

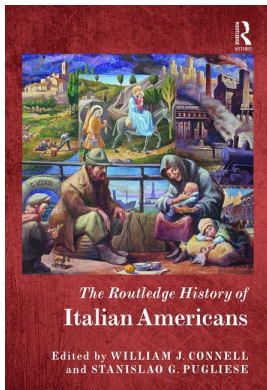
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WHEN THEY WERE FEW

Italians in America, 1800–1850

John Paul Russo

On 24 April 1799, Vice President Thomas Jefferson wrote to Carlo Bellini, professor of modern languages at the College of William and Mary, about their mutual friends and acquaintances going back before the Revolution. There had been a seven-year gap in their correspondence; Bellini had been seriously ill; his wife had died the previous year. The letter was intended to comfort an old friend. Although Filippo Mazzei “was living in Pisa,” other friends had settled permanently in America: “[Y]ou know that Giovanni Strobia has got rich as a grocer in Richmond.” Bellini, Mazzei, and Strobia had all enlisted in the Virginia militia. “Vincent [Rossi] is in flourishing circumstances,” Jefferson continued. “Anthony Giannini has raised a large family, married several of them, & after thriving for a while, has become embarrassed, & little esteemed. Francis, his brother in law, & Anthony Molina have done tolerably well. Giovannini da Prato has been constantly sickly & miserably poor. All these are still in this neighborhood”—by which Jefferson meant Charlottesville.¹

Mazzei, the Florentine physician who was Jefferson’s close friend and a financier of the Revolution, had encouraged these mostly Tuscans to emigrate to Virginia in the 1770s. After twenty-five years some were successes, some were failures, and some were doing “tolerably well.” Strobia, a tailor and a former member of Jefferson’s Williamsburg household, had had the initiative to move on. He even anglicized his name as “John” (as one learns from his obituary in 1809).² In a similar vein Jefferson referred to Vincenzo Rossi as “Vincent” and both Antonio Giannini and Antonio Molina were known to him as “Anthony.” “Vincent” without the surname suffices to identify a common friend. Writing with the same empirical precision that informs his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson testifies to his friendship with these men and also to their Americanization.

One cannot estimate with certainty the number of Italians residing in the United States either in 1800, when the country extended to the Mississippi River with an entire population of 5,309,000, or in 1850, when it reached the Pacific Ocean with a population of 23,191,867. Figures ranging from 3,000 to 12,000 Italians have been suggested. The United States did not track immigration until 1820, and only thirty Italians were recorded as entering in that year. In the decade 1841–1850, an average of 187 Italians entered annually, which was just .11 percent of the total number, a far cry from its 23.26 percent during the heyday of Italian immigration fifty years later. In 1850 there were 3,679 Italian-born immigrants, not including offspring born in America (“second-generation” Italian Americans) or Italians who arrived before 1820 and were living in 1850.³ On the other side of the ocean, the states that made up the geographical territory of Italy did not keep emigration records until the Kingdom of Sardinia (Savonia-Piemonte) began to do so in 1821. Cesare Correnti did not publish the first *Annuario statistico italiano* [Yearly Italian Statistical Report] until 1857.⁴

With these small numbers of widely scattered Italians in America, the method of examining them cannot reasonably be derived from large-scale immigration studies or micro-histories

of Little Italies. To be certain, there must have been pockets of modest density. Ferry Street in Boston's North End, as described by William Dean Howells in his *Suburban Sketches*, was a Little Italy, but the sketch was first published in 1869.⁵ In sum, for 1800–1850, one's conclusions about these Italians in America, mostly bourgeois and professional, arise from piecing together a mosaic of individuals.

The Clerics

In one group are the clerics, with a long history in North America by 1800. In the years from 1800 to 1850 some Italian clerics achieved public status whereas others toiled in obscure parishes or preached along the frontiers as missionaries among the Native Americans, settlers and backwoodsmen. In the former category, Giovanni Antonio Grassi (1775–1849) served as vice president (1811–1812) and ninth president of Georgetown University (1812–1817). A native of Schilpario in the province of Bergamo, Grassi was a Jesuit who, upon ordination, was sent to be rector of a Jesuit college in Russian Poland. His fields of study were mathematics and astronomy. Within a year he was posted to a Russian mission in China, though his departure kept being delayed owing to the disruptions of the Napoleonic Wars. In 1810, after five years of waiting in ports at Copenhagen, London, and Lisbon, he was reassigned to a mission in America, specifically, to Georgetown.

At the time, the university was sorely in need of competent administration. Its founder, Bishop John Carroll, commented that it “has sunk to its lowest degree of discredit.” Grassi himself, confronting a mountain of debts, considered himself a “sorrowful spectator of the miserable state of this college.” Not mincing his words, he referred to “blackguard” students.⁶ Eight presidents in twenty-one years meant a lack of continuity and the goals of the university were confused: Should it be Catholic or secular, pre-seminary or not, local or national? Enrollments had sunk to seventy-five students, while full tuition and board had risen to \$220, one of the highest in the nation. Grassi set to work quickly and made significant changes in faculty recruitment, the composition of the student body and the curriculum. He lowered tuition and board to \$125 per year, which brought the school within the range of middle-class Catholic families. And he welcomed students of other denominations. Within a year the number of students rose to 120, and by 1815 it stood at 224, thereby wiping out an annual deficit of \$3,000. Moreover, he put Georgetown on track to be a national school: in only a few years it went from one-fifth of its students coming from outside the Washington/Maryland area to two-fifths from outside. These long-distance students came mostly from New York and Pennsylvania and many were given scholarships. During the War of 1812, when the British put official Washington to the torch, departing the following day, Grassi offered the government the use of college facilities while also opening the academic year on schedule just five days later. A grateful Congress later granted Georgetown an official charter. Another milestone was reached under Grassi in 1817, when Georgetown awarded its first degree, the Bachelor of Arts.

