

ONE

A Definition of *Bella Figura*

There exists in Italian an expression called *fare figura*, more frequently *fare bella figura*, whose literal meaning may be translated as “to make a beautiful figure.” It is sometimes used to explain the Italian national character to non-Italians. For example, *Eyewitness Travel Guides* warns English-speaking tourists that “the skill of *fare bella figura* (‘looking good’) is so prized that visitors will be judged by the same standard”; it shows the figure of a slim, fashionable woman, her stylish purse slung over one shoulder. Underneath her lies the caption “Italian chic . . . *bella figura*” (19). Another publication, *Doing Business Abroad*, announces:

Italians love style; in fact they live by it. *Bella figura* is no small part of their view of the world. Business negotiators tend to dress smartly, groom themselves neatly, and occupy modern well-equipped offices. . . . They make entrances and exits with a flourish, eat and drink well (but not excessively—so watch your drinking . . .) and talk about their families with pride. (Kennedy 172)

In order to teach this idiom in the context of appropriate situation and vocabulary, a recent advertisement for an Italian grammar textbook designed for American use prominently displays *BELLA FIGURA!* as one of its chapter titles. British journalist Charles Richards, who purports to explain the “new” Italians, defines “the cult of *bella figura* . . . [as] showing oneself off to one’s best advantage” (57). Historian John Julius Norwich writes, “The Italians are extroverts, and acutely conscious of what others think

of them. To make a *bella figura* is, and always has been since the days of ancient Rome, of primary importance; a *brutta figura* (an ugly figure), by contrast, is to be avoided at all costs" (28).

A search of the Internet (using the browser Netscape and search engines Excite, Infoseek, Lycos, and Yahoo) reveals numerous entries under *bella figura*. Lynn O'Hare contrasts the Italian outlook toward reality with that of Americans by discussing the concept of *bella figura*:

Again and again, ITALIANS explained La Bella Figura to me as an overdeveloped concern with façade, the elaborate picture you show the world, and even a funny form of self-knowledge; unlike we Americans, compulsively mucking around in our inner selves, searching for MEANING and BEAUTY and VALUE there, the Italians cynically surmise maybe there's not a lot to be mined in that vein, and who really wants to? So LOOK GOOD, STRUT IT, FLAUNT IT—NOW! and leave what's inside, inside!
<<http://made-in-italy.com/fashion/news/lynn/htm>>

In Italian texts, however, little explanation seems to be made of the term *bella figura*. Three recent publications that purport to describe *l'identità degli italiani* (Italian identity) do not use it, even though they write about specifically Italian cultural constructs such as *mafioso* and *campanilismo* and *la dolce vita*.¹ Yet the notion of *bella figura* informs descriptions of Italian life. For example, without specifically naming them as *bella figura* traits, Ruggiero Romano calls "*mangiare e bere, bestemmiare e sentire magico, un certo gusto estetico o il piacere della vita in piazza*" ("eating and drinking, swearing and feeling magic, a certain aesthetic sense or the pleasure of life in public") elements common to all Italians, despite regional differences (*Paese Italia* xvii).

Italians writing about Italian life in English also seem not to make specific mention of *bella figura*. For example, journalist Luigi Barzini, author of *The Italians: A Full-Length Portrait Featuring Their Manners and Morals*, never uses the term although he gives an apt description of it. In his chapter on the importance of spectacle,

Barzini says, “This reliance on symbols and spectacles must be clearly grasped if one wants to understand Italy, Italian history, manners, civilization, habits. . . . It is the fundamental trait of the national character” (90).

Despite its seeming absence in the sociological and anthropological literature written by Italians themselves, the concept of *bella figura* is facilitated and emphasized by the language’s habitual use of adjectival suffixes. Called *nomi alterati* (“altered nouns”), these suffixes create *sfumature* (“nuances”) of subtle distinction (Fontanesi and Ugolotti 144). In the case of *figura* the following apply:

1. *figuraccia* in which the *dispregiativo* or “depreciatory” suffix “*accia*” means “bad”;
2. *figurone* in which the *accrescitivo* or “augmentative” suffix “*one*” means “big”, which implies “good”;
3. *figurina* or *figuretta* or *figuruccia* in which the *diminutivo* or “diminisher” suffix *ina* or *etta* or *uccia* means “poor” or “measly”.

