

In (Re)cognition of the Italian/American Writer: Definitions and Categories

Most men do not think things in the way they encounter them, nor do they recognize what they experience, but believe their own opinions.

—Heraclitus

And I thought, "Does this son of a bitch think he is more American than I am?" Where does he think I was brought up? Because my name is Ciardi, he decided to hyphenate the poem. Had it been a Yankee name, he would have thought, "Ah, a scholar who knows about Italy." Sure he made assumptions, but I can't grant for a minute that Lowell is any more American than I am . . .

—John Ciardi, in *Growing Up Italian*

"If every picture I made was about Italian Americans, they'd say, 'That's all he can do.' I'm trying to stretch."

—Martin Scorsese, in *Premiere* (1991)

Part One: A Premise of Sorts

Ethnic studies in any form or manner, for instance, the use of ethnicity as a primary yardstick, do not necessarily constitute the major answer to knowledge gaps with regard to what some may consider ethnic myopia in the United States. Nevertheless, and by now a cliché, we all know that the United States of America was born and developed, at times with tragic results, along lines of diversity.¹ What is important in this regard is that we understand, or a least *try* to understand, the origins of the diversity and difference which characterize the many ethnic and racial groups which constitute the kaleidoscopic nature of this country's population. In accepting literature as, among many things,

the mirror of the society in which it is conceived, created, and perceived, we come to understand that one of the many questions ethnic literature addresses is the negative stereotyping of members of ethnic/racial groups which are not part and parcel of the dominant culture. By ethnic literature, I mean that type of writing which deals contextually with customs and behavioral patterns that the North American mind-set may consider different from what it perceives as mainstream. The difference, I might add, may also manifest itself formalistically, i.e., the writer may not follow what have become accepted norms and conventions of literary creation; s/he may not produce what the dominant culture considers *good* literature.

This last point notwithstanding, one of the goals of ethnic literature is, to be sure, the dislodging and debunking of negative stereotypes. In turn, through the natural dynamics of intertextual recall and inference, the reader engages in a process of analytical inquiry and comparison of the ethnic group(s) in question with other ethnic groups as well as with the dominant culture. In fact, it is precisely through a comparative process that one comes to understand how difference and diversity from one group to another may not be as great as they initially seem; indeed, one understands that such difference and diversity can not only co/exist but may even overlap with that which is considered characteristic of the dominant group. This, I believe, is another of the goals/functions of ethnic literature: to impart knowledge of the customs, characteristics, language, etc., of the various racial and ethnic groups in this country. Finally, partial responsibility for the validity, or lack thereof, of *other* literatures also lies with the *critic* or *theorist*.² In fact, the theorist's end goal for *other* literatures, perhaps, should not limit itself only to the invention of another mode of reading. Instead, it should become in itself a strategy of reading which extends beyond the limits of textual analysis; it should concomitantly and ultimately aim for the validation of the text(s) in question vis-à-vis those already validated by the dominant culture.

The fortune of Italian/American literature is somewhat reflective of the United States mind-set vis-à-vis ethnic studies. Namely, until recently, ever since the arrival of the immigrants of the 1880s, the major wave of western European emigration, the United States have considered ethnic/racial difference in terms of the melting-pot attitude. The past two decades, however, have constituted a period of transition, if not change, in this attitude. Be it the end of modernism, as some have claimed, or the onslaught of the postmodern, as others may claim, in academic and intellectual circles today one no longer thinks in terms of the melting pot.³ Instead, as is well known, one now talks in terms of the

individual ethnic/racial culture and its relationship—not necessarily in negative terms only—with the longstanding, mainstream cultural paradigm. It is, therefore, with the backdrop of this new attitude of rejecting the melting pot and supplanting it with the notion of Americana as a “kaleidoscopic, socio/cultural mosaic,” as I have rehearsed it elsewhere,⁴ that I shall consider an attempt to (re)define Italian/American literature and recategorize the notion of the *hyphenate writer*. By using the phrase “kaleidoscopic socio/cultural mosaic,” I mean to underscore how the socio/cultural dynamics of the United States reveal a constant flux of changes originating in the very existence of the various differentiated ethnic/racial groups that constitute the overall population of the United States. As an addendum, I would suggest that, as people, we still must come to understand that the population of the United States is indeed similar to a mosaic in that this country consists of various bits and pieces (that is, the various peoples, ethnic and/or racial, of the United States) each one unique unto itself. The kaleidoscopic nature of this aggregate of different and unique peoples is surely descriptive of this constant flux of changes that manifests itself, as the various peoples change physical and ideological position, which ultimately change the ideological colors of the United States mind-set.

