

CHAPTER 1

English as a Dialect of Italian

“We don’t speak Italian,” my mother used to say, “we speak dialect.” Everything we spoke, English included, was a dialect of Italian. We had a clear sense that we did not speak any national language at all. As far as we were concerned, national standard Italian was exactly what Dante had meant it to be when he first proposed it: an imperial tongue—that is, a language whose speakers were by definition cosmopolitans. My grandparents were all immigrants, which means they were transnationals, to be sure, but no one would have called them *cosmopolitan*. National standard Italian was a language for them to respect, to talk about, to read in the Italian papers, to hear on the radio, to tell us to learn, but not for them to speak. And as for English, that was another imperial tongue, and still something to conquer. “Learn English!” My mother was determined that we should master this language as well as possible. It was not something she thought we could take for granted. As a girl in school, she had felt much as Maria Mazz-iotti Gillan remembers feeling:

Miss Wilson’s eyes, opaque
As blue glass, fix on me:
“We must speak English.
We’re in America now.”
I want to say, “I am American,”
but the evidence is stacked against me.

My mother scrubs my scalp raw, wraps
My shining hair in white rags
To make it curl. Miss Wilson
drags me to the window, checks my hair
for lice. My face wants to hide.

At home, my words smooth in my mouth
 I chatter and am proud. In school,
 I am silent, grope for the right English
 words, fear the Italian word
 will sprout from my mouth like a rose,
 fear the progression of teachers
 in their sprigged dresses,
 their Anglo-Saxon faces.¹

Neither English nor Italian belonged to us, although we belonged to them. They were signs that others had mastered us.

Italian, right from the start, has never been just a way of speaking. From the moment of its invention, Italian was a political act with international consequences. Dante Alighieri called it a New Latin.² He based it on the ordinary speech of living people (unlike Old Latin, which had become either the speech of dead people or else the exclusive living speech of privileged people such as priests and lawyers), but he nonetheless designed it to travel in wide circles. Italian dialects were not like that. The languages Italians called dialects were *local*, intensely local. The three thousand people in my mother's home town of Salle, provincia di Chieti, high in the Apennines of Abruzzi, spoke a tongue they could easily distinguish from the language the two thousand people who lived in San Tommaso, a few kilometers away, spoke. In short, each dialect was tied to a single place. It was the opposite of cosmopolitan. It marked its speakers by locale and by class as well. In the days before mass media, the educated people learned national Italian in school. Poor people generally left school too soon even to think of mastering it.

Like most Italian immigrants, my family came into the English language with the mental habit of people who have lived forever in a dialect. Their speech marked them geographically and tribally. It assigned them a low place in Italy's economic and cultural hierarchies. For the poor, to live in a dialect meant to live within narrow limits. The word *dialect* recurs in two distinct adjectival forms, *dialectal* and *dialectic*. *Dialectal* refers to attributes of a kind of speech that specify its physical and class location. It is a linguistic and social term, referring to phonemes and morphemes, marks of sound and of other physical features. *Dialectic* refers to verbal struggle. It is often used to describe historical process. In using it to refer to a form of speech, we make this adjective emphasize the protagonism implied in a dialect, its power to limit a person's life chances and to place a person in class relations

toward others. A dialect can be called *dialectic* because it assigns a person a set of possibilities and positions in the process of history.

In a relatively static social arrangement such as the one the migrant Italians left behind them, the dialectic aspect of their linguistic situation was little more than an implication, a possible meaning that only rarely could show itself in action. But in the life of the Great Migration, the immigrants perceived themselves to be confronted continually by the challenges of social change. They were forced daily to assess the meaning of their class location, which they experienced in the social implications of how they spoke.

When I was a little girl,
I thought everyone was Italian,
and that was good. We visited
our aunts and uncles,
and they visited us.
The Italian language smooth
and sweet in my mouth.

In kindergarten, English words fell on me,
thick and sharp as hail. I grew silent,
the Italian word balanced on the edge
of my tongue and the English word, lost
during the first moment
of every question.

