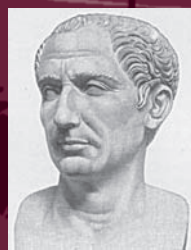


# *Buried* Caesars

and Other Secrets of  
Italian American Writing



R O B E R T V I S C U S I

Buried Caesars,  
and Other Secrets of  
Italian American Writing

SUNY series in Italian/American Culture  
Fred L. Gardaphe, editor

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Robert Viscusi

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*To the memory of my grandparents*

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## Preface

*“Italian America is an underworld empire where gangsters rule.”* Italian Americans wonder why people believe this. They object. “I am a cardiologist.” “I am a gardener.” “I am a poet.” “I am a teacher.”

They are right to wonder and to object. After all, the belief is false and damaging. What is the secret of its amazing persistence? Why is the gangster epic *the* Italian American story?

Yes, there are gangsters, but they do not rule.

Yet Italian America is indeed shaped by powers that lie deep in darkness. Most of these hidden powers are not criminals, not even persons at all. Rather they are beliefs—lost causes and impossible loyalties. These beliefs, and the conditions of their subsistence, are what give life to the myth of Italian America as an underworld.

Italian America is like an iceberg. Most of its mass is invisible.

Italian America looks like Pizzaland. But it thinks with the mind of a lost empire. Italian Americans are not always aware that they operate from the tacit assumptions of imperial subjects. By *tacit assumptions*, I mean beliefs that people share without exploring in detail where they originate or what they imply. Many assumptions that govern Italian America are old pieces of Italian national propaganda deeply embedded in Italian American culture: “Italy is not just a *country*. It is a *civilization*—a *culture* admired and envied and imitated by the whole world.” “The Italian language was invented by Italy’s national poet Dante Alighieri.” “The Italian family is eternal.” “Italy is destined to rule Africa.” This brand of propaganda was beamed at Italians who lived in the colonies for decades. The intensity of the beam grew greater and greater until December 11, 1941, when it flat-out stopped. On that day, Benito Mussolini, the Fascist dictator of Italy, declared war on the

United States, and all the fine fantasies about Italy that Italian Americans had been reading in their newspapers and hearing on the radio suddenly became enemy propaganda. This is no mere figure of speech. Those who had not become U.S. citizens—about 600,000 persons—had to register as enemy aliens. Hundreds of Italian Americans were interned in army camps all over the country, fifty-two thousand more lived under conditions of virtual house arrest. In Italian neighborhoods, posters everywhere commanded, “Don’t Speak the Enemy’s Language! Speak American!”<sup>1</sup>

Italian Americans stopped speaking Italian in the street. They no longer taught their children the language they themselves had grown up speaking. Many Italian-language publications went out of business.

This abrupt way of becoming American left Italian Americans with a large set of beliefs that they shared and continued to pass on to their children, beliefs that had no easy entry into the general American-language conversation. These beliefs are the Buried Caesars of my title. They survive in a half-light where they rarely become the subject of outright debate. They function as an unconscious imperialist faith. They are as powerful as they are hidden. When they surface, they usually take some distorted form. I will conduct a tour of many such forms. The most famous of these forms—the most glamorous, the most damnably attractive to Americans, who have their own imperialist dreams—are the ones that surface in the myth of the mob. That myth is both the glory and the curse of Italian American writing. It is a curse because it keeps Italian Americans in a state of suspended colonization. It is a glory because it is tremendously inventive, and because unpacking it, as we shall see when we come to the Imperial Sopranos, can teach us an enormous amount about what it means to tell an Italian American story.

## Sightings

Caesars’ ghosts are familiar apparitions in U.S. culture. Americans, it sometimes seems, go to Rome in a time machine. There they encounter, at the minimum, “a vague sense of ponderous remembrances.” Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the first analysts of this phenomenon, describes the experience as something uncanny, “a perception of such weight and density in a by-gone life, of which this spot was the center, that the present moment is crowded out, and our individual affairs are but half as real, here, as elsewhere.”<sup>2</sup>

Italian Americans can taste this thrill without visiting Rome. Of course the dynamics are different. The Roman past touches them very near. It lives in their own bodies. Italian Americans know and recognize this, often without being ready to say why or how it is that they do. They suffer “the forgetting of history which history itself produces.”<sup>3</sup> However, they can, and sometimes do, turn to the “ponderous remembrances” that they share. Italian American writers have worked to represent this encounter. Many have aimed to show how the forgotten and embodied past can surprise a person:

Michael shifted uneasily in his chair. He looked at his older brother. He remembered Sonny as being sometimes casually brutal but essentially warmhearted. A nice guy. It seemed unnatural to hear him talking this way, it was chilling to see the names he had written down, men to be executed, as if he were some newly crowned Roman Emperor.<sup>4</sup>

Italian Americans have seen them at Sunday dinner, the bridges of those imperial noses, the curls of those familiar haircuts. And Roman totems, still today, are always heroes of spectacle. But they are not always heroes of thought. Indeed, for many Italian American writers, these figures evoke troubling reflections. They bristle with buried feelings of unutterable loss and unspeakable desire. The images of Caesars recall the very contradictions that made Italian America.