Bouncing off notions of *ethnic*—or for that matter any *other*—literature which are immediate to postcolonial literature, we may indeed state that, first of all, such a notion cannot be “constructed as an internally coherent object of theoretical knowledge”; that such a categorization “cannot be resolved . . . without an altogether positivist reductionism.”⁵ Secondly, *other* “literary traditions [e.g., third world, ethnic, etc.] remain, beyond a few texts here and there, [often] unknown to the *American* literary theorist” (p. 5). While it may be true that Ahmad’s use of the adjective *American* refers to the geopolitical notion of the United States of America, I would contend that the situation of ethnic literatures within the United States is analogous to what Ahmad so adroitly describes in his article as, for lack of a better term, “third-world literature.” Thus I would suggest that we reconsider Ahmad’s *American* within the confines of the geopolitical borders of the United States and thereby reread it as synonymous with *dominant culture*. Thirdly, “[l]iterary texts are produced in highly differentiated, usually overdetermined contexts of competing ideological and cultural *clusters*, so that any particular text of any complexity shall always have to be placed within the *cluster* that gives it its energy and form, before it is totalised into a universal category” (p. 23; my emphasis). Thus, it is also within this ideological framework of cluster specificity that I shall consider further the notion of Italian/American literature as a validifiable category

of United States literature and (re)think the significance of the Italian/American writer within the (re)categorization of the notion of the hyphenate writer.

Finally, I should specify at the outset that which I have in mind for Italian/American writer throughout this essay. Because of language plurality—standard Italian, Italian dialect, and United States English⁶—I believe that there are different types of writers that may fall under the general category of Italian/American writer. They range from the immigrant writer of Italian language to the United States-born writer of Italian descent who writes in English; and in between, of course, one may surely find the many variations of these two extremes.⁷ In the pages that follow, therefore, I shall use the phrase “Italian/American writer” in reference to that person—be s/he born in the United States or in Italy—who is significantly involved in creative literary activity in the English language.⁸

Part Two: Definitions and Categories

The notion for an enterprise of this type is grounded in a slightly unorthodox mode of thought. In this poststructuralist, postmodern society, my study therefore casts by the wayside any notion of universality or absoluteness with regard to the (re)definition of any literary category vis-à-vis national origin, ethnicity, race, or gender. Undoubtedly one can and should readily equate the above-mentioned notion to some general notions associated with the postmodern. Any rejection of the validity of the notion of *hierarchy*, or better, *universality* or *absoluteness*, is characteristic of those who are, to paraphrase Lyotard, “incredul[ous] toward [grand or] metanarratives.”⁹ Indeed, one of the legitimized and legitimizing *grands récits*—metanarrative—is the discourse built around the notion of canon valorization. By implicitly constructing an otherwise nonexistent category, or *subset*, of American letters, that is, Italian/American literature, the notion of a centered canon of the dominant Anglo/American culture is rattled once more. Rattled *once more* precisely because fortunately there already exist *legitimized*—that is, considering the Academy as the legitimizing institution—similar categories, such as African/American or Jewish/American fiction; one need only peruse the list of graduate courses in American and English literature in the various catalogues of most American universities.¹⁰

In the past, Italian/American art forms—more precisely, literature and film—have been defined as those constructed mainly by second-generation writers about the experiences of the first and second gener-

ations. In a recent essay on Italian/American cinema, for example, Robert Casillo defined it as "works by Italian-American directors who treat Italian-American subjects."¹¹ In like fashion, Frank Lentricchia had previously defined Italian/American literature as "a report and meditation on first-generation experience, usually from the perspective of a second-generation representative."¹² Indeed, both constitute a valid attempt at constructing neat and clean definitions for works of two art forms—and in a certain sense we can extend this meaning to other art media—that deal explicitly with an Italian/American ethnic quality and/or subject matter.¹³ Such definitions, however, essentially halt—though willy-nilly by those who offer them—the progress and limit the impact of those writers who come from later generations. Thus they may result in a monolithic notion of what was or is, and what was not or is not, Italian/American literature. Following a similar mode of thinking, Dana Gioia more recently proposed yet another definition in his brief essay, "What Is Italian-American Poetry?"¹⁴ There, Gioia describes "Italian-American poetry . . . only as a transitional category" for which the "concept of Italian-American poet is therefore most useful to describe first- and second-generation writers raised in the immigrant subculture" (p. 3). Together with his restrictive definition of Italian/American poetry, Gioia also demonstrates a seemingly furtive sociological thought pattern in not distinguishing between ethnicity passed from one generation to the next vis-à-vis a member of the subsequent generation's decision to rid him/herself of or deny his/her ethnicity, when he states that "[s]ome kinds of ethnic or cultural consciousness seem more or less permanent" (p. 3).¹⁵