In addition, by affixing an “s” to the verb *figurare* and creating *sfigurare*, the opposite meaning is achieved: not to make the figure.²

My contention is that *bella figura* is a central metaphor of Italian life, admittedly an extremely complicated one. It is a construct that refers to face, looking good, putting on the dog, style, appearance, flair, showing off, ornamentation, etiquette, keeping up with the Joneses, image, illusion, esteem, social status, reputation—in short, self-presentation and identity, performance and display. Further, I contend (with Lakoff and Johnson)³ that as a cultural code it is deeply embedded as one of the primary arbiters of Italian social mores, so deeply imbedded that natives are frequently unaware (consciously at least) of conforming to it. But understanding Italian life is impossible without understanding the intensity with which one must *fare bella figura*.⁴

The term defies easy translation, making it perhaps even more important to attempt one, for, as Salman Rushdie advises his readers, “To unlock a society, look at its untranslatable words” (Burke, *Fortunes* 9). *Bella figura* is one such “word” in Italian. Dictionaries

cite a variety of contexts for its use. *Il Nuovo Dizionario Italiano Garzanti*, published in 1984 in Milan, defines *far figura* as “*essere appariscente*” (“to be showy or striking, remarkable”) and “*dare una buona impressione, apparire migliore della realtà*” (“to give a good impression, to appear better than the reality”) (610). However, the term is usually construed as *far(e) bella figura*, literally “to make a beautiful figure.” (Note that sometimes the final “e” of the infinitive “fare” is dropped). Garzanti says *far bella figura* means “*riuscire bene; ottenere apprezzamento e stima*” (“to make a beautiful figure” means “to succeed well; to obtain appreciation and respect”) (611). Its opposite exists as well, namely *fare brutta figura*, literally “to make an ugly figure.” There is also *fare cattiva figura*, in which *cattiva* translates as “bad,” a slightly stronger indictment than *brutta*. For example, someone who eats with his hands makes a *brutta figura* whereas someone who refuses to help his infirm father to eat his soup makes a *cattiva figura*.⁵

Clearly, *far(e) figura* is too complicated a notion to be captured by a single dictionary definition, but the fact that the construct is well demonstrated in the Italian language demonstrates its importance in the culture. Many are its ramifications. Clothing can be the subject of the verb: *un vestito che fa figura* (“a showy dress”). In this case the emphasis is on appearance. Performance can also be emphasized. One can *far figura nel parlare* (“to sound good”) or know how to perform a skill—such as embroidery or dance—that *fa figura*. This performance aspect can veer slightly away from the truth, so that sometimes very subtle deception is implied. For example, a woman can be told to “*lasciati il cappello se vuoi far figura*” (“leave your hat on if you want to *far figura*”) when her hair is unattractive that day. The *Grande Dizionario Hazon Garzanti: Inglese-Italiano, Italiano-Inglese*, the first edition of which was published in Milan in 1961, includes *fare la figura dello sciocco* (1372) to mean “to play the part of a fool” or “to act the fool.”⁶

Minor ramifications to *fare [bella] figura* exist as well. In *Il Nuovo Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana*, published in Florence in 1897, the adverbial phrase *di figura* (literally “of figure”) is defined as “*di cosa che ha bella apparenza, a cui non sempre corrisponde l'intrinseco*” (“about something which has a beautiful appearance, whose

appearance does not always correspond to the reality of it”) (725). The example is “*mobiglie di figura, ma costano poco*” which means “furniture *di figura* but which is inexpensive” (725). The word *figura* itself can also refer to a geometric figure, a personage, a rhetorical figure, a dance position, and the exterior of something, especially the human body. In these ways it is not unlike the English word “figure” to which it also refers in the sense of, literally, a physically “beautiful figure.”

Interestingly, if no adjective is used for *figura*, *bella* is intended. For example, to simply *far figura* means to look good. Sometimes, though, the negative tone of an utterance can substitute for an adjective in carrying the message of *brutta*. *Che figura che ho fatto!* (“What a figure I made!”) said in a tone of dismay implies a catastrophe.

Both *figura*, from the Latin *figura*, and *far figura* have a long tradition in written Italian. *Il Vocabolario degli accademici della crusca*, a dictionary published in Florence in 1612 by a group founded in 1583 and comparable to l’*academie française*, includes literary references to the term which go at least as far back as the 1500s. One example refers to the term in its rhetorical sense: “*la figura é quasi un abito del quale il parlare si veste e s’adorna*” (“figure is almost a suit with which speaking dresses and adorns itself”) (1123). From Manzoni’s *I Promessi Sposi*, written in the middle 1800s, comes “*Per quanto noi desideriamo di far fare buona figura al nostro povero montanaro . . .*” (“Inasmuch as we want our poor mountain boy to make ‘buona figura’ . . .”; [*buona* or “good” is an unusual replacement for “bella”]).

