

Peter Carravetta
CUNY/Graduate Center & Queens College

Reflections on Italian Literary History and Italian Studies in North America

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Preliminary Considerations

When we teach, we draw our materials from a body of published works that generally make up a very amorphous entity called the Canon. But what is a Canon? According to scholars, it is constituted by a selection of titles which confer authority to an idea or a value. Subsequently, this idea (which historically can take the form of an icon, a rule, a practice or myth) becomes the norm or the *metron* against which to measure all or most of the creative products of a society. The canon thus determines what is alive and worthy of circulation and conservation for the collective memory, and conversely what is deemed acceptable to be left by the wayside, or ignored, or simply left for dead, in a given moment in a specific culture. The history of the constitution of the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that in antiquity there was also fierce competition among religious canons, and it took centuries for a specific number of Books to congeal into a stable Text, the **Septuagint**. The word and the related concept are in fact of theological derivation, specifically Biblical. The Hebrew Canon is what the Torah determines as worthy of an interpretation, which turns authoritative enough to become part of the *tradition of the sense of the text* (or word) ideally written/spoken by God himself. Applied to secular writings, to canonize a book or author of a particular country means accepting that it will exercise a *censorship function* with respect to other texts around it, making them immediately “minor” or “marginal.” A Canon cannot exist by itself, it comes into being the very moment it claims authority or legitimation against a host of other possible linkings deemed (for a time at least) irrelevant. The choices made with reference to a(n unquestioned) Canon are therefore not only subtly theological or philosophical, they are unquestionably political, embodying an array of symbolic representation, proselytizing and power-positioning in a given society.¹ Canons can be closed or open. Moses’ text is closed because his prophecy, his Law is not contested, and does not permit that other texts be placed by its side to modify it in any way. Yet the Book of Laws is an open canon (Midrash) insofar as its objective is to determine which other texts or interpretations can be added in order to change slowly over time, and permit subsequent generations of exegetes to reframe or readapt the original meanings. This requires that, socially, a certain constituency be permitted to flourish – the exegetes, the critics originally of a sect, or “nation” – so as to continue the sifting and positing of Meanings that are worthy of what

¹ As Jacques Derrida among others observed: “Ogni istituzione...ogni rapporto con l’istituzione, dunque, richiede e, comunque implica *a priori* un prender partito in questo campo: tenuto conto, tenuto effettivamente conto del campo effettivo, una presa di posizione e un partito preso Non c’è un posto neutro o naturale nell’insegnamento.”

Foucault would call the Archive, and what instead should be dragged to Thrash and made to vanish. Often an ancient text was not part of the Tradition, but found its dignity generations later, as is the case with *Ecclesiastes*, which though appearing to question the ordinary law, it nevertheless becomes a continuator of a given belief and is articulated in the symbolic-semantic range of its predecessor. As a secular example, consider the “fortune” of Dante in amorphous arena of the Italian and European literary tradition, or the inclusion of William Blake in the English Studies curricula on Romanticism only beginning at the turn of the past century, a belated “rediscovery.” In *italianistica*, the venerable historiographic concept of *Maggiori e Minori* represents a two-tiered Canon, a “Major Authors” version (much like the homonymous Norton Anthology of English Literature) and a “Minor Authors” one. But a new interpretive model, one less ideologized *a priori* and more concerned with establishing *relations* and newer combinations, would reveal not only that the reason some authors make it to the Pantheon is tied to some concrete political interest, but also that the very criteria on which these choices are based are purely abstract ones. Like the concepts of ineffable, *letterarietà*, and the most misunderstood of all, “aesthetic value.” A complex locus still very much with us where Baudelaire, Croce, Jakobson and most recently, Harold Bloom, can coexist amiably. Moreover, “minor authors” ought not to be confused with Minor Literature in the sense developed by Deleuze and Guattari, as this grouping (I desist from calling it a “category.”) is marked by an irreducible difference: they are linguistically de-territorialized, raising complex questions about the relationship between language, culture and territory. But because of this, “minor” literature has come to symbolize an ideal location for a diffracting of sense and a political resistance to forces of homogenization and assimilation. As I suggest below in the Programme, Italian minor literature is what is most exciting on the scene today.