## Contradictions

Memories of dominion look out from under their brows, reproaching Italy for its centuries of decline. A long time has passed since Caesars ruled in Rome. Italian immigrants of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries knew this. They had often heard that after the 1860s, the newly unified Italy of the Risorgimento was going to change the story. There would be a new empire. Not soon, however, as it turned out.

Singing Italy's glorious songs about itself, millions left in search of work. They could never forget the despair and hunger that had driven them out, nor could they forget the dead silence of the boundless ocean. Living in the United States, they would read Italian newspapers that liked to trumpet Italy's new national will to power, but they could readily see (even though many of them chose not to) that a more formidable will to power was shaping their lives in the United States. Italy had

abandoned them when they lived there. That was why they left. Now it would abandon them all over again in the United States. Like hopeless lovers, many went on believing in Italy's greatness no matter how badly she treated them.

Love forgets injuries. Once Italian Americans grew accustomed to living in English, the memories of many unhappy contradictions went underground. Most Italian Americans nowadays have forgotten their origins as orphans of massive political catastrophes. Their writers can hardly avoid such knowledge, however. In Italian American writing, *Italy* is a word that means both "the homeland of desire" and "the empire that failed." Reading Italian American writing without encountering the hopeless dreams of glory that lie entombed in it is impossible. These dreams too are Buried Caesars. They shape the tormented mixture of pride and humiliation that gives this literature its emotional texture and appeal.

## Method

The history of how Italian American literature came to use the English language has its moment of crisis in 1941, but it neither begins nor ends there. As soon as Italian immigrants were able to write in English, they began to do so. But language is a complex phenomenon, deeply intertwined with questions of power and identity. Consequently, the most difficult problem for Italian American writers and readers is language. For some, English is the enemy's language. As lately as the 1980s, a Sicilian American poet was calling English a *cursèd tongue*.<sup>5</sup> For most, however, it has been necessary both to accept English and at the same time to find a way of making it visibly Italian.

Italian American writers, when they want to present themselves as such, generally do so by finding ways to use Italian words when writing in English. This seems a simple enough procedure, but it presents many problems. On the one hand, Italian words establish place and filiation and pride, but on the other hand, the class systems of both Italy and the United States tell Italian Americans that their Italian is "only" a dialect—a sign of marginality. This opposition can be treated as a paradox, only a seeming contradiction. More frequent, however, is the attempt to resolve this contradiction by resorting to figures that seem large enough to contain both sides. Frank Sinatra might act like a thug, but he would also be known as the Chairman of the Board. Such characters are among the Caesars of Italian American ideology, deeply buried in ways of thinking and behaving. They resemble neurotic "solu-

tions”—hidden illusions we use to distance ourselves from the contradictions of our lives.<sup>6</sup> Such solutions are hard to get rid of, even when we know where they are, because so many things depend on them.

Contradictions and solutions produce and reproduce one another in a culture. This book shows how some writers—John Fante and Don DeLillo, for example—have emphasized the contradictions. One can see how Italian-American writing often plays two opposing hands at the same time. This book also shows how other writers—Mario Puzo and Gay Talese, for example—have dug up the Buried Caesars and placed them on view, allowing the reader to see the intimate relationships between deep conflicts and the mythic figures that appear to rise above them.

This book follows the windings of political self-contradiction through attention to the evolution of an Italian American literary language. This language is always the scene of conflict, always open to the temptations of grandiose solutions, always susceptible to deflation and revision.

Language presents us with the most visible structural evidence of contradictions, especially when we bear in mind that language is never merely the vehicle for personal beliefs. National languages, which mingle on the page of Italian American writing, are intricately bound with national literatures. And these present the student of literature with serious issues of discernment.