Il Nuovo Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana, also published in Florence in 1897, gives the following examples of meaning:

É un uomo che fa figura nelle conversazioni.

(He’s a man who makes *figura* in conversations.)

Nel Parlamento ci fa figura.

(He or she makes *figura* in Parliament.)

Cosí non si fa figura.

(This isn’t the way to make *figura*.)

È un bravo ragazzo, ma nelle scuole non ci fece mai figura.
(He's a good boy but in school he never made *figura*.)

Quella donna ai suoi tempi faceva figura.
(In her heydey that woman used to make *figura*.) (124)

Experts' opinions vary on precise meaning of the term *bella figura*, although all agree on the importance of its public quality.

Margherita Pieracci Harwell, an Italian native who is an associate professor of Italian at the University of Illinois at Chicago, agrees that *fare figura* is a central metaphor—if not THE central metaphor—to Italian life. “*Figurare vuol dire farsi notare*,” says Harwell. “*La figura è sempre legata all'apparenza. Se uno stesse rinchiuso in una stanza non conterebbe nulla.*” (“To figure means to make oneself be noticed. *Figura* is always linked to appearance. If one were to remain closed up in a room *figura* would not count at all.”) She stresses the public quality of *figura*: what difference would appearance make if there were no audience to appreciate it?

Another native informant, Marisa Bonaccorsi, sees *figura* as a code of conduct: “*Bella figura* is to behave in appropriate ways—it shows you're not wanting. You go out of your way so people won't criticize you.” Native Francesco Nardini agrees that *bella figura* courts societal approval for both men and women. “*Bella figura* has no gender,” he says; “it has social class more than gender. It is like a Sunday dress almost, something you put on to masquerade what you actually are; you try to be part of the group that already has the social status that you are looking for.”

Anthropologist Sydel Silverman links the concept with *civiltà*, a sense of civility which she views as one of the main themes of the urban traditions of Central Italy. She comments:

The concern with one's *bella figura*, or “good face,” is ever-present as a quite self-conscious guide to behavior. The concept is a measure of personal integrity, but it has little to do with one's essence, character, intention, or other inner condition; rather it centers upon public appearances. To acquire and preserve *bella figura* requires

being impeccable before the eyes of others. Physically, one must be as immaculate and elegant as possible; if not at all times, given the necessities of work, then at least when engaging in social interaction after work. One must always present a pleasant face to the world, regardless of the negative emotions that may simmer behind it. One must carefully observe the formalities already described; even an unintentional violation will cause a person to be-moan [of himself], "*Ho fatto brutta figura!*" One must show oneself to be knowledgeable of the proper order of rights and obligations in social relations. (A butcher's wife once lamented to me about the *brutta figura* she had made for erring in a judgment of two of her customers' relative social rank and awarding the last available pork chop to the wrong one.) (*Three Bells of Civilization* 40)

According to Harwell, *bella figura* is both class and age related. While it has to do with the image that one wants to present, Harwell sees this image as differentiated according to gender. She thinks that for men *bella figura* has to do with power and with sex—if a woman turns a man down, he will *fare brutta figura*. She thinks that for a woman the issue has to do with a more extensive series of issues: gentility, grace, thinking about others. She said, "*Per la donna la bella figura ha tante piccole faccette. È il desiderio di essere ammirate esteso in tanti campi.*" ("For the woman *bella figura* has many small facets. It is the desire to be admired extended to many different fields.")

An example from contemporary Italy may prove helpful in understanding these small facets. Here the current mores say that wedding gifts must be expensive in order to *fare bella figura*. As in the U.S., there exists a "*lista delle nozze*" ("bridal registry") in Italy, and guests have a sense of how much to spend in order to do the right thing. "*Per i regali di nozze pagano delle cifre enormi—entra la bella figura perché se io faccio un regalo da 50,000 e mio fratello lo fa di 500,000 poi faccio brutta figura,*" specifies Harwell. ("For wedding gifts they spend enormous sums—*bella figura* enters in because, if I give a 50,000 lire gift and my brother gives 500,000, I make an

ugly figure.”) Invited to the wedding of the daughter of a friend of hers, Harwell asked the mother what she could buy for a wedding present. The mother said that she could buy her daughter “*mutandine*” (“panties”), to Harwell’s mind a strangely inexpensive and private gift. It turned out that these *mutandine* were hand-embroidered silk panties which cost 180,000 lire each, in today’s money, about \$150. The girl’s close friends were in fact going out and buying them for her so she would have a set of six.