My discussion on canon is motivated by the pressing fact that, though Canon is indeed a useful construct to import into Italian Studies (supplanting the *Maggiori e Minori* model), it ought to be re-considered, and contested when opportune, not solely on metaphysical and ideological grounds, but also in view of its pedagogical use, its capacity still to furnish us with a ready-made template of names and partial texts to bring to class, in short, in terms of whether it can survive at all as a guiding norm in the practice of our activity. It is reassuring that some sort of collectivity is implied.² On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, the university as a whole cannot handle the exponential creation and outpour and transactions of information, messages, cultural productions in which we swim daily. Having a more contemporary and malleable notion of what the Canon of Italian Literature is, for example, would make it somewhat easier to decide whether “la fiction dei cannibali,” il Teatro di Ravenna or the performances of Almamegretta are worthy of analysis in a classroom, and what other perhaps more traditional text will not make it (at least in that class, for that semester, etc.). I recall a few years ago a *rinascimentalista*, reflecting upon an exchange on the postmodern emphasis on “popular culture” – which in Italy must vie with the notion of “*cultura di massa*,” insofar as

2. See Fox-Genovese, cited in Krupak: “...however narrow and exclusive the canon we have inherited, the existence of some canon offers our best guarantee of some common culture.” Elsewhere she calls the canon the “collective autobiography” or “cultural identity.”

“popular” evokes *populista*, -- and critical views coming from other sectors of the university, remarked in disbelief: “but then, we may actually have to think whether to do Ariosto at all???” Yes, indeed, without taking anything away from Ariosto. Maybe Ariosto interpretations through the centuries, and especially theatrical and filmic versions of the past twenty-five years, are more interesting, cogent, relevant, than **Il Furioso** *nel suo tempo*, though I am not by any means discrediting this crucial dimension to knowing a text. It is more a question of *emphasis*, or of avoiding doing an author **exclusively nel suo tempo**, as many medievalists and rinascimentalisti actually end up doing.³ The Canon will change because it is transacted among present-day social agents in an ever-changing plenum that cannot be (any longer, *pace* the “Agostiniani”) conveniently identified with the passage of time as the ultimate arbiter. Time does not go anywhere on its own. It is human agency within fluid spatiotemporal frames that mark the experience and the volition to better one’s lot while seeking to establish a meaningful memory that determines what, despite or even “through” time, survives a decade or a century or a millennium. For nearly a century Italian intellectuals (in the Gramscian sense) have decreed that **Piccolo mondo antico** was required reading, much like **Robinson Crusoe** had been considered cultural patrimony of the educated British. But finally their insidious bourgeois-imperialist ideology was unmasked. So, to say that the traditional canon, beyond the individual variations introduced by its compilers, needs revision, especially when its choices impact on the near totality of a population within a nation-state, is almost moot.

And yet, and here again the critic is called upon to perform a tightrope act, the moment we would like to import and revise the notion of canonicity and its varied and complex socio-political lives, we must also protect it as a *useful concrete pedagogical tool* that will permit elaboration, conservation and, of course, *si spera*, innovation in the Great Memory of Italian Writing.

Programme

L’impressione è che nel nostro paese l’organizzazione della cultura abbia subito un irrigidimento molto simile a una sclerosi dietro il quale si può intravedere una cancrena etica e sociale forse inarrestabile. In tutta serietà, dove può andare la critica in un contesto culturale come quello che ha espresso il fenomeno “tangentopoli.” La critica, come istituzione, come genere, come pratica professionale, per la quale è vitale l’esistenza di una domanda “forte,” che può essere espressa solo da una società degna di tale nome, è dunque destinata a morire”

Giuseppe Leonelli

3. I can point to Petrarch, D’Annunzio and Vico studies, where word from the first world is still pretty much angled toward positivist-idealist philology. But here, once again, above and beyond the preferred area of inquiry, a revised and highly inter-disciplinary, cultural studies approach to an author’s time and place would reveal its “context” to possess very different features. Hence possibilities for revising the collective memory or, otherwise said, the Canon.

Leonelli's generalization here is a synthesizing conceptual "conclusion," rhetorically necessary after having traced the erratic and often unfortunate course of "militant criticism;" it not a scientific assertion, nor does it claim to be, as I am sure he is aware on the Italian panorama there are a few, like Fabbri, Durante, Pagnini, Raimondi, Luperini and in particular Remo Ceserani, who have consistently innovated and expanded the very field of literary interpretation. But postponing a metacritique of their specific contributions to another chapter, let us now try to make some suggestions to revive the practice of critique by taking a few inferential leaps from what has been said up to now, and sketch what I see as tasks that lie ahead for Critique in general and *italianistica* in particular.

Critique today must ask of the works/authors it studies what do they have to contribute to an understanding of the present epoch. Sounds obvious yet obviously not everyone in the profession attends to it, preferring instead to lock their exegesis in the non-space of abstracting unrelatedness, in the main writing for a few "specialist" colleagues. Moreover, what seems to be lacking is the capacity – or willingness – to effect self-critique, to develop theories or paradigms, and carry out a constant *messa a punto* of one's working instruments. All critique is also metacritique and must begin and end with the critic in his/her time, a hermeneutic requirement known to the best historical criticism of the XIX and here and there in the XX century.

