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## American Studies in Italy

### Part 1 : State of the Art of American Literary Studies in Italy

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## Part 1 : State of the Art of American Literary Studies in Italy

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- 1 Almost a decade ago, upon discussing the question of the study of multiculturalism in Italy, Mario Materassi stressed the literary nature of American studies in this country and added that most academic members of the Italian Association of North American Studies (AISNA) taught American literature as part of the offerings of the English or the modern languages departments. He also pointed out, besides the impact of “prevailing generational ideologies” upon Italian research, “the peculiar role that Italian specialists in the non-mainstream aspects of American culture can play within the large picture of American studies, vis-à-vis today's push toward national or group self-affirmation.” (*American Quarterly*, 48.1, March 1996). Today things have become different : the 2003 AISNA Conference held in Rome, “Ambassadors. American Studies in a Changing World” has updated the picture with the offer of an overview of Italian approaches to American studies.
- 2 In the literary, as in each humanistic disciplinary field, the global debate has kindled lately on questions of nationalism, transnationalism, and postcolonialism, center and periphery, identity, gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion and the role those elements play in the representation of culture. Across literary genres, moreover, aesthetics has been linked, after 9/11, with the theme of destruction, on which a special issue of *RSA-Journal* came out in 2002. Such nightmare, one should add, has kept its tragic relevance in the wake of destruction and terrorism connected with the war in Iraq.
- 3 By the time “a view of world literature” (*New Left Review* 1, 2000) was called into being at the turn of the century (or should I say millennium) by Franco Moretti, who subsequently argued against the West having “a monopoly over the creation of forms that count” (*New Left Review* 20, 2003), a different outlook of American Studies started being envisaged in Italy, with the cultural and methodological paradigms being approached spatially from an intercultural and transnational perspective, across boundaries, in their dialectical interrelationship with different traditions, and from a non-hegemonic point of view—in one word, “globally”. The collection *America at large. Americanistica transnazionale e nuova comparatistica* (ed. Donatella Izzo, Giorgio Mariani, Milano 2004), while aiming at dropping the idea of “uniqueness” and “exceptionalism” as characterizing the U S nation, propounds a radical revision of the cultural and

methodological paradigms upon which American studies rest. The way is cut for a re-examination of what it means to study the literature of the USA.

- 4 Such recent perspectives in academic research have impacted on current ideologies as well as on teaching methods, considering also the five-year process of restructuring so far undergone by the Italian University system. I will not dash into the field of the “new” educational policy to participate in the polemical debate about credits, modules, the duration of courses, or the length of the dissertation. I just wish to acknowledge that the reformed system gave us teachers of American literature and supporters of American studies as a disciplinary area in its own right, the possibility of organizing, within our respective University Faculties, a three- or five-year course inspired by a hemispheric approach to America, with Anglo-American literature [and Spanish-American and/or Brazilian literature] as major subjects. This is something that the first Department of American Studies (originated at “La Sapienza”, later at Roma Tre) had auspicated since its birth in the early nineteen-eighties, and so far almost exclusively a prerogative of Ph. D. programs.
- 5 Having considered the present state of affairs as a new departure for future studies, let me record which targets have been hit since the mid-nineties. Today American studies display a more congruous variety of the “interdisciplinary approaches” called for by Materassi, and can count upon the research of political scientists, philosophers, ethnologists and ethnographers, anthropologists, architects, musicologists, and specialists in the visual arts—all focusing their research on things American (as is evident from the exceptional nature, in some cases, of the contributions to the four-monthly international journal *Acoma*, founded in 1994). Inspired by the same dynamic opening, much of what was exquisitely “literary” has definitely entered the cultural knot in such a way that an amalgam of disciplines cross-fertilizing one another has taken shape, causing contaminations and transformations within a plurality of methodologies. On the other hand, however, in spite of Moretti’s call for a “text-free literary scholarship” the philological inquiry into the literary text is sound and alive, and is considered, as Gayatri Spivak’s claims, the best practice of old comparative literature, a discipline based on plurality and diversity in opposition to a unified system (*Death of a Discipline*, 2003). The refusal to lower one’s attention for the textual and linguistic aspect of the literary work in favour of a totalizing view of “literature”—as is clearer and clearer from the hottest disputes over the new critical approach—is undoubtedly due to the tradition established, and encouragement offered to their disciples, by those scholars who held the earliest chairs of American Studies in Italy. Today’s heritage was implanted by them as a seed for future scholars to cultivate, within the diversity due to their backgrounds, by Agostino Lombardo, Alfredo Rizzardi, Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli, Rolando Anzilotti, and Sergio Perosa.
- 6 In the Italian post-war panorama, divided between the devotees of artistic prose and *engagés* writers, Izzo has recalled in her obituary following the untimely death of the “father” of American studies in Italy, Lombardo—a Communist intellectual and militant critic—who devoted his philological efforts to translate such elitarian and metalinguistic a text as James’s *Art of the Novel*, thus revealing the exquisitely political and historical value of what would appear to many an exasperating product of aestheticism. The way was thus cut for James’s studies in Italy, while the idea of a fully anglicized artist was definitely dropped. James’s “Americanism” would soon be fully