One question that arises is: what do we do about those works of art—written and visual—that do not *explicitly* treat Italian/American subject matter and yet seem to exude a certain ethnic Italian/American quality, even if we cannot readily define it? That is, can we speak to the Italian/American qualities of a Frank Capra film? According to Casillo's definition, we would initially have to say no. However, it is Casillo himself who tells us that Capra, indeed, "found his ethnicity troublesome throughout his long career" (p. 374) and obviously dropped it. My question, then, is: can we not see this *absence*, especially in light of documented secondary matter, as an Italian/American sign *in potentia*? I would say yes. And in this regard, I would suggest an alternative perspective on reading and categorizing any Italian/American art form.¹⁶ That is, I believe we should take our cue from Scorsese himself and therefore "stretch" our own reading strategy of Italian/American art forms, whether they be, due to content or form, *explicitly* Italian/American or not, in order to accommodate other possible, successful

reading strategies. Indeed, recent (re)writings of Italian/American literary history and criticism have transcended a limited concept of Italian/American literature. New literary and critical publications have created a need for new definitions and new critical readings, not only of contemporary work, but of the works of the past. In addition, these new publications have originated, for the most part, from within an intellectual community of Italian Americans.¹⁷ Therefore, I would propose that we consider Italian/American literature to be a series of on-going written enterprises which establish a repertoire of signs, at times *sui generis*, and therefore create verbal variations (visual in the case of film, painting, sculpture, drama, etc.) that represent different versions—dependent, of course, on one's generation, gender, socio-economic condition—of what can be perceived as the Italian/American *interpretant*. That is, the Italian/American experience may indeed be manifested in any art form in a number of ways and at varying degrees, for which one may readily speak of the variegated representations of the Italian/American ethos in literature, for example, in the same fashion in which Daniel Aaron spoke of the "hyphenate writer."¹⁸

Within the general discourse of American literature, Daniel Aaron seems to be one of the first to have dealt with the notion of hyphenation.¹⁹ For him, the hyphen initially represented older North Americans' hesitation to accept the new/comer; it was their way, in Aaron's words, to "hold him at 'hyphen's length,' so to speak, from the established community" (p. 213). It further "signifies a tentative but unmistakable withdrawal" on the user's part, so that "mere geographical proximity" denies the newly arrived "full and unqualified national membership despite . . . legal qualifications and . . . official disclaimers to the contrary" (p. 213).

Speaking in terms of a passage from "'hyphenation' to 'dehyphenation'" (p. 214), Aaron sets up three stages through which a nonAnglo/American writer might pass.²⁰ The first-stage writer is the "pioneer spokesman for the . . . unspoken-for" ethnic, racial, or cultural group, that is, the marginalized. This person writes about his/her co-others with the goal of dislodging and debunking negative stereotypes ensconced in the dominant culture's mind-set. In so doing, this writer may actually create characters possessing some of the very same stereotypes, with the specific goals, however, of 1) winning over the sympathies of the suspicious members of the dominant group, and 2) humanizing the stereotyped figure and thus "dissipating prejudice." Successful or not, this writer engages in placating his/her reader by employing recognizable features the dominant culture associates with specific ethnic, racial, or cultural groups.

Aaron considers this first-stage writer abjectly conciliatory toward the dominant group. He states: "It was as if he were saying to his suspicious and opinionated audience: 'Look, we have customs and manners that may seem bizarre and uncouth, but we are respectable people nevertheless and our presence adds flavor and variety to American life. Let me convince you that our oddities—no matter how quaint and amusing you find them—do not disqualify us from membership in the national family'" (214). What this writer seems to do, however, is engage in a type of game, a bartering system of sorts that may sometimes downplay, set in the background, or ignore the injustices set forth by the dominant group, asking or instead hoping that the very same dominant group might attempt to change its ideas while accepting the writer's offerings as its final chance to enjoy the stereotype.²¹

Less willing to please, the second-stage writer abandons the use of preconceived ideas in an attempt to demystify negative stereotypes. Whereas the first-stage writer might have adopted some preconceived notions popular among members of the dominant culture, this writer instead presents characters who have already sunk "roots into the native soil." By no means as conciliatory as the first-stage writer, this person readily indicates the disparity and, in some cases, may even engage in militant criticism of the perceived restrictions and oppression set forth by the dominant group. In so doing, according to Aaron, this writer runs the risk of a "double criticism": from the dominant culture offended by the "unflattering or even 'un American' image of American life," and from other members of his/her own marginalized group, who might feel misrepresented, having preferred a more "genteel and uncantankerous spokesman."