Critique must ask authors/works what their relationship to the past is, and which region or version of it in particular. The harder it is to assess this *vis à vis* the present, the more challenging and risky the attempt. The "Geography of Literature," much like the geography of history, is a field long announced but never fully come into its own. If we learn to think beyond the national language-national literature disciplinary boundary, then geography ceases to be treated as an analogic map with place names, and turns instead into the interphase between cultural developments and natural and individual forces. This is of capital importance to any research and writing which identifies itself as Cultural Criticism.

Critique must develop a rhetoric which is intrinsically inter-personal, dialogic, politically sensitive and fundamentally polemical.⁴ But not necessarily antagonistic. When an author releases a book, he or she immediately partakes of the dynamics of production and reproduction of new meanings, which take concrete form and enter the grid of commodification, labeling, and a inter-class, trans-disciplinary dynamics. A reader

4. Without intending to make this a technical paper on the nature of the rhetorical as I have been developing it for years, I will specify that critical discourse ought to make conscious use of a structure which harnesses both, *discourse as argumentation*, as persuasive and therefore made up of "credible" phrases to win over approval or consensus (typical of ideologies, where the *aptium* commands degrees of intensity (*ethos, pathos, delectare*) along the essentially narrative plane); and *discourse as* capable of offering "*scientific*" *demonstrations of its initial claim*, in other words, taking the rhetorical (once again, we might say) as a *methodological structuring* whose final aim is to find a value (a "truth" or a "universally valid result," or a "logically deductible" axiom) above the contingency of the *Da-Sein*, above my uniqueness and irreproducibility. This was the thrust of my *Il fantasma di Hermes*: to show that rhetoric (the Humanities) and Method (the Sciences) are not antithetical or mutually exclusive but, rather, the *recto* and *verso* of the same ontological precondition for existence both social and individual.

may disagree with a given author's intended sense concerning a particular theme, but he or she ought also to consider the inevitability of new values and the creative, positive aspects of suggesting different venues from the same text. Indeed, there *can be* healthy disagreement. A "negative" critical reading is not to be intended *ad personam* but *contra differentiae*, whereby each one of us defends his or her fundamental democratic right to have a different informed opinion, without implying with that gesture that "I don't like you." Too often in academia offering an alternative view to a given interpretation is read as "an attack" on the totality of the interlocutor. I find that ridiculous: loosen up, people!

The Critic in Italian Studies looking at the *actualitas historica* of his/her time is likely to confront topics that may be unsettling in many ways.. Let's begin, *rhetorically*, from the broadest question: Have we looked at the concrete development of Italian Literature studies in this country in such a way as to be able to assess whether as an institution, which sanctioned specific practices and upheld given aesthetic ideals, they may have outlived their historical reason for being, and need to reinvent themselves? A detailed empirical record of college departments and their curricula and staff would be a necessary philological component of this. But it would also require that the profession be looked at from the beginning in terms of what other similar constituencies, consensus groups, political parties and capitalistic developments underwent. More broadly, maybe the university ought to try to re-inject into the technological cosmopolis forms of education, or operative precepts, from another time and place. Suggestions have been made: We can integrate Buddhist practices, learning poems by heart, recover and update the Trivium and the Quadrivium, and teaching shop skills all at the same time, after the lesson in Windows and the other in Latin. I am sure many will convene that these are both appropriate and somewhat 'desperate.' What may be required are hypotheses subjected to thorough complex historiographical and ideological cross-examination, not to speak of course of questioning the very foundations and objectives of our practice. Hypotheses, indeed Theses, Critical Stands.

Let us continue, then, by asking: Why have certain topoi *not* been addressed, or sufficiently explored, in the published record of this our group within the university? Here I can merely list some of these, reserving to another site a fuller discussion:

A) Why has Italian-American literature been systematically avoided for the past fifty years? The topic has only recently been cautiously broached and then only by a few of the persons who exemplify concretely its existence. This is a literature produced outside of Italy which, although written in another language, may well have a lot to do with Italian history and culture,⁵ although the Italian literary establishment, of which some Italianistica USA is but a province, in general does not even wish to acknowledge.

