

Chapter 1

JACOB RIIS: IMMIGRANTS OLD AND NEW, AND THE MAKING OF AMERICANS

The Italian comes in at the bottom, and in the generation that came over the sea he stays there.

—Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890

It was their home. They were children of the dump, literally. All of them except one were Italian.

—Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890

He was a poor little maimed boy with a sober face, and it wrings my heart now, the recollection of the look he gave me when I plumped out: “Pietro, do you ever laugh?” “I did wunst,” he said.

—Jacob Riis, *The Peril and the Preservation of the Home*, 1903

In his chapter “The Italian in New York” in *How the Other Half Lives*, the journalist and pioneering photographer Jacob A. Riis begins by discussing the transformation of the Italian immigrant as he makes his way from the Old World to the New. Riis notes that Italians form a “picturesque, if not very tidy, element” in New York City’s burgeoning population. By 1890, when *How the Other Half Lives* was published, the stream of Italian immigration was

indeed threatening to become a flood, and that flood most threatened New York City. The Italian, Riis says, “claims so large a share of public attention, partly because he keeps coming at such a tremendous rate, but chiefly because he elects to stay in New York.” Once ensconced in the tenements of New York’s Lower East Side, the Italian “promptly reproduces conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the frame-work of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach.”¹ The Italian is equally picturesque, equally romantic, in both an Old World Campagnan field and a New World Manhattan alley. Any change in the Italian during transplantation is not so much with the Italian himself, but rather with his relationship to his environment and how Americans perceive that relationship. In Italy, in “the frame-work of Mediterranean exuberance,” in its “natural” environment, the Italian’s “destitution and disorder” can be naturalized, aestheticized, framed within the artist’s canvas or the travel writer’s prose sketches. Thus contained, destitution and disorder are a fit subject for artistic delight, as they had been for the countless American writers, artists, and amateur sketchers who had traveled to Italy in the nineteenth century. Having never been to Italy, Riis knew of this delight only secondhand, through America’s entrenched vision of picturesque Italy and the images of poor, chaotic Italy that had been circulating in America for at least a century.

Riis was more directly acquainted with Italians in New York, where transplanted into the context of American “matter-of-fact” practicality and reality, these same destitute and disorderly Italians become something less benign. Their very picturesqueness, while still quaint, exotic, and seductive, becomes both a menace and a rebuke to American character and American progress. Here in America, the Italian is still a subject for the illustrators and sentimental travel writers who venture into New York’s Lower East Side to produce colorful sketches and articles for magazines such as *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* and *The Cosmopolitan*. However, the Italian now is also a subject for the documentary photographer and the journalist and, perhaps more important, a “problem” for the social scientist and the reformer, all roles that Riis played at one time or another. In Italy, the Italian is the stuff of cultural romance; in New York, although still picturesque in his dirt and disorder, the Italian is a threatening, provocative, and seductive reality.

Riis’s dichotomy is a neat one in that it schematizes commonly held contradictory attitudes toward the Italian at the turn of the century. For many Americans, Italy still was the land of art, history, culture, and romance. This continuing fascination resulted in a flood of travelogues, guidebooks, antiquarian studies, historical novels, and poems that peaked around the turn of the century, making the Gilded Age a golden age of travel writing, with Italy the crown jewel.² However, this golden age of travel writing coin-

cided exactly with the period of greatest Italian immigration to the United States. And for many of those same Americans, Italy was becoming the distrusted source of the hundreds of thousands of picturesque, but dirty and menacing, Italian peasants pouring into a New York City ill equipped to handle, absorb, or assimilate them. By the mid-1890s, even someone as sympathetic to the Italians as William Dean Howells could begin seeing the immigrants as alien intruders. He wonders by what "malign chance" the Italians have metamorphosed from the "friendly folk" they are "at home" in Italy to the "surlly race they mostly show themselves here: shrewd for their advancement in material things, which seem the only good things to the Americanized aliens of all races, and fierce for their full share of the political pottage."³

Riis's own reaction to and interpretation of the Italian's attractive yet threatening reality are curiously contradictory, and in their contradictions are representative of large segments of American society during the decades surrounding the turn of the century. In his writings about Italian and other immigrant groups, Riis melds stereotypes and sympathy, and reveals himself as a far more complex commentator than the classic progressive reformer he has been made out to be. A closer look exposes a journalist/reformer with deeply divided attitudes toward the new immigrants and their prospects for assimilation. Riis's written and photographic representations of the immigrants are of particular interest for a number of reasons. Riis himself was an immigrant who later in life wrote a very popular autobiography tellingly titled *The Making of an American*. Riis's commentary on the new immigrants becomes even more interesting when read alongside and against the work of another immigrant journalist, Edward A. Steiner, whose *On the Trail of the Immigrant* appeared sixteen years after *How the Other Half Lives*. Broadly speaking, Riis, a Scandinavian Protestant, and Steiner, a Hungarian Jew, represent the old and the new immigration to America, a distinction that was deeply etched into the American consciousness. The experiences of these two journalists and their writings on the new immigrants, when examined together, offer sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary commentaries on the nature of the Italian (and other new) immigrants, the prospects for their assimilation, and what it meant to be and become an American around the turn of the century.

As an immigrant, Jacob August Riis was both typical and atypical. He was born in 1849 in the ancient town of Ribe in southwest Denmark, into "a homogenous, family-centered, industrious Lutheran society, with only mild manifestations of class divisions."⁴ Riis's father taught Latin and Greek at a centuries-old preparatory academy and occasionally did part-time editorial work for the local newspaper. The father envisioned a literary career for Riis, but the young man, hearing of golden opportunities in America, left Denmark in 1870. Riis himself would say that it was James Fenimore Cooper's

