


An Italian/American State of Mind

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In launching i-Italy, we shall inevitably re-consider our own individual positions within the Italian/American community. ...

... Namely, what are the duties and/or responsibilities of someone involved in Italian Americana? Must we take on that Gramscian role of “organic intellectual,” or can we just go about our business as the individuals we are? How do we create an Italian/American State of Mind?

This is one of the most important issues that impacts our community, deserving of greater attention as required by our individual and collective sense of amor proprio. We must, for sure, ponder the issue of the group versus the individual, especially that person similar to any famous Italian American who has the ability (read, cultural currency) to further the group’s cause. This is an age-old question that we need to tackle, since we can now readily say that we have – literally and metaphorically – arrived.

Allow me to pose a series of questions in this regard. First, why is there no section in bookstores, especially in a city like New York, dedicated to Italian/American writing? Given the thousands of square feet a bookstore occupies, what impact could one bookshelf of Italian/American books have? Second, why is it that of the six or seven forthcoming books on a publisher’s home page, the one dedicated to Italian Americana does not appear? Third, why is it that a book dedicated to United States poetry, one that seems to present itself as historically analytical and prescriptive, does not include a chapter on any Italian American, not even John Ciardi?

We need to be sure that our progeny is aware of our culture. They can access it in two ways: (1) Teachers and professors on all levels need to be trained to impart the information necessary for such cultural awareness. The strategy for its success is binate: (a) lessons on significant Italian Americans need to be integrated into the various K-12 curricula; (b) professors at the college level need to include Italian Americana in their various courses, especially in their graduate seminars. Now, with the creation of i-Italy, a virtual network connecting Italy and Italian America, the promulgation of such information becomes easier with each click of a button. (2) All of this leads to a second way of access — where “push comes to shove.” This is where cultural philanthropy comes into play; professorships in Italian Americana should be established; centers for Italian/American Studies should be formed. Both, clearly, can be done through endowments of approximately \$2,000,000 and



\$1,000,000 respectively. Professorships and centers run the gamut for other United States ethnic groups, funded by individuals and/or their foundations. Very few individuals among the Italian/American community have engaged in such cultural philanthropy; we can count the number on one hand.

Ultimately, we need to take our culture more seriously. We simply cannot continue to engage in a series of reminiscences that lead primarily to nostalgic recall. Instead, we need to revisit our past, reclaim its pros and cons, and reconcile it with our present. We need to figure out where we came from, ask those unpopular questions of both ourselves and the dominant culture, and champion our many Italian/American cultural brokers — artists and intellectuals — so that they can engage productively in an Italian/American state of mind.

Ultimately, all of this is dependent upon our recapturing our sense of amor proprio, combining it with our abilities — financial, performative, aesthetic, intellectual — in order to engender, document, maintain, and transmit our Italian/American culture; anything short of such activity is tantamount to failure.

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