Harwell’s explanation for this peculiar gift request—which seemed at first to challenge her evaluation of the family as *senza pretese* (“without pretensions”)—concentrated on the point of display. Obviously, the girl was not going to run around in her panties. But she still could *fare bella figura* because gifts get shown to family and to friends. So the *mutandine* did more than just satisfy the Italian taste for beauty; they also created the appropriate effect on others when being shown off as a lovely wedding gift. “*Una parte di questo lusso é legato al fatto che si possono fare vedere. La bella figura é qualcosa che porta ammirazione,*” says Harwell. (“Part of this extravagance is linked to the fact that they [the gifts] can be shown. *Bella figura* is something which engenders admiration.”)⁷

Harwell spoke at length about how the manifestation of *bella figura* has changed in contemporary Italy. For example, forty years ago women would never have used “*parolacce*” (“bad words”—perhaps we would say “swear words” or “coarse language”) for fear of being judged unrefined themselves. Now relatives report to her that some women say, “*Non m’importa una sega*” (“I don’t give a shit”) along with the men.

As a case in point, Harwell related an instance of a store clerk who, while waiting on her in refined fashion, was simultaneously talking on the phone. The clerk was reporting to a friend about her participation in a protest against Italy’s old-fashioned universities. Unabashed, she mentioned that the sign she carried had said, “*Non mi rompere la vagina.*” (“Don’t bust my vagina” is a sort of female rendition of “Don’t bust my balls” or “*Non mi rompere i coglioni.*”) Apparently, the clerk considered this language not at odds with waiting on customers. She was not attacking Harwell, but lambasting a university system that she considered anti-female. The point,

however, is her use of the language at all. Harwell said that some years ago such *parolacce* would never have been used (and certainly not publicly) by a young woman in front of an older woman in a public setting. It would have meant untold *brutta figura*.

However, upon further reflection, Harwell said, "*Le cose sono cambiate ma non sono cambiate tanto. È eterno proprio.*" ("Things have changed but they haven't changed a lot. It's really eternal.") She gave as proof another story about Filomena, the same woman alleged to have said, "*Non m'importa una sega.*"

It is necessary to understand the Italian class system of fifty years ago to see what Harwell means. Filomena, in her seventies, is the cousin of the man who used to be the *contadino* ("one from the country" or "peasant" or "farmer," here used in the sense of "caretaker of the land") for the property which Harwell's family owned. She herself had been the *donna di servizio* ("nursemaid") in charge of the nine year old Harwell. Now this former "*donna di servizio-contadina*" lives happily as a retired housewife in a lovely condominium with her married daughter. They are "*chiaramente arricchiti*" ("clearly grown rich").

"*Contadino*" means "farmer," literally, but it is often used to mean "rustic" or "peasant" in a sense which is deprecatory—almost like "redneck" in English. According to Silverman, the level of "*civiltà*" ("civility") in Colleverde, a hilltop village in the province of Perugia not dissimilar from Harwell's own Tuscan village, is the most important indicator of prestige stratification. Among other qualities, this concept includes "a number of specifically urban patterns: fashionable clothing, nonrustic habitation, refined manners, nondialectal speech, participation in the cafe-and-piazza social life, and access (direct or indirect) to larger centers" ("An Ethnographic Approach" 912). A *contadino*, presumably, would have few of these prestige qualities; even an ex-*contadino* who has taken on village "ways" (by moving from the country or changing his *mezzadro* work status) is still "indelibly identified" (911) as in the lower prestige category.

In the elevator of the condominium one day, Filomena pointed out a neighbor with hostility, "*Vede quella donna lì? È una grande scema perché sa che cosa mi ha detto? 'Ma tu eri una contadina?*"

Perché si vede' . . . Pensi che ignorante!" ("Do you see that woman? She's a big dope because do you know what she said to me? 'But were you a *contadina*? Because you can see [that you were].' Just think how ignorant!")

According to Harwell, Filomena was obviously offended by the remark. However, her sense of the remark as insult had nothing to do with concealment, since Harwell knew her origins. After all, she had worked for Harwell's family. Also, according to Harwell, there is nothing the matter in today's Italy with looking like a "*contadina*." Harwell says, "*Perché lei si offende? Non dovrebbe. Cinquanta anni fa uno nascondeva la sua condizione sociale. Ma in questi ultimi anni c'è stata tutta una campagna per valorizzare il popolo versus la piccola borghesia. L'implicazione è che se uno non è nato principe allora meglio che sia nato contadino.*" ("Why is she offended? She shouldn't be. Fifty years ago one hid one's social condition. But in these last years there's been a big campaign [she means by the Communist Party] ennobling the advantages of the masses versus the bourgeoisie. The implication is that if you aren't born a prince, then it's better to be born a peasant.")