All literatures are ideologies, but not all literatures are equal. A national literature is an ideology that reflects the tastes and interests of the people who dominate the nation. Other literatures have less concentrated force behind them. Italian American writing, the subject of this book, arises from the history, thought, and beliefs of a people that has not exercised dominion in any nation, a marginalized people forced to leave its ancestral home in Italy, a people forced to abandon its inherited languages, a people that has long struggled to achieve social and economic progress in the United States. To study Italian American literature means to engage that struggle—to engage in that struggle if the student is an Italian American. The task that faces such a student is daunting.

The first difficulty is to define an Italian American literature that differs critically from those of both Italy and the United States. *Italian* and *American* are both names for national projects, each of which has its own imaginary and its own literature. These are well-constructed, well-established, and forceful projects. They constitute overwhelming presences in Italian American writing. Italian literature belongs to the

warriors, priests, and merchants who have ruled Italy for many centuries. American literature reflects the ideology of Western culture and territorial expansion that have guided the growth of this continental empire throughout the centuries of its career as an expansionist power. Each of these literatures looms infinitely larger than Italian American writing can possibly do, and each comes supplied with a large institutional force in the form of school textbooks, curricular requirements, histories, biographies, works of reference, libraries, editions, newspapers, reviews, publishing houses, endowed chairs in universities, national prizes, private patronage, and government support at many levels.

Because Italian American literature does not belong to a national project, it has no large established force of its own. Instead, it maintains relations—sometimes consciously, but always in a posture that is inevitably subordinate—with the agenda of fully articulated and fully institutionalized national ideologies. Thus, Italian American literature often engages in its own marginalization.

- Many Italian American writers boast thoughtlessly of Italy. Their texts repeat the Italian notions that *real* Italian culture is the metropolitan ideology of the great Italian cities and, correlatively, that immigrants are poor and uneducated persons, more interesting for their folklore and their cooking than for their philosophic or artistic contributions. This unconscious colonialism is often intensified under the old defensiveness that afflicts exponents of Italian metropolitan culture; these defenders live with a degree of self-doubt that has nothing to do with migration, but rather has its own deep roots in Italy's long history as a country, once great, that later suffered foreign dominion for many centuries before it became a nation, an old thirst for vindication that led directly to Italy's history of disastrous imperialism during the first half of the twentieth century.
- American literature still treats Italy as a conquered province. Americans see Italy as a pleasure colony of dubious virtue. And much Italian American literature works against its own interests by exploiting this attitude. In some Italian American writing, one sees reflected the American notion that Italians are people whose main contribution to life in the United States has been to charm and entertain Americans, while at the same time constituting an ineradicable criminal conspiracy—in short, a

people morally unequipped to enter civil life in the democratic paradise of the United States.

In neither case does Italian American literature have a clear and independent agenda. In both cases its position is colonial; that is, its own force is alienated from itself to strengthen claims that belong to one or another national project.

- Italian America stands to Italy in the relation of a captive market for Italian value-added goods; its history flows from its position in the market of cheap labor, of migrants who left Italy in search of salaries and then, for generations afterward, sent back money that kept Italy's balance of payments flourishing. Today, many Italian Americans not only continue to identify themselves with the nation that excluded them, but they also carry within them many of the leading themes of Italian national culture.
- Italian America stands to the United States in the relation of a colony-within, perpetually assigned certain historical tasks in the food, fashion, and entertainment industries. The default belief is that Italian Americans are a people not to be trusted past a certain point. Thus the myth of a vast underworld conspiracy. Its illegality serves as a constant ceiling to Italian American political and social ambitions.

The ideological effect of this doubly colonized position has been a double blindness.

- Italian Americans have forgotten why Italy matters in their lives. They have only the vaguest notion of how their position in the United States is affected by their relationship with Italy. They have forgotten why they no longer speak the Italian language; and with that language has gone the much effective notion of Italian history and thought, along with any sense of what the current political and economic interests of Italy may be, or any critical understanding of how these interests may affect Italian Americans.
- Italian Americans believe in a Hollywood version of their lives in the United States. Most Italian Americans have only a hazy idea of what their actual history in the United States has been.



Any precise knowledge of their real purposes, interests, struggles, or heroic leaders has been replaced by the ubiquitous luminescent cloud of semidivine Mafia dons and movie stars—that is to say, by the American ideology that permanently assigns Italian Americans to life in a subaltern colony within the United States. Political leaders such as Arturo Giovannitti and Vito Marcantonio are infinitely less well known than Al Capone and Lucky Luciano, or Frank Sinatra and John Travolta.