5. I am of course referring to whatever goes under the aegis of Italian-American Literature, which presently counts a substantial and complex body of works, both critical and creative. Though I believe this "marginal" and uncanny "minor" literature (for its deterritorialization is not of the *langue*, but of its collective memory, of its historical semantics, so to speak) should *de jure* be the object of study within departments of English and American literature (where it should rank in relevance and availability next to any other hyphenated text in any syllabus, and precisely *because*

B) Why has there never been a true “theoretical” production among *italianisti* in America (I will desist from saying, according to a well known trope in Italian literary history, that the field is “lagging behind” other “European” cultures, and/or “not at the level of” departments such as French, Comparative Literature, Women Studies, English and German, because this only betrays a long-ingrained cultural inferiority complex)? And what have been the effects of *importing* critical schemes *from* Italy which have consistently proven to be useless in our more pedagogically sound universities, and which moreover re-enact for the “critici italiani d’Italia” their *epopea colonialista*, granting them the perverse privilege of treating their American counterparts as, well, subjects, *coloni*! However, as suggested below, there has recently begun a tendency to *export* theories *to* Italy which may well reveal that what is *colonizzato* is the mainstream Italian critical establishment’s mindset.

C) What might be a possible reason for the exponential growth of studies on fascism, especially by feminists, during the past ten years, that is, from after the fall of Cold War bipolarism and the Berlin Wall? As a great many innovative theoretical approaches were devised and available from the sixties through the eighties (for instance, structuralism, which received a mild acceptance among American italianists), why is it that almost no one dealt with writers and issues from the *ventennio*? Was it because before justifying their interest and inquiry, they had to respond critically to the left’s (La Sinistra, not the Angloamerican blend so much) appropriation of the fascist period? In other words, has the left been an obstacle rather than a conduit to explore taboo topics, “questioni aperte?” Or is it just a generational coincidence, with the old guard of italianisti USA (not really known for their critical audacity or political courage) reigning from the fifties through the eighties (in some cases creating feudal strongholds, baronati, in some major universities), and only recently finally making room for a contingent of (necessarily younger, and in great part women) critics raised or trained in the States, weary of or unimpressed with the achievements of Italian critics from Italy, and certainly more in tune with the world outside of literature per se. Nietzsche once remarked that in order to be a true German, or to understand Germany, one must live outside of its national territory. I suppose the same can be said of Italian critics (and writers) living outside i patrii lidi.

D) Finally, to touch on another topic within the Italian canon of the past fifty years: I recall how Romano Luperini in his 1981 *Il Novecento* dismisses the so-called *Letteratura meridionalista* in two paragraphs for being rhetorical, sentimental, too partisan or too, poteva mancare? “provinciale,” (552 et infra) whereas “great realist literature” addressed the critique of the bourgeoisie in the name of the supernal values of

it is written in English), I also believe that its “content” as it were is of paramount importance to Italianists and Italian area studies researchers and critics as well. Once again, italianistica could learn a lot by looking beyond its in/secure departmental walls to gauge how French, Spanish and Portuguese have dealt with the problem of conquest, migration, colonization, and the ideological retro-influence (or lack of) on the home country, the *madre-patria*.

Essence, Emancipation, Struggle toward idealdom meanwhile effecting a “critica della borghesia tardocapitalista”. Now, nearly twenty years later, when the boxful of labeling *ismi* utilized by *that* Marxist approach is nearly empty, when anthropology and ethnography have looked at literary and social relations *across* national(istic) boundaries and juridical frontiers, and perceived interactions and metamorphoses of traditions that do not fit in with the national allegory (whether left, center, or right), nor do they fit in with the conflicted internationalism of liberals and libertarians, the old *sinistrati* must confront self-critically the very categories and practices that made up the egalitarian, utopistic and strongly contentious yet hegemonic “canon” of the sixties, seventies and eighties. With very few exceptions – most notably, Galvano Della Volpe, a true giant waiting to be rediscovered – not all proposals to alter the course of literary/cultural history either theoretically or pragmatically were *that* revolutionary. The reason has partly to do with a misappropriation of the scientific notion of Method, as will be demonstrated in a forthcoming piece. In the meantime, recent studies by those younger critics who emerged in the nineties have begun to paint a radically different picture, introducing concepts and methods that are quite at odds with the venerable left literary canon. I am thinking of the neo-colonialist and cultural studies approaches to the study of the Mezzogiorno and the intricate literary and cultural lives it has been living for centuries, the unacknowledged import of colonization from-within, the erasure of the consciousness and sense of greatest peace-time exodus in European history, the uncomfortable prospect of having to deal with a hybrid, extra-comunitarian and generally immigrant literature that is sprouting throughout the peninsula, and its literal suppression in the sociohistorical process of creating, developing and then imposing the modern nation-state (whether liberal, fascist or republican).