Almost every day
Mr. Landraf called Joey
a “spaghetti bender.”
I knew that was bad.
I tried to hide
by folding my hands neatly
on my desk and
being a good girl.³

Dialect was what they had spoken in Italy, a clear and indelible marker of their position in the Italian social universe. Their English would long have a similar impact on them. Varying degrees of Italian accent, of Broken English, and of lower-class urban patois accompany the portraits of Italians in vaudeville (Jimmy Durante, Chico Marx), in the movies (*The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*), and on television (*The Sopranos*). This is a set of American phenomena, so that the reader may

reasonably think it only sensible to treat any noticeably Italian American English as if it were what the phrase implies: a form of American English. Italian American English uses the grammar and word list of the majority North American language, along with words and features clearly Italian, and it marks its speakers as belonging in the contact zone between speakers of standard American English and speakers of Italian dialects.

Dialectally, let us say, these forms of speech approximate forms of standard American and come to belong to the large spectrum of Broken Englishes (broken with Spanish, Yiddish, German, Greek, French, and many other languages) and of creoles that surround this national tongue.

Dialectically, on the other hand, Italian American English retains its orientation to Italian regardless how much it absorbs of the English language's stock of words and figures. To the extent that Italian American English exists, it retains a dialectic or antagonistic relationship to Italian. This relationship is as varied as such a relationship is likely to be when it survives through the medium of spoken language. As a way of sampling its range, we can consider some of its linguistic, national, commercial, and literary implications.

Linguistic

Written Italian American English develops a complex relationship with Italian at every social level. It can present local features, and the representation of Italian dialect is a favorite trope in Italian American writing from *Mount Allegro* (1942) to *Were You Always an Italian?* (2000).⁴ Italian in Italian American English can also express the ambiguities of an interlingual situation. Such situations appear among Italians of every social stratum who come to the United States, not just among steerage immigrants. More important, Italian American English can reflect the transvaluation of Italian. Immigrants spoke an English broken with Italian dialect, a sign of social subordination. The American English of the Park Avenue Italian expatriate or of the third-generation Italian American who has been to college and has lived in Italy—as a student, a tourist, or a bourgeois expatriate—may use Italian, but it will be standard, or national, Italian. Such usage carries a dialectic implication: it is a mark of standing, and sometimes a trophy of victory, in the class wars.

Insofar as it is literature, and insofar as it is Italian, Italian American literature makes Italian language, geography, culture, and literature into abiding points of reference. These things do not simply mark cul-

tural difference or signs of class subordination to the dominant Anglo-American culture of the United States. Rather, they are the foundational markings and global orientations that belong to the history of all that the word *Italian* has meant and continues to mean in the world market of cultures and commodities. For a U.S. citizen, assuming the identity Italian American means asserting salience to the powerful and persistent international myth of Italy as it expresses itself in many media.

Such salience had one sort of value at the end of the nineteenth century when the Great Migration was still going strong. This same salience has quite another value on the threshold of the twenty-first century when Italian America has become the home of a very large middle-class and upper-middle-class sector in the United States. Today, there are over fifteen million Italian Americans. They are no longer poor. For example, Italian Americans comprise 38 percent of the population of Westchester County in New York, per capita the wealthiest county in the nation. The magic of money has worked its powers on *italianità* as it does on so many signs of difference. Things that used to be stigmas can now be signs of distinction.

As Italian American writing in English progresses, its Italian claims return in forms that the immigrants would have recognized but could never have translated into terms acceptable to Americans of a century ago. Contemporary Americans and Italian Americans are working in an entirely different social environment.

The Italian difference in Italian American writing has an ideological value that both persists and varies with time. It sometimes takes the shape of a sacred object, valued very highly within the immigrant enclosure as a sign of Italy and in later years transformed into something of equivalent value in the American world outside. My immigrant grandmother cooked polenta on certain Sundays. She spread it out on a large board that covered the dining room table. Over it, she ladled ragù and placed a meatball in the middle. Her three children and their families sat around that table—twenty people with forks. Each person started eating. It was a race. The winner was whoever first reached that meatball. Quite a lot of polenta was on that board. The family manners were those of medieval mountaineers who had survived on cornmeal polenta through many a long winter when they had not much else to eat. Nowadays, elegant New York restaurants serve tiny slices of polenta as a delicate accompaniment to rabbit or truffles, all at prices that would make a peasant blanch. A change in class means a change in value.

Something similar has happened to many elements of *italianità*. They survive in both dialectal and dialectic relationships, but the values

and positions change sharply. The usual thing is that the Italian difference survives in two varieties. One kind becomes American, and this American version becomes the dialect, or lower class, version; the other returns to Italian, and this becomes the standard, or bourgeois, model.

