

Introduction

I am often asked by collectors and others about the origins of my collecting works written in Italian, published in this country (or if published abroad, reflecting experiences here). After all, there has not traditionally been, even since the expansion of the possibilities of book collecting that began between the two World Wars,¹ a well-recognized field of collecting Italian American books.

The simple answer is that this collecting activity unites two core passions in my life: my deep interest in the history and role of books in the human experience, and the perplexity that I share with every Italian American intellectual about the peculiar place that Italians have had, and continue to have, in American culture – most simply put, deeply admired but more deeply reviled.

One answer to this perplexity is to understand the book history of Italians better, especially since Italian Americans are often beset with a deep amnesia about their origins, and the Italian American experience has more often begun with the understandable desire to learn and live in the language of their country of adoption, not their country of origin. As the significance of language in identity formation is all too obvious,² a fresh examination of an extensive Italian-language publishing history, in newspapers and in books, seems like an excellent starting point to understanding the place of Italians in American history. It is how the identity of those living in an almost forbidden language – the prevailing pedagogic and political theory had public school teachers in the first half of the 20th century instruct Italian children like my mother in the 1920s to “tell your parents to stop speaking Italian at home, so you’ll learn English more quickly” – plays out in any particular instance that makes the story meaningful. (The experience of Italian immigrants to Argentina was an utterly different one from that of immigrants to the United States, for example.) The United States, a land of immigrants, has a tortured history of how it received any particular immigrant group. In the case of

the Italians, the reception accorded to this group was and remains deeply ambivalent.

To get to the heart of it: my examination of this publishing history led to the conclusion that Italian-language American book publishing before World War II created and reflected a vibrant literary and political culture among a broad spectrum of Italians living and working in the United States for lengthy periods and, in many cases, as permanent immigrants. This conclusion need not clash with statistics showing high rates (as high as 53%) of illiteracy among Italian immigrants. By 1910, in a population in the U.S. of perhaps five million Italian immigrants, there remained perhaps 2.35 million immigrants literate in Italian, for whom reading was an important activity outside of work and family, as the flourishing of a thousand or more Italian-language newspapers in the first half of the 20th century suggests. In addition, of those illiterate upon entry to the U.S., Italians, more than any immigrant group other than Jews, used public libraries extensively to learn to read and write in Italian (as they had not in Italy), as well as to learn to read and write in English.³

The first reason for my conclusion is that many of the immigrant book authors reflected in this exhibition were already accomplished writers, usually journalists by trade, most of them educated and trained in Italy. In addition to the literary and political culture that they created or found themselves involved in, the overall quality of their written work was not an amateurish literature (more on that later) that might not be worth our time and attention. If it were, it would perhaps be less of literary interest, than of historical or anthropological interest to us now.

Secondly, I hope the catalogue that follows the essays will make clear that there was a broad cross-pollination of these sophisticated imaginative writers of fiction, poetry and politics between and among publishing houses, in fact, so great as to suggest the existence of a real, mostly urban literary culture that reached across the nation, among obvious centers like New York, Chicago and San Francisco, but also in seemingly unlikely locales for literary activity, such as Scranton. Cordiferro's *Ode alla Calabria* (cat. 72), in addition to the poem itself, here published in Argentina (which was reprinted from a January 1931 issue of his family's brilliant literary review, *La Follia di New York*) contains copies of appreciations of the poem in the

Italian-language immigrant press, ranging from *La Sentinella* of Bridgeport, Connecticut, to *Colombo*, a weekly journal in Houston, Texas, to *La Tribuna del New Jersey*, in Jersey City, to a writer from Westerly, Rhode Island, to a reader of *La Follia*, to *La Follia*'s own reviewer. These notices provide evidence of a widespread common literary culture among Italian immigrants in the United States. Moreover, the notice or review published in a Calabrian newspaper shows that interest in Cordiferro reached back to the mother country.