Further Considerations

And now for a real provocation: Do literature and language have to go together? Shudder if you must! I am aware that, unlike other arts, such as painting or music, literature is indissolubly tied to language because its primary material is precisely words. The moment a word is uttered (or written) and released in inter-subjective space, it may acquire a thousand meanings and trigger as many images, as sense can and will ever be slipping and seeping out from any “form,” while reconfiguring endless unforeseen and unforeseeable paths for signification. Now, let us for a minute contemplate another scenario, one inspired by the fact that, since Plato and through Kant, Nietzsche and even in Croce, indeed even for Eco, literature has resisted categorical definition and can easily, without running into any contradiction, be considered an acceptance, a particularity, or a subcategory of language-use. A case could be made for “great poetry,” or what I call language-at-the-limit (forever scouring and scraping the outer envelope of communication and expression, in any national or regional language), yet we are still dealing with something which has a circumscribed presence, and whose “politics” is pretty much well known: it is, and has always been, the rallying cry and imposition by an élite, no need to invoke Edward Said or Sartre or Marx or anyone else on the relationship between culture and imperialism. The fact remains, in short, as semiotics and neohistoricism have amply demonstrated, that literature is one *among other* cultural artifacts. The question then becomes: if we transport and interpret music and paintings from other parts of the word,

should we not be able to do the same for literature? Though some have defended the nearly miraculous power of words, and of “the poetic word” in particular, and its “pronunciation” as taumaturgic (Plato, Leopardi, Vico, Heidegger, etc.), *poetry is not all language*: when I get on the bus I do not inquire how much the fare is “in rime baciato” (though that might be fun), when I do my testament I avoid *sineddhoches*, and when I speak to my students I consciously avoid polysemy in favor of univocal, unambiguous speech (unless polysemy is the object of the lesson). Language has other *uses* and in fact 90% of the time we experience it in a radically different way than when we do (read, write, edit) literature.

The “politics” of this idea is that as long as language and literature are institutionally joined at the hip, if one goes down, so does the other. In this vein, so many proposals have circulated in the last ten years or so about something called Languages Across the Curriculum, which I feel Italian teachers and critics ought to spend some time on and adapt to their threatened programs and curricula. In the mid-nineties I proposed a version of this concept to my administrators: it stipulated that most majors in the Social Sciences, and even in the Natural Sciences, be required to learn or at least show reading skills to carry out research in a foreign language, requiring typically a minimum of two years and if necessary linked to the overall college foreign language requirement.⁶ It would of course have created newer articulations for Italian as well, which as everyone knows is a “threatened language,” especially when faced with the (politically and socially justified) growing interest in Asian languages. But to change a “culture” or “mind set,” meaning the specialists in fields outside of the humanities, is an arduous task, and many rejected the thought as unnecessary or opposed it simply on survivalist grounds: why make the requirements so tough when student registration in foreign language courses is declining, etc. That is why we ought to enlist help from above, from administrators who actually believe that a scientist or a financier would benefit from being able to read or speak one or several foreign tongues, and impose through college-wide curriculum reform such a requirement.

Following up on these considerations, I once made another concrete proposal to my Dean and the English department, namely, that we separate the Language Curriculum from the Literature Curriculum. The reaction? *Apriti cielo!*, yet I insist, the suggestion is worthy of further analysis. Some of the most influential books in the recorded histories of humankind have been texts whose cultural and social effects depended *not* on their original languages! Think of the *Bible*! On the other hand, how many authors have been “re-discovered” or relaunched by a community *not* from the home country. Think of Poe, discovered by the French half a century later. Or how the American social sciences communities engaged the Viconian mind in the seventies and eighties in particular, and allowed it to make great strides in hermeneutic possibilities (which is to say: gaining critical relevance in several fields “outside” of Italian studies), something which could *not*

⁶ I am aware that at some universities the language requirements is two years, and so on. My argument is necessarily broad because the fact is that in the great majority of American colleges there are ways of getting a four-year degree with less than a year and at times with no foreign language instruction (as for instance when we are forced to give the equivalent of three semester worth of credits to those who took foreign language for three or four years in high school).

take place in the more traditional and philologically oriented Italian context.⁷ But there is another side to this issue: as all foreign language teachers know, American students just don't know their English, while teachers of English in the main know very little about foreign languages and linguistics, and care even less. I am not talking about English as a *vehicle* to learn another subject, but as *object* of study: the English language could be taught side by side with any other language the given college offers. On the other hand, English literature could be taught also in conjunction with any other national literature, depending on the specific interests and competence of the instructor. If this means that at the present state we would have to reconsider also what is the meaning and purpose of Comparative Literature, then let's do it.⁸ Moreover, even on the basis of the above restrictive view of poetry just suggested, it would make a lot of sense to finally be able to teach poetry by selecting say, for the Romantic period, Leopardi, Hölderlin, Coleridge and Gerard de Nerval, especially since in reality these (and most authors) read, wrote and were greatly influenced by other writers (texts, if you prefer!) written in other languages and coming from different cultural contexts.