Not all literary texts engage in self-subordination. This book shows how Italian American writing has begun to develop a critical sense of its own historical role. This is necessary work. Literary texts that deal directly with colonial blindness are little known in Italian America. Works that explore the paradoxes and difficulties of the Italian American position—works such as John Fante's *Ask the Dust* or Helen Barolini's *Umbertina*—are still little read and less discussed among Italian Americans. Today, Italian Americans go to college. They learn to read the contradictions that give life to the novels of Herman Melville and Virginia Woolf. But they have yet to acquire the habit of paying the same kind of intellectual or political attention to the contradictions that animate the writings of Italian Americans.

This failing is most evident in the way that Italian American readers have received works such as *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*. Whereas critics from Rose Basile Green to Fred Gardaphé and Marianna DeMarco Torgovnik and Chris Messenger have analyzed these works for what they have to tell us about the complexities of Italian American culture and history, their approach has not dominated the conversation. Many Italian American readers and organizations have greeted these works as occasions for lament and for cries of discrimination. Such readers are correct to say that discrimination inevitably accompanies and draws nourishment from works such as these. But they make a fatal mistake when they stop there. *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* are the most widely influential works of narrative that Italian America has yet produced. Their very successes call for the best critical and historical understanding that critics can bring to bear on them. Their enormous popularity and prestige does not rest simply on an uncritical use of criminal stereotypes (and indeed, these stereotypes are themselves complex historical facts that call for patient analysis and unraveling). Stereotypes alone do not produce the impact that these nar-

ratives have had. *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* are, for good or ill, works of art. To respond to them with less than full critical attention amounts to a serious failing, one that leaves Italian Americans unprepared to deal with the cultural situation they in fact occupy.

National literatures can confuse the issue for colonized persons. National literatures convey, or they reflect on, the national ideologies to which they belong. Colonized literatures convey, or they reflect on, the profoundly conflicted ideologies that constitute them. Colonized persons have a special need of literature because it helps them to clarify and to make conscious the unspoken contradictions that hold them in thrall to their historical condition. A critical understanding of Italian American literature can allow Italian Americans to see and to understand the ideological double bind that constitutes their condition. Thus, this book has two steady themes:

1. How Italian American literature embodies Italian nationalist and imperialist ideology, often unconsciously, at the level of language and rhetoric, as well as in moral standards and visionary imagination. This ideology is the source of the Buried Caesars in the book's title, the powerful meanings that come, often unannounced, with the very name *Italian*.
2. How Italian American writing embodies the American ideology. Acceptance, conscious and unconscious alike, of the Italian ideology has made escaping American ideology, which has class interests more in common with Italian national culture than with Italian immigrant culture, difficult for Italian Americans. This is why the Buried Caesars of Italian ideology emerge in the United States.

To the degree that Italian Americans achieve critical awareness of these inherited ideological burdens, they grow freer to invent an Italian American culture rather than to repeat one symptomatically.

This book examines the shape of a literary history that can call itself distinctly Italian American. But a literature does not begin with critical consciousness alone. Italian American writing, like other literatures, requires an institutional and economic base. Its very condition ensures that it lacks the institutional force of the national literatures that stand on either side of it. Italian American literature cannot thrive as such without coming to terms with its relationship to these national literatures. Italy's fortunes affect Italian America both

directly and indirectly, and Italian American ideology needs to take account of this, needs to develop awareness that is much more conscious and to articulate a relationship with Italian ideology and with American notions of Italy.

Shakespeare's Mark Antony says, "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him." Neither of these predictions is fulfilled. Antony does not avoid praising Caesar. Nor does Caesar remain buried. His ghost continues to play an important role long afterwards.

Italian Caesarism showed a similar resilience in Italian America after the lights went out in December 1941, recurring everywhere in the form of unacknowledged and misunderstood allegiances to dead ideals. These allegiances became the colonial phantasms that still return in the shapes of Don Corleone and (for that matter) Frank Sinatra.

Italian America, if it is ever to stop reliving its ancient dependency, needs a new vision of its American past and of its relationship to Italy. This need alone is reason enough to examine the dreams and purposes that move under the surface of Italian American writing.