novels that “first set my eyes toward the west.”⁵ But Riis found little of Cooper’s imagined America when he landed in New York. The city was half provincial capital and half world capital, a city on the brink of an incredible demographic transformation that would swell its population and give it a distinctly foreign look. According to *The Making of an American*, the greenhorn Riis lived on the edge of poverty, tramping in and around New York, and at one point ending up in a police lodging house. He did odd jobs and pursued odd schemes, becoming in succession a roustabout, laborer, salesman, and reporter for small newspapers. Through it all, he maintained his stubborn pride and unwavering optimism, relying on values that had been formed in Denmark, including religious faith, respect for education, and reverence for the family.⁶ Two things happened in 1887 that would dramatically alter his fortunes. He landed a job as a probationary reporter for the New York *Tribune*, and he read a four-line dispatch from Germany announcing the discovery of flashlight photography. Riis hooked up with photographers Henry G. Piffard and Richard Hoe Lawrence, two distinguished amateurs interested in flash, and began making nighttime raiding parties into the tenement districts, essentially taking photos by proxy. On January 25, 1888, armed with one hundred slides of photos taken in New York’s slums, Riis delivered a lecture, “The Other Half—How It Lives and Dies in New York,” before the Society of Amateur Photographers. The lantern-slide lecture was intended to highlight the work of Piffard and Lawrence, but Riis, using the “sunshine and shadow” conventions of the day, took the talk to another level, giving his audience a titillating tour of the city’s seamier side.⁷ In short order, the lecture became a newspaper story (“Flashes from the Slums”), a magazine article, and finally the book that launched Riis’s career as a influential journalist, lecturer, and reformer.⁸ By the time of his death in 1914, Riis had delivered numerous lantern-slide lectures across the country and written hundreds of newspaper stories, dozens of magazine articles, and fifteen books.

Riis tells his classic rags-to-respect story in his unorthodox *The Making of an American* (1901), which is by turns guileless and shrewd, idealistic and realistic, egotistical and disarmingly candid. In it, Riis takes most pride in his Americanness and in his work as “a reporter of facts” who loved his fellow man.⁹ The book enjoyed great popular success, selling out two editions in three weeks.¹⁰ Riis saw himself (and was seen) as the quintessential self-made immigrant whose life was a morality tale of complete assimilation and unabashed nationalism verging on jingoism.¹¹ Prominent reformer, confidante of Theodore Roosevelt, and national treasure, Riis was seen to embody the American Spirit.¹²

Obviously, Riis’s tale is much different from the stories of the immigrants who would serve as the foundation for not only Riis’s assimilation, but also his fame and prominence. Riis’s middle-class northern European roots

(and looks), rudimentary knowledge of English, and occupational skills gave him valuable advantages over the mostly lower-class southern and eastern European immigrant groups who constituted the vast majority of New York's "other half." Riis's native beliefs and values had more in common with native-born Americans than with the ethnic groups that constituted the so-called new immigration.¹³ Consequently, Riis's relationship with the later immigrants is a curious one. At least one critic has argued that Riis rarely acknowledges the distinct advantage he had over the new immigrants and consequently exhibited toward them "a racism which from the outset closely coincided with the nativist ideology" of the day.¹⁴ However, it is not as simple as that. Riis comes at the new immigrants from a number of different perspectives and for that reason serves as a particularly rich source on questions of American identity and national character, assimilation, and attitudes toward the Other at the turn of the century. "He invariably asked what the character of the American city was and what the future of an American society would be. His questions implicated almost every nativist fear about the transfiguration of the American city by the immigrant and the impoverished."¹⁵

By the time Riis began depicting the poor and the immigrants—these two groups were by now nearly synonymous—the slum dweller and the foreigner were already a topic of strong interest for police reporters, photographers, novelists, true-crime writers, muckrakers, and social reformers. There already existed an established tradition of urban literature in which magazines featured poor but picturesque urban peasants.¹⁶ The same year that *How the Other Half Lives* was published, *Harper's Weekly* undertook a series of illustrated articles on "The 'Foreign Element' in New York City." William Rogers, the leading exponent of the picturesqueness of poverty, provided illustrations that depicted the immigrants as hard working, proud, and self-sufficient, if somewhat downtrodden. Rogers's illustrations provided a sympathetic, humanizing counterpoint to articles that sometimes carried a more negative tone. The piece on Italian immigrants describes two distinct classes of Italians: the fairer complected northerners who are enterprising and "full of energy" in the French mode, and the "swarthy" southern Italians who are "by no means slow to anger, and who repel an insult with a thrust of the stiletto." These Neapolitans and Sicilians are "inclined to the philosophy which finds its highest expression in loafing and lying at one's ease." Unlike their northern cousins, the poorest (read southern) Italians are vocational failures "simply because they are too ignorant to rise from the social slough of despond in which they find themselves." While praising the poor Italians' honesty and hard work, the article offers this faint and damning praise: "The poorer class of Italians are ignorant, but they are not *all* lazy or bad. They are keenly grateful for any kindness that is shown them, and most of them are not mentally vigorous enough to be evil." These comments are indicative of

certain attitudes toward the Italians at this time, many of which are echoed by Riis. By italicizing the word “all,” the article implies that *most* Italian immigrants *are* lazy and bad. And although most Italians are bad, they are not smart enough to be evil, a curious distinction.¹⁷

In addition to magazine articles, a number of books testify to the hungry market for glimpses of the city’s “other half.” By the 1880s, the press and popular literature had established the literary convention of an urban landscape so fragmented, so alien, as to turn quarters of the city into “another country.”¹⁸ Although Riis would claim that his title, *How the Other Half Lives*, was original, pure inspiration on his part, “‘the other half’ was not least among a battery of well-worn tropes evoking ‘nether’ regions that presented an ‘excursionist’ with scenes so alien, forbidding, or disgusting that they required the mediation of journalists or artists.”¹⁹ Increasingly, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the city was being seen as a symbol of menace, mystery, darkness, and shadows, a place in need of light and reason, a text to be deciphered, comprehended, and demystified. “American letters, often drawing upon biblical images of the fallen city or upon the hope of a New Jerusalem, made it possible and popular to see the city as divided. One half was dark, resistant to Christian virtue and not amenable to social control and order; the other half dwelt in light and was propertied, stable, virtuous, and domestic.”²⁰ Afraid of losing touch with and control over the “other half,” the privileged half sought ways to ward off the dangers. The urgency of the situation was evident at the Christian Conference that Riis attended in New York in early December 1888. Riis says the goal was “to discuss how to lay hold of these teeming masses in the tenements with Christian influences.”²¹ However, speakers “discussed how the ‘foreign’ element was responsible for vice and crime, how the non-Anglo-Saxon was resistant to assimilation, how a rising Catholic populace contested the hegemony of American Protestant mores.”²²