But Filomena had apparently maintained intact the notion of *bella figura* unchanged from years ago. To BE a "*contadina*" is one thing, but to look like one is too close to the negative meaning of the word for comfort. Even though her language made her appear "*piú evoluta, non si era evoluta nel modo di pensare*" ("more evolved, she hadn't evolved in her way of thinking"). For, as Harwell mentioned with some irony, "*Se le avesse detto 'sembra una maestra' non si sarebbe offesa.*" ("If they had told her, 'you look like an [elementary school] teacher' she wouldn't have been offended.") This example shows the extraordinary importance of non-*contadina* appearance to the issue of *bella figura*.

Giovanna Del Negro concurs. In a dissertation which studies the *passaggiata* or "promenade," the ritual stroll up and down the piazza in the hour before dinner, she says:

In Sasso the cultural desire to *fare bella figura* is collectively reenacted everytime Sassani perform their ritual *vasche*

(laps) down the main thoroughfare. . . . [Here] the consummate art of display is given full reign. With its emphasis on appearance, *bella figura* is largely measured in terms of demeanor and presentational style. . . . The most talented performers . . . usually possess what the Italians call *disinvoltura* (ease of manners) . . . , spontaneous and above all free from affectation. (*"Our Little Paris": Gender, Popular Culture and the Promenade in Central Italy* 52–55)

This notion of self as a social presentation for the consumption of others is widespread in the Mediterranean world. It is linked to the reputation which the community awards to its members. According to Pitkin, it represents "a kind of displacement of the interior self to the exterior where it becomes constructed as social fact. One is, for purposes of social discourse, what one is perceived to be" (98). Of course, this community of the *passaggiata* needs to be urban in orientation—piazza-like—rather than rural in order to provide the necessary audience to judge the *figura*. Since actors and audience are forever changing roles, the system continues to perpetuate itself for, according to Del Negro, "everywhere people are surrounded by mirrors" (4).

The concept of "honor and shame and the values of Mediterranean society" (Peristiany, Pitt-Rivers, among others) is useful in fixing a paradigm in which to place this development of a constructed social self as *figura*.⁸ In his vision of the Mediterranean as a geographical whole, that is, as a former Roman colony consisting of Spain, France, Italy, Greece, and northern Africa—a concept he and other anthropologists first discussed in 1959 at Burg Wartenstein—Peristiany sets up honor and shame as a binary opposition in which

Honour and shame are the constant preoccupation of individuals in small scale, exclusive societies where face-to-face personal, as opposed to anonymous, relations are of paramount importance and where the social personality of the actor is as significant as his office. (11)

The functioning of this paradigm depends, to some extent, upon honor being what Foster describes as a "limited good"; that is, actors must forever court public opinion—of which there is a finite amount—in order to be worthy of it.

Julio Caro Baroja associates the Spanish *honor* (in Italian, *onore*) with a medieval development arising from the *honos*, *honoris* of classical Latin meaning "ideas of respect, esteem and prestige . . . and . . . rewards, ornaments and clothes which elevate their bearer above the rest of the community" (82–83). He links the Spanish *verguenza* ("shame"; in Italian, *vergogna*) with the Latin *verecundia*, defined as "not only chastity and modesty . . . but also as respect for parents and elders . . . and as humility, reserve and respect for the laws and their representatives" (87). Then, in a series of complicated historical changes, he explains how these two concepts, both all-pervasive in the circum-Mediterranean, come to depend upon specific gender roles, especially upon notions of female chastity.

Clearly, this is a value system which favors men. That is, honor goes to the man who keeps his women chaste and shame to the man whose women are unchaste. A woman's honor lies solely in guarding her "shame," a particular demureness protecting her chastity, while a man's honor can also be won through other exploits with his social equals (other men). Therefore, shame can be both male and female while honor is exclusively male.

In 1987, David Gilmore set about to "reexamine fundamental assumptions about Mediterranean unity made on the basis of the original honor/shame model" (2). He edited *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*, acknowledging once again these specifically Mediterranean traits. But he added the crucial point that manifestations of honor and shame vary from country to country. For example, Michael Herzfeld proposes hospitality in place of honor, as he analyzes his ethnographic data from Greece. Other authors in this volume also extend Peristiany's original concepts. Stanley Brandes describes Spanish settings in which the word *honor* is rarely employed while *verguenza* (shame) appears frequently as a quality for both men and women. Michael Marcus describes Moroccan honor among rural strongmen of the past as a

facet of cooperation, rather than competition, as was previously thought. These researchers extend Mediterranean anthropology to include “a culturally, politically, and historically localized discourse” (Herzfeld 88).

