

## INTERVIEW with Peter Carravetta (1994)

**Interview:** Response to Paolo Giordano's written questions for the "Postface" to the special issue of *Canadian Journal of Italian Studies* (McMaster University) dedicated to Italian American Literature, which he guest co-edited with Anthony Tamburri.<sup>1</sup>

QUESTION 1. *What inspired you to undertake your excellent anthology on Italian Writers in America?*<sup>2</sup>

More than a single event or thought motivated the *Poesaggio* project. In fact I hope it will become evident how, to begin with, it breaks the boundaries of the genre anthology, being closer to a collective dramatic script, or if you don't consider it immodest a symphonic score in which the players were asked to submit their own pieces and I orchestrated them: if you were there at Charlottesville when it was first performed in April 1991, you'd know what I mean. More broadly, there are several strands that intertwine and define a new cultural space, a fluid geography that inscribes an intellectual and political chameleon, an aesthetic of the chimera. It certainly can be read in terms of the purely (auto)biographical, as I interacted with(in) the broader social, professional, ideological context. Obviously I wanted to validate my own *ventennale* experience, having published several book of poetry and in two languages, and so could no longer deny or apologize for the centrality of creative writing in my life.

Beyond that, however, I have always found it irritating that on the basis of a prevailing prejudice (paradoxically and ironically even among intellectuals and academics) an artist couldn't also be a scientist or logical wiz (to run industry or government for example), or that a philosopher or academic in general couldn't also be a very creative (usually translated as necessarily anarchic) person, a painter or musician or writer. When I was younger, I wanted to be a physicist and a novelist. I relinquished science as a professional objective in my junior year in college, but the interest persisted

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *Canadian Journal of Italian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 53, 1996, pp. 215-222.

<sup>2</sup> [The reference is to the anthology I had co-edited with Paolo Valesio, *Poesaggio. Poeti italiani d'America* (Treviso, Pagus, 1993), which gathers the interventions from the "poessay" I had organized at the American Association for Italian Studies annual conference held at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, NC, in April of 1990. Retrospectively, it was a major event in the consolidation of what much later will become the Italian literary diaspora, and the creation of an *Italophone canon* outside of Italy. See now: Luigi Bonaffini and Joseph Perricone, eds. *Poets of the Italian Diaspora* (New York: Fordham UP, 2014].

and found expression through my getting into linguistics, philosophy, and criticism. On the other hand, clearly the passion for art continued and was nurtured by the career I then chose, pursuing the doctorate and teaching in Literature and Humanities departments. I have therefore worked on both sides of the fence, so to speak, and over the years I spontaneously gravitated toward those who had analogous experiences, who lived and practiced a double, triple, multiple cultural existence. Only thing was, the advent of postmodernity notwithstanding (Italianistica actually resisted it) professors weren't supposed to be poets, and were more or less compelled to conceal (except among the initiates) their potentially perverse art, their suspicious handling of the language of the tribe. I challenged the commonplace that professors were to be solely and adamantly "scientists of the humanities," sort of anachronistic late-nineteenth century positivistic philologists and/or dogmatic idealists, grammarians of the status quo.

This state of affairs was further complicated by the peculiarly displaced condition of the authors, all of which were educated in Italy, wrote and probably thought in Italian, but had been living in North America from anywhere between five and forty years. The critic/poet dualism was being bounced between two languages, two cultures, two histories. Look at the authors of *Poesaggio*, play their verses against their poetics. Their writings both critical and creative reflected this in-betweenness that needed voicing, this urge to re-connect and configure the polylogues, the nomadism, the existential politics of their situation.<sup>3</sup> Besides, even in other work I did as a critic and scholar, I found myself increasingly drawn to this topic of the writer with two or more distinct registers, and who moreover writes in a language which is not that of his/her more immediate and concrete reality, culture, or country. So by the mid-eighties I decided to find out concretely whether, how many, and how and why professors (and doctoral students) lived also a secret poetic life while dealing with their splintered, dislocated, decentered personal/political lives. I started organizing poetry readings within academic spaces.<sup>4</sup> *Poesaggio* was therefore meant to bring out of the woodwork for all to

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<sup>3</sup> As a writer in two languages I found a similar socially and ideologically imposed normativity and functionalistic range of expression in English and American academic culture as well. Think of the creation and growth of Creative Writing Majors within (and often nearly independent of) traditional English Departments, and the skepticism if not downright oppositions they received by conservative, canon swaying academics. A cursory look through the MLA's *Profession* and *The Chronicles of Higher Education* will bear this out. A recent historiographic assessment is contained in Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* (St. Paul: Greywolf Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Fuller chronicle of my previous experiments in poetry readings and broader theoretical considerations are to be found in the "Introduction" to *Poessay* published in *Romance Languages Annual* (W. Lafayette: Dept. of For. Langs. & Lits., 1991).

reckon with authors (twelve in this edition) who dared be both, critics and poets, educators and re-creators, specialists and comparatists.