Charles Loring Brace’s *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872) best typifies the charity writing that would to some degree influence Riis’s work. It focused on the miserable living conditions in the slums (overcrowding, filth, extremes of heat and cold, lack of air and sunlight) and the ills of the urban poor (crime, beggary, disease, disorder, dissolution of family life). At the same time Brace proposed redeeming Protestant virtues (cleanliness, industry, order, temperance) as the solution to these social problems. Riis takes up the same subjects and employs many of the same tropes found in Brace. Like Brace, Riis combines anecdote and statistic, generalizes about ethnic and racial groups, compares immigrant types, and invokes the immigrant homelands as a contrast to the New York slums. While influenced by Brace and the religious groups that sponsored his lantern-slide lectures, Riis is usually seen as part of a newer reform movement that had begun to chal-

lenge traditional moral descriptions and analyses that attributed poverty to individual vice.²³ This new reform movement was more apt to offer an environmental explanation for poverty and vice. Riis attributed his reform impulses to his professional contacts with the genteel, progressive members of the New York Board of Health. "Part of the growing group of middle-class technicians who would manage the legislative fiats of the coming Progressive Era, they had a faith in science, reason, progress, and the cultural superiority of Anglo-Saxon institutions," James B. Lane writes. "Energetic, moralistic, sentimental, nationalistic, and above all optimistic, Riis was confident that the rational and scientific control of the environment would set the conditions for a world of harmony by allowing the spirit of goodness that was in all men to flower."²⁴ This standard view of Riis sees him as an enlightened moral and social crusader, but one who did not always rise above the racial and ethnic stereotyping of his day. "Riis justifiably could be chided for his occasional exaggerated characterization of some groups in the polyglot populations of New York," writes Alexander Alland Sr., who, like Riis, was an immigrant and a photographer interested in social reform.²⁵ In fact, racial stereotypes permeate Riis's descriptions in *How the Other Half Lives*: The Chinaman is stealthy and scrupulously neat, the Jew obsessively thrifty, the Negro sensual and superstitious.

Riis devotes separate chapters of *How the Other Half Lives* to five "racial" groups: Italians, Chinese, Jews, Bohemians, and blacks. By segregating these groups and their racial/national idiosyncrasies into discrete chapters, Riis not only perpetuated the stereotypes but also gave assurances that "the other half" was perfectly atomized, and therefore perhaps less menacing. "The general subject was not only more easily apprehended according to ready categories but also more easily contained given the evident internal divisions."²⁶ If these various racial/national groups were subsumed in "the other half," it was a half that Riis divides into discrete parts. He may speak of New York's "queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements"(19), but he depicts the individual groups as homogenous. Riis consistently deals with each group in the singular—referring to the Italian, the Chinaman, and so on—thereby implying a certain sameness to members of each racial/national group. Riis's use of the singular case allows him to essentialize each group into a type; in essence, it serves as a shorthand for stereotyping the various groups, who can then be compared and contrasted to each other. We will see examples of this by turning to Riis's specific representations of "the Italian."

Not surprisingly, the Italians are the first group Riis treats in detail in *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis is both attracted to and repelled by the colorful, chaotic Italian and his colorful, chaotic neighborhoods. In one short passage about an Italian quarter of the Mulberry Bend, Riis conflates the Italian's colorful picturesqueness and his chaotic violent streak, making the

Italian the target of both the tourist and the police. Riis points out the Italian's red bandanna and yellow handkerchiefs, his "infinitely" sweet tongue, and all the "ristorantes" of the innumerable Pasquales. "[H]alf of the people in 'the Bend' are christened Pasquale, or get the name in some other way," Riis writes, before oddly segueing from Pasquale the restaurant owner to Pasquale the murderer. "When the police do not know the name of an escaped murderer, they guess at Pasquale and send the name out on alarm; in nine cases out of ten it fits" (52). Riis's contradictory responses to the Italian continue throughout *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis's Italian is colorful, destitute, disorderly, and dirty—and he does not seem to mind his degraded condition. With regard to cleanliness, the Italian is seen as immensely inferior to the Negro but on a par with the Polish Jew, with whom he constitutes "the lowest of the whites" (116). Riis here echoes the theme of the dirty, disordered Italian so vividly captured by Brace in *The Dangerous Classes*. Brace describes the Italian tenements as a "a bedlam of sounds, and a combination of odors from garlic, monkeys and the most dirty human persons," concluding, "They were, without exception, the dirtiest population I had met with."²⁷

The Italian gravitates naturally to slums, according to Riis, and where he does not find a slum, he creates one, "if allowed to follow his natural bent, which is to come in at the bottom, and, at least in the first generation, to remain there" (43). The "Italian hordes" are pushing out from the Bend "in ever increasing numbers, seeking, according to their wont, the lowest level" (32). Rather than improve the Negro neighborhoods, the infiltration of the Italian in some ways only exacerbates the situation. Where the Negro, the Italian, and the tramp from the Bend meet on Thompson Street, what results is "the aptly-named black-and-tan saloon," the "border-land where the white and the black races meet in common debauch." Without elaborating, Riis concludes: "Than this commingling of the utterly depraved of both sexes, white and black, on such ground, there can be no greater abomination" (119). The depiction of the Italian as a slum-maker is intriguing in that it runs counter to Riis's environmental explanation for poverty and vice. Here, Riis seems to be saying that you can take the Italian out of the slum but you cannot take the slum out of the Italian. In a later chapter, "What Has Been Done," Riis qualifies his assessment. Pointing to a new model tenement in the Bend, Riis says of the Italian: "With his fatal contentment in the filthiest surroundings, he gives undoubted evidence of having in him the instinct of cleanliness that, properly cultivated, would work his rescue in a very little while" (218).