## Acknowledgments

When I began working on this subject in 1979, little of the institutional discourse that makes a collection of texts into the body of a literature existed. A rising generation of scholars and writers, however, was interested in supplying what was lacking, and this work has been conducted, as it were, in their midst. When a field is forming, the most important discussions are often not the ones printed in books. The writings of Italians in America, their use of English and of Italian, have been the themes of many debates during the time I have been working on this book. My interlocutors have included the following persons—some professionally interested in the subject and some simply willing to discuss it with someone who needed to talk about it: Steven Acunto, Theresa Aiello-Gerber, Flavia Alaya, Stefano Albertini, Carole Bonomo Albright, Bruno Arcudi, Patrizia Ardizzzone, Joseph Arleo, Stanley Aronowitz, Louis Asekoff, Ignazio Baldelli, Luigi Ballerini, Franco Bagnolini, Helen Barolini, Regina Barreca, Luigi Barzini, Thomas Belmonte, Jean Béranger, Adria Bernardi, Steen Boatti, William Boelhower, Mary Jo Bona, Luigi Bonaffini, Jerome Bongiorno, Marylou Bongiorno, Vittore Branca, Marina Cacioppo, John D. Calandra, Sal Cannavo, Philip V. Cannistraro, Vincenzo Cappelletti, Rocco Caporale, Betty Boyd Caroli, Alessandro Carrera, Santa Casciani, Robert Casillo, Frank Cavaoli, Diana Cavallo, Teresa Cerasuola, Mark Ciabattari, Edward M. Cifelli, Gaetano Cipolla, Raffaele Cocchi, Furio Colombo, Terri Colpi, Francesco Corrias, George Cunningham, Matilda Raffa Cuomo, Pellegrino D’Acierno, Rosetta D’Angelo, Robert D’Attilio, Alexander De Conde, Don De Lillo, Tony De Nonno, Louise De Salvo, Dona De Sanctis, Bénédicte Deschamps, Mario Diacono, Bill Di Biasi, Jeanne Dickey, Pietro di Donato, Elvira Di Fabio, Cesare di Montezomolo, Robert Di Pietro, Diane Di Prima, Giuseppe Di Scipio, Lawrence Di Stasi,

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Some of the chapters of this book have had earlier lives, in somewhat different form, in the following places: "*De vulgari eloquentia*: An Approach to the Language of Italian American Fiction," *Yale Italian Studies*, I, no. 3 (1981): 1–28; "*Il caso della casa*: Stories of Houses in Italian America," in *The Family and Community Life of Italian Americans*, ed. Richard N. Juliani (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1983), pp. 1–9; "*Son of Italy*: Immigrant Ambition and American Literature," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 28, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 41–54; "The Text in the Dust: Writing Italy across America," *Studi Emigrazione* (Marzo 1982): 123–30; "The Semiology of Semen: Questioning the Father," in *The Italian Americans through the Generations*, ed. Rocco Caporale (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1986), pp. 185–96; "Circles of the Cyclopes: Schemes of Recognition in Italian American Discourse," in *Italian Americans: New Perspectives*, ed. Lydio Tomasi (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1985), pp. 209–19; "A Literature Considering Itself: The Allegory of Italian America," in *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana*, ed. A. Tamburri, P. Giordano, and F. Gardaphe (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1991), pp. 263–81; a draft of chapter one served as keynote address at the October 1999 conference of the Semiotic Society of America in Pittsburgh.

My steadiest interlocutors have been the published texts of scholars who have addressed this theme, particularly Rose Basile Green, *The*

*Italian American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures* (1974); Lawrence DiStasi, *Malocchio: The Underside of Vision* (1981), *Dream Streets: The Big Book of Italian American Culture* (1989), and ed., *Una storia segreta The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment during World War II* (2001); William Boelhower, *Immigrant Autobiography: Four Versions of the Italian American Self* (1982); Helen Barolini, "Introduction," *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian-American Women* (1985); Giuseppe Massara, *Americani* (1986); Fred Gardaphe, Anthony Tamburri, and Paolo A. Giordano, "Introduction," *From the Margin; Writings in Italian Americana*; Fred Gardaphe, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* (1995), *Dagoes Read: Tradition and the Italian American Writer* (1996), and *Leaving Little Italy: Essaying Italian American Culture* (2004); Anthony Tamburri, *To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate* (1991), and *A Semiotic of Ethnicity* (1998); Antonio D'Alfonso, *Italics* (1996); Pasquale Verdicchio, *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism through the Italian Diaspora* (1997); Pellgrino D'Acierno, ed., *The Italian American Heritage* (1998); Mary Jo Bona, *Claiming a Tradition: Italian American Women Writers* (1999); Kenneth Scambray, *The North American Italian Renaissance* (2000); Francesco Durante, *Italoamericana* (2001); Edvige Giunta, *Writing with an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Writers* (2002); Martino Marazzi, *Voices of Italian America* (2004). These are some of the books that have mattered to me, but there are dozens of other works, all duly recorded in footnotes, to which I owe the pleasure and enlightenment that any student needs to keep going. These works have kept me company when I was writing, challenged me the most deeply, and rewarded my attention the most fully. My longest and most sustaining conversation has been with the philosophical poet and critic Peter Carravetta whose many essays and journal, *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*, have kept me in dialogue with a transatlantic conversation of considerable breadth and of irreducible disparity with the kinds of things we were more likely to talk about here in Italian America. Carravetta took it on himself to provide a forum for Italian thought in the United States, which served to remind intellectuals in Italian America that they need no longer consider themselves alone on the planet.