On a diplomatic mission to Rome in 1817 Grassi fell ill; an inoperable hernia made another transatlantic voyage inadvisable. His presidency came to an abrupt end. From across the ocean, he heard of his accomplishments undone, his plans unravelling, at the hands of less capable administrators and, with six presidents in the next ten years, Georgetown reverted to its earlier plight. “What I had procured with so much labour and patience,” he wrote in November 1818, “now I see . . . destroyed.”⁷ In this year Grassi published *Notizie varie sullo stato presente della repubblica degli Stati Uniti dell’America settentrionale* [Diverse notices on the present state of the republic of the United States of North America], in which his disappointment breaks out: don’t leave Italy: “consider the proverb that he who fares well should stay

at home.”⁸ Edward B. Bunn, Georgetown’s forty-fourth president, called Grassi its “second founder,” after Bishop Carroll.⁹

As a parish priest—when “parish” is what you make of an endless wilderness—Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli, O.P. has had few equals. Born in Milan in 1806, he studied to be a Dominican at Faenza, interrupting his novitiate to heed a call for missionaries from Edward Fenwick, the first bishop of Cincinnati. Fenwick’s diocese stretched from Lake Huron to the Mississippi and from the Ohio River to the Canadian border. It was an area known as the Old Northwest, originally (in 1787) the “Territory Northwest of the River Ohio,” out of which were carved Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and half of Minnesota.

Mazzuchelli’s memoirs project his belief that immanent signs were guiding him on a divinely appointed mission at each major step in his career, signs that provided structure to his third-person *Memoirs*. Leaving home, he invokes the injunction of Luke 14:26: “Whoever does not renounce father, mother, brothers, and sisters cannot be my disciple.”¹⁰ As his ship approaches North America, in November 1828, a howling gale descends, “bent on destroying man who defied its anger,” plunging the ship amid “turbulent foaming waters,” as if to warn him of the menace that lies ahead or to test his faith. Mazzuchelli was “clinging to the mainmast,” as if beneath the Cross, staring into the “violent, imperious waves venting their wrath,” while the “dark and thundering sky denied even the slightest ray of hope,” while the wind “whistling constantly among the masts and cordage seemed to prophesy ruin and death.”¹¹ As the modern writer Belden Lane observes in *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, the negative sublime entails death but also the possibility of rebirth. The Atlantic, the immigrant’s first great hurdle, is spectralized by Mazzuchelli to the degree of apocalyptic ultimacy: “And there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations, bewildered by the roaring of the sea and waves” (Luke 21:25–26).¹²

Mazzuchelli disembarked in a New York that held no Augustinian temptations for him. “Several days of delay . . . convinced the traveler that the splendors of this world are always closely associated with general moral corruption.”¹³ The journey to Cincinnati, by coach and steamboat, would have been more arduous had he not encountered a kindly American who made all the arrangements, and, at the end, refused reimbursement. Again, Mazzuchelli reads a sign, as if from the Biblical story of Tobias and the Angel: “Father, what wages shall we give him [the Angel Raphael]? Or what can be worthy of his benefits? He conducted me and brought me safe again” (Tobit 12:2–3).¹⁴

In October 1830, after learning English, and learning to ride a horse and live in the open, and also after completing his novitiate, Father Mazzuchelli traveled 600 miles north by boat, across Lakes Erie and Huron, into the Michigan straits to his headquarters on Mackinac Island, at the opposite end of the diocese of Cincinnati. Then, in November, he boarded a trading vessel to visit Green Bay, which for years had had no priest to offer Mass or give instruction, where “almost all were of Canadian descent and married to the [mainly Menominee] Indians.”¹⁵ He then hastened back to Mackinac before the ice froze over. He was 24.

A liberal Catholic in the manner of Manzoni, Mazzuchelli won the respect of Protestant ministers who were as intent upon conversions as was he himself. It was his first lesson in American competitiveness, which he seems to have relished. He appreciated the American separation of Church and State, and he publicly criticized a Protestant Army captain who ordered the soldiers on Mackinac to attend a weekly Calvinist Sunday service despite the fact that many of them were French and Irish Catholics.¹⁶