The third-stage writer, in turn, travels from the margin to the mainstream, "viewing it no less critically, perhaps, but more knowingly." Having appropriated the dominant group's culture and the tools necessary to succeed in that culture, greater skill in manipulating a language acceptable to the dominant group, for instance, this writer more strongly than his/her predecessors feels entitled to the intellectual and cultural heritage of the dominant group. As such, s/he can also, from a personal viewpoint, "speak out uninhibitedly as an American."²² This writer, however, as Aaron reminds us, does not renounce or abandon the cultural heritage of his/her marginalized group. Instead, s/he transcends "a mere parochial allegiance" in order to transport "into the province of the [general] imagination," personal experiences which for the first-stage ("local colorist") and second-stage ("militant protester") writer "comprised the very stuff of their literary material" (p. 215).²³

An excellent analog to Aaron's three stages of the "hyphenate writer" can be found in Fred L. Gardaphé's threefold Vichian division of the history of Italian/American literature. Gardaphé proposes a culturally "specific methodology" for the greater disambiguation of Italian/American contributions to the United States literary scene. In his essay, he reminds us of Vico's "three ages and their corresponding cultural products: the Age of Gods in which primitive society records expression in 'poetry' [*vero narratio*,] the Age of Heroes, in which society records expression in myth, and the Age of Man, in which through self-reflection, expression is recorded in philosophic prose." These three ages, Gardaphé goes on to tell us, have their parallels in modern and "contemporary [socio-]cultural constructions of realism, modernism, and postmodernism" (p. 24). And, ultimately, the evolution of the various literatures of United States ethnic and racial groups can be charted as they "move from the poetic, through the mythic and into the philosophic" (p. 25).

In making such an analogy, it is important to remember, as Aaron had already underscored, that personal experiences "comprised the very stuff of . . . literary material" for both the first-stage ("local colorist") and second-stage ("militant protester") writers; whereas the third-stage writer, on the other hand, travels from the margin to the mainstream without either renouncing or abandoning his/her cultural heritage. For Gardaphé, Vico's three ages (read, Aaron's three stages) constitute the pre modernist (the "poetic" = "realism"), the modernist (the "mythic" = "modernism"), and the postmodernist (the "philosophic" = "postmodernism").

For the first-stage writer, then, a type of self-deprecating barterer with the dominant culture, the *vero narratio* constitutes the base of what s/he writes. S/he no more writes about what s/he *thinks* than what s/he *experiences*, that is, his/her surroundings. His/her art then, in a sense records her/his experiential feelings more than her/his analytical thoughts. This writer is not concerned with an adherence to or the creation of some form of objective, rhetorical literary paradigm. S/he is an expressive writer, not a paradigmatic one; his/her ethnic experiences of the more visceral kind serve more as the foundation of his/her literary signification.

The second-stage writer, the "militant protester," is by no means as conciliatory as was the first-stage writer and belongs to the generation that (re)discovers and/or reinvents his/her ethnicity. While s/he may present characters who have already "sunk roots in the native soil," s/he readily underscores the characters' uniqueness vis-à-vis the

expectations of the dominant culture. As Gardaphé reminds us, before this writer can “merge with the present,” s/he must recreate—in a *sui generis* manner, I would add—his past; s/he must engage in a “materialization and an articulation of the past” (p. 27).

The use of ethnicity at this second stage shifts from the expressive to the descriptive. As a rhetorical-ideological tool, ethnicity becomes much more functional and quasi descriptive. It is no longer the predominantly expressive element it is in the pre modernist, poetic writer (that is, the bartering, first-stage expressive writer). Whereas in the pre-modernist, poetic writer ethnicity as theme is the expressive conduit, through which s/he communicates his/her immediate sensorial feelings, for the modernist, mythic writer ethnicity becomes more the tool with which s/he communicates his/her ideology. In this second case, the ethnic signs constitute the individual pieces of the ethnic paradigm this second-stage writer so consciously and willingly seeks to construct.

While this modernist, mythic second-stage writer may engage in militant criticism of the perceived restrictions and oppression set forth by the dominant group as an *expressive* residue of the evolution from the pre modernist to the modernist stage, the third-stage writer (Gardaphé’s postmodernist, philosophic writer) may seem at first glance to rid him/herself of his/her ethnicity.²⁴ This writer, as Aaron reminds us, will often view the dominant culture “less critically” than the previous writers, but indeed “more knowingly.” This should not come as any surprise, however, since, as Gardaphé later tells us, this writer finds him/herself in a decisively self-reflexive stage in which s/he can decide to transcend the experiential expressivity of the first two stages by either engaging in a parodic tour de force through his/her art or by relegating any vestige of his/her ethnicity to the background of his/her artistic inventions.²⁵ In both cases, the writer has come to terms with his/her personal (read, ethnic) history without totally or explicitly renouncing or abandoning cultural heritage. This writer therefore transcends “mere parochial allegiance” and passes completely out of the *expressive* and *descriptive* stages into a third—and final—reflexive stage in which everything becomes fair game. All this is due to the “post-modern prerogative” of all artists, be they the parodic, the localizers, or others simply in search of rules for what will have been done.