# Introduction

## Secrets of Italian American Writing

Italian Americans have two problems, one they acknowledge and the other they keep secret, even from themselves.

The problem they acknowledge is the Mafia. They not only acknowledge this problem, but they never stop talking about it. People (I am one of them) who would like official Italian America to spend much more of its money supporting writers and scholars find this obsession with the Mafia frustrating. Its workings are familiar: in a game of blame tag, some Italian Americans make a lot of money on a Mafia movie, and other Italian Americans, especially large Italian American organizations, give the movie free publicity by loudly protesting it. Whether these protesters are insincere or just too angry to stop and think is hard to determine. On the one hand, they certainly mean what they say, and they write eloquent speeches and articles about their position, articles that would be more convincing if they had had any demonstrable effect. But thirty years of protesting *The Godfather*, often hailed as the greatest movie ever made, did not hamper *The Sopranos*, often hailed in its turn as the greatest television show ever made. Oscars and Emmys have rained down on the producers, directors, actors, screenwriters, composers, editors, set designers, and just about everyone else who has had anything to do with these productions. Such a result might lead the protesters to wonder if something might be wrong with their tactics or even with the case they are making. That something is their second problem, the one they do not acknowledge.

The second problem, the secret problem of Italian Americans, is Italy. This problem is a secret in two ways. First, plenty of Italian Americans have forgotten all about Italy. It has nothing to do with them, they



suppose, even if they still keep their Italian names.<sup>1</sup> They are Americans pure and simple, and glad of it. Second, many Italian Americans, particularly the ones who protest the Mafia films, do not think of Italy as a problem but as a reason to boast. We painted the *Mona Lisa*. We discovered America. We invented the opera.

But Italy *is* a problem, and pretending that it is not is the main reason Italian Americans have never been able to dispel the Mafia stereotype. Let us look at how the ways of pretending that Italy is not a problem have confused the issue for Italian Americans.

*The belief that Italy has nothing to do with Italian Americans.* This amounts to a massive act of denial, comparable to a black person's pretending to be white. *Italian* is the difference-marker in the expression *Italian American*; and for a long series of reasons, Italy continues to play a role in giving that expression its meaning as a social and historical fact. A few cases in point:

- Anglo-Americans descend from a long history of not liking, wanting, or respecting Italians. During the Protestant Reformation, Italians became synonymous with the evil, double-dealing Catholic Church. In England, the spokesperson for Renaissance Italy was Niccolò Machiavelli, a political thinker so feared, hated, and secretly admired that the English began calling the devil Old Nick in his honor.
- Italy, long divided into many states, became a system of subordinate provinces and principalities after the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559. Dominated afterward for centuries by French, Spanish, and Austrian armies, Italy suffered the contempt that accompanies the condition of a dependency.
- The Risorgimento aimed to restore dignity to Italy and to Italians in the world, a worthy task that had only begun—and begun badly—during the years of the great Italian exodus, when millions of people decided that Italy's good fortunes were too far into the future for them. When they left, the name of Italians in the world was still not what they might have hoped.
- All of these factors came into play during the Great Migration to the United States. Millions of Italians poured into U.S. ports, while Nativist Americans looked at them through eyes narrowed by racial and religious bigotry and by the greed and class arrogance of people who were systematically exploiting the

Italians as cheap substitutes for slave labor. Italian immigrants suffered discrimination, hatred, and even lynchings.<sup>2</sup>

- During Prohibition, Italians became the designated guilt-bearers for American hypocrisy about liquor, gambling, and sex, forbidden pleasures that Italian gangsters supplied to them.
- Finally, during World War II, Italy was an enemy nation, and Italian Americans were interned in concentration camps and forbidden to speak their native language in the streets of their own neighborhoods.

In short, the history of Italian American stereotypes has everything to do with the history of Italy. Italy's long subjection to the other powers in Europe combined with American conditions to ensure that Italian Americans would live in a subaltern condition, a colony within. Italy's doomed adventurism in the years since the Risorgimento led to the wars of Fascism, whose policies first flattered Italian Americans with dreams of Italian glory, then left them, millions of them, to live with the memories of those dreams in a country where they had suddenly become enemy aliens.