For all his faults, Riis's Italian is a docile, attractive tenant who makes less trouble than the "contentious Irishman" or the "order-loving German." The Italian is "content to live in a pig-sty and submits to robbery at the

hands of the rent-collector without a murmur." He is an uncomplaining victim of the *padrone* system, trusting in his unscrupulous countryman "with the instinct of utter helplessness." He is a slow learner, unable to write his native language, knows no English, and lacks any instinct or desire to learn. "The man is so ignorant that, as one of the sharpers who prey upon him put it once, it 'would be downright sinful not to take him in.' His ignorance and unconquerable suspicion of strangers dig the pit into which he falls." Of course, all these attributes—fatalism, submission, helplessness—run counter to the American virtues of self-reliance, energy, and initiative that Riis valued so much and tried to emulate. Also un-American is the Italian's failure with the English language. "Unlike the German, who begins learning English the day he lands as a matter of duty, or the Polish Jew, who takes it up as soon as he is able as an investment, the Italian learns slowly, if at all" (43). Encoded in this comparison are important racial/national distinctions that go beyond the ability or willingness to learn. Riis's comparison sets up a hierarchy of learning. The Italian is at the bottom; he lacks both the ability and the desire to learn English. The Polish Jew learns quickly because he sees the English language as a utilitarian business investment. Learning English will help him make more money, a worthy American pursuit, even if Riis's grasping Jew takes it to extremes. The German, who is most like Riis and most like the Anglo-Saxon American, not only has the most aptitude for the English language, but also the best, most American motivation. Riis implies that if the Polish Jew learns for commercial reasons, the German learns for civic reasons, out of a dutiful desire to make himself a better citizen of his new homeland. In this hierarchy, the Italian is far inferior to the northern European Teuton, but also below his fellow "new immigrant" Polish Jew.

Despite his shortcomings, Riis's docile and ignorant Italian "manages to turn the very dirt of the streets into a hoard of gold." In Italy, the Italian might turn beggary into "a fine art," but in New York he represents a much smaller percentage of the street beggars than does the native-born American, Irishman, or German, Riis says, citing statistics. On this score, the tenement "has no power to corrupt the Italian, who comes here in almost every instance to work" (194). In general, the Italian finds his gold in recycling the bones, rags, and tin cans of New York's ash-barrel. "Whenever the back of the sanitary police is turned, he will make his home in the filthy burrows where he works by day, sleeping and eating his meals under the dump, on the edge of slimy depths and amid surroundings full of unutterable horror." However, even this example of individual Italian initiative is tainted. Once an "independent 'dealer,'" the Italian rag-picker is now a simple laborer in a work gang controlled by the corrupt, rapacious *padrone* (44).

A "born gambler," the Italian is at his worst on the Sabbath, "when he settles down to a game of cards and lets loose all his bad passions," Riis

writes. "His soul is in the game from the moment the cards are on the table, and very frequently his knife is in it too before the game is ended" (44). This is a curious characterization in that it equates bad passions with the Italian soul, both of which are directed toward gambling on the very day that should be devoted to matters of the spirit. These bad passions are given vent with a knife that the Italian keeps concealed on his body. Just as the Negro has his "razor in his boot-leg" and the Chinaman his "knife in his sleeve," so too the Italian has his "stiletto in the bosom" (119). Riis's Italian is not only violent, but also underhanded in the manner of the Negro and the Chinaman. Riis himself apparently had no argument with *unconcealed* weapons. Landing in New York, he had spent exactly half his capital on a "navy revolver of the largest size," strapped it on, and strode up Broadway, thinking he was "following the fashion of the country." When a police officer suggested the revolver was better left at home, Riis was relieved to be free of the heavy weapon.²⁸ Riis need not have worried about being attacked by an Italian, for the Italian's violence is directed at his own kind. Justice, too, is the Italian's alone, Riis says. The Italian crime victim will not cooperate with the police, but instead "wards off all inquiries with a wicked 'I fix him myself,' and there the matter rests until he either dies or recovers." If the victim recovers, the police will get news of another stabbing, a dead or dying man "fixed, and the account squared" (47). Only the Chinese, Riis says, are more adept at putting up obstacles to police investigations (82).

"With all his conspicuous faults," Riis concludes, "the swarthy Italian immigrant has his redeeming traits. He is as honest as he is hot-headed." He may have been a brigand in Italy, but generally "the ex-brigand toils peacefully with pickaxe and shovel on American ground." He might murder a countryman over a card game, but his worst offense is keeping the stale-beer dives that contribute to dissolution and vice. In short, the Italian is "gay, light-hearted and, if his fur is not stroked the wrong way, inoffensive as a child." The Italian women, meanwhile, "are faithful wives and devoted mothers" whose costumes "lend a tinge of color to the otherwise dull monotony of the slums they inhabit" (47). However, the Italian family ignores America's siren song of upward mobility and falls far short in the domestic sphere that was so important to Riis. Riis's "Teuton" is clearly the most likely to resist the tenements' leveling tendency by making a strong home. In contrast, Riis writes, "The Italian and the poor Jew rise only by compulsion" (22). Clearly, Riis appears to have little hope for the Italian as he is represented in the text of *How the Other Half Lives*. The Italian's faults and shortcomings are many, and his so-called virtues—his docility, manageability, lightheartedness, and tendency to keep his violence strictly intramural—are not the type of values that could contribute to American national character and American progress. The Italian's industry and his very ability to turn dirt

into gold are made to seem pointless because they are not translated into the American dream of social mobility. The Italian cannot or will not rise above the slum tide because of his natural tendency to seek and cling to the lowest level. For Riis, only the Italian woman has untainted, unqualified virtues, and these, not surprisingly, are the decidedly middle-class American ideals of domestic devotion and faithfulness. However, nearly as important are the Italian woman's "vivid and picturesque costumes," the (local) color she adds to an otherwise drab scene.