In May 1831, after the ice thawed, Mazzuchelli sailed back to Green Bay to establish some semblance of regularity in the mission. In this and the following years he visited Sault Ste. Marie and L’Arbre Croce (Harbor Springs, Michigan) among the Ottawa tribe; turned

westward, traveling by horse and canoe and on foot with snowshoes into the unsettled regions of Wisconsin and Iowa; preached to the Winnebago, Sacs, Sioux, and Fox tribes; stopped over at Prairie du Chien; and crossed into Minnesota territory. Sometimes he followed the tribes: where they wandered, he wandered with them. He translated Latin into Chippewa so that the Indians could sing hymns in their own language. The Mississippi proved a convenient avenue, and he went up and down, founding parishes, erecting churches after his own design. One of them, St. Mathias Church, was constructed upstream at Prairie du Chien, and then, in 1842, floated down the river to Bloomington (now Muscatine, Iowa). His Irish parishioners fondly called him “Father Matthew Kelley.” By 1836 he was sufficiently well known to address the Wisconsin legislature as it was entering upon its first steps to statehood. Most often he was alone, riding from one village to another. Getting wind of his coming, the Indians would build him a church of mats and an altar of bark in a matter of hours, or sometimes he would celebrate mass on the “vast prairie.”¹⁷ “[T]here was no need of Italian marble for a pavement,” he wrote, with almost biblical eloquence, “that was found ready-made of the green grass in summer and hard frozen earth in winter.”¹⁸ On one occasion he rode alone through a blizzard “in a sledge, drawn by a single horse, crossing prairies, woods, rivers, and frozen lakes,” from Galena, Illinois, to Green Bay and back (400 miles), to retrieve some humble yet precious church furnishings.¹⁹ New York must have seemed far behind, let alone Milan.

He returned to Italy in 1843–44, less for rest than to write his *Memorie storiche ed edificanti d'un Missionario apostolico dell'Ordine dei Predicatori* [Memoirs, Historical and Edifying, of an Apostolic Missionary of the Order of Preachers], a book of major interest for church history, Christian apologetics, anthropology, and autobiography. Writing in the third person, Mazzuchelli becomes “the Missionary”—“the ideal personality in whom self-will has given way to divine will.”²⁰ As in a saint’s life, the facts are selected and arranged in order to fulfill an ideal type. So he recalls his youthful energy and enthusiasm, and, in light of the magnitude of his mission, he prays for courage and endurance:

[T]he young priest did not lack that abundant zeal that is usually the first fruit of ordination. Would God that he and all priests in the world might persevere and take with them to the tomb the holy fervor that animated them when ordination raised them to the sublime dignity of Christ’s ambassadors.²¹

During the second phase of his career in the Old Northwest he founded institutions: Sinsinawa Mound College (1846); the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters (1847); and St. Clara Academy (now Dominican University). Yet his main duty continued to be pastoral and on the road. In 1863 he died from pneumonia caught tending a sick person in Benton, Wisconsin. So far as I know, his only public memorial is a roadside tablet, one mile west of Benton, lost amid the immense spaces, fitting tribute to the Missionary. In 1993 Pope John Paul II declared Mazzuchelli Venerable, the first step toward sainthood.

The Literati and the Exiles

Every generation has its version of the Wandering Scholar. The first person to occupy a chair in modern languages at a North American college was Carlo Bellini (1735–1804), who taught for twenty-five years at the College of William and Mary. Bellini was a Florentine from a bourgeois business family. His freethinking and Masonic connections put him at odds with municipal authorities, and so he prudently left town and traveled across Europe, exercising his natural gift for languages by learning German, French, Spanish, and English.

He met up with a fellow Florentine Mason, Filippo Mazzei, in London. When the *Polizia del Granducato* pardoned him, he returned to his native city and took a position in the tax office.

In 1774, however, at the invitation—or rather the instigation—of Mazzei, Bellini and his wife emigrated to Virginia and within months of their arrival they were guests of Jefferson at Monticello. Whether it was his radical politics, his cosmopolitanism, or his genial personality, Bellini impressed Jefferson, who in subsequent years helped him stay afloat by finding him positions as a tutor and interpreter. In his role as a militiaman, Bellini was content with being an “ordinary soldier,” which he held a “noble and glorious office.” His captain was the future Revolutionary hero Patrick Henry, who addressed him with two other Italian volunteers: “You, Sir, render an important service to this state with your example, because barely arrived in this county, you voluntarily undertake to defend it as a soldier.”²² Surveying his first years in his adopted country in 1778, Bellini wrote an encomiastic letter to his brother in Tuscany that was subsequently published in two Florentine periodicals and widely circulated, which was almost certainly Bellini’s intention. He wrote:

I am at last a free and independent man. As a consequence of liberty and independence in all these vast regions one finds not even a single being so stupid as to have the insolence to believe himself superior to another.²³

On Jefferson’s recommendation, in March 1778, the State of Virginia appointed Bellini to be a foreign correspondent and interpreter, a role that Bellini puffed up among Italian friends to be that of “Secretary of this State of Virginia for Foreign Affairs.” In August 1778, on the recommendation of Jefferson and of Patrick Henry (then the state’s new governor), Bellini was appointed to the chair in Modern Languages at William and Mary. His sisters in Livorno referred to it as “Saint Mary.”²⁴ During the British invasion and seizure of Williamsburg in 1780, Bellini remained behind while the revolutionaries abandoned the town, and he may have saved the campus by his personal diplomacy.