While emphasizing the critical importance of gender perceptions and gender roles, Gilmore also questions what he calls the “sexual-contest perception” (5) as a distortion of contemporary Mediterranean values. To view women’s chastity as overwhelmingly important in all of Italy, for example, is an oversimplification, according to Gilmore. In fact, Maureen Giovannini—whose research in Sicily shows female chastity codes as still important there (65)—reiterates Silverman’s account, which proves the opposite to be true elsewhere.

In 1968 Silverman stated:

In a sense, the values related to sex have some basis in the agricultural system. Family honor in Southern Italy, as in other Mediterranean areas, is largely vested in the virginity of the girls. Masculinity is asserted (sometimes violently) by the protection of one’s own virgins, the vindication of one’s violated girls, and the conquest of other families’ virgins. *In Central Italy, these themes of virginity and the contest over it are much softened. Girls have considerable freedom of movement, loss of virginity is not taken seriously, violence is almost unheard of, and the whole subject is injected with humor.* (“Agricultural Organization” 16; emphasis mine)

Therefore, setting aside the absolutist concern with female chastity, and allowing for country-by-country differences, particularly in the naming of honor and shame, this paradigm would seem to work in Italy. Specifically, it makes sense that the concepts of honor and shame create external constraints or boundaries in a society where personhood is paraded in the piazza—rather than located in the inner self and bounded by guilt.

Peter Burke, a cultural historian, re-iterates this anthropological concept when he speaks of “three Europes: north-western,

southern, and eastern. Thus, Southern Europe, Mediterranean Europe, was Romance-speaking, Catholic . . . with an outdoor culture . . . and a value-system laying great stress on honour and shame" (*Popular Culture* 57).

In Italy, specifically, *figura* can be thought of as encompassing both honor and shame. That is, *bella figura* represents "honor" (a word in most Italian contexts seldom mentioned) and *brutta figura* "shame" or *vergogna* (a word more frequently mentioned). Shame or *brutta figura* is, above all, visual and public—it requires an audience. "In the psychic mechanism of shaming, it is the 'eye' of the community and the related sense of paranoid observation that are assimilated to worldview and to personality" (Gilmore 101). Thus, the absorption with making a *bella figura*. Gender identification is linked in the way that men and women make *bella figura*—that is, the roles are acted out in distinct, sometimes contrasting fashion—but both sexes have equal access to the benefits of performing well. In its revisionary view, this is not a particularly sexist system.

It is, however, one which remains difficult to understand for those who have internalized the notion of self as an interior mechanism restrained by guilt. Many Americans, regardless of their specific ethnicities, have learned to valorize the "idealization of the rural in English thought and the mythification of nature in German consciousness" (Pitkin 99). These landscapes are the opposite of the "urbanscape" which Pitkin links to the making of a *bella figura*. Of necessity, someone who speaks of the "inner self" as found in communing with nature—the English romantics, for example, gave rise to what Burke calls a "culture of sincerity" (*Fortunes* 108)—tends to see the putting on of a *figura* as a kind of deception. While there is, according to Del Negro, "always some level of artifice and impression management involved" (personal e-mail correspondence), to see *figura* as exclusively (or even primarily) put-on is to miss the point.

Many American writers do. Casillo, for example, speaks of Jake La Motta in the film *Raging Bull* as attempting to claim for himself

that violence and invulnerability that pagan religions ascribe to the gods. Thus he would achieve the ultimate *bella figura*—godlike status in the eyes of a simultaneously idolatrous and envious crowd for which all-powerful violence is the unacknowledged sign of divinity. (391)

But *bella figura* is not a sometime thing—not a showing off which is controlled only by certain circumstances. Rather, it is a deeper, more constant construction performed all the time, mostly as a matter of course. This is not to say that Jake La Motta was not claiming for himself “the ultimate *bella figura*”—he probably was; but, in so doing, he was not restricting the meaning of it to violent spectacle. His choice of violent performance—and the crowd’s adulation of it—are ethical issues separate from his performance of *bella figura*.

Another misunderstanding occurs in Fred Gardaphé’s analysis of *The Godfather*.