As is evident, Riis covers a lot of ground in *How the Other Half Lives*, depicting an Italian type that was becoming more and more represented to Americans at the turn of the century. Riis both condemns and praises the *Italian* (more of the former than the latter), but how well does he understand *Italians*? To a great extent, Riis the reporter completely fails to see—or at least write about—the diversity of the Italian immigrants. Wanting to see only poverty, dirt, chaos, and oppression, he fails to note the varied responses of Italian immigrants to the rich variety of their immigrant experiences. The text of *How the Other Half Lives* may capture the lived reality of a segment of Italian immigrants, but there is little indication that Riis truly questioned that reality, much less imagined alternative realities for New York's Italians. Of course, scholars disagree about the nature of Italian immigration on many levels. However, scholarship clearly shows that Riis presented a terribly distorted picture. It is not my purpose here to address every distortion point by point. A few examples should suffice.

Riis would have his readers believe that Italians in New York were little more than illiterate peasants who worked at nothing but menial labor for short-term economic gain, giving little thought to the more long-term goal of assimilation and social mobility. As Michael La Sorte says, "The oversimplified portrait of the Italians fixed at the bottom, the Germans and Jews in the middle, and the native born at the top of the job prestige hierarchy needs to be refined."²⁹ Although many of the southern Italian immigrants were in fact illiterate peasants, among them were fishermen, artisans, and petty merchants. According to Donna Gabaccia, during the 1880s very few Sicilian peasants migrated to New York. Instead, 80 percent of the earliest Sicilian migrants to the city were artisans, of whom shoemakers, barbers, and woodworkers formed the largest groups. Others included butchers, metalworkers, seamstresses and tailors, and pasta makers. And although Italians did work as unskilled laborers and rag-pickers in New York in the 1880s, they also performed slightly more specialized tasks and were involved in selling fruit, macaroni, plaster figurines, candy, and artificial flowers.³⁰

Riis's image of the Italian immigrant as a natural, contented slum dweller also needs qualification. Riis correctly identified tenement overcrowding as a problem caused by high rent, slack work, and low wages. However, as a

material determinist like many early reformers, he may have exaggerated overcrowding to better show how the “tenement housing evil” destroyed America’s “home ideal.” Although reformers like Riis made a connection between poor housing and social pathology, the Italian tenement dwellers were not entirely socially disorganized, but instead “created neighborhoods and communities in ways that they—not middle-class reformers—deemed appropriate.” Many of the unskilled urban workers did tend to congregate in crowded tenement neighborhoods. The large numbers of Sicilians on Elizabeth Street would have considered the tenement apartments small, but the density and the absence of light, windows, running water, and toilets would have been less shocking to them than to the reformers.³¹ Although nuclear families predominated, families often crammed boarders into their apartments, creating less expensive domestic arrangements known as “partner households” or “malleable households.” These emerged as a way to accommodate arriving young immigrants, generate income from the boarders, and satisfy the Italians’ preference to be with kin and countrymen from the same village or province. The Italians clustered together for a number of reasons, and consequently were seen as clannish. Lacking mobility, urban Italians often lived, worked, shopped, and socialized in the same tenement neighborhood. “The street served as playground, market, information center, and as the entrance to stores, cafes, and other institutions.”³² Italian tenement dwellers may not have liked their dingy apartments, but the evidence is that they enjoyed the social life of their neighborhoods, while appreciating that the rents, although high, were lower than elsewhere in the city. Concerned with jobs and making ends meet, they had little reason to fret over any unachieved housing ideals, at least for the present. A sizable number of women, both mothers and daughters, were often called on to produce income either in a factory or by doing homework (making or washing clothes, and fabricating candy, tobacco products, and artificial flowers).³³ This left little time and energy for housekeeping, as Gabaccia shows. “Like wives in Sicily, immigrant wives worked hard to keep their floors clean, but they remained oblivious to other chores that American social workers believed essential. The scrubbed wood or oil-clothed Italian tenement house floor might stand in odd contrast to the unpainted and smoke-begrimed wall.”³⁴

The Italian’s clannishness and his image of willing victim/slave of the Italian boss, or *padrone*, is both misunderstood and overblown by Riis. The Italian’s perceived insularity is usually attributed to *campanilismo*, an attitude of fear and distrust of outsiders symbolized by anyone living beyond the sound of the village church bell or *campanile*. *Campanilismo*, an attitude bred by centuries of foreign domination, was one reason southern Italians in particular sought security in family- or village-based networks. In New York, the immigrants maintained these tight social and economic networks, but these

alone were not protection enough in the large, fragmented, and chaotic city. As a consequence, these Italians looked beyond their immediate circles and expanded their networks to include people from other villages and regions of Italy.³⁵ Sometimes these Italians put their trust in a more powerful countryman to help manage their materials affairs. They looked to the *padrone*, as this figure is called, for employment, banking services, and a variety of other needs. Most of these so-called *padroni* provided legitimate, much needed services to newly arrived immigrants, but as might be expected there were abuses by some unscrupulous *padroni*.³⁶ For Riis and other reformers, however, the *padrone* was “an ahistoric personification of greed and primitive cruelty,” and virtually every middle-class immigrant was tainted with the suspicion of being a *padrone*.³⁷ Riis’s depiction of a rapacious *padrone* taking advantage of docile, gullible immigrants was even supported by Baron Fava, Italian ambassador to the United States, who blamed the *padrone* system on the proverbial simplicity of the southern Italian peasant.³⁸ However, reducing New York’s Italian immigrant population to corrupt *padroni* and oppressed workers is to ignore that very often this symbiotic relationship worked to the benefit of all. Just as Riis exaggerated tenement overcrowding, so too did he exaggerate and distort the *padrone*–worker relationship for purposes related to his reform work. The mythical *padrone* offered an easy target, while the worker served as a victim in desperate need of saving.

For now, I will not inquire into Riis’s characterization of the Italian as a money-grubbing slow learner who has no interest in education or social mobility. As we will see, Riis qualifies in his later writings some of the attitudes expressed in *How the Other Half Lives*. Additionally, I will take a closer look at these negative images in my chapter on the immigrant journalist Edward Steiner, who more than a decade later reprised some of the same stereotypes found in Riis’s work.