Bellini’s salary depended on the fees of his students, and, in later years, when he suffered strokes and was invalid and paralytic, his resources dwindled to near nothing. Living in a run-down house near the campus, he survived on wine and biscuits brought to him by a student. When Bellini’s sight declined, Jefferson arranged for a pair of eyeglasses. After Bellini’s death in 1804, Jefferson, holding power of attorney, took responsibility for the disposition of the man’s will. The case began while Jefferson was in his first term as President and dragged on for thirteen years after Bellini’s death. In the very last of these documents, written from Monticello (1 August 1817), Jefferson made a special request to the consular office in Livorno that testified to his feeling for Italy: “[W]e are erecting a College in my neighborhood”—the future University of Virginia—and “are in want of a stone-cutter . . . capable of cutting an Ionic capital . . . and we suppose we can be better accommodated with one from your place than here, for indeed such workmen are scarcely to be had here at all.”²⁵ Jefferson’s biographer, Dumas Malone, wrote that Bellini was the “only man in history” who addressed Jefferson as “My dearest Thomas.”²⁶

Another Italian, Pietro Bachi (1787–1853) combined the role of Wandering Scholar with that of the Political Exile. In 1814 the Harvard historian George Ticknor had complained of being unable to locate in Boston a single Italian grammar.²⁷ Ten years later, opening the new program in foreign languages, he interviewed Bachi and offered him the job. Ticknor might not have known at the time that his real name was Ignazio Batolo and that he had a price on his head. Bachi (or Batolo) was a native of Palermo who received his doctorate in law from the University of Palermo. In January 1822 his name was found on a list of Carbonari

conspirators who were plotting to overthrow the Bourbon government in Sicily. He was convicted *in absentia* and sentenced to twenty-four years in chains. Ten others were executed, but somehow Batolo slipped through the roundup and escaped to Malta, thence to London, and finally to Boston, where he turned up as Ticknor's "accomplished Italian exile," reading Italian aloud to him and to the historian William H. Prescott.²⁸

Bachi's career at Harvard (1826–1846) was highly productive in its first years. One of his pupils, Theodore Koch, wrote of his teaching that "everybody liked him, not to say loved him. . . . As a critic of Dante, he had exactly the gift which a good teacher ought to have."²⁹ When Henry Wadsworth Longfellow needed a French instructor, he wrote that he should be "a youth of spirit and a gentleman, such as I have in German and Italian," referring to Bachi, "the Italian with his charming accent and the shadow upon his life."³⁰ During these years Bachi published an ambitious series of grammars, anthologies, and a conversation guide, supplying the very lack that Ticknor had lamented. Longfellow praised the revised edition of *A Grammar of the Italian Language* (1838), a project of "immense labor . . . at once comprehensive and clear, and wherein every rule is literally *shored up* with good authorities."³¹ It was "by far superior to all those already in use in schools."³² Harvard conferred an honorary MA upon him, and he enjoyed the growing company of Cambridge Italophiles.

If Bellini had a natural gift for languages, Bachi adopted a more scientific approach to pedagogy. "His books were written with great care," they were philologically sound, and they took a student's practical needs into account. His publications in Spanish and Portuguese were "the first studies of comparative philology produced at Harvard."³³ In the preface to *A Comparative View of the Italian and Spanish Languages, or An Easy Method of Learning the Spanish Tongue for Those Who Are Already Acquainted with the Italian*, he pleaded the case for Italian as "indispensable" to a "polite education." He projected his defense of Italian against a centuries-old disparagement of the language and its authors by French and British critics. Bachi could note, quite objectively, that

Spanish has in some respects a higher claim to attention [than Italian] at the present day in this country—the claim arising from the great extent to which it is spoken on the American continent, and its utility in commercial transaction.³⁴

But the fortunes of Italian were about to take a surprising turn.

When Longfellow mentioned a "shadow" upon Bachi's life, he was referring to the latter's life in exile. Even from across the Atlantic Bachi persisted in his political commitments. When Giuseppe Mazzini revived Giovine Italia (Young Italy) in England in 1838, Bachi was appointed Boston's *Ordinatore* (commander) and he instructed its *Congrega* (assembly). How many participated? There must have been a respectable number because Bachi at one point expelled three of them on grounds of poor morals. In the summer of 1844 Bachi joined a group of conspirators on Malta, hoping to invade Sicily. However his movements, like those of the others, had been tracked by Bourbon police, the plot was foiled, and Bachi returned to Harvard without setting foot on the island. The shadow deepened and it exacerbated his alcoholism. Longfellow noted it during the examination period in July 1846: "the Spanish classes did well; the Italian not so well." After twenty years' teaching, and in poor health, Bachi was fired "due to neglect to attend your classes without giving notice."³⁵ "It was," comments one scholar, "the end of Bachi's career—nay, service at Harvard, for a career it never was."³⁶ But this is too harsh, for Bachi's record of publication and his teaching up until the early 1840s would be the envy of any scholar.

Bachi returned to Palermo in 1847 in time to participate in the Revolution of 1848. But the younger generation of nationalists treated him like an old-timer, and when, after fifteen

months, the Palermo revolt collapsed, he went back to Boston. He died in bankruptcy in 1853. Bachi was not replaced at Harvard until Luigi Monti, another Sicilian exile, was appointed in 1853.³⁷ Monti, having become an American citizen, had the satisfaction of returning to Palermo in 1861 as American consul.

Not long before Bachi's death, his daughter commissioned his portrait from Albert Gallatin Hoit, a New England artist noted for his ability "to capture an accurate likeness with frankness, while imbuing it with discretion and 'sweet cordiality.'"³⁸ In his portrait of Bachi (see Color Plate 5), Hoit's accuracy trumps his discretion and sweetness. The portrait betrays Bachi's anxiety, perplexity, and sense of failure in his final years.