On another level, I wanted to test an idea, which developed spontaneously over the years. From the time I was a graduate student, I was interested in comprehending the changing faces of avant-garde art and related issues in the aesthetics, poetics, criticism of the phenomena. Right at the time I started teaching Italian literature at Queens College, in 1983, I read at Cerisy-la-Salle and then published what is now to me a crucial paper, "Beyond the Ancient Diaphora."<sup>5</sup> Much work I did in the following years was focused on certain artists (G. Stein, Marinetti, Beat, the *Novissimi*, Spatola, Porta), and thematics (postmodernism, hermeneutics, methods of criticism, technology), and specific thinkers (Vico, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Gadamer, Eco, Foucault), all of whom were interested in margins, boundaries, anti-identity or multi-identity subjects and sensibilities, hypostasis of a specific yet elusive difference. *Poesaggio* is not sequential, predictable, easily circumscribable. Its form is dynamic, interactive, a theatrical field, a happening or event. It marks a transition from the avant-gardes to post-modernity at least the way I understood it. There is not much irony and there are plenty of masks and routes and talk about not-being-in-place while paradoxically constantly evoking that the life experience is *in situ, in loco*: displacement or dislocation are no longer exceptions or variants or mutations, they seem to be rather the new polycentric and shifty dwellings of these poets, of a great many people these days if we consider demographics, world migrations and ethnic self-awareness. Displaced as poets in society at large are, the *Poesaggio* twelve are displaced also in terms of their identity and role within a community called Italian culture, criticism and cultural discourse as takes place in most cities in Italy today. Suddenly, despite the ready-at-hand freedom and possibilities of telephone, fax machines, airplanes and high speed trains and cars, these poets acknowledge and demonstrate that being away from the country of origin (whether as *patria* or *madrelingua*)<sup>6</sup> greatly enhances their potential for exclusion and non-recognition in an already competitive, amorphous and distrustful community. Developing this further, it became evident to me that with their individual voice what was passed over in silence and ignored is also a potential collective formation to join the ranks of many others now on the scene both in North America and in Europe, a new and problematic discourse (such as letting more women poets tell their side of being an exile or expatriate), or a poetics (see for example Valesio's concluding essay, which revolves around the metaphor of the tribe, but a scattered and

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<sup>5</sup> The paper appeared with the proceedings from the conference "La postmodernité en art et philosophie" in the journal *Krisis* (Houston, TX), No. 3/4 (1985):112-28. It was subsequently touched up to become ch. 4 of my *Prefaces to the Diaphora. Rhetorics, Allegory, and the Interpretation of Postmodernity* (W. Lafayette: Purdue Univ. Press, 1991): 169-88.

<sup>6</sup> I discuss this in more detail in the introductory essay to *Poesaggio*.

heterogeneous one at that). By bringing them together I was hoping also to send a message to the community that there is something new on the horizon for Italians and Italianists alike, a group of multifarious personalities with whom to enter into some sort of exchange. In other words, we<sup>7</sup> we felt that it was time to introduce Italian Writers in America as a peculiar constellation, as a *caso storico*: and the debate on an italophone literature, or an Italian literary diaspora *for our times*, has only just begun.<sup>8</sup>

As to what these poet/critics specifically speak about, once again I must reiterate that it cannot be easily pinpointed, and I refuse to generalize because *Poesaggio* if nothing else demonstrates the great variety and singularity of its participants. Though inevitably I hinted at some symptoms or metaphors in my Introduction, one must read and roam into its labyrinthine semantics to create one's own idea.

QUESTION 2. *What has been the response to the anthology? What do you think the anthology*

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<sup>7</sup> Valesio agreed with me on this from the first time we discussed publishing the volume in Italy, eventually in the series -- emblematically called Codex Atlanticus -- he directed for Pagus.