Two years after *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis again took up the subject of the Italian. Riis was investigating a murder at an East River dump when he found a crew of Italian men and boys living there. After visiting other dumps and finding similar living conditions, Riis wrote a newspaper piece in March 1892, “Real Wharf Rats, Human Rodents that Live on Garbage under the Wharves,” in which he portrayed Italian children surviving on the offal of society. These children are scarcely human, not simply animal-like but real (wharf) rats.³⁹ That year Riis also wrote a series of articles for *Scribner’s* that were collected in *The Children of the Poor* (1892). Here again, the Italian is content at the bottom, trapped in the “worst old world rookeries” by their smarter countrymen.⁴⁰ However, where *How the Other Half Lives* speaks generally of the Italian, *The Children of the Poor* specifically indicts the southern Italian, a distinction that began to appear in the 1880s and would have increasing currency throughout the succeeding decades. And now the image

is not so much of the Italian as naturally content with degradation and squalor, but of the Italian as the natural and willing victim of his own countrymen (a clear reference to the *pardoni*). Riis says he has noticed a degradation in the quality of the children. "Perhaps the exodus from Italy has worked farther south," he writes, "where there seems to be an unusual supply of mud" (10–13). The bulk of Italian immigration was in fact coming from the poorer, less literate South, and Americans were increasingly making sharper distinctions between northern and southern Italians, as Henry Cabot Lodge had done in a piece for *The North American Review* in January 1891. Lodge depicted northern and central Italians as generally industrious, trustworthy, strong, capable, and moral. The same qualities did not apply to the illiterate southern Italian emigrants who, Lodge said, came from a land of endemic brigandage.⁴¹

Despite the worsening degradation of the Italian immigrant children, Riis struggles to find cause for hope. Italian schoolchildren—that alarming "black-eyed brigade of 'guinnies,' as they were contemptuously dubbed"—were now finding a favored place in the schools because of their "sunny temper." These Italian students were in fact teaching the teachers that even crowded schoolrooms could marvelously expand to embrace the slum children. As a result, "every lesson of cleanliness, of order, and of English taught at the school is reflected into some wretched home, and rehearsed there as far as the limited opportunities will allow" (18–19). Riis here offers a holy trinity of Americanization: cleanliness, order, and the English language. Wash up, impose some order in your life, and learn English if you want to become an American, Riis seems to be saying. Education means not only learning the English language, but also the Anglo-Saxon Protestant virtues of cleanliness and order.

However, Riis's chapter, "The Italian Slum Children," ends not with sunny-tempered Italian schoolchildren learning to become Americans, but with Italian children as scavengers and future dagger-carriers perhaps incapable of assimilation. The young Italian wood-gatherers are like "crows scenting carrion." Their "odd old-mannish or old-womanish appearance, due more to their grotesque rags than to anything in the children themselves," betrays their Italian race (21). Yet, the sunny child of Italy is not easily discouraged by poverty or hard knocks. "His nick-name he pockets with a grin that has in it no thought of the dagger and the revenge that come to solace his after years," Riis writes, condemning the Italian child to a future as a typically violent, vengeful Italian (21). The chapter ends with Riis finding a group of youngsters picking bones and sorting rags along New York's waterfront at a time when they should have been at school. The boys tell Riis that they slept at their work site. "It was their home. They were children of the dump, literally. All of them except one were Italian" (27–28). Absent here are both

the home and the school, perhaps the two most important institutions for Americanization, according to Riis. Absent too is the cleanliness and order that Riis valued so highly.

In November 1896, we encounter an altogether different Italian boy in a sketch that Riis wrote for *The Atlantic Monthly* and later included in his collection, *Out of Mulberry Street: Stories of Tenement Life in New York* (1898). All these stories depict sympathetic if stereotypical characters, but it is "Paolo's Awakening" that best combines Riis's powers of description with his moralistic optimism.⁴² The story concerns an eight-year-old boy whose father drowns on his way to a *padrone*-controlled job at an island dump. Paolo now lives with his mother and uncle in a dark basement tenement, and spends most of his days helping his mother do piecework at home. For pleasure, Paolo rummages for scraps, chases rats at the city dump, and builds castles and other things from abandoned clay, mortar, or sand. A teacher notices Paolo's artistry and persuades his mother to enroll him in school. "Paolo's slavery was at an end," Riis writes. Rich and powerful patrons find better jobs for his mother and uncle, and the family moves into a better tenement. Paolo wins a medal for a bust of his gentle, patient peasant mother, and his teacher praises his faithful work and "the loyal manhood that ever is the soul and badge of true genius." Paolo's award includes a travel stipend that will allow him and his mother to return to "the sunlight of his native land." Would Paolo return to Italy to pursue his art studies in the manner of countless other nineteenth-century American artists? Or were he and his mother returning for good, as successful birds of passage? Riis does not say. The question quickly becomes moot because Paolo's dreams are short-lived: He is killed in a train crash on his way home from graduation. Riis, however, turns the tragedy into triumph: "Brighter skies than those of sunny Italy dawned upon him in the gloom and terror of the great crash," Riis writes. "Paolo was at home, waiting for his mother."⁴³

The story, while obviously marked by sentimental moralizing, is interesting. Most telling is that although Paolo is cut down just as he seems to be entering into the American dream, Riis's (and the boy's) vision of heaven is favorably compared to the romantic sunny skies of Italy, not to the sunny skies of Paolo's emerging assimilation and Americanization. Also suggestive is the fact that the vehicle for Paolo's success (and assimilation and Americanization?) is art, specifically sculpture, which had long been associated with Italy. Not for Paolo some more masculine American pursuit, such as business. Better that Paolo is an inspired artist and not some bootblack picking himself up by his bootstraps. And yet Riis's tale hints at an alternative ideal of manhood based not on success in the competitive arena of business, but on loyalty to mother and family, which the teacher equates with "true genius." If there was anything Riis consistently liked about the

Italians, it was the mothers and their familial feelings. Riis seems to be saying that Italians may have the right stuff in the domestic sphere, but doubts remain about their aptitude for the public spheres of business and citizenship.