Pizza is the most familiar example of this double transformation. In its American English form, this Italian dish has become the sign of what is persistently, even ruthlessly, inexpensive. Pizza is highway food, fast food, midnight-delivery-to-the-dorm-room food. It resembles chow mein in that it retains the class and race stigma that accompany mass migration. It is archetypal food for people who do not have much money to spend. But in its bourgeois Italian form, pizza has become a delicacy in the United States. Restaurants advertise brick ovens with wood fires, usually in Italian, *forno a legna*, as if one were dining in Tuscany instead of Fairfield County, Connecticut. They serve individual pizzas with expensive garnishes. This is not storefront by-the-slice Ellis Island food. This is gourmet presentation; it features artichokes, caviar, portobello mushrooms, and mozzarella imported from Sorrento.

The most tormented form of this double transformation is the Italian participation in international commerce. In its American English form, Italian business has become the Underworld. Violent, crude, murderous, and ungrammatical, the American version of the Italian Mafia retains and revives every element of stigma that comes along with the mass migration. This Mafia is as American as Hollywood.

But in its new bourgeois form, Italian American business has returned to its place in the Italian world trade networks, as old as the crusades and as opulent as Venice. Italians now come to New York not to organize garbage trucks and cocaine dealers, but to represent major manufacturers, traders, and banks. They have offices along Park Avenue. They win lucrative contracts to build bridges and pipelines all over the world. Magazines such as *Italia* and *Italy Italy* present glittering images of their prosperity and of their commodity splendors. They import the most exquisite silks and worsteds, just as their forbears did in medieval Brussels and Renaissance London. And their Italian American patrons are not John Gotti and Tony Soprano—or at least not exclusively such persons. From Greenwich, Connecticut to Palo Alto, California, Italian American professionals have the financial and educational capital to appreciate the finer—that is, the more socially dominant—meanings of the word *Italian*. Italian American business managers preside over corporations that manufacture automobiles and computing machines. These graduates of Stanford and Harvard do not resemble the candy store bookies and Brooklyn torpedoes who populate

American Mafia films. As Italian Americans move toward the notion that *Italian* means something central and authoritative, their impatience with the immigrant stigma grows. Some spend huge amounts of energy protesting the Mafia mythology. Others simply buy themselves villas in Tuscany.

This process of transvaluation has an important place in the growth of Italian American writing in English, and it underlies the argument of this book at every turn. From the start, I contend, Italian American writers in English have been aware that Italian precedes English among the modern languages. Such an awareness is part of the ideological heritage of the Italian colonies. First-class liberal educations have helped Italian American writers understand the weight of evidence that accompanies such awareness. Meditating their own position as outsiders in this English-speaking culture, such writers have sought to recuperate the Roman authority of the Latin language that stands behind Italian, French, Portuguese, Romanian, and Spanish. Through these modern languages, Latin has had a mighty influence over the growth of literary culture, as well as during the days when the ruling classes of the British and American empires read Cicero and Virgil in school.

National

Italian American writing arises in the oscillating space that subsists between two formidable national/imperial programs. In this arena, one hears a steady noise of struggle for precedence. The United States—with its victorious armed forces, its overwhelming economic engine, its political stability, its bottomless fund of natural resources—is a leading power that makes its presence felt everywhere in Italy, thus giving it a double presence in that part of the United States that connects itself in any way with Italy. Nonetheless, Italy has its antique prerogatives. Those Italian Americans who choose to thematize Italy in their thinking and writing soon enough begin to compile claims of precedence that have roots deep in the Italian national imaginary. In America, as everywhere in the international world, the Italian Renaissance can plausibly be said to have strongly influenced contemporary life in many areas, among them art, music, architecture, navigation, political philosophy, theater, mathematics, geography, bookkeeping, and banking. Nowhere is this influence more profoundly consequential than in the very project of a national language. Italian literary and political history perpetually returns to this project. It has followed Italians into the diaspora.

How did my mother come to know her own language as a dialect? She grew up in the United States, but the language map of Italy had been an article of faith among all Italians, including emigrants, ever since Italy became a nation in 1861. The magic of a national language was a basic element in the nation-building process. Massimo d'Azeglio is said to have framed this enterprise in a famous remark, "*L'Italia si è fatta, ma gli italiani non si fanno*" ("Italy has been made, but Italians are not being made").⁵ Italian became a national language as a way of completing the making of Italy, consolidating the achievements of the Risorgimento by making not only a country but also people who belonged to it, rather than to one of its parts. Making Italians became a central purpose in educational policy. That purpose drew authority from antiquity and aimed at a glorious future as well. Since Unification, national Italian has presented itself as self-consciously incorporating the bodies of its ancestor tongues for many generations.