In the Don’s speech to the heads of the other crime families after the murder of Sonny, he attempts to make peace through an appeal to the American Dream, but the whole speech is an example of *bella figura*, a public posturing designed to shield his true plans and to present the illusion that he is willing to assimilate to the American ways of doing illegal business. (91)

But the performance of *bella figura* does not get turned on and off, in almost schizophrenic fashion, by the Italian performing it. This is not to say that the Don’s speech could not have been duplicitous, a “public posturing designed to shield his true plans”—it certainly could have been. But the *bella* (or *brutta*) *figura* of it is a separate issue. If the Don’s intention had been to express honest thinking and feeling, his rhythmical language, poetic use of metaphor, and parallel constructions would have been just as good an example of *bella figura*. In fact, his creation of ethos—a sort of us-*v.*-them mentality implicit in “None of us here want to see our

children follow in our footsteps" (91)—is quintessential *bella figura*. Veracity, or the lack thereof, has nothing to do with anything in this case.

Helen Barolini, American-born author of *Umbertina*, also misunderstands this notion of facade: "I lived a long while in Italy and came to associate it with a kind of cover-up—where there was little or no substance, style (*bella figura*) could make the effect" (personal correspondence).

What all of these interpretations share is a peculiarly American naiveté which sees *figura* as somehow separate from the true self, the pristine, unadorned self. They fail to comprehend the very subtle, all-encompassing, and public ways in which the expression of Italian identity is imbricated in creating *bella figura*. Thus, those who ask, "Where is the real person behind the *bella figura*?" fail to understand the point: *bella figura* is a social construction of identity that depends upon public performance for its reification. In its "interaction between personal aspiration and assessment by others" (Pitkin 98), it becomes part of the real person's creation and presentation of self. To oversimplify, the "real person" is *in the bella figura*.

A mention of the etymological history of the word "performance" is in order here, for one American difficulty in misunderstanding *figura* may lie in the way in which these two concepts are linked. While *The Oxford English Dictionary* clearly defines "performance" as "the action of performing a ceremony, play, part in a play, piece of music, etc., formal or set execution" (543), it also lists many other meanings for the word. Among them are "the carrying out of a duty" and "the execution of anything undertaken"; other definitions denote psychological and/or linguistic meanings. The root word "perform" comes from Middle English adapted from the Old French *par*—*perfourmer*—*furmer*—*former*—meaning either "to carry through in due form" or "to accomplish entirely." Thus, in general, "performance" implies a doing of something undertaken as a task.

In all eleven definitions from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "performance" has only one slightly negative meaning: a twentieth century definition of "display of temperament, anger or

exaggerated behavior, a fuss or 'scene' ” (544). The verb “perform” also has no negative meanings except for its use in recent Australian slang: “to display extreme anger or bad temper; to swear loudly; to make a great fuss” (544). Why then the American tendency to limit the meaning of the word to its stage concept? Why associate it with behavior which covers up or is somehow lacking in veracity? This limitation seems of recent date.

Some Historical Notions

An impressionistic and cursory note on Italian history is in order here. Romano claims that thirty centuries of Italian identity begin with the Romans who provide “*Un modello costituito dal diritto, dalla lingua, da un certo senso della vita di relazione (teatri, terme, arene . . .)*” (5). (“A model constituted by law, language, and a certain sense of social life [theatres, baths, arenas . . .]”; [emphasis mine]). If we construe this phrase to mean an understanding of human relations as public and performed, then Roman influence on Italian identity can be linked to *bella figura*.

The importance of ceremony can also be traced to the Middle Ages. Speaking of feudalism Romano says:

L'aspetto formale é presente anche nell'atto di vassallaggio: il vassus pone le mani in quelle del signore, manifestando in tal modo il suo totale darsi a quest'ultimo, il quale, a sua volta, con poche parole accetta l'offerta del vassus. Intervengono dunque, parole e gesti e, molto probabilmente, sono piú i secondi che le prime, ad avere peso e senso. (40)

[The formal aspect is present even in the act of vassallage: the vassal puts his hands into the lord's, thus demonstrating his total giving of himself to the latter, who, in his turn, accepts with few words the offer of the vassal. Therefore, both words and gestures occur, and, *very probably, the gestures have more weight and meaning than the words.*] (Emphasis mine)

This investiture can also be linked to *bella figura* in the sense that real benefits—loyalty to the lord, on the one hand, and use of the land by the vassal, on the other—occur through a symbolic act in which the public performance of the gestures carries the meaning.