<sup>8</sup> We are all aware that literature in exile is not new to Italian society (in a way almost scarring it from the beginning, with Dante) but the point is that we cannot assess the production of contemporary Italian writing outside of Italy -- such as those represented in *Poesaggio* -- utilizing the criteria that explained the great intellectual migrations throughout Europe and elsewhere that followed the Renaissance, or that informed the dramatic motivations for leaving the native country just before, during and immediately after Fascism. We need fresh research on this topic, as the world of Gramsci, Salvemini, Prezzolini, Fermi is no longer with us, in fact even the cultural dynamics and critical vocabulary of the fifties and sixties -- still present in some of the authors in *Mal D'America* -- are fast receding from the global network and hyper-fragmented interconnectedness on the eve of the new millennium. This issue is hermeneutically complicated by the unsurmountable obstacle of the exiled/expatriated individual, rife with personal, aesthetic and ideological prejudice. This is most evident in correspondents of major Italian dailies residing in large North American cities, the diplomats, and of course the politicians. Much more open and interesting the situation in other arts, such as cinema and fashion. As I discuss at length in a forthcoming article -- in the anthology of essays titled *Italian Diasporas* edited by you, Paolo Giordano, and Fred Gardaphé and Anthony Tamburri, presently being considered by Southern Illinois University Press [the article was never submitted in time for inclusion, *Ed.*]-- -- several of the authors now in *Poesaggio* do care to point out that they are not to be considered Italian Americans, please! exile and expatriates, yes, but not immigrants or descendants of immigrants, [and as] there's no significant connection, if anything at all, we may call them Italian Poets in America (which is precisely what Fontanella and Valesio title their issue of *Gradiva*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1992/93)). Fortunately, though, their poetry upstages their critique in that it speaks of/to themes, situations, and experiences which are no longer *solely* Italian, and which are strongly attached to the detail of the place, the being-in-the-world-in-America, existence as traveling, communication as an event of code switching. Home now is here, there, and everywhere. For everyone.

*and your role in it has accomplished?*

The response has been enthusiastic, critically encouraging, despite some snags we ran into with the publisher after the volume came out (mostly concerning distribution). Nevertheless, whoever saw it called it, well, "beautiful," "new," something unique, beguiling, who knows, perhaps also ideologically unsettling, at least from the Italian point of view. The book was in fact conceived with an Italian (from Italy, that is) audience in mind, and the first couple of reviews highlighted the novelty of the idea/orchestration of the Poessay as well as the challenge posed to Italian literary history and poetics by the presence of these previously unseen or unheard poetries of Italians abroad,<sup>9</sup> a variegated community which is still trying to identify itself but which certainly must make use of words like exile, expatriate, nomadic, borderline, floating marginality, a ghostly de-territorialized pronunciation that alternatively apes mimics parodies extols and condemns that very confounding *paesaggio* which is contemporary Italy.

I'd like to believe that my involvement and contribution were determining factors. I feel I understand these unrecognized and unmapped shards of poetries objectively, comparatively, professionally, with enough poetic sensibility to listen up close and enough critical sense to remain outside of it. I hope the results bear this out in some fashion.

QUESTION 3. *You are known primarily as a theoretician and as a critic of Italian literature but over the last couple of years you have involved yourself in the arena of Italian American Studies: Why? What has prompted your sudden interest in this field of study?*

The involvement in Italian American culture is perhaps the counterpoint if not the premise to my *Poesaggio* project, that is, to identifying and/or situating an Italian poetics outside of Italy. Again, it was a long and complex itinerary that eventually brought me to this area of study. It really wasn't that sudden. I should say at the outset that I came to this country at the age of twelve, in 1963, as an immigrant from the deep South, sociologically at the tail end of that great historical demographic process that began in

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<sup>9</sup> Of course I am generalizing, as some of the poets are already well known in Italy, as are some of the novelists who write in Italian while living/working abroad. The fact is that, as already hinted above, the tendency if not downright necessity to see oneself as belonging to a community of scholars and academics in the European fold partially obliterates national and linguistic boundaries: this goes back first of all to the humanistic ideal, then to the Enlightenment project, to subsequent universalizing forms of legitimation (transcendentalism, romanticism, idealism, Marxism), and finally to the adoption of scientific models of inquiry and expression which in order to function must too often transcend other considerations, such as the subjective, creative, personal and political instances of the writing itself. In the postmodern epoch these dossiers are being reopened, with previously unknown or invisible issues coming to fore, and requiring new vocabularies and different cultural politics.