Until that time, Italian, which Dante first proposed in the fourteenth century, had become such a perennial theme for debate that it acquired an epithet: *la questione della lingua*, the language problem. The language was reformulated several times by Italian intellectuals during the Renaissance.⁶ Centuries later, during the Risorgimento (1815–1870), Italian was still a literary project, rather than an actual spoken language. Alessandro Manzoni wrote a novel, *I promessi sposi*, which became a primary text for the makers of Italy and of Italians. When Manzoni was writing it, he was using a literary Italian full of Milanese regionalisms, but he came to accept the old idea that Tuscan ought to be the basis for the national dialect of Italy. In those days of no national dictionaries and no decent highways, after publishing the first edition of his novel in 1827 he took his entire family on the long and difficult overland journey from Milan to Florence so that he might revise his text at the geographical font of what would later become national Italian. In 1842 Manzoni published the definitive edition of the novel in the new literary Tuscan he had developed for it and for the future of Italian literature and speech. In 1868, for a commission appointed by the new Minister of Public Instruction, Manzoni set forth his linguistic program for the new nation in the treatise "*Dell'unità della lingua e dei mezzi di diffonderla*" ("On Linguistic Unity and on the Means of Promoting It"): the program covered everything from diction to pronunciation.⁷ Insofar as Italian schools have enjoyed a national curriculum, this language and its ambitions have stood at its center.

Most immigrant newspapers used the national language.⁸ By the time my mother came to America in 1919, at age three, Little Italys everywhere had effectively erected national Italian as a tribal totem. People could read it in the numerous Italian journals or understand when they heard it on the radio, although few immigrants actually spoke it. Their belief in its power was, and remains, unquestioned. People still apologize for speaking a dialect. Thus, to call English a dialect of Italian means referring to the political ambitions of United Italy, which from the start have been entwined in the powers and pretensions of its national tongue. Because Italians began to enter global diaspora in a large way only after the Risorgimento, when the full-scale promotion of the national language had begun, their socialization had taken place under the influence of this nationalist cult. Wherever they went, the belief in a national Italian inevitably came along with them. Most Italian Americans abandoned Italian in the early 1940s, after Mussolini's Italy had declared itself an enemy of the United States, but, strange to say, their respect for the national language persisted. To this day, many Italian Americans are reluctant to speak Italian because they know perfectly well that, like my mother, they "speak dialect." The prestige of the standard language shames them still.

Power was an object from the start in this story. Dante's claim to have invented a New Latin was an early Renaissance notion in that it underlined the attempt, something that would soon become universal in Italy and afterward in Europe, to recover the authority and imperial force of the Roman language. Italian was the first New Latin, but it was neither the last, nor the most successful. Italian immigrants, with their uncertain purchase of national Italian, soon found themselves facing the more powerful agenda of another New Latin, this time under the Anglophone aegis of the United States.

When two languages are in contact, the differences can be brutal. In crudest terms: the more politically powerful language can treat the less powerful as an unacceptable dialect. In 1887 the U.S. Commissioner for Indian Affairs, for example, wrote in his annual report:

Schools should be established which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted . . . the object of greatest solicitude should be to break down the prejudices of tribe among the Indians; to blot out the boundary lines which divide them into distinct nations, and fuse them into

one homogeneous mass. Uniformity of language will do this. Nothing else will. . . . It is also believed that teaching an Indian youth in his own barbarous dialect is a positive detriment to him. The first step to be taken towards civilization, towards teaching the Indians the mischief and folly of continuing in their barbarous practices is to teach them the English language. . . .⁹

Italian immigrants to the United States found that the Americans treated their Italian languages not very differently from the way they treated the “barbarous dialects” of the Indians. And, back in Italy, the promulgators of national Italian had treated with a similar contempt the dialects of the rural poor.