*The belief that Italy is a reason to boast.* Would that this were true, but it is not. Italy is wonderful, no doubt. Too wonderful, in fact. Seen from Italian America, Italy represents a mountain of prestige that Italian Americans do not share.

- Italy expects Italian Americans to consume Italian manufactures: cheese, wine, textiles, clothing, leather goods, perfumes, and bottled water.
- Through its network of Italian Cultural Institutes in major U.S. cities, Italy supports the diffusion of Italian paintings, sculptures, films, operas, books, and programs of language instruction.
- Italy expects Italian Americans to be proud of Italy. Indeed, it needs them to be proud of Italy, which is still industriously at work overcoming the effects of political misadventures that have very long histories. Italy, indeed, still feels the need to improve its image in the world. Italian nationals can scarcely help bristling whenever anyone identifies them with Italian Americans, who still live in a colonial condition that Italians want to believe they themselves have overcome.

- Italy finds not colonizing Italian Americans difficult. Certainly, of course, Italy pays them attention. They are not only a colony but also a rich one—a large market driven by American prosperity, ambition, energy, and organizational power. Italian Americans function as distributors for Italian exports in the United States. The Northeast corridor alone, where so many Italian Americans live, constitutes a market for Italian luxury goods as large as the entire national market for those goods in Italy itself. Italian Americans are fit to import Italian goods and culture. But they remain in a colonial condition.
- Italy is slow to accept Italian Americans as equals in culture and intelligence. No Italian American Cultural Institutes exist in Italy. As a consequence, every time Italian Americans devote their time, money, energy, and will to boasting about Italy, they are reinforcing a colonial order of prestige that places them at the bottom of a very large, very old, and very heavy pyramid.

*The Mafia is the myth of the Italian American colonial condition.* The message is that Italian Americans cannot achieve cultural equality. They belong to Little Italy and can never escape. Getting rich does not help. Little Italy began its life as an informal colony of the Italian nation. Thanks to this arrangement, Italy, with its ancient woes and its intense interest in its own affairs, is always inclined, and often without much thinking about it, to reinstate Italian America in its colonial condition. “Just when I thought I was *out*,” Michael Corleone complains in *The Godfather, Part III*, “they pull me back *in*.” That line is frequently quoted in *The Sopranos*, where Italian Americans still have their loyalties in the old neighborhoods, still operate outside the rules of the dominant culture, even after they move to the suburbs, even after they send their children to Ivy League schools. To be sure, this story belongs to the history of American culture. But it also has a powerful Italian context, not only in the past, but also in the present. Italian Americans descend from people Italy does not even want to remember. Italy still has no need to redeem them, even if it wanted, or were able, to do so. The Mafia fable dramatizes the truth that Italian Americans still secretly belong to the order of prestige established by Roman aristocrats thousands of years ago and never once seriously disturbed in all this time. Italy has never had a successful revolution. The Risorgimento, which pretended to be a revolution, ended by making rich people richer and by starving poor people, millions and millions of them, out of Italy altogether.

Italian Americans cannot forget Italy, even if they would like to. They must, however, learn to deal with it on their own terms and not those dictated by the Italian Trade Commission or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Like other colonials, Italian Americans must learn to see themselves at the center of their own world, not merely on the periphery of someone else's. This takes time, and it takes writers. Italian American writing, the subject of this book, grapples with the meaning of Italy in Italian America. The Italy of the mind is large and complicated. Its meanings in the lives of Italian Americans are many and not always easy to sort out—or even to discover. But writing does this necessary work, taking old meanings apart and using the pieces to assemble new ones.

In Italian America, writing finds the monumental display of a colonial mind. The Roman Caesars built altars to themselves throughout their military empire. Imperialist United Italy exported cheap labor, settled trading colonies, printed newspapers, inspired Columbus Day parades, and promoted the cult of its own greatness throughout its mercantile empire in the United States. The monuments of that empire are the fetish foods Italian Americans still import from Italy, as well as the beliefs, the heroes, and the attitudes that still shape their sense of themselves and of their history. These monuments do not usually carry labels. They do not even seem to be monuments. They are Buried Caesars.

### What are Buried Caesars?

In Italy, a *Caesar* is not just a person, but also a category.