What can we finally make of these writers who seem to evolve into different animals from one generation to the next? Indeed, both Aaron and Gardaphé look at these writers from the perspective of time, and their analyses are generationally based, and rightfully so. However, we

would not err to look at these three stages from another perspective, a cognitive Peircean perspective of firstness, secondness, and thirdness as rehearsed in his *Principles of Philosophy*.²⁶ All three stages, for Peirce, represent different modes of being dependent on different levels of consciousness. They progress from a state of non rationality ("feeling")²⁷ to practicality ("experience")²⁸ and on to pure rationality ("thought")²⁹—or potentiality, actuality, and futuribility.

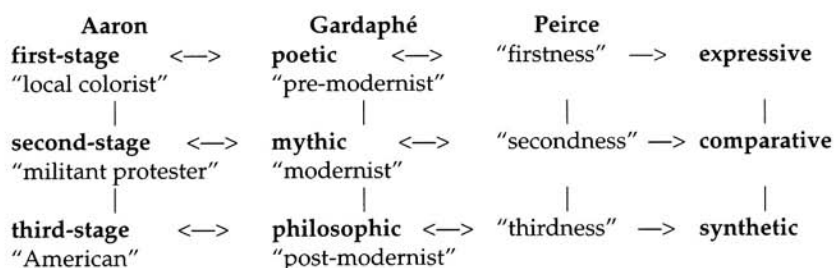
If firstness is the isolated, *sui generis* mode of possibly being Peirce tells us it is, we may see an analog in the first-stage writer's *vero narratio*. For it is here, Gardaphé tells us, that primitive society records expression in poetry, in unmitigated realism, by which I mean that which the writer experiences only.³⁰ In this sense, the writer's sensorial experiences, his/her "feelings," as Peirce calls them, constitute the "very stuff of [his/her] literary material." Namely, those recordings of what s/he simply experiences, without the benefit of any "analysis, comparison or any [other] process whatsoever . . . by which one stretch of consciousness is distinguished from another."

As the second-stage writer shifts from the expressive—"that kind of consciousness which involves no analysis," Peirce would tell us—to the descriptive, s/he now engages in some form of analysis and comparison, two processes fundamental to Peirce's secondness. This writer therefore becomes aware of the dominant culture—"how a second object is"—and does not repeat the conciliatory acts of the first-stage writer; s/he undergoes a "forcible modification of . . . thinking [which is] the influence of the world of fact or *experience*."

The third-stage writer transcends the first two stages of experiential expressivity either through parody or diminution of significance of his/her expressivity, because s/he has seen "both sides of the shield" and can therefore "contemplate them from the outside only." That "element of cognition [thirdness, according to Peirce] which is neither feeling [firstness] nor the polar sense [secondness], is the consciousness of a process, and this in the form of the sense of learning, of acquiring, mental growth is eminently characteristic of cognition" (1.381). Peirce goes on to tell us that this third mode of being is timely, not immediate; it is the progressive "consciousness of synthesis" (1.381), which is precisely what this third-stage, postmodern writer does. S/he can transcend the intellectual experiences of the first two stages because of all that has preceded him/her both temporally (Aaron, Gardaphé) and cognitively (Peirce).³¹

What we now witness after at least three generations of writers is a progression from a stage of visceral realism to that of incredulous post-modernism, with passage through a secondary stage of mythic mod-

ernism in which this monolithic modernist writer believes to have found all the solutions to what s/he has perceived as the previous generation's *problems*. In light of what was stated above, we may now speak in terms of a twofold evolution—a both temporal and intellectual process—that bears three distinct writers to whom we may now attach more precise labels. The *expressive* writer embodies the poetic realist who writes more from “feelings.” Through the process of analysis, on the other hand, the second is a *comparative* writer who sets up a distinct polarity between his/her cultural heritage and the dominant culture in that s/he attempts to construct a *sui generis* ethnic paradigm. The third writer instead, through “mental growth,” as Peirce states, can embrace a consciousness of process (that is, self-reflexivity) and consequently engage in a process of synthesis and “bind . . . life together” (1.381). This I would consider to be the *synthetic* writer. The following graph charts my use of the above-mentioned terminology in what I have proposed as three possible categories of the Italian/American writer or, for that matter, any ethnic/racial writer:



Having proposed such a reclassification, I believe it is important to reiterate some of what was stated before and underscore its significance to the above-mentioned categories. First and foremost, it is important to emphasize that the three different general categories, while generationally based for Aaron and Gardaphé and cognitively based for Peirce, should not by any means represent a hierarchy—they are, simply, different. For in a manner similar to Peirce's three stages, these three general categories also represent different modes of being dependent on different levels of consciousness. The key word here, of course, is *different*. These categories are different precisely because, as Ahmad reminded us, just as literary texts in general “are produced in highly differentiated, usually over-determined contexts of competing ideological and cultural clusters,” so too do each of the three categories constitute specific cognitive and ideological clusters that ultimately

provide the energy and form to the texts of those writers of the three different stages.