One must conclude that these were not solitary scribblers whose works were dutifully published by their friends, having no real impact. Average people, as well as the *litterati*, read these works. Besides the readers of poetry who thrilled to the latest work of Cordiferro, Italians waited patiently for the latest episode of, say, a novel by Bernardino Ciambelli to appear as an "appendix" in one or another newspaper, or in issues of *La Follia*, much like the more familiar phenomenon of English and American middle class readers awaiting the latest episode of a Dickens novel to be released in parts. Writers of Ciambelli's stature could then, and did, sell the rights to a publisher to release the serialized work in a single volume (cat. 135b).

To better understand how widespread not merely the praise but the very genuine interest was in works like Cordiferro's poem, to take that example again, one need only look at the vivid and dramatic literary life of Riccardo Cordiferro himself, first in Italy and then in the United States and elsewhere, chronicled by Francesco Durante in his essay in this book. Cordiferro was published by Nicoletti Brothers, the Cocce Press, and the Italian Book Company, as well as his and his family's own *La Follia di New York*. Others, like the dramatist and novelist Paolo Pallavicini, published in both San Francisco and New York, and across the Atlantic in Italy (many of the writers in this exhibition had at least some of their works published in Italy as well as in the United States).

Next, while there were some (like Luigi Galleani) who only wrote political tracts, many of the writers wrote richly dramatic and imaginative, as well as political, works, whether for didactic reasons or as a release from their political activities: besides Cordiferro and Pallavicini, Arturo Giovannitti stands out as a dramatic writer of depth and accomplished poet, as well as political writer, and Gigi Damiani, a political philosopher, was a forceful

Italian playwright (cat. 84-87), albeit of political dramas published in the United States, though there is no evidence that he even visited this country. Even a straight political figure like Italy's Errico Malatesta used in an American publication the traditional Italian literary technique of having an average worker ask questions of another while at a café together, building into a crescendo of an understanding eventually of the evils of capitalism and the plight of the worker (cat. 81).

Nor did serious political writing mean that these authors were not engaged in the real world. Jean-Paul Sartre, had he known them, would have applauded the quality of *engagement politique*, the ability of these writers to break away from their desks to lead factory workers in strikes, as well as to lead an even broader range of anti-fascists in demonstrations against Mussolini, and they did so not as one-offs, to enhance their literary credentials, but rather as an integral part of who they were, as their political activities endured in a concerted, consistent way over time. These writers include, besides Giovannitti, Ezio Taddei and Efrem Bartoletti, among others. They worked as miners and organizers of miners in Italy, in Pennsylvania and the Mesabi range of Minnesota, as well as leaders during particularly trying events, like the 1912 Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, led by Giovannitti and Tresca (cat. 112, 115, 148). Some, like Carlo Tresca, went on regular *giri di propaganda*, i.e., propaganda tours, stirring up workers on the West Coast (where Tresca was sometimes barred by company officials who feared his ability to stir up otherwise complacent workers) as well as the East Coast, not just in cities like New York, but in regional locales like Utica and Buffalo (see cat. 117, 118).

Fourthly, the level of competence of the publishers who could nurture and encourage high-quality writing was itself fairly high, even if the books they produced were rarely striking examples of the book arts. Native Italian speakers, of course working in their own language, were employed by book publishers who were already experienced and relatively sophisticated either in business (or soon became so) (e.g., Tocci, De Martino) or as journeymen in the book arts (e.g., Attilio Coccè and Alberto Nicoletti, trained as typographers and linotypists in Italy), even if few of the works in this exhibition are models of contemporary trends in book design or printing, Taddei's works being the exception. At least a few – especially Tocci,

De Martino, Ettore Nicoletti and Adamo and Claudio Coccè – were literary editors (as well as businessmen) who had some idea of nurturing and spreading literary talent from both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, *there were bookstores*, Italian bookstores, lots of them, not only in the major cities, that served as the locus for not only the books themselves, but for the people who bought and read them. Some, like the Italian Book Company or Rossi's, stocked works of all kinds, and sheet music as well (cat. 134, 142c); others were so-called "red bookstores" (cat. 56) or the more high-minded sounding Libreria Sociologica in Paterson (cat. 81), which stocked radical materials well represented in this exhibition. Nor were these isolated examples: one grammar writer, Angelo De Gaudenzi (cat. 9), also maintained a business as "editore e librai" (publishers and booksellers), which offered in an advertisement in the 1905 *Italian American Directory* (cat. 49) "at your request to send a 'prospectus' for the establishment of a bookstore to be supplied with books *at reasonable prices*." Whatever their political perspective, the existence of bookstores – and the commercial encouragement of more bookstores to meet an evident demand – reflect a communal interest in books and a developing book culture.