the 1880s, and therefore also just before a great many Italians started coming to the US no longer seeking any kind of work but rather to find pleasure, professional schools and investments, reaping the fruits of the economic boom that began in the mid to late fifties and continued until it tapered off in the eighties. I grew up in the Bronx but not in an Italian American neighborhood. I "hanged around" Italian American working class youths when I was around twenty, and I held various jobs while I was studying first science and then English at CCNY. Those were the years of *The Godfather*, of the Sons of Italy, but all this actually occupied only a part of my life, what with Vietnam, Nixon, campus unrest, questioning and contesting of all middle class panaceas and hypocrisies, seeking a way, a calling. Certainly the problem of "identity" was a constant background obsession, but it was not framed solely in terms of nationality or ethnicity as it is today. There were too many unclear, unresolved dilemmas before me, and many a staunch stance I used to hear from family, friends and college people alike were just too quick, too passionate or too plainly self-serving to satisfy me. My resolve to continue my education made me leave that world behind in 1973, when I went to the Univ. of Bologna. At that point I was really intrigued by Italy, no longer by the "little Italies" of New York (which I had symbolically "left behind"), and not even by the little mountainside Calabrian village I was born in, but the "new" Italy, borghese, sophisticated, politically aware, tense and problematic, secularly cynic and yet mystic and profound, the Northern Italian urban setting, rich with history and possibilities. By this time I had entered Italian studies. Upon my return, after a stint at the now defunct *Progresso Italo-Americano* which for me highlighted the differences, the rifts, the non-homologous mentalities of Italians from Italy and Italians from New York, I moved West to study in Chicago. I had by this time developed the notion that to study my own background, my own situation, or "identity", whatever that was or was going to turn out to be, I had to first learn a bunch of other things, acquire a critical distance, listen to other people's (hi)stories, explore knotty linguistic and theoretical problems. I would say that my "return" to Italian American culture and literature began slowly through the late eighties, partly as a result of my focusing on the newer generation of college students I was exposed to at Queens College, in part also thanks to frequenting Robert Viscusi and other friends who were constantly talking about this problem of an identity, a role, an image of Italians in America. Viscusi in particular came across as a sort of Cornell West of Italian American studies in his being dialectical and political, constantly sifting through *both* canons, the Italian and the American one, listlessly revising the languages of history, of power, of class, and prejudices in order to get a grip on this elusive social subject or constituency. He the Anglo-Americanist, I the Italianist, we bounced ideas and problems off each other endlessly. Against the background of my growing interests in non-European cultures and my studies in different critical traditions, I slowly trained my critical sights on the issue of what is or might be an

Italian American culture and literature at the present time.<sup>10</sup> I also found it problematic that nearly no one in Italianistica even considered this territory, whereas in English departments it is well known Italian American studies were shunned and shoved toward sociology and quantitative historical research. Still, I did find a growing number of younger scholars and writers -- both Italians and native Americans of Italian descent -- who took up the challenge seriously. I suppose the watershed year was the Columbus quincentenary, which brought to focus several strands of inquiry from many fields. Suddenly Madonna, Mario Puzo and Guy Talese were mentioned in discussions on Columbus, colonialism, America's (un)changing idea of itself, XIX and early XX century European imperialism, fascism, the cold war, the disappearing Italian American immigrant, the emergence of newer cultural formations, Italian diasporas, the need to review and revise standard though outdated historical accounts, the necessity to sensitize our academic community, create an audience, an alternative public image and an aesthetic. My speaking out on these issues at a conference at the Univ. of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in the Spring of 1993 resulted in my getting invited to co-teach, with Viscusi, a doctoral course on Italian American literature at the CUNY Graduate Center. In the Dept. of English! Clearly things were changing. With Viscusi and others we also started monthly encounters with writers whose only common trait was that they all had Italian origins of some sort, and really nothing else if we judge by the way they write and what they write.<sup>11</sup> But that is precisely what spurred us on. There was no monolithic homogenous Italian American typology possible, the only plausible common denominator concerned visibility, acceptability, and a capacity to issue newer creative and critical forces. The isolated writers had to stitch up a new web between the aesthetic and the political, insert metaphors and styles that not only were other than the shrill stereotypes even polished academics (both in English and Italian departments) casually dropped in their lectures, but were actually contrary and potentially destabilizing -- well, at least a nuisance, a mole, a cancer -- of the pre-established order of things. That process, those cultural events, are ongoing, and are marking a growing field of research.<sup>12</sup> I am interested in this area because (learning from what happened to other groups), the styles and identities were never clear from the beginning, as the evolution of and responses to Italian generations in America is

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<sup>10</sup> This line of critical engagement found concrete expression in the special double issue of *DIFFERENTIA REVIEW OF ITALIAN THOUGHT* No. 6/7 (Spring/Autumn 1994), dedicated entirely to Italian American culture, which I coordinated with the guest co-editors Anthony Tamburri and Ron Scapp.

<sup>11</sup> The group called itself IAWA, Italian American Writers Association, now in its fourth year.

<sup>12</sup> Needless to add that during these past few years I have been drawn to and greatly profited from the writers in *VIA, Voices in Italian Americana*, recently launched by you, Tamburri and Gardaphé. This in itself is a sign that "the times they are a-changing."

peculiar, slippery, easily but no less dramatically misunderstood. On another level, now that we have the awareness and instruments of deconstruction, hermeneutics, post-colonial studies, post-cold war (non)ideologies, we might strive not so much to have Italian American culture defined by and integrated into a mainstream or canon only the nostalgic or hagiographers still believe in, but to use this vantage point to mount a critique of history, of social difference, of national(istic) allegories, in other words, of both the Italian context as well as the American one, just for starters. A tall order no doubt, but the first critical stones have been laid. A marginalized, fragmented, non-glorious Italianness circulating in the English language may end up disclosing the spaces and occasions for a new literature, polysemantic, critically creative, constantly destabilizing, yet requiring it be read and valued on its own merits. We'll see.