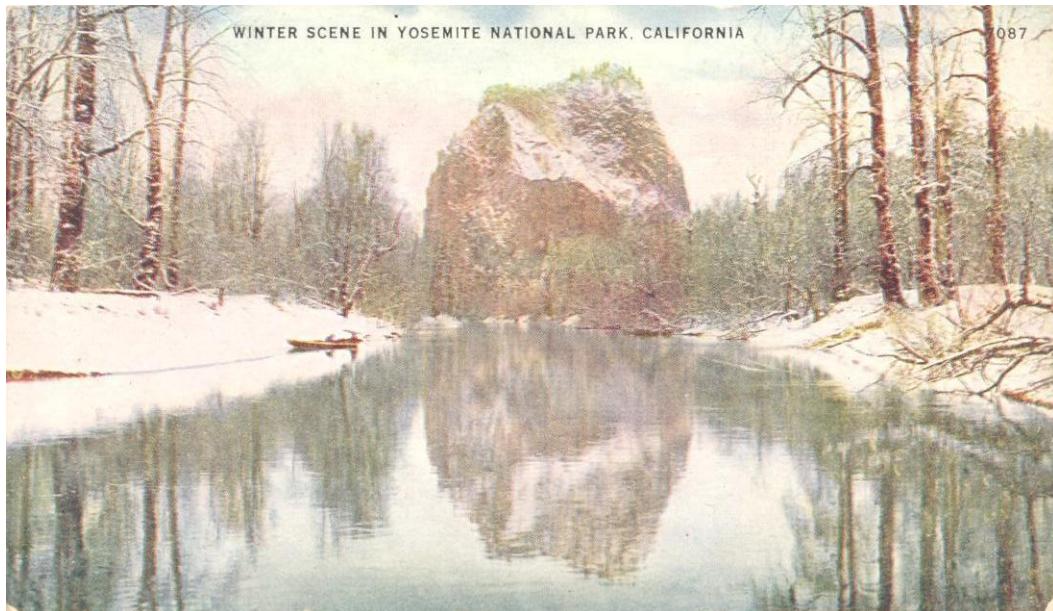
ILL. 3A



ILL. 3B



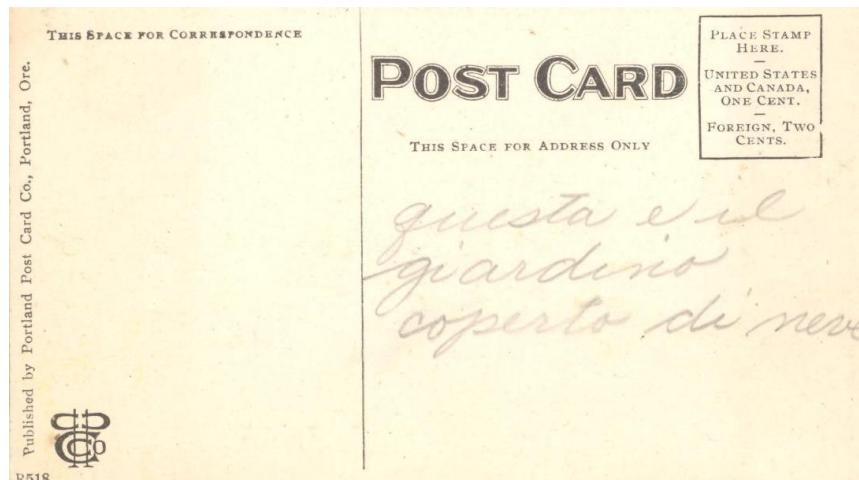
ILL. 4A



Someone is writing to an aunt back in Italy [ILL. 3A and 3B]. That someone has nice handwriting – clear, slightly flowery, learnt and practiced in years of school. I am inclined to think that there is a feminine touch to it. It's the simple elegance. Her son is just learning to read and write at the Lincoln Grammar School, in Madera, near Fresno. And he is so good that he can even try his hand at some Italian: he grabs his pen, and movingly writes in block capitals the simplest, caption-like, piece of news: «MIA SCUOLA», plus his name «ROY». The elementary use of syntax seems to indicate that he is mentally translating from his native English, or striving to write under dictation, or both, since he omits the definite article, obligatory in Italian. His name is not an Italian name. Where does it come from? Maybe he is the son of a marriage between an (Italian) immigrant (woman) and an American (man). Maybe the son of two immigrants of different origins, or of two Italian immigrants opting for an Americanization. In any case, an American name was chosen. And the mother, who has such clean handwriting style, Italianizes it, with a minimal but blatant misspelling: «ROI». Not only: interestingly enough, in neither card she bothers marking the accent on the third person singular of the verb *to be*. Her *is* is not once, but twice the simple vowel: «e» instead of “è”. It is quite a bit disconcerting, considering the general flair of basic but good education, and the respective positions in this small family drama.

And there is even more if we turn to the second card [ILL. 4A and 4B]. Here we find another quick description of the immigrant's daily condition. She says that they have a garden, and that it is covered with snow. But it really is a scam: the Ligurian auntie can probably be fooled quite easily. The deictic «questa» is deliberately misleading, since it purports to associate the supposed garden and a pristine scenery from Yosemite National Park; not only, but here again is an elementary blunder, that is the quite cacophonous lack of gender agreement between adjective and noun: «questa [...] giardino coperto». Such grammatical errors add up. They're *so* basic, and seem so much

ILL. 4B



in contrast with the surrounding nicety that one is tempted to guess that it is the mother who is actually American (hence her flawed Italian), and that the Italian aunt is really related to her Italian immigrant husband. Except that it would still be striking that a mother misspelt the name of her child, and that an American showed lack of familiarity with the letter *y*. How much can a mother be unfamiliar with the spelling of her son's first name? It is not easy to come up with satisfactory answers. Wherever we turn, we find ourselves captured inside this small drama of motherly love and deceit, of tenderness and pretentiousness, made bigger by the participation of Roy, and made plausible by the aunt's distance. Her expected ingenuity is not that different from our cluelessness.

We have arrived at a sort of full circle. That "mother" tongue has – like Dante suggested – indeed begotten a new life, in a new environment. Roy is proud of his American *y* and of his American school; we are induced to think that he speaks the (new) local language, and that he makes recourse to Italian mainly within the family circle. His parents have kissed their tongues, moved, made love, and they, too, are moving on. But their (her) original language is not quite what it used to be. Nor is their (her) life, to be sure. There probably is a school for the child, but as for the garden we can't be really sure. It is true that, turning again to Dante, angels do not really need a language in the eternal garden that is Paradise. But the plight of the immigrants is not quite so rosy and ethereal. Their language – be it printed, spoken, or half-way between the two – is in a constant state of flux. It is not *per se* good or bad, right or wrong. When we offhandedly point out its "errors", we refer to a set of norms that were barely shared within the newly-formed communities. Our reasoning as monological observers is as epistemologically (if not more) simplistic as that of the immigrants in transition. Like all languages, their language needs to be listened to. All the more because it has always something to say. And that is far more interesting and important than any abstract obedience to the rules. Usually neither anarchic nor highfalutin, the language of immigrants by and large stems from a dramatic communicative and cultural condition, and requires the widest possible choice of testimonies as well as an additional effort of interpretation.