Finally, Riis offers an extended treatment of the Italian when he revisits the tenement districts in *The Battle with the Slum* (1902), published twelve years after *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis was now at the height of his powers. In 1901, his friend Theodore Roosevelt was elected the president; reform had broken Tammany's hold on New York; and Riis published his highly popular *The Making of an American*.⁴⁴ "During this time his religious faith, his adulation for Roosevelt, his optimism, and his nationalism became more dominant features of his personality," and his response to the Spanish-American War was to become an unabashed jingoist, biographer James B. Lane writes.⁴⁵ With *The Battle with the Slum*, Riis was ready to become a national evangelist for reform. But first he would reassess what had been accomplished in the slums of New York City. Riis saw "only cause for hope" that "the day of the boss and of the slum" was ending, the gap between rich and poor no longer widening, and Americans "certainly coming closer together."⁴⁶ He invests his hope not in the professional social scientist whose "infallible system" reduced people to "mere items" and classified and subclassified them until they were "as dried up as his theories" (431). Riis turned instead to the "world-old formula of human sympathy, of human touch" (439). As the title of the book's penultimate chapter says, Riis would "Reform by Human Touch," which was an extension of the bridge "built of human hearts" that he invoked at the end of *How the Other Half Lives*.

Riis's depiction of the Italian in *The Battle with the Slum* does appear to be somewhat more sympathetic than that of *How the Other Half Lives*. But still the Italian is portrayed as a problem to be addressed, an immigrant who sorely tested America's ability to embrace him, a crude lump of clay that needed shaping in the American mold. Riis's most extended treatment of the Italian comes in the chapter "Pietro and the Jew," a curious title that links a stereotypically named Italian to a nameless, generic Jew with no direct narrative thread. Arguing that the problem of the tenement is "to make homes for the people" (175), in essence equating home/family and nation, Riis turns his attention to the tenement tenants. Piling up statistics from a government "slum inquiry," Riis begins by sounding much like the arid, systematic social scientist of whom he says "that man I will fight till I die" (431). The Italians surveyed in the inquiry were from the south of Italy, "avowedly the worst of the Italian immigration," Riis says, later adding, "Of last year's intake 116,070 came from southern Italy, where they wash less, and also plot less against the peace of mankind, than they do in the north" (177).

Riis's reprise of the dirty, docile southern Italian in *The Battle with the Slum* ran directly counter to events in Sicily, where workers battled for social

justice from 1888 to 1894, when the movement was brutally suppressed by the northern-run national government. At its peak, the *Fasci Siciliani* was a popular cooperative movement with a membership of about 350,000 Sicilian farmers and sulfur mine workers, most of whom naively believed the *Fasci* would bring about independence of Sicily and, ultimately, social justice to all workers. The failure of the movement was blamed on the machinations of northern Socialist leaders, friction between Socialist groups, the backwardness of the Sicilian workers, and the strength of the bourgeoisie. Many of the most militant *Fasci* fled the repression by joining the great wave of migration to America.⁴⁷ However, Riis makes no mention of the *Fasci Siciliani*. Instead, he quotes a news report about a peasant in Italy who received less than half a bushel of grain after having his crop threshed. There follows one of Riis's patented anecdotes about an Italian immigrant family being detained in New York because the father was too old to be allowed into the country. "Two young women and a boy of sixteen rose to their feet at once," Riis recalls. "Are we not young enough to work for him?" they said. The boy showed his strong arms" (180–181). These anecdotes are certainly designed to elicit sympathy, and the latter one may illustrate Italian initiative and dignity. However, Riis's Italians remain objects of pity, with no hint that, in Sicily, some of these same immigrants may have been actively involved in a struggle for political rights and social and economic justice. It is interesting that of all the news reports coming out of Italy over the last few years, including reports about the Sicilian *Fasci* disturbing the "peace of mankind," Riis highlights the unfortunate peasant farmer who is squeezed at the mill. In his efforts to make the Italian immigrants tragic, if sympathetic victims in desperate need of America's political, social, and economic opportunities, Riis erases complementary (and more complimentary?) images of Italians actively struggling to secure those same opportunities at home. These latter images simply did not fit into Riis's depiction of Italians as docile victims in need of a champion such as Riis himself.

Clearly Riis saw himself as the champion of these victimized Italians. Having played on the sympathies of his jury of readers, Riis assumes the role of defense attorney for the Italians, whom he collectively dubs "Pietro." Riis concedes that the Italian immigrant is dirty, ignorant, and clannish, and that he promotes child labor, gambles and uses a knife (mostly on his own people), and buys fraudulent naturalization papers. However, there are mitigating circumstances, Riis says, now beginning to show some understanding of the social, economic, and political factors that had influenced the Italian immigration and helped shape the Italian immigrants themselves. Italian immigrant children more than likely attend school, Riis notes, and there are signs that the Italian is shelving the old vendetta in favor of American law and justice. If the Italian acted like a starved wolf and dealt in fraudulent citizenship papers, was

it not because he fled oppression in Italy to make a new life in America? “He came here for a chance to live. Of politics, social ethics, he knows nothing. Government in his old home existed only for his oppression” (181–187). Riis places his greatest hope in the public school, where the immigrant children speak English, salute the American flag, and give their “heads and hearts to our country” (204). While holding out hope that the second generation of the new immigrants can be assimilated through the public school, Riis rules out the possibility that the first-generation immigrant will ever become an American the way that he did. And, despite the public school’s miracle of transformation, problems persist with America’s open-door policy. He cites as an example “a nest of Italian thugs who lived by blackmailing their countrymen” in the Mulberry Street area. All are notorious Neapolitan criminals “who had been charged with every conceivable crime, from burglary to kidnapping and ‘maiming,’ and some not to be conceived of by the American mind.” When Riis recalls that, he wants to “shut the door quick” (204–205). Of course, Riis here is making reference to the image of a mysterious, bloodthirsty Black Hand Society that was becoming etched in the public imagination. Italians themselves had helped propagate that stereotype during the period following Italian unification, when northern Italians firmly fixed images of brigandage, the mafia and camorra, and corruption to southern Italians.⁴⁸ The true extent and nature of Italian crime in America are difficult to gauge. In their search for security, some Italian immigrants turned to those in their networks who resorted to the kind of thuggery, extortionism, and criminality that critics claimed were the province of the mafia and the camorra, as Donna Gabaccia writes. “From the migrants’ perspective, there was no criminal conspiracy or Black Hand behind protection rackets—just a desire for order and security and a handful of isolated toughs willing to sell their services promising order in a multi-ethnic city.”⁴⁹