Pietro D'Alessandro (circa 1812–1855) was a Sicilian poet and political refugee, whose reading of Carlo Botta's *Storia della guerra d'Indipendenza degli Stati Uniti* [History of the War of Independence of the United States] (1809) led him to American shores.³⁹ Botta's was a standard history that contributed a fiery idealism to the Italian Risorgimento. In translation it was well received in the United States, remaining on Harvard reading lists through the 1820s until George Bancroft's multivolume history began appearing a decade later.⁴⁰ D'Alessandro was a Carbonaro sympathizer and member of the Sicilian secret society known as "*l'ardita falange*" (the bold phalanx). He stayed for nine years in Boston (1833–1842), though he made one or two trips back to Palermo.

D'Alessandro's "Letters of an Italian Exile," a memoir of his first years in America, appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1842, translated by Henry Tuckerman, himself a Boston Italophile. A tone of melancholy pervades the "Letters." The writer cannot turn back, yet he does not like what he sees going forward. At the outset he captures the mixed emotions of the immigrant. The weariness of the long voyage vanished entirely upon his sighting land and he felt the thrill of arrival; at length, the recollection of home "awoke in my mind the most painful sense of uncertainty. I felt doubtful of every thing, even my own existence . . . I then felt intensely what it is to be alone." In the end, however, a sense of reintegration and confidence is established: "I stooped reverently to kiss the land sacred to liberty, and felt for the first time that I, too, was a man."⁴¹

Boston proved uncongenial to D'Alessandro who, without steady work, lived in strained circumstances and relied upon remittances from his family in Sicily. (Fifty years later the remittances of Italians would cross in the other direction!) Though Bachi proved a friend to D'Alessandro, the newcomer had no money and the many responsibilities that come with a growing family. The Bostonians were civil, but they were also cool, distant and "exceedingly wary of foreigners"—not only of Europeans like himself but of non-New Englanders. To be a "stranger" was a kind of "original sin," compounded by the "still less pardonable sin of poverty." Religious metaphor bespeaks the language of the Puritans. Instead of thrift and modesty, which he expected in the city of Mather and the Adamses, he found consumerism and outright extravagance: "their lives are entirely spent in striving after new accumulations," nowhere more apparent than in women's fashion: "gala dresses, all satin and muslin, light feathered bonnets, silk stockings and dancing shoes, with a bit of fur round their necks, of the skirt of their pelisses to *whisper of comfort*." Boston women changed outfits several times a day, which Italian women did not do. Rejecting his desire for companionship, they "glide over the ice with a calm indifference." On the other hand, D'Alessandro admired the sense of order (soldiers and police did not roam the streets as in Palermo), the respect for learning, the libraries of Harvard and the Boston Athenaeum, the simplicity of customs forms and official applications in contrast to Italy, the general efficiency: "a quiet population incessantly intent upon industry and commerce, without being retarded by civil restrictions or tyrannical extortions." He earned a decent living by going into the import-export business. Yet if his

decision to return to Italy was marked, again, by mixed emotions, no such emotions inform his ringing advice to Italians: Remain in, and work for Italy. “Live ever in the love of your friends, of letters, of your country.”⁴²

Aside from translations, D’Alessandro published one book in his lifetime, *Monte Auburno*. It appeared in 1835 with a single eponymous poem of 319 hendecasyllabic lines, inspired by Ugo Foscolo’s *I Sepolcri* and by Mount Auburn Cemetery, the first “rural cemetery” in America (1831), which became a noted resting place of writers, artists, Boston Brahmins and Cambridge professors. Like the cemetery itself, *Monte Auburno* reflected the Romantic attitude toward death, which held that the beloved or the friend was not dead but sleeping, having returned to the bosom of nature.⁴³ As historian Philippe Ariès once explained, starting around 1750, cemeteries that for millennia had been located in town centers were removed—often under a pretense of sanitation and seemliness—and set in landscaped meadows. The tomb site became a kind of family property in which the loved ones were “at home,” waiting to be visited, “as one would go to a relative’s home, or into one’s own home, full of memories.”⁴⁴ D’Alessandro praised the sheltering

... robusta

Quercia, che l’arco all’Indian vagante

Fornì prima co’ rami ed or l’incurva

Pia su le tombe, e le protegge.

[... sturdy oak, that once supplied the wandering Indian with his bow, and now bends its pious shape above the graves, protecting them.]⁴⁵

The autumnal foliage, New England’s “beautiful death” is the appropriate setting for the “*bel soggiorno*” of the dead. Mount Auburn was the most cherished of those “convening places for the literary society of Boston.” “[F]riends and colleagues . . . often chose the same cemeteries, and sometimes the same sections of those cemeteries” for their own resting place, because friends and lovers meet again in death as if on earth.⁴⁶