Second, these stages do not necessarily possess any form of monolithic valence. What I am suggesting is that writers should not be considered with respect to one stage only. It is possible, I would contend, that a writer's opus may, in fact, reflect more than one, if not all three, of these stages.³² In this respect, we should remind ourselves that pertinent to any discourse on ethnic art forms is the notion that ethnicity is not a fixed essence passed down from one generation to the next. Rather, "ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual,"³³ which, in the end, is a way of "finding a voice or style that does not violate one's *several components of identity*" (my emphasis) constituting the specificities of each individual. Thus, ethnicity—and more specifically in this case, *italianità*³⁴—is redefined and reinterpreted on the basis of each individual's time and place, and is therefore always new and different with respect to his/her own historical specificities vis-à-vis the dominant culture.

This said, then, we should also keep in mind that we may now think in terms of a twofold evolutionary process—both temporal and cognitive—which may or may not be mutually inclusive. The temporal may not parallel the cognitive and vice versa. Hence, we may have, sociologically speaking, a second- or third-generation writer—according to Aaron's distinction, s/he would have to be a "second-" or "third-stage" writer—who finds a voice or style in his/her recent rediscovery and reinvention of his/her ethnicity. This writer, though a member of the second or third generation, may actually produce what we may now expect from the *expressive* or *comparative* writer, namely, the first- or second-generation writer. Conversely, we may actually find a member of the immigrant generation—undoubtedly, a "first-stage" writer from a temporal point of view—whose work exudes everything but that which we would expect from the work of a first- or even a second-generation writer (that is, Aaron's "first-" or "second-stage" writer). This immigrant writer may indeed fall more easily into the category of the *synthetic* writer rather than that of the *comparative* or *expressive* writer. For my first hypothesis, then, I have in mind a writer like Tony Ardizzone, a third-generation Italian American whose work fits much better the category of the *expressive* and/or *comparative* writer. My second hypothesis is borne out by the example of Giose Rimaneli, an Italian born, raised, and educated in Italy, who has spent the past four decades in the United States. His first work in English, *Benedetta in Guysterland*, is anything but the typical novel one would expect from a writer of his migratory background.

Part Three: Some General Considerations

An analogous discourse of one's own cultural and historical specificities may indeed be constructed around the notion of the reader. The manner in which texts are interpreted today, that is, the theoretical underpinnings of a reader's act of disambiguation, is much more broad and, for the most part, tolerant of what may once have seemed to be *incorrect* or *inadequate* interpretations. Today the reader has as many rights as the author in the semiotic process. In some cases, in fact, the reader may even seem to have more rights than the writer. Lest we forget what Italo Calvino had to say about literature and the interpretation thereof: the reader, for Calvino, relies on a form of semiosis which places him/her in an interpretive position of superiority vis-à-vis the author.³⁵ In "Cybernetics and Ghosts" Calvino considers "the decisive moment of literary life [to be] reading (p. 15)," by which "literature will continue to be a 'place' of privilege within the human consciousness, a way of exercising the potentialities within the system of signs belonging to all societies at all times. The work will continue to be born, to be judged, to be distorted or constantly renewed on contact with the eye of the reader" (p. 16). In like manner, he states in "Whom Do We Write For" that the writer should not merely satisfy the reader; rather, he should be ready "to assume a reader who does not yet exist, or a change in the reader" (p. 82), a reader who would be "*more cultured than the writer himself*" (p. 85; Calvino's emphasis).³⁶

In making such an analogy between reader and viewer I do not ignore the validity of the writer. For while it is true that the act of semiosis relies on the individual's time and place and is therefore always new and different with respect to its own historical specificities vis-à-vis the dominant culture, that is, the canon, it is also true that the writer may willy-nilly create for the reader greater difficulties in interpretation. Namely, if we accept the premise that language—verbal or visual—is an ideological medium that can become restrictive and oppressive when its sign system is arbitrarily invested with meanings by the dominant culture, i.e., the canon-makers, so too can it become empowering for the purpose of privileging one coding correlation over another by rejecting the canonical sign system and, ultimately, denying validity to this sign system vis-à-vis the interpretive act of a noncanonical text.³⁷ Then, certain ideological constructs are deprivileged and subsequently awarded an unfixed status; they no longer take on a patina of *natural facts*. Rather, they figure as the *arbitrary categories* they truly are.