Therefore, and finally, if the linguistic competence required to read, write, and practice the critique of Italian literature is relatively high, then two prospects arise. First: we collectively turn our attention to *translations*, since if we cannot transmit, contribute to and circulate the culture (of which language is a part, but only a part), then whatever the word Italian may mean, it stands to lose its semantic (and social, and political) currency, it will be perennially "in crisi," and could conceivably disappear from, or become a curiosity in, the collective (Angloamerican, *ergo* world) memory. Second: let us think of developing programs in which Italian is used as the language of daily problems

7. Aside from the fact that Vico became de facto "prisoner" of contending idealist-historist and marxist interpretations and this for over sixty years. I suppose it was difficult to see "through" these hegemonic academic models of historiography, but there is no excuse for not trying out interdisciplinary approaches developed elsewhere, perhaps retooling them in view of the particular parabola of Italian history, as for instance was done with semiotics and philosophy of language.

⁸ I am sure I am not the only one to have found it irritable to learn that too often a course on Dante or on the Enlightenment or Symbolism is being offered simultaneously by Italian, Comp. Lit. and English departments. It irritates me because we lack intramural dialogue and the structure and history of the university does not really encourage cross-pollination (again, there are of course exceptions, such as specifically interdisciplinary "Programs" and "Institutes"). My question here is: why are we so surprised when deans and other administrators decide to pare off branches and faculty on the grounds of "duplication" of offerings and so on. We all know that *philosophically* no two people can teach the very same course with the very same texts and say the same things (thank Heavens!), but realistically, administratively, politically, "they" will see it as a continuation of that privileged ivory tower mentality still dominant in the Humanities and Literature departments in particular, which have increasingly raised suspicions and often come downright under attack. We must stop being territorial on the basis of departmental mandates and allocations, and essay to initiate instead collaboration and intramural sharing of ideas and resources, working on programmatic changes ourselves, before our profession and our jobs will be axed by the keystroke of an accountant or an "independent consultant!"

(the vehicle, as we said above of English), as the means to discuss anything, not just literary and psychological matters, but also the politics of the world, the future of the profession, the possibilities for employment, travel. And this requires that our PhD's become as well versed in the politics of Telecom and Rizzoli as in the rhythmic variations in a sonnet by the Magnifico. This latter knowledge is strictly and exclusively of literature, the former is of the concrete social, political and amorphous existential world of our students. Perhaps complementary to the above-mentioned Languages Across the Curriculum proposals that circulate in various universities, my suggestion is to strive for a Foreign Languages for the Profession or Practical Foreign Language Skills. This would be articulated in this format: "Italian [or French, or Spanish, etc.] for journalism," "Italian for finances," "Italian for medicine" or "electronics," etc. The difference between the first and the second proposal is that the first emphasis a *reading knowledge* of the foreign language for professionals generally stable in their home environment (i.e.: American or Anglophone), the second emphasizes the *speaking* and therefore *active aspect of language competence* for those professionals who may instead be more often "on the road," so to speak. Here critical judgment is not called upon to choose one of the two roads at the expense of the other (although I know colleagues at some colleges who have had to do just that, preferring the small yet "positional" gain within the hierarchy), but, rather, to effect a creative, *syncretic* move and attempt to integrate the two roads. Let's give ourselves a realistic chance, rather than seem surprised and start squawking when we hear that Italian will no longer be offered at some godforsaken university in the Rocky Mountains. Judging by the rukus made before the 2001 AAIS conference, it appeared that some of our colleagues were "shocked!" I mean: they didn't see that coming? Yet the handwriting has been on the walls for sometime now.

Although in our midst we still recognize the old timers (or the dinosaurs, depending on the mood of the moment) by their perorations in the name of a self-transcendent, supra-historical notion of Alta Cultura – one of the most pernicious concepts brandished by aristocracies and bourgeois alike till well past its apogee in the late-XIX Century, still heavily present in Gramsci albeit as object of critique – others more attuned to the times have gone beyond, expanded their range of what the word Culture means to include pulp fiction, Madonna, and paperino, and have then come to terms with the possibility -- indeed: reality! -- that no matter how one defines or understands it, culture itself is primarily another commercial arena, an amorphous, wildly regenerative set of images, values and compartments no longer under the unquestioned authority, protection and legislation of the academic, the professor, the critic. Some of these professors ought to recall that tenure itself is increasingly questioned, in some colleges challenged as a throwback to earlier models of culture and capital. Alta Cultura is no longer a valid canonical paradigm to perpetuate, having become but one among a variety of sets of beliefs which the mediatized techno-autarky churns inside-out at will, as long as there is an exchange-value, a sale, a symbolic flash, no more and no less important than a soap opera, a live-TV report, a fifties recording, or Battiato's latest CD.