investigated upon thanks to Perosa's efforts, and continuously re-discovered and re-invented by scholars of the following generations.

- 7 In today's grown-up—in size and in awareness—modern Europe the processes and implications involved in transatlantic connections haven't and aren't being ignored by Italian Americanists. Facilitated by low-cost airlines, e-mail correspondence, and European programs such as Erasmus/Socrates, European Americanists look at each "other" and look at the USA as "Other", envisaging possible patterns for collective (self-)definition or reciprocal reflection, and importing-exporting models developed in literature but also in cinema, theatre, mass media, and all those expressions of popular culture that find their way into the written or oral language. As Izzo reminded us in her address to the AISNA members in taking up her office as President of the Association, our discipline is no more, or perhaps has never been, relegated to the academic environment. On the contrary, it provocatively emerges on television, in the newspapers, in bookshops or at the cinema, thereby stimulating scholars to a fruitful interaction with the extra-academic world, and, simultaneously, enriching the quality of their critical and analytical instruments.
- 8 Within such dynamic framework, the concept of "nation" is undergoing re-vision, as is clear from works such as *La formazione di una cultura nazionale : la Letteratura degli Stati Uniti dall'Indipendenza all'età di Jackson (1776-1850)* (ed. Alessandro Portelli, Roma 1999), *Storie di fondazione. Letteratura e nazione negli Stati Uniti postrivoluzionari* (by Salvatore Proietti, Roma 2002), and *Rinascita di una nazione. Le scrittrici americane e la guerra civile* (by Sara Antonelli, Roma 2004). Reflections on the ensuing intercultural debate are gathered in: *Mappe senza frontiere. Cartografie letterarie dal modernismo al transnazionalismo* (by Paola Zaccaria, Bari 1999), "Intersecting Discourses in the American Renaissance (and Beyond)" *Anglistica A.I.O.N.* (ed. Donatella Izzo and Mario Corona, 2002), and *Culture a contatto nelle Americhe* (ed. Bottalico and R.Maria Grillo, Salerno 2003). Multicultural studies have exploded alongside ethnic and emigration studies, all having obtained full recognition. The stress is often on, but not limited to, Italian-Americans (cfr. *'Merica. Forme della cultura italoamericana*, ed. Nick Ceramella and Giuseppe Massara, Isernia 2004). African-American, Jewish-American, and Asian-American, besides Chicano, Caribbean, and Native literary studies have all received critical attention. Among the profusion of work in that direction, I will mention the individual work of many specialists—Maria Giulia Fabi (whose *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel* was published by Illinois UP in 2001), Alessandro Portelli, Sara Antonelli, Paola Boi, Maria Giulia Fabi, Giordano Di Biasio, Elena Mortara, Mario Materassi, Michele Bottalico, Luigi Sampietro, and Gabriella Morisco—and Lina Unali's establishment (a few years ago) of the *Asia and the West* Conference. In addition, critical developments of Native literature have led to the following outcomes: *Gli Indiani d'America e l'Italia* (Alessandria 2002) and *Indian Stories, Indian Histories* (Torino 2004) both co-edited by Fedora Giordano; *Voci dal Sudovest. Terra e identità negli scrittori indianoamericani* (ed. Laura Coltelli, Pisa 2002) and the Native American Poets series directed by Coltelli, *Le radici della memoria* (Urbino 2002); and Giorgio Mariani, *La penna e il tamburo. Gli Indiani d'America e la letteratura degli Stati Uniti* (Verona 2003).
- 9 Among the initiatives promoted in the field of women's studies are a national research on nuns' literary-historical writings (directed by Caterina Ricciardi), and a national project focused on the on-going international debate on modernism and the twentieth-century canon which re-reads the multifaceted relationships between art, life and