All this results in a pluralistic notion of artistic invention and interpretation which, by its very nature, cannot exclude the individual

artist and reader/viewer who has found "a voice or style that does not violate [his/her] several components of identity" (Fischer, p. 195) and who has thus "recreated," ideologically speaking, a different repertoire of signs. In this sense, then, the emergence and subsequent acceptance of certain *other* literatures, due in great part to the postmodern influence of the breakdown of boundaries and the mistrust in absolutes, has contributed to the construction of a more recent heteroglossic culture in which the "correct language" is deunified and decentralized. In this instance, then, all "languages" are shown to be "masks [and no language can consequently] claim to be an authentic and incontestable face." The result is a "heteroglossia consciously opposed to [the dominant] literary language," for which marginalizing and thus the silencing the *other* writer becomes more difficult and thus less likely to occur.³⁸

Turning now to a few writers, we see that their work represents to one degree or another the general notions and ideas outlined above. Two fiction writers, John Fante and Pietro di Donato, and a poet, Joseph Tusiani, have produced a corpus of writing heavily informed by their Italian heritage. Their works celebrate their ethnicity and cultural origin, as each weaves tales and creates verses which tell of the trials and tribulations of the Italian immigrants and their children. Fante and Di Donato confronted both the ethnic dilemma and the writer's task of communicating this dilemma in narrative form. Tusiani, on the other hand, invites his reader, through the medium of poetry, to understand better, as Giordano points out, the "cynical and somber awareness of what it means to be an immigrant" and to experience the "alienation and realization that the new world is not the 'land of hospitality' he/she believed it was."³⁹ Tusiani's "riddle of [his] day" indeed figures as the riddle of many of his generation, be it the novelist Di Donato, or the short-story writer Fante, as it may continue to sound a familiar chord for those of subsequent generations: "Two languages, two lands, perhaps two souls . . . / Am I a man or two strange halves of one?"⁴⁰

In a cultural/literary sense, it becomes clear that these and other writers of their generation belong to what Aaron considers stage one of the *hyphenate writer*. They are, from the perspective of what is stated above, the *expressive* writers, for this type of writer is indeed bent on disproving the suspicions and prejudices his/her stereotyped figure seems to arouse and, at the same time, win over the sympathies of the suspicious members of the dominant culture. Fante, Di Donato, Tusiani, and their *co-ethnics* indeed both examined in a *sui generis* way their status in the new world and, insofar as possible, presented a positive image of the Italian in America.

Writers who have securely passed from the first to the second stage of hyphenation may include the likes of Mario Puzo and Helen Barolini. Each writer has dealt with his/her cultural heritage as differently from each other as from those who preceded them. No longer feeling the urge to please the dominant culture, these writers adopted the thematics of their Italian heritage insofar as it coincided with their personal development as writers. In his second novel, *A Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964), recounting the trials and tribulations of a first-generation immigrant family, Mario Puzo figures as a fine example of the *comparative* writer. Ethnically centered around Lucia, the matriarch of the Corbo family, the novel examines the myth of the American dream and the real possibility that the *outsider* might succeed in realizing it. As he does later in *The Godfather*, Puzo does not always paint a positive picture of the Italian American in this novel. Yet, considered from the perspective of a greater social criticism, Puzo may indeed engage in a form of "militant criticism." His use of a sometimes sleazy Italian/American character, especially those involved in the stereotypical organized crime associations, may readily figure as an indictment of the social dynamism of the dominant culture which refuses access to the *outsider*.⁴¹ The novel's expansive themes of survival and the desire to better one's situation lie at the base of the variegated, kaleidoscopic view of a series of tragedies which the family, as a whole, seems to overcome.

Helen Barolini's *Umbertina* (1979) could not be more Italian/American. As the author of a novel which spans four generations of an Italian/American family, she undoubtedly is acutely aware of her ethnicity and hyphenation.⁴² Her main characters are all women, and each represents a different generation. In a general sense, they reflect the development of the Italian/American mind-set as it evolved and changed from one generation to the next. Yet, with this novel, it becomes increasingly clear that Barolini has gone one step further than both the men and the women who preceded her. She is now able to reconcile her ethnic/cultural heritage with her own personal specificities of gender and generational differences in order to transport these personal experiences, as Aaron stated, closer to the province of the general imagination. As a more advanced *comparative* writer, Barolini in *Umbertina* combines her historical awareness of the Italian and Italian American's plight with her own strong sense of feminism, and the reader ultimately becomes aware of what it meant to be not just an Italian American but indeed an Italian/American woman.⁴³