The Italian appears again in *The Battle with the Slum* in a nostalgic chapter, “The Passing of Cat Alley,” in which the sentimental Riis mourns the disappearance of one of the hellhole alleys that he had fought to abolish. He remembers Cat Alley as “properly cosmopolitan,” with every element but the native-born American. “The substratum was Irish, of volcanic proportions.” Other layers included the German, Frenchman, Jew, and Italian, “or, as the alley would have put it, Dutch, Sabe, Sheeny, and Dago.” To the “Dago” the alley “did not take kindly,” Riis says. The Italian was seen as an outcast among outcasts whose overcrowding threatened to turn Cat Alley into another Mulberry Street (314). Riis concludes the chapter with an anecdote from the last days of Cat Alley. As the clearing of the alley proceeds, Riis watches a troop of Irish children scream with delight on a makeshift seesaw. “A ragged little girl from the despised ‘Dago’ colony watched them from the corner with hungry eyes.” The largest of the Irish girls saw the

Italian and made room for her on the ride, explaining to the others that the girl's mother was stabbed the day before. "And the little Dago rode, and was made happy" (339–340). Besides expressing Riis's romantic optimism and his abiding sentimental faith in children and women, the anecdote serves to balance and comment on an earlier incident in which an Italian family had been evicted from Cat Alley for overcrowding, for creating one of those "partner" or "malleable" households to which Italians sometimes resorted. Here we have inclusion replacing exclusion, a bridge built on human hearts, reform by human touch. But what is being included is an alien "with hungry eyes" from "the despised 'Dago' colony," a girl who is seen as at least one step below the Irish girls. The Italian girl is invited to play not for who she is, but rather for what she represents. She is an object of pity, someone whose mother was stabbed the day before. And stabbed by whom? Riis does not say. Perhaps that detail is extraneous to his simple parable of charity, human kindness, even sisterhood. However, the few details we are given, when placed in the context of Riis's writings, point to a probable culprit: either her husband, a relative, or some other Italian. Riis's clues add up: The victim was an Italian, the Italian's favorite weapon—presumably a knife—was used, and Italians often attack their own in fits of passion. This anecdote is one that cuts two ways, as interesting for what it says as for what it implies. In its apparent plea for human brotherhood (or, in this case, sisterhood), for reform through human touch, it humanizes and privileges one slum group, the Irish (who not long ago occupied the Italians' lowly position), while objectifying the Italian girl as victim of—most likely—her own kind.

As we know, Riis's written descriptions of the Italians and other immigrant groups are not his last words on the subject. There are the photographs that appeared either as illustrations or halftone prints in newspapers and magazines. Additionally, Riis used photographic images in the lantern-slide lectures that he delivered to church and charitable groups and other middle-class audiences. It will be worthwhile to look at these images before trying to draw some conclusions concerning Riis's treatment of the Italian immigrants.

Today Riis is best known for his photographs, a still powerful collection that represents the only full photographic record of the so-called new immigration. During his life, however, he was best known as a writer and lecturer, and that was how he saw himself. When he died in 1914, his family gave his personally annotated papers to the Library of Congress. Yet Riis had not bothered to save his collection of photographs since it had little meaning for him apart from its role in his books and lectures.⁵⁰ In fact, Riis used all these modes of communication—written text, visual image, oral address—very effectively for diverse rhetorical strategies. For example, *How the Other Half Lives*, which began as a public lecture, had something for everyone, as the *New York Evening Sun* pointed out: statistics for the social scientists, suggestions for

the charitable worker, and stories, anecdotes, photographs, and freehand sketches for those seeking primarily entertainment. The paper's reviewer inventoried the contents of the book "as if he were strolling through that archetypal nineteenth-century site of consumption, the department store."⁵¹ *How the Other Half Lives* was the first American book to include snapshots of the slums. The publisher, Scribner's, decided to use the newly developed halftone process, which allowed the direct transfer of photographs to the metal printing plate. This new method was cheaper than hiring artists and engravers to transform the photographs into illustrations, as had been done for Riis's newspaper and magazine pieces. However, Scribner's also "might have wished to capture, rather than mask, the unique, disconcerting graphic qualities of the photographs."⁵² In some measure it was the small grainy photos that helped make the book an instant success, as at least one reviewer noted. One reviewer spoke of the "horror" of the photographs, while another simply saw them as an aesthetic feature that made the book a collector's delight. Only the reviewer for the *Critic* made any serious attempt to deal with the images. This reviewer said of the photos: "There is a lack of broad and penetrating vision, a singularly warped sense of justice at times, and a roughness of vision amounting almost to brutality. The 'Heathen Chinees' and the Russian Jew fleeing from persecution in his own land finds no mercy in Mr. Riis's creed."⁵³ This surprisingly harsh reviewer is on target, but only half right. The photographs generally associated with Riis do lack a unifying theme and style. They are alternately rough and soft, brutal and sentimental, merciless and sympathetic. One thing we can say for sure: The photographs offered radically new ways to represent reality, altering and enlarging the public's idea of what is worth looking at and what it had a right to observe, making of the photographs "a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing."⁵⁴

Any study of Riis's photography is risky because Riis the photographer is even more problematic than Riis the writer. To begin with, the photographs present a number of textual challenges for the critic. Riis's collection of photographs essentially disappeared from the public consciousness after his death, not to be rediscovered until the 1940s. The rescuers were photographer and Riis biographer Alexander Alland, who like Riis was an immigrant interested in social reform, and Grace Mayer, then curator of prints for the Museum of the City of New York. They convinced the Riis family to donate to the museum 415 four-by-five-inch glass plate negatives, 326 lantern slides (positives on glass), and 191 vintage prints found in the attic of the Riis family's Long Island home. Alland took fifty of the best negatives and transformed them into quality prints by using modern photographic techniques such as enlarging, cropping, burning, and dodging. These prints were shown at the Museum of the City of New York in 1947, captured the attention of