Linguistic dominion is a very old story in Italy. Not all dialects have the glorious military and financial histories of Venetian and Tuscan. Citizens of today’s Republic of Italy are descended from the very first colonies that the all-conquering Latin tribes established in the other regions of Italy, from Benevento to Milan. Samnites, Oscans, Umbrians, Etruscans, Brutii, and Siculi entered the orbit of Rome, each people having its own god to lay on the altar of Jove, its own tongue to silence before the sword of Mars.¹⁰

In the United States, linguistic domination had three special aspects. One was the ideological program of Manifest Destiny, which kept Anglocentric linguistic ambitions at the forefront. A second aspect, corollary to the first, was the general contempt the more powerful and established native citizens had for foreigners of all sorts, particularly those as poor and as numerous as the Italians. The third was the particular relationship that Anglo-Saxon culture had had with Italy and Italian for centuries.

English has long seen itself as a New Latin. The very notion of Latin is intimately connected with linguistic dominion. As New Latin became the basis for Italian, so French, Spanish, English—and all the New Vernaculars that came to codify and standardize themselves as ideals of speech during and after the Renaissance—belong to the category Dante established: all of them are New Latins. English culture, after the Reformation, had to deal with contradictory motives. On the one hand, it aspired to global authority. On the other hand, it drew much of its own authority from its supposed filiation to the language of the Roman Empire.

School English, which plays such a dramatic role in the formation of Italian American language consciousness, presents itself expressly as

a New Latin, an imperial tongue with eight parts of speech. Indeed, schoolmasters in the eighteenth century portrayed the King's English as in every possible way conformable with Caesar's Latin.¹¹ The Renaissance motive of identification with Roman prestige and Latin universality is an area where English has been a dialect of Italian since Lorenzo Valla brought Renaissance humanism to England in 1420. As with the Renaissance Ciceronian prose of Lorenzo Valla and of his enemy Poggio Bracciolini, European New Vernaculars have imitated Dante in using Latin as the standard (in the double sense that it was both the ensign and the measure) of their enterprise and of their ambition. Humanist schooling from the fourteenth century onward practiced as a silent motto, governing much of its normative discourse, the saying of Petrarca, "For what else is history, all of it, but praise of Rome?"¹² To this day, some grammarians present the history of Italy's dialects as the history of their deviation from Latin.¹³

Standard English has a rank in the chart of comparative literary prestige. It stands ambitiously among the New Latins, alongside other European national languages, each with its library of dictionaries and grammars and rules of style designed to establish and enforce its hegemony.¹⁴

Nationalist and imperialist cults attend to origins and precedence; these have given to Italian and to the Latin that stands behind it an authoritative character that the bourgeois Italian American rarely hesitates to assert, placing American English culture into a perpetual dialectic relationship with Italian. *The Proud Italians: The Great Civilizers; What Italy Has Given to the World; Italians First!*—such titles proliferate.¹⁵ Italians who migrate to the English-speaking world may first establish themselves economically, but soon afterward many of them turn to the notion of cultural seniority that is hidden in the project of a New Latin built upon an Old Latin, which belongs to Italy's myth of its national tongue. We think of dialectal relationships as existing in space—centers and peripheries. But dialectic relationships require time, past and present. In this medium Italy continues to claim precedence.

Commercial

The Italian American occupies a position that draws its vocabulary of self-construction from a world commodity culture in which the positions *Italian* and *American* derive much of their meaning from their mutual commerce. This was true in one sense during the Great Migration, and it is true in quite a different sense now.

When Italians were arriving by the thousands in the United States, they experienced their passage as an ordeal that changed them. No longer human souls, they became animal cargo, shipped in steerage alongside goats and cattle, medically examined on departure and again on entry, as if they were breeding stock or beasts of burden. During that same period, the transport of Americans to Italy was a luxury trade, and its passengers were treated as consumers rather than as objects of consumption. This difference of class agency persisted in the United States. Cabin-class Americans were conspicuously capable economic subjects who employed and deployed steerage-class Italians as objects of consumption. This trade functioned with the brutal insensibility that had begun in steerage; so-called free laboring immigrants had to negotiate the harshest laws of the market, their ability to function always dependent on certificates of acceptability as issued by the immigration doctors and the downtown police.

As in all such transactions, class differences only masked the fact that subject and object transformed one another. The Italians, as they learned to survive the Darwinian pieties of the New York labor market, began to become Americans and to acquire their own consumer fantasies. The Americans, as they decorated their palaces with ornamental plaster and polychrome mosaics, marked themselves with the eternal insignia of their ferocious dominance. They made themselves Italian in the most diabolical sense of the word. In their excesses, they aped the same Renaissance popes that their Protestant preachers had taught them to despise. The U.S. capitol building at a quick glance might be Saint Peter's. Architectural decorations that signify Italian artisan labor often also signify a fortune built on brutal exploitation. American millionaires such as Morgan, Carnegie, Frick, and Hearst built themselves vast Roman villas, in effect arrogating to themselves the spiritual force of the European immigrants whom they were reducing to the status of brutes in their mines and mills.