In a different vein, yet also "bind[ing] life together," as Peirce would state, Gilbert Sorrentino could easily represent the *synthetic*

writer. His poetry attempts to fuse his inherited immigrant culture—represented by terms of nature—with his artistic concern, as John Paul Russo has demonstrated.⁴⁴ Yet references to Italian/American culture are most infrequent throughout his *opus*. In his own words, Sorrentino surely “knew the reality of [his] generation that had to be written,”⁴⁵ as he too contributed to this cultural and literary chronicle. However, he took one step further than his *co-ethnics* (Italian Americans) and, so to speak, dropped the hyphen. Yet the dropping of the hyphen, according to Aaron, does not necessarily eliminate a writer’s marginality. Aaron states that the writer “. . . has detached himself, to be sure, from one cultural environment without becoming a completely naturalized member of the official environment. It is not so much that he retains a divided allegiance but that as a writer, if not necessarily as a private citizen, he has transcended a mere parochial allegiance and can now operate freely in the republic of the spirit.” In Sorrentino’s case, while he was keenly aware of the American literary tradition that preceded him, in dropping the ethnic hyphen he appropriated yet another form of marginality; with the likes of Kerouac and Ferlinghetti as immediate predecessors, Sorrentino chose the poetics of late Modernism over that of mainstream literary America.⁴⁶

In dealing with his/her Italian/American inheritance, each writer picks up something different as s/he may perceive and interpret his/her cultural heritage filtered through personal experiences. Yet there resounds a familiar ring, an echo that connects them all. Undoubtedly, Italian/American writers have slowly but surely built their niche in the body of American literature. Collectively their work can be viewed as a written expression par excellence of Italian/American culture; individually each writer has enabled American literature to sound a slightly different tone, thus bringing to the fore another voice of the great kaleidoscopic, socio/cultural mosaic we may call Americana—*kaleidoscopic mosaic* precisely because the socio/cultural dynamics of the United States reveal a constant flux of changes originating in the very existence of the various differentiated ethnic/racial groups that constitute the overall population of the United States. What emerges, as Fischer has stated, “is not simply that parallel processes operate across American ethnic identities, but a sense that these ethnic identities constitute only a *family of resemblances*, that ethnicity cannot be reduced to identical sociological functions, that ethnicity is a process of *inter-reference* between two or more cultural traditions (my emphasis)” and, I would add, between two or more generations of the same ethnic/racial group.

An appropriate way to close perhaps would be to borrow from Marshall Grossman and, again, from Lyotard. If the “power of the [hy-

phen] lies in its openness to history [or better still] in the way it records and then reifies contingent events," (Grossman) and since the "ideology of a particular hyphen may be read only by supplying a plausible history to its use,"⁴⁷ then the person who opts to eliminate it, to use something else in its place, or, as I have suggested elsewhere,⁴⁸ turn it on its side, does so in the search "for new presentations," (Lyotard). In this manner, the text the writer creates and the work s/he "produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules [of canon formation], and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*" (p. 81; emphasis textual).

In an analogous manner, so does the reader of these texts work without rules, establishing as s/he proceeds similar interpretive rules of what *will have been read*. Such is the case with the reader of ethnic texts, who proceeds to recodify and reinterpret the seemingly arbitrary non-canonical (read, ethnic) signs in order to reconstruct a mutual correlation of the expressive and content functions, which, in the end, do not violate his/her intertextual knowledge. Moreover, such an act of semi-osis relies on the individual's time and place, and is therefore always new and different with respect to its own historical specificities vis-à-vis the dominant culture—the canon.

In final analysis, it is the dynamics of the conglomeration and agglutination of different voices and reading strategies which, contrary to the hegemony of the dominant culture, cannot be fully integrated into any strict semblance of a monocultural voice or process of interpretation. The utterance will always be polyvalent, its combination will always be rooted in heteroglossia and dialogism,⁴⁹ and the interpretive strategies for decoding it will always depend on the specificities of the reader's intertextual reservoir. For the modernist reader, therefore, one rooted in the search for existing absolutes, an Italian/American sign system may appear inadequate, perhaps even contemptuous. For the postmodernist reader, who is open to, if not in search of, new coding correlations, an Italian/American sign system may appear significantly intriguing, if not on occasion rejuvenating, as these texts indeed may present a sign system consisting of manipulated sign functions which ultimately (re)define the sign. In defense of a sustained but fluctuating Italian/American category of creative works, one may recall Lyotard's "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xiv) and the late twentieth century's increasing suspicion of narrative's universal validity, for which artistic invention is no longer considered a depiction of life. Stated in

more ideological terms, artistic creation is no longer executed/performed according to established rules and regulations.⁵⁰ Rather, it is a depiction of life as it is represented by ideology,⁵¹ since ideology presents as *inherent* in what is represented that which, in actuality, is *constructed* meaning.⁵²