During the late 1830s, D’Alessandro and another exile, Antonio Gallenga, occasionally joined Bachi for supper at his house in Brattle Street, Cambridge. Born in Parma to an upper middle-class family, Gallenga had been imprisoned for his part in a student protest; he would travel far and wide in exile and write a copious memoir, *Episodes of My Second Life* (1885), in which he depicted the flowering of Italophilia in the New England of the 1830s and 1840s. One can imagine the three of them conversing over their literary works, their families, their daily struggles and then, inevitably, turning to the subject of Italy, first with odd bits of news and gossip, then with growing anger at the police, the Pope, the informers, and the corruption in their native country. Why, for the previous two hundred fifty years, had a country with an abundance of human energy and ingenuity squandered its resources so recklessly? Why had its ruling class, with so many models of *buon governo* (good government) before them, been so lacking in vision? Why had it misgoverned the Italians, both economically and politically, so that they fell under foreign rule, forcing the country’s best minds into exile? There was practically a tradition in Italy of brilliance denied, a tradition that began with Dante and continued through Marsilius of Padua, Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella, Galileo, Giannone, Pagano, Cuoco, Foscolo, and Mazzini. It is a conversation one still hears in Italy today.

D’Alessandro returned to Palermo in 1843 to marry and manage his estate. Never abandoning politics, he became a Secretary during the Revolution of 1848, afterwards going into exile on Malta as an aide to Ruggero Settimo, the head of the unofficial government

in exile. There, in 1855, he died of rheumatic fever at the age of 45. Henry Lushington, the Secretary of the English colonial government of Malta, himself to die within months of his friend, wrote a poem to D'Alessandro:

Rest in thy foreign grave,
Sicilian! whom our English hearts have loved,
Italian! Such as Dante had approved—
An exile—not a slave.⁴⁷

Note how the “Sicilian” blossoms into an “Italian,” in the spirit of 1848, “Such as Dante had approved”—and Machiavelli too.

Lorenzo Da Ponte

Perhaps the most famous, and certainly most colorful Italian American of the nineteenth century was Lorenzo Da Ponte (portrayed in Color Plate 4), whose immortality is assured on account of his having been Mozart's favorite librettist, providing the text for *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*. When Da Ponte disembarked at Philadelphia in 1805, he was already 56 years old and his fortunes were at their lowest ebb. Venice had banished him for licentiousness and adultery in 1779; Austria for *lèse-majesté* in 1792; and he was forced to leave England for breach of contract in 1804. His final days in England were spent in hiding aboard a ship. But Da Ponte threw in his lot with America; became a citizen in 1828; never returned to Europe; and lived to his ninetieth year. If the American period of his life would never attain the height of his years with Mozart, it cannot fairly be called a decline, thanks to Da Ponte's unusual ability to match his considerable creative resources to the needs of his new community.

Long ago in a classic essay, Ernesto Masi ranked Da Ponte and Filippo Mazzei among Italy's eighteenth-century “adventurers.”⁴⁸ Neither man exactly fit the type that was instead fully realized by Casanova and Cagliostro: egoist, amoral, libertine, cosmopolite, living by one's wits, moving from country to country and going from rags to riches—and, often enough, back to rags—in a ceaseless circle. Yet Da Ponte resembled the type more closely than Mazzei, not least in his association with fellow Venetian Giacomo Casanova, who was always ready to offer him a good adventurer's advice. Because Da Ponte did not always follow that advice—he did have scruples of one form or another—he seems more like an *avventuriere galantuomo* (a “gentleman adventurer,” similar to Goldoni's self-styled “*Avventuriere Onorato*”) rather than an *avventuriere canaglia* (scoundrel).⁴⁹ Indeed the naïve, good-natured Da Ponte is perhaps described even better as an adventurer *manqué*, more sinned against than sinning, or, in his case, more duped than duping.

He was born Emanuele Conegliano in the Jewish ghetto of Ceneda (now the city of Vittorio Veneto), 40 miles north of Venice. His mother died when he was five. His father, a leather worker, converted his family to Roman Catholicism when Lorenzo was fourteen, gave the boy the name of the local bishop, and sent him to a religious preparatory school. Financial and domestic problems constrained Lorenzo and his two brothers to become priests. By the time he was ordained in 1773, however, he had already visited Venice on business several times and had fallen in with its libertine circles. The priesthood would be one of Da Ponte's many masks—poet, librettist, bookseller, publisher, gambler, impresario, grocer, tutor, professor. He typically hid the fact that he was a priest, that he was married—or that he was not married, dissimulating according to his advantage.

Let us pass over his golden years in Vienna to his silver ones in New York. It was Casanova who saw Da Ponte floundering as an impresario in London and suggested that he teach Italian. Da Ponte scorned this as “a profession currently practiced by waiters, cobblers, exiles . . . who by way of payment are insulted with a few pennies, or a shilling, or sometimes a measure of beer.”⁵⁰ One episode in Da Ponte’s remarkably entertaining *Memoirs* speaks to the image of Italy in the United States circa 1810. Passing a Broadway bookstore, Da Ponte stopped in to ask if there were any Italian books: “I have a few,” the clerk replied, “but no one ever asks for them”:

While we stood chatting, an American gentleman approached and joined our conversation. I was soon aware from his remarks that he was admirably read in a variety of literature. Coming by chance to allude to the language and literature of my country I took occasion to ask him why they should be so little studied in a country as enlightened as I believed America to be.

“Oh sir,” he replied, “modern Italy is not unfortunately the Italy of ancient times. She is not that sovereign queen which gave to the ages and to the world emulators, nay rivals, of the supreme Greeks.”⁵¹

The gentleman added that there were “five or at the most six” Italian writers of lasting importance in the previous six centuries, counting out on his fingers Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Tasso, then holding onto that last finger. “To tell the truth, I cannot recall the sixth.”