Now that Italian Americans have acquired position in the American commercial hierarchy, although they have for the most part lost the ability to speak any dialect of Italian, they have been able to surround themselves with fetishes of *italianità*. Madonna Ciccone in her video *Like a Virgin* wears a wedding dress while being poled through Venetian canals dreaming of being touched "for the very first time." This is the fantasy of the woman as possession who has become a woman in possession, what Madonna elsewhere calls by the ambiguous term *material girl*. Becoming a consuming subject, this Italian American woman transforms such emblems of her oppression as the Madonna

and even virginity itself into the commercial tokens of the wedding dress, the Venetian tour, and the hired gondolier. With a similar extravagance of gesture, the bourgeois Italian American now can deploy her difference in that large segment of American shopping where Italian signatures guarantee high commodity distinction: Miuccia Prada, Giorgio Armani, Donatella Versace, and Ermenegildo Zegna.

An even deeper sense of physical validation rests on the use of Italian luxury comestibles in the United States. Many Italian Americans ritually celebrate their Italian distinction through regular consumption of water bottled in Piemonte, olives packed in Puglia, fresh gnocchi flown in daily from Abruzzi. Imported pastas, cheeses, wines, liquors, and cakes line the shelves of the “Italian store” to be found wherever Italian Americans congregate. Whether in North Beach—the old Little Italy of San Francisco—or in a suburban mall, the Italian store offers a long list of edible and potable fetish commodities marked *Made in Italy*, and these objects constitute the nouns and verbs of an Italian language that asserts itself substantially and regularly without ever needing to explain itself at all. Its precedence rises from stigma to distinction through its visible position in the hierarchy of conspicuous costliness and wasteful expense.

Literary

Literary relationships between American English and national Italian do not only subsist in the immigrant contact zone, where dialect words provide direct access to the immigrant mind and to the vaudeville comedy of ethnic subordination. Literary relationships between American English and national Italian also substand all of contemporary writing in English, whether in the United States or elsewhere.

English is one of the New Vernaculars whose literature grew in the world invented by Dante’s New Latin. Dante’s experiments with language and poetry initiated a series of startling innovations later in the fourteenth century when his admirers Francesco Petrarca and Giovanni Boccaccio followed him in showing Europe yet more new ways to use ordinary language to fulfill the purposes of literature.¹⁶ These writers established long-lasting vogues for their innovations—their use of prose, their ingenious *canzoni* and *sonnetti*. In English, the flowering of the humanities in the schools, courts, and universities meant that there would continue to renew itself a steady audience for the determined linguistic innovations of the Italian Renaissance. Indeed, imitation of Italians became a major theme in the growth of the canonical school of

English literature: Chaucer, Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson, Milton, Fielding, Sterne, Keats, Byron, Shelley, Browning, Eliot—all major British writers with Italian stylistic agendas.¹⁷

Italian American writing may never forget its humble origins in immigrant poverty. But these origins grow more mythical with time, and the contemporary reality of Italian American life brings its writers closer to the literary traditions not only of English male poets, but also of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, Iris Origo, Shirley Hazzard, and indeed all the other bourgeois writers of both genders who have pursued the art of English composition using Italy as a source of material, as a place to work, or both. The Italian American who has acquired the economic means and social powers to pursue a literary career will quickly come on this international literary empire, which numbers among its citizens most leading British writers of the past two centuries and many Americans as well. This large English-speaking Italy belongs to the future of Italian America as a past it will inhabit after its own manner.

What will that manner be? How will Italian America plant its ambiguous flag on the contested territory of Italian prestige? That project will always require meditation because such gestures of appropriation have served racist purposes more than once.¹⁸ This is not surprising. No past can be entirely usable, no heritage can rest exempt from the attentions of the critical mind. The Italian past must admit to poverty and loss quite as much as it can ever boast of trophies and masterpieces. Italy has many histories of its own as well: in some of these it is a golden dream made real; in others it is a delusional utopia, a lie bankers and politicians tell. In all these conflicted histories, the recurrent dialectic between what is American and what is Italian presents its own special difficulties. To confront such difficulties belongs to the proper work of literary history.