history, the results of which are gathered in *Networking Women: Subjects, Places, Links Europe-America, 1890-1939. Towards a Re-writing of Cultural History* (ed. Marina Camboni, Roma 2004). Contributions to the ongoing research on feminine writing are nationwide: among them, Gianfranca Balestra on Edith Wharton, Camboni on H.D., Bianca Tarozzi's *Parole scolpite. Profili di scrittrici degli anni '90* (Padova 1998), and Liana Borghi's edition, *Passaggi. Letterature comparate al femminile* (Urbino 2001). Lastly, I'll mention a collection by colleagues honoring Biancamaria Tedeschini Lalli at her retirement: *Donne d'America* (ed. Giorcelli, Palermo 2003). Another factor that has been widely investigated upon is the interconnection, within the theme of identity, between identity and gender. It is developed, by Italian Americanists, in the series *Abito e Identità* (ed. Cristina Giorcelli, Roma) which revolves on fashion and clothing; it also springs, to quote just a few critical works, from work undertaken by several scholars in search of the many faces of Margaret Fuller, from Mario Corona's explorations of Whitman's, Kerouac's, and Baldwin's writings, from Maria Vittoria D'Amico's inquiries into Paul Bowles' writing and "translating", and from analyses of gay literature.

- 10 The question of space in terms of the urban, suburban, and "natural" realities has attracted many scholars wishing to re-visit the cultural-historical-geographical tradition of the sense of place, or walk into the trajectory of progress and technology to detect its ecological foundation. After the seminal interdisciplinary Conference on *Città reali e immaginarie del Continente Americano* (Roma 1997), the debate on the city was continued at subsequent AISNA Conventions, and papers appeared in *America Today* (ed. Gigliola Nocera, Siracusa 2003) and *America and the Mediterranean* (ed. Massimo Bacigalupo and Pierangelo Castagneto, Torino 2003), many of them dealing with the urban/suburban space surrounding man. On New York 1890-1929 focuses the more recent *Public Space, Private Lives* (ed. William Boelhower and Anna Scacchi, Amsterdam 2004), where the city is investigated upon right through its heart and at the crossing of its intercultural, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious tensions. The two volumes of *Riscritture dell'Eden. Il giardino nell'immaginazione letteraria angloamericana* (ed. Andrea Mariani, Napoli 2003 and 2004) are centered on the garden as a synecdoche of the world, a dimension for the blooming of textual interactions, a sign to be interpreted and re-interpreted across time and space as across the different cultural perspectives, and a metaphor for the exploration of the American imagination. The river, on the other hand, is the protagonist of Mario Maffi's study entitled *Mississippi. Il grande fiume: un viaggio alle fonti dell'America* (Milano 2004).
- 11 In the visual ambit, research has followed different paths, from the studies concerning women art collectors in *Before Peggy Guggenheim* (ed. Rosella Mamoli Zorzi) to *Literature and the Visual Arts in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America* (ed. Michele Bottalico) which examines the interrelationship, within diversity, of formal and conceptual images, and, not last, film and theatre studies (the latter not neglectful of the aspect of performance) that have thrived sparsely in recent years.
- 12 Such a brief and limited account of today's ferments, however, has not distanced, and—luckily—will not distance, scholars of literature who strongly believe in the practice of close reading, from the text. Literature in verse is a fecund terrain for the assessment and re-assessment of textual practices, as is evident from the analyses undertaken by various scholars on major figures such as Poe (like *Fantastico Poe*, ed. Roberto Cagliero, Verona 2004), Dickinson (whose poetic persona has been interpreted by Barbara Lanati and Marisa Bulgheroni), Eliot, Pound, W.C. Williams, H.D., Marianne Moore,

Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Patchen, Denise Levertov, Gregory Corso, Frank O'Hara, Robert Lowell, Mina Loy, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery, Charles Wright, poet-performer Anne Waldman, Puerto-Rican poet-performer Pedro Pietri, and many others. Textual case-studies on some of those poets are published, besides individual monographic studies, in the periodical *Letterature d'America*, and in collections such as *The Idea and the Thing in Modernist American Poetry* (ed. Cristina Giorcelli, Palermo 2001) and *City Lights : Pocket Poets and Pocket Books* (ed. Maria Anita Stefanelli, Roma 2004), the latter accounting for the widespread influence of writers coming to maturity in the fifties and sixties. An 80-page introduction is provided by Bacigalupo in *Antologia della poesia Americana* (ed. Antonella Francini, Roma 2004).

- 13 The Bible is the subject of a 2003 issue of *Letterature d'America*. Concerning prose, giants such as Emerson, Stephen Crane, and Thomas Wolfe have been recently reassessed in collective works edited by Giorgio Mariani, Sonia Di Loreto, Carlo Martinez, Anna Scannavini, and Igina Tattoni (Roma 2004), by Biancamaria Pisapia, Rubeo and Scacchi, (Roma 1998), and by A. Lombardo, M. Faraone, M. Melloni, and I. Tattoni (Roma 2004), respectively ; additions to the Emerson scholarship are by Giuseppe Nori. Extensive work has been done on Melville (*Letterature d'America* 2003) and James (among which, the monograph Izzo's *Portraying the Lady. Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James*, Lincoln 2001) ; monographs have come out on Poe (by Ugo Rubeo, Roma 2000), Hawthorne (by Valerio Massimo De Angelis, Roma 2004), Thoreau (by Gigliola Nocera, Milano 1998), and Flannery O'Connor (by Alessandro Clericuzio, Roma 2003). Essays have appeared, among others, on Faulkner, Hemingway, Philip K. Dick, John Barth, Raymond Carver, Paul Bowles, Mary Caponegro, Paul Auster, and Don De Lillo. Music and cinema have been investigated upon by Franco Minganti and other authors, while Hollywood western heroes are evoked in *Musi gialli e berretti verdi*, by Stefano Rosso (Bergamo 2003), a book on the Vietnam war. Theater studies have been enriched by *Teatro e censura* (ed. Annalisa Goldoni and Carlo Martinez, Napoli 2004), and several contributions on individual authors (among others, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Sam Shepard, David Mamet, and women of the Harlem Renaissance). On James's hesitation between narrative and drama revolves '*Quella rara intensità*' *Henry James tra narrativa e teatro* (by Mirella Vallone, Pescara 2003) ; on James have recently written, among others, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, Alide Cagidemetro, and Stefania Piccinato. To a Jamesian scholar at his retirement is dedicated the miscellaneous *A Goodly Garlande in onore di Sergio Perosa* (ed. Mamoli Zorzi and Cagidemetro, Venezia 2003).
- 14 Before concluding this hurried account of U.S. literary studies in Italy I wish to mention, with contributions by most of us, *Voci dagli Stati Uniti. Prosa, poesia & teatro del secondo Novecento* (ed. Ricciardi and De Angelis, Roma 2004), and last (but not least) Anna Scannavini's work on the languages of the United States in their regional, ethnic, and social variants ; their use in communication on the part of the speech community, and their representation, on the writers' part, in literature (*Giochi di giochi. Parole e lingua nella letteratura angloamericana*, Roma 2003). A fuller review of Italian scholarship can be found in the Italian section of Duke U.P. *American Literary Scholarship* (completed, in the last decade, by Algerina Neri, for 1996 and 1997, Andrea Mariani, for 1998 to 2000, and Maria Anita Stefanelli, for 2001 to 2004).

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