

IDENTITY IN MIGRANT LITERATURE: THE CASE OF ITALIAN AMERICANS*

COSMA SIANI

In this paper I will explore how the notion of one's identity and the language used to express it have interacted in the experience of Italian migrants to the United States, especially those immigrants who were driven by literary ambition. I shall take my cue from an established personality in the American literary tradition, Arthur Miller.

Miller's concern with Italian Americans does not seem to extend beyond his play *A View from the Bridge* (1955), a story of illegal immigration set in an Italian family living in New York. But as we go through the corpus of his works, we come across a short story that has an Italian title, "Monte Sant'Angelo," the name of a small town on the Gargano Mount, in south-east Italy. There is no time here to clarify why Miller wrote about a small place in Italy so remote from his experience¹. But the story has to do with the question of identity. It tells of an American Jew, Bernstein (the evident mask for the writer himself) who accompanies his friend Vinny on a journey to Italy and to a faraway village, the mountain town of Monte Sant'Angelo, in search of relatives. Vinny carries out his search with such a firm intention that his companion says: "You're crazy, you know that? You've got some kind of ancestor complex. All we've done in this country is look for your relatives"².

Miller wrote this story in 1951. Curiously enough, decades later many Americans of Italian descent may indeed have been seized with an "ancestor complex". I know of a number of Italian families, mainly Southern, that have been contacted by Americans of Italian descent looking for their relations and origins in this country. It appeared surprising to me how determined and

* Questo saggio costituisce la relazione presentata al XXVIII convegno nazionale del TESOL Italy, "Language and Identity", svoltosi a Roma il 21-22 novembre 2003. Studia alcune implicazioni linguistiche della crisi di identità e del senso di sdoppiamento psichico a cui si trova esposto chi emigra e si confronta con un nuovo idioma e una cultura diversa.

¹ Cfr. Cosma Siani, "Arthur Miller's Gargano," transl. Susan Perry, *Bridge Apulia USA* (Lecce), Issue II, 1997, pp. 86-89. (See also the original Italian "E il sogno americano atterrò sul Gargano", *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno* [Bari], 31 agosto 1990, and the updated Italian version "Arthur Miller viaggiatore nel Gargano", *Il Giannone* [San Marco in Lamis, Fg], III, 5, genn.-giu. 2005, pp. 143-47).

² Arthur Miller, *I Don't Need You Any More. Stories*. NY, The Viking Press, 1967, p. 55. (The whole collection is available in Italian as *Non ho più bisogno di te*, transl. Bruno Fonzi, Milano: Rizzoli, 1970.) The story "Monte Sant'Angelo" was first published in the *Harper's Magazine* in March 1951.

untiring these Americans were. A Di Muzio family in America have even established a sort of “Newsletter” for the branches of the family all over the States. Some Savastios whom I met in Rome a few years ago wanted to visit their ancestors’ homes in Apulia. So did some Panozzo-Billingtons looking for distant cousins in Piedmont.

One more case I can personally report is that of a Sonny, from New York. Sonny wanted to use the Italian language in writing to his Italian counterpart, but he knew no Italian, nor did his Italian correspondent know any English. Sonny decided to use an automatic translation software. This is an example of how communication went:

Egregio Amico ***

Ha ricevuto la Sua lettera che era buon udito da Lei. Scrittura giusta finita una lettera a *** ed ***.

Come per la Sua domanda della lettera che ho spedito [ot] *** in italiano con l’uso del computer. Non ho tenuto l’originale in inglese. Le lettere che gli spedisco ora, li spedirò in inglese ed italiano.

Conosco molto piccolo di computer. *** e *** sono più bene informato di computer.

Se Lei come e può usare nel Suo computer, gli spedirò un disco allentato che traduce dall’inglese all’italiano, e dall’italiano all’inglese. Anche hanno altro disco allentato che traduce dal francese all’inglese, spagnolo a inglese, e dal tedesco all’inglese.

Mio cugino che Sandra ha detto quello Sua sorella era dalla regione di A’Quila. La città è di Acciano lontano dal Suo luogo di nascita?

Accluderò una copia di una lettera che ho spedito alla famiglia. Nella lettera può vedere che mio secondo e terzo nonni erano dalla città di Acciano.

Ha Internet E imposta indirizzo per il Suo computer? Lo spedirà a me il prossimo tempo che scrive a me?

Un piccolo di me stesso, nel 1995 sono andato in pensione da Unito Sparte Servizio dopo che 29 anni. Avevo 55 anni, troppo giovane andare in pensione, così sono andato lavorare per la Città di New York. Guido una scuola del [delivering] del furgone piccola approvvigiona.

Chiuda la lettera per ora. Contento che mi ha scritto. Speri di sentire da Lei di nuovo.

Il Suo Amico
Figlio mio³

A comparison with the original English letter may be instructive for those who are interested in language learning & teaching. Here are some comparative

³ Personal letter to the writer.

excerpts:

Egregio Amico ***

Ha ricevuto la Sua lettera che era buon udito da Lei. Scrittura giusta finita una lettera a *** ed ***.

*Dear Friend ****

*Received your letter it was good hearing from you. Just finished writing a letter to *** and ***.*

Se Lei come e può usare nel Suo computer, gli spedirò un disco allentato che traduce dall'inglese all'italiano,

If you like and can use in your computer, I will send you a floppy disc that translates from English to Italian,

Mio cugino che Sandra ha detto quello Sua sorella era dalla regione di A'Quila. La città è di Acciano lontano dal Suo luogo di nascita? [...] mio secondo e terzo nonni erano dalla città di Acciano.

My cousin Sandra said that your sister was from the region of A'Quila. Is the town of Acciano far from your place of birth? [...] my second and third grandparents were from the town of Acciano.

Chiuda la lettera per ora. Contento che mi ha scritto. Speri di sentire da Lei di nuovo.

Il Suo Amico *Figlio mio*

Will close the letter for now. Glad that you wrote me. Hope to hear from you again.

Your Friend Sonny

Much of the irregularity in the Italian translation is explained by Sonny's use of non-standard English in his original input. And much is due to the fact that the machine cannot (thank goodness) discriminate as much as the human brain. As you see, in "it was good hearing from you", *hearing* is recognized as a noun – one of the five senses – by the software and translated as *udito*; *floppy disc* is not recognized as a unit, and conveyed as *disco* "allentato"; the solution to the closing, *figlio mio*, is how the computer software understands and renders the writer's nickname *Sonny*, a diminutive of *son*. But doesn't that "second and third grandparents" from the town of Acciano make us think of Miller's "ancestor complex"?

There is certainly some humour in such epistolary exchange, but there are also serious implications. In going on their quest, Sonny and the others evidently want to specify and round off their American identity by tracing it back to their non-American origins. Sonny in particular comes upon the question of language

as connected with identity. It may have seemed natural to him to use technology in order to establish communication with non-English speakers as he realizes that the completion of his search for identity meets the stumbling block of language.

Now this is a fairly elementary (and painless) case where language and identity intertwine. But the numbers who left Italy for the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had