Harwell traces *bella figura* in particular to Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, the first draft of which was composed in 1508, during the height of the Renaissance. The Renaissance rendered Italians famous for their art, their food, their decorating, their design, their artisanship, their music, their grace, a reputation which they retain today. It is interesting to note that all these elements depend upon a visual performance for their effect.⁹

Italians seem to have always been very good at spectacle. Burke speaks of Italy as

the best evidence for improvised drama in the *commedia dell'arte* . . . often known during this time as *commedia all'improvviso*. Whether Italians extemporised more readily than other performers or whether their performances have simply been recorded more carefully, it is difficult to say. (*Popular Culture* 143)

Either way, attention to *figura* seems paramount, for the recording itself is a testimony to the importance of spectacle.

In fact, Jacob Burckhardt describes a “national passion for external display” (274) as a singular characteristic of Italian Renaissance during which the “chief points of superiority in the Italian festivals” are described as “the capacity to invent a given mask, and to act the part with dramatic propriety” (301). He describes in great detail the “pomp and brilliancy” (300) of the secular *Trionfi* (“triumphs”) modeled on the processions of the Roman Emperor. No efforts were spared: in Milan, the great Leonardo directed pantomimes! In Venice festival processions, replete with allegorical figures and elaborate masks, moved on water.

The strong historic sense of the Italians allowed them to group and compose characters and scenes effectively; the public was a competent critic of this piazza artistry, having seen it all their lives. This creation of literary, political, spiritual, and historical perfor-

mances with a “view to splendid and striking scenic effects” (307) emphasizes the idea of *figura* and also makes it available on a regular basis. Mystery plays, feast-day processions, great court festivals, brilliant pantomimes, Carnival—some of which continue today—were a continuance of Italian national life as performance. Says Burckhardt, “The Italian festivals in their best form mark a point of transition from real life into the world of art” (2).

Another example of the continuing importance of historical tradition is provided by the medieval cathedral found in Barga, a nucleated center of 5,000 in the province of Lucca. A plaque is mounted on this Duomo with the words of adopted citizen, romantic poet Giovanni Pascoli. Written in the late 1800s, the inscription says:

Al tempo dei tempi, avanti il Mille, i Barghigiani campavano rosicchiando castagne, e fecero il Duomo. Dicevano: “in casa mia ch'io salti anche da un travicello all'altro; benedetta libert a.” Ma il Duomo ha da essere grande, col pi u bel pulpito di marmo che si possa vedere e col pi u forte dei Santi. Dicevano: “Piccolo il mio, Grande il nostro.”

[Once upon a time, before the year 1000, people from Barga got by by gnawing on chestnuts, and they built the Duomo. They would say, “In my house let me even jump from beam to beam; who cares!” But the Duomo must be large, with the most beautiful marble pulpit that anyone has ever seen; and with the holiest of Saints. They would say: “Let mine be little, but ours should be big.”]

Pascoli's words blend the real-life efforts of the anonymous stone masons and carvers and painters and sculptors who built the Duomo with the world of art to which the building now belongs. The “transition” which he provides, this linking of the past with the present, depends upon an understanding of the *figura* which the participants wished to create. It is fascinating to see this viewpoint, separated by nine centuries, evidence itself with the

same singularity of intent! Additional credence to the *bella figura* lies in the fact that the plaque was erected to celebrate the reconstruction of the Duomo during the Fascist Era.

Castiglione, who himself served in the Court of the Duke of Urbino from 1504 to 1508, intends to describe

the trade and maner of courtiers, which is most convenient for a gentleman that liveth in the Court of Princes, by the which he may have the knowledge how to serve them perfetely in every reasonable matter, and obtaine thereby favour of them, and praise of other men. (15)

Evoking a “tradition of behavior to which Aristotle, Cicero, rules for monks, and courtesy books for knights and ladies all made contributions” (Burke, *Fortunes* 153), this decidedly upper-class experience becomes especially important to the practice of good manners throughout Western Europe. Of particular importance is the way in which the perfect Italian chooses understated elegance:

Therefore will I have our Courtier to descend many times to more easie and pleasant exercises . . . but let him laugh, dally, jest, and daunce, yet in such wise that he may alwaies declare him selfe to be wittie and discrete, and every thing that hee doth or speaketh, let him doe it with a grace. . . .

Therefore that may bee saide to be a verie arte, that appeareth not to be arte, neither ought a man to put more diligence in any thing than in covering it: for in case it be open, it looseth credite cleane and maketh a man litle set by. (Castiglione 49, 53; emphasis mine)

In short, Castiglione heralds here the kind of artful grace which appears artless; it is a further ramification of the connection between appearance and *bella figura*. Castiglione calls this quality *sprezzatura*, (mistranslated by Hoby as “recklessness”). The term implies a studied carelessness, a nonchalant display which conceals the efforts expended to acquire it.