Later in New York, Da Ponte would discover that he was exceptionally good at teaching Italian. But first he tried his hand at opening shops to sell things to support his wife and four children. He sold food, dry goods, and liquor, and he doubted that the Italian language or its literature would sell in a city where “they were about as well known . . . as Turkish or Chinese.”⁵²

Da Ponte opened groceries first in New York, and then in Pennsylvania in Elizabethtown and Sunbury, each of which failed, mainly on account of his credulity in selling on credit. Yet he never appears to have been unduly depressed by the consequences. His mood is well captured in the picture he paints of himself weighing items in scales and measuring cloth, much like Figaro measuring the size of his bed in *The Marriage of Figaro*.⁵³

But Da Ponte returned to New York permanently in 1819 and it was there that he took up the teaching of Italian. One of his students, Clement Clarke Moore, was the son of the president of Columbia College. Moore, who would become a distinguished Hebrew scholar, was a Columbia trustee, although he is known best as the poet who wrote “The Night before Christmas.” He recommended Da Ponte to his fellow trustees, and, in September 1825, Da Ponte (at age 76) was appointed its first Professor of Italian literature, with his salary to be paid based on the number of students enrolled.

For the first six or seven years all went well. Da Ponte was a natural teacher, filled with enormous enthusiasm for his subject, as histrionic as it was possible to be within the bounds of good taste, “ordering books from Italy, arranging little plays to be performed by his pupils in his home, and holding weekly receptions at which Italian classics were read and discussed.”⁵⁴ Though his association with the high culture of late eighteenth-century Vienna enhanced his stature, the secret to his achievement lay in his charismatic charm, optimism, energy and inventiveness, like a character out of his own libretti.

In Da Ponte’s first term of teaching, a company of opera singers specializing in the Italian repertoire found its way to New York. It was the Garcia troupe, with its celebrated soprano

Maria Garcia, later Maria Malibran (1808–1836), then 17 years old and at the beginning of an all-too-brief career. Recognizing her talent at once, Da Ponte convinced her father to include “my *Don Giovanni*” in the spring season, with Maria in the role of Zerlina. The tour, which introduced America to Italian opera, was a sensational success, and together with the vogue of studying Italian contributed to a modest change in fortune for the reception of its language and culture. The Garcias moved on but in subsequent years Da Ponte devoted his major effort to establishing Italian opera in New York. Almost on his own he raised sufficient funds to build what he named the “Italian Opera House,” the first of its kind in America, which opened in 1833 (Da Ponte was 85). Curiously in that first season, although there were operas by Rossini (6), Cimarosa (1), Pacini (1), and Salvioli (1), there were none by Mozart. Within two seasons Da Ponte’s lack of business sense led to ruin. His partner disappeared, leaving him deeply in debt, so that he had to sell the building to pay his expenses. It would burn to the ground in 1836. Yet his efforts stimulated an interest in opera that within another decade would be wildly successful in New York, as Walt Whitman, among others, observed.⁵⁵

Da Ponte’s last years were unhappy. His son Giuseppe died suddenly at 21. His wife, 20 years his junior, died in 1831. His opera plans had quite literally gone up in flames. The demands of the role of impresario, successful or otherwise, undoubtedly kept him from his professorial duties, and fewer and fewer students signed up for his courses. He would have understood Robert Frost’s lines:

No memory of having starred
Atones for later disregard
Or keeps the end from being hard.⁵⁶

Joseph Rocchietti and the Italian American Novel

Joseph (Giuseppe) Rocchietti has the distinction of writing the earliest known Italian American novel, *Lorenzo and Oonalaska*, which was published in Virginia in 1835.⁵⁷ Rocchietti styled himself “Joseph” Rocchietti on the title page, and identified himself as coming from “Casal”—by which he meant Casale Monferrato in Piedmont. A teacher of Italian, he also published a tragedy in Italian, *Ifigenia* (1842); a lengthy essay “Why a National Literature Cannot Flourish in the United States of North America” (1845), arguing that the United States were too insular, imitative and nativist;⁵⁸ and a play about the Civil War, *Charles Rovellini, a Drama of the Disunited States of North America* (1875). The facts of Rocchietti’s biography are scanty—when and why did he come to America? Where did he live? Why did he publish in Virginia? His bibliography is likely to grow as more items are uncovered in the coming years. According to scholar Francesco Durante, Rocchietti is “perhaps the most prolific among Italian American writers of the early nineteenth century, but certainly the least well-known.”⁵⁹

Lorenzo and Oonalaska is a short epistolary novel of 132 pages that draws inspiration from Foscolo’s *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* [Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis] as well as from Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* and Germaine De Staël’s *Corinne*. In the novel Lorenzo’s parents instill in him the ancient values of the Greek *polis* and the Roman republic. The hero writes that his father “made me swear against every other principle of politics but those of Brutus, Cato, and Washington.”⁶⁰ These beliefs force him into exile at Geneva, where he teaches Greek, Latin, French and Italian. Oonalaska, a young Englishwoman, is among his pupils in Geneva and they fall in love. After extensive travels in England and America he returns to Switzerland. A series of misunderstandings leads to a duel in which he refuses to kill his rival, while allowing himself to be shot to death.⁶¹ Oonalaska dies upon hearing the news. Most

importantly, the novel expresses Rocchietti's revolutionary republicanism. His hero "longs for Italy to achieve the American political system."⁶² To achieve that goal, one must revive a Machiavellian *virtù* that is able "to bear up against adversities with calmness, and heroism."⁶³