Another point is that professional organizations such as the AATI, the AAIS and others ought to bury their clannish tomahawks and smoke the pipe of cooperation and mutual strategic planning. Here again an effort is required to co-sponsor conferences, readings, publications with organizations that represent not only other language groups (as suggested above), but more and more "transversal" groupings, some even outside the

humanities. Cinema, political science, architecture, ethnic studies are areas to explore with the critical-political intention of seeking alliances and reciprocal structural help within and outside the university. And we can begin by developing a *revisionist catachretic politics*. For example, why is the Modern Languages Association still continuing the practice, at its annual conventions, of relegating all English and American Literature meetings in one hotel and all foreign languages and comparative literature to another building: where's the *architectural space* for interaction, exchange, boundary-crossing?⁹ Is it logistics only? And too much to handle for those humanists who, called upon to devise a word processor attuned to their needs, Nota Bene, failed miserably! Then call on the colleagues in Computer Science to lend a hand.

Last but not least, there is a sore need to make Italian Studies *significantly* more interdisciplinary and comparative. In Italy there are only two or three Comparative Literature Chairs or *cattedre*. Ironically, this in the country whose medievalists and historians have always been among the top comparatists and multiculturalists. In any case, what in the Angloamerican world is called neo- or post-colonial critique is something that can help revise the Italian canon both epistemologically and ideologically. Remo Ceserani among a few others has already broached several of the above-mentioned topics, especially in terms of seeing literature interrelated to other facets or productions of culture. Asor Rosa did the same a generation earlier, though still under the hegemonic beams of a liberal Marxism. However, there is concrete evidence of a just as compelling need to extend *geographically* outward. And we need truly to fly over historical terrain again and again and see things so far obscured by some untouchable cloud of silence. In particular, Italian literature critics would do well to interpret the sense of literature with reference to *colonialism* and *imperialism* (both *nostrano e internazionale*, as the two cannot be disciplinarily, that is, arbitrarily, separated), in terms of whether Italian culture owes a greater debt to its Mediterranean or its European soul, and then to which parts within those two huge areas. Strong on opening up the study of literature to the relationship between Europe and “the third world” is Armando Gnisci and his comparatist colleagues at the University of Rome, La Sapienza. Gnisci is one of a few Italian critics who believes that dealing with the thorny colonization/decolonization issue -- systematically removed from the cultural conscious and unconscious of the Italians since approximately Sept. 8, 1943, -- opens up critique to other complex aspects of our times which have a way of crystallizing in literature no longer circumscribed solely by language and national identity and no longer under the privileged aegis of aesthetics or *letterarietà*. Along with Durisin, who had redrawn the field by positing a “centrismo interletterario tricontinentale mediterraneo,” Gnisci develops the critical notion of *inter-letterarietà*, which permits novel regroupings and spawns new approaches and theorems, showing for example how Italian literature of the past two centuries has followed a mildly aristocratic “European vocation” and in its broadest characterization made claims to be a major representative of the “Western Canon,” of “civiltà” *tout court*, perhaps (well, almost certainly) ignoring other possible accounts and reconfigurations. The “comunità interletterarie”

9. See in this context Michael Holquist's “Babel” piece and the necessary evolution of the academic status of Comparative Literature.

vengono diversamente disegnate sulla carta dei mondi europei in base ad affinità e rapporti geografici, culturali e storici, come le comunità balcaniche, quella centro-europea, quella nordica ed altre. Nella mappa non c'è alcuna comunità interletteraria "occidentale" e/o europea in quanto tale. (2001:17)

Sounds like the much touted drive in literary criticism to "catch up" with Europe from the 1860's onward was motivated by the same cultural politics and partisan articulations which legitimated and imposed national literatures on the coattails of nationalism, itself an ideological *imaginary construct*, as Benedict Anderson put it [though, a *ragion veduta*, a *necessary fiction*]. Here what is suggested is that Italian critique effect an "ontological-ideological" turn in its objectives and its practices, that it recognize that its Italianness and its contribution to a European Identity is actually a very recent procustean academic model, and that it consider seriously issues relating to multilingualism, to boundary writing, to trans-national regional regroupings, to *mestizaje* and hybrid identities, to the polycentrism and politics of literature (even when the metacritical armamentaria of the Europeans is in various stages of rigor mortis).¹⁰ As we retool and redraw the maps, we shouldn't expect the criss-crossing whirlwind of ideas to cease, leaving us time for contemplation until we are ready for battle. The ship is always on the high seas, and repairs must be made en route. And it is incumbent upon us as critics, intellectuals, and teachers, to suggest alternative fields of research, sharpen the critical pencils, meanwhile acknowledging an ethical need, almost a moral imperative:

10. Consider the concise though provoking yet mostly accurate summary of the past forty years of Italian criticism by Leonelli: "Nelle sue varie maschere e metamorfosi, la critica, slanciandosi quasi al di là di se stessa, ha sventolato bandiere, proposto e rifiutato poetiche, segnato confini, divieti di circolazione, sensi obbligati, sempre smentita, sempre aggirata. Fieramente battagliera e un po' *pompier*, anche se in buona fede, negli anni in cui risplendevano le stelle fisse dell'impegno e della versione normativa, fraintesa, del nazional-popolare, quella critica s'era ritrovata col fiato corto allorché erano cominciati i crolli, poi rovinosi, delle ideologie." (P. 226) But not all critics from those two generations have stopped trying. See Fortini's 1990 contribution to Luperini's symposium held at Siena: "La *facies*, secondo me, del nostro tempo è quella della fine di qualunque possibilità di "smascherare e sabotare" in arte e letteratura e critica letteraria. Poco conta che il Postmoderno secondo Jameson, nel suo *rigor mortis*, sia anch'esso il prodotto ideologico di una fase del Capitale che finge inesistenti le invarianti. E meno ancora che passi di moda. *Se non ci fosse bisognerebbe inventarlo, rivelarlo nell'intrico del presente*. Non se ne esce né con le proposte di Jameson né con le polveri bagnate delle Avanguardie ma con la ripresa radicale e a lungo periodo di un modo di produzione e di consumo inconciliabili con la riproduzione del Capitale, tipica della sua fase più recente." (267). This position, though still anchored to the Immutable Idea called Capital, can in part be integrated with Gnisci's, insofar as both consider the inequities of manipulated (economic) development as a spring of social interaction: "la linea di frontiera e conflitto va ricercata attraverso i dislivelli dello sviluppo internazionale globale dove ha sede la contraddizione suprema." (Ib. 266) However, the obsession of "la contraddizione" assures that the project misses out on all the radical subversions propounded by the postmodernists who do not line up behind Jameson.

L'imperativo [...] di una decolonizzazione europea indica una poetica-pratica che induca gli umanisti europei – da ora e ormai – a ragionare e ad agire assumendo la storia della colonizzazione-colonialismo-globalizzazione dei mondi nell'occhio della propria intelligenza e sentire di doverla rovesciare: la storia e l'intelligenza. (ib. 24)

In short, the ethical commitment of the critic, and of the critic within Italian studies in particular, would require perceiving his or her activity within the porous boundaries and hitherto unlikely transfers of symbols and stories from areas and among authors who cannot be grouped by our traditional categories, such as letterarietà, social class, adherence or not to a given national canon or subset of that. Polycentrism, internationalism, plurilinguism, translations between languages and across different media, allegorizing and masking have since always reigned in the production and circulation of cultural artifacts, it is a pernicious anachronistic self-deluding critical fiction to continue to believe in the Euroamerican bourgeois hegemony as the inherently ahistorical standard of taste and relevance. Indeed, the chapter that has yet to be written concerns the massive advent of technology in all aspects of our lives and therefore also in academia. How much weight will be given to articles and creative writings which appear more and more frequently in electronic form, in newly conceived websites, in settings where peer-reivew itself must reframe its criteria, in cyberlocations which do not guarantee (contrary to popular belief) that an artifact will last as long as a book?¹¹ Politics is going both macro and micro at once, and we can, as befits our destiny, filter and sort out quality and relevance in a fluid yet dialectical in-between, in hybrid spaces, in maps without territories and terrains that require indeed urge creative and less strung-up assemblages of sense.

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¹¹ This is a timely and complex major topic and at some conferences it is finally given its due. My observations are based on concrete experience: at tenure decisions, how much importance is accorded to materials which have only a “virtual” existence? Yet in media studies, cinema, the visual arts and finally even in philology and textual analyses, the internet is used widely and has quickly become crucial to those areas of inquiry. But in some quarters of our profession, outside of practical correspondence and editing, the so-called “intrinsic value” of the publication which appeared only in electronic format is still questioned.

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