The essays that follow this introduction suggest the richness of this enterprise. The first two are by Italian scholars, classically trained in Italian literature before they encountered American history, and who can thus look at the Italian literary output in the U.S. with a detachment and objectivity few of us here have. Martino Marazzi's *And the Word Was Made Ink-carnate: From Oral to Written to Published Literature in Italian America* is an insightful analysis of how Italians in America moved from spoken to written, and thence to published language in an amazingly short historical period, the move that parallels Robert Viscusi's brilliant apothegm about the wrenching experience of Italians coming to America: "A whole nation walked out of the middle ages, slept in the ocean, and awakened in New York in the twentieth century."⁴ Marazzi shows how that transition elucidates the central linguistic trauma, the "uprooting" from their language parallel to the uprooting from the mother country.

Francesco Durante, the godfather of the study of Italian literature in the United States, creates a vivid portrait of one of the most important of these writers, Riccardo Cordiferro, a writer whom Durante considers an "arche-

typal” Italian American, in that he best personifies “those characteristics that were considered in his contemporary America to be typically Italian: incurable sentimentality; exaggerated populist passion in politics; grandiose and ornate (if not downright histrionic and borrowed from the grand opera stage) in word and gesture; and an unrepentant seducer’s spirit combined with a paradoxical, quasi-religious worship of the domestic virtues.”⁵

Robert Viscusi, whose attunement to issues of language and identity is that of one classically trained in Latin and Greek, as well as English and American literature, provides a series of poignant reflections as well as scholarly observations. The work he examines is one of the more lavishly produced books, an elephant folio, half of which is composed of essays reflecting the progress of Italians in America, and the other half of which is a directory of prominent Italian American businessmen of the time, *Gli italiani negli Stati Uniti d’America* [Italians in the United States of America] (New York: Italian American Directory Co., 1906) (cat. 50). He sees that work in the historical context of the Milan Exposition of 1906, whose planners had called, a year before the Exposition, for production of this work. Viscusi concludes that the Milanese regarded Italians in America then as perhaps not constituting much more than a revenue-producing colony of Italy, a colony whose prominent members are on display permanently, well captured in this book, almost as if in a zoo (though he does not quite say that), alongside specimens from Italy’s failed colonial forays into Africa.

These essays, as well as this exhibition, then, were conceived in praise of these, a different kind of Italian American “pioneer.” The shame of it has been that so few of the works exhibited and discussed here have been translated into English and made available to an English-language readership, Italian American or otherwise. With the anticipated publication in 2013 of the translation and publication by the Fordham University Press of Durante’s monumental *Italoamericana* (volume 2), however, excerpts from about 65 of these writers will see their first translations into English and begin to fill this significant gap in American (as well as Italian American) studies. My only hope is that this exhibition is also an important step in the same direction.

NOTES

1. See Jean Peters, *Book Collecting: A Modern Guide* (New York: R.R. Bowker Co. 1977); Nicholas Basbanes, *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995).
2. See, e.g., Nancy C. Carnevale, *A New Language, a New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
3. See Robert E. Park, *Immigrant Press and its Control*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1922); Alexandra DeLuise, "The Italian Immigrant Reads: Evidence of Reading for Learning and Reading for Pleasure, 1890-1920s." *Italian Americana* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2012): pp. 33-43.
4. Robert Viscusi, *Astoria* (Guernica: 1995), p. 22.
5. Francesco Durante, "Riccardo Cordiferro: An Italian American Archetype," in *Strangers in a Strange Land*, p. 18.