Other noteworthy Italians established themselves in America in the period from 1800 to 1850. Orazio de Attellis, from a noble family in the Molise, fought in Napoleon's armies in Italy and Russia. Jacobin activities led to his expulsion from the Papal States, Spain, and Mexico. In New York, where he befriended Da Ponte, he opened a girls' boarding school on Broadway and then another in New Orleans, becoming an American citizen in 1828. His twin goals were "to encourage a more assiduous Italian presence in the institutional life of the United States" and "to make Italians acquire in America that national conscience that they did not have in Italy."⁶⁴ Having established in New Orleans an Italian guard troop, the Mount Vernon Musketeers, he took up the cause of Texas independence—though not annexation, which he feared would expand slave territory in the West. At age 75 the Revolution of 1848 drew him back to Italy, though amid the intense nationalist fervor his Jacobite ideas were seen as outmoded. He died in 1850 at Civitavecchia on the eve of a planned departure for New York.

In the 1830s Giuseppe Tagliabue emigrated from the environs of Como and set up shop on Pearl Street in New York City, designing and manufacturing scientific instruments such as the hydrometer, lactometer, and thermometer. In the same decade Eugene Grasselli migrated to Cincinnati where he opened a factory for making sulfuric acid; he expanded his business by moving to a site in Cleveland next to Rockefeller's Standard Oil with whom he did business for many years, refusing to be bought out by the oil magnate.⁶⁵ Giacomo Beltrami (1790–1855), from Bergamo and in exile for liberal sympathies, explored the upper reaches of the Mississippi and wrote about the discovery of its source in 1824, only to be proven wrong by Henry Schoolcraft eight years later. Eleuterio Felice Foresti, a Carbonaro, was released from Austria's Spielberg prison in an amnesty of 1836 on condition that he "transport" to America. He would succeed Da Ponte in the chair of Italian literature at Columbia.

From 1800 to 1850 the Italians who arrived in the New World encountered long-standing preconceptions. Some belonged to the Renaissance, a period that spread the idea of the Italian as humanist, scientist, courtier or courtesan, but also as the deceitful Machiavel. Yet another Italian profile developed with the advent of Romanticism. Where better to combine both strands of the Italian character, high and low, than in the type of the "noble savage"? Where the Enlightenment treated the child as an imperfect adult needing to be shaped by culture, the Romantics idealized the child as father of the man. Italians were described as unself-conscious children at play, full of candor but with a lack of control, in contrast to Anglo-American maturity, seriousness and work.⁶⁶ Closer to nature, the child is in contact with spontaneous life, like the savage—or the naïve artist. Italians were seen as representing the childhood of modernity, to be viewed with fond nostalgia, as in a museum.

The Romantic idealization of the child, which reached its zenith in America in the 1820s and 1830s, improved the general view of Italians. Negative stereotypes remained latent, as immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century would realize;⁶⁷ yet, in our period, 1800–1850, with few Italians actually present, and these mostly middle class and professional—a good number of them freedom-loving exiles in a country whose own revolution had inspired them—the ways in which Italians differed from native-born Americans were perceived with fondness and sometimes with wholehearted admiration.

The Time of the Exiles Ends

In July 1850, after the defeat of the Roman Republic of 1849, Giuseppe Garibaldi arrived as a famous refugee in New York City. Typically, he refused the honor of a public reception.

His rheumatism, which incapacitated him from time to time, could not dissuade him from manual labor, and he went to work in a candle factory, mostly hauling barrels of tallow. His name and presence fostered Italian charities in the city (indicating a growing population). He took the first steps toward American citizenship, but then bided his time. Rather than remain in America, after three and a half years, in January 1854, he returned to Europe, stopping over at London to encounter prominent European radicals. As a result of these meetings the exiled Russian intellectual Alexander Herzen was able to write a character portrait of Garibaldi, whom he revered as “a hero of antiquity, a figure out of the *Aeneid*.”⁶⁸ In one conversation Garibaldi expatiated on the adverse effects of a long exile, a matter with which Herzen was sadly familiar. “What can [the exiles] do now in Europe?” Garibaldi wondered. Then he answered his own question:

Grow used to slavery and be false to themselves, or go begging in England. . . . Settling in America is worse still—that’s the end, that’s the land of “forgetting one’s own country”: it is a new fatherland, there are other interests, everything is different. . .

Many an immigrant would feel the pungency of that remark. Then the man of action turned to the business at hand:

[M]en who stay in America fall out of the ranks. What is better than my idea, what could be better than gathering together round a few masts and sailing over the ocean, hardening ourselves in the rough life of sailors, in conflict with the elements and with danger? A floating revolution, ready to put in at any shore, independent and unassailable!⁶⁹

It was a prophetic statement. A few years later Garibaldi would ship out from a port near Genoa with his volunteer followers—the “Thousand”—and they would “put in” at Marsala to commence the unification of Italy. The time of the exiles was over.

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