A Caesar is, first, a leader who arises out of a deadly stalemate.<sup>3</sup> Italian history has been rich in such violent oppositions, so Italians have found it useful to have a name for what happens when the situation becomes serious and neither side wishes to risk extinction. The opponents compromise on a figure that, characteristically, glows with an impossible glamour for as long as he lasts and then afterward makes a bad end. Outside of Julius Caesar himself, some examples of such figures are Mussolini, whom they hung naked by his heels in the public square; Cesare Borgia, who was found with twenty-seven stab wounds in his body; and the great Roman rabble-rouser of the middle ages Cola di Rienzo, whom the Romans tore to ribbons, then hanged upside down naked before burning him to ashes in front of the Mausoleum of Augustus.

Italian culture, we may say, also has many Caesars who are not persons but monuments to persons. Marble Italy is littered with portrait

busts and colossal fists and broken temples that commemorate Caesars. In Italian America, the statues are not as numerous, but the Caesars are everywhere.

In Italian America, the Caesars include impossible ideals and exaggerated claims to which Italian Americans still give their devotion: the notion that Rome was noble; the belief that the Family is sacred; the axiom that Italians discovered America. As with Caesars themselves, such claims and ideals, arising out of impossible conflicts between one set of interests and another, can seem necessary to social and civil survival. American realities were in harsh conflict with Italian dreams. Emigrants departing Italy did not always leave their heroic phantoms behind. Indeed, a faith in such ghosts would remain basic to their sense of themselves as Italians. Beliefs that Italy's emigrants carried away with them have found their lodging places in what emigrants and their descendants have written in new countries and new languages.

Many Caesars lie buried in Italian American writing, as do many themes of Italian politics and culture. Most such themes are secret, not because they are hidden but because readers do not recognize them as what they are. Like other elements of the old Italian ideology, they are the sources of profound conflict in the colonial imagination. Reading Italian American writing well means understanding its secret themes, where they come from, how they work, and what they accomplish.

### Where They Come From (Resurrecting Rome)

This story begins in Italy.

In Italy, people do not worship the dead, but they consult with them. Often, it is an intimate conversation. Come Saturday morning, under the cypress trees just outside any small town, people are changing candles and flowers at family tombs and telling their departed the week's news. It is also a public ritual. The Patriarch of Venice addresses the remains of Saint Mark. The pope talks to Saint Peter at his tomb on the Vatican Hill where the apostles laid him to rest. And the dead reply. On the graves of grandparents, children in Sicily find sweets and toys. Saints send dreams and miracles. The dead fill the audience chamber where we hear the lines of Italy's great poets.

Italians learn from the dead. This process is basic to the way that Italians reinvent themselves, century after century. They follow the sun that emerges from the underworld. They are experts in raising the dead. Christian religion preaches the resurrection of the body. This has its precise parallel in Italian ideology. In the fourteenth century, when the

popes were forced to live at Avignon under the protection of the King of France, the poet Francesco Petrarca and the notary Cola di Rienzo began preaching the need to restore the authority of the Eternal City. The resurrection of Rome has been a steady element in Italian national ideology ever since.

The Renaissance or Rebirth (1400–1600) grew out of a centuries-long dialogue in which medieval Italians learned from the shades of ancient Romans. Poets contended with Virgil and Ovid. Lawyers took lessons from Cicero and Quintilian. Political scientists quibbled over Livy and Tacitus. Architects measured the Pantheon and the baths of Diocletian. Painters competed with frescoes they found on the walls of imperial villas. Generals would imitate Caesar; popes would ape Caligula. Out of all this copying and rivalry with the mighty dead, Renaissance Italians developed a style of spectacle that has left many reminiscences of itself along the streets of Rome and Florence, Naples, and Milan.

The Risorgimento or Reawakening (1815–1870) grew out of the same conversation, this time concentrating on questions of empire. That is, medieval trade and Renaissance spectacle had long since collaborated to make Italy a rich prize, but the prize had afterward fallen mostly into the hands of non-Italians. The French, the Spanish, the Austrians, and the Papacy had divided the opulent territories of Italy among themselves. The Risorgimento addressed this situation, and it imagined itself reviving the heroes who had once made Rome a great power. The Risorgimento's marching song begins with these words:

*Fratelli d'Italia,  
l'Italia s'è desta;  
dell'elmo di Scipio  
s'è cinta la testa.*

Brothers of Italy,  
Italy has risen now,  
with Scipio's helmet  
has belted her brow.<sup>4</sup>

The grandeur that was Rome: Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who defeated Carthage, scored the definitive victory that gave Rome its *imperium* or empire in the Mediterranean. Invoking Scipio, the Risorgimento foreshadowed its aim to build what it would come to call the Third Rome—third after those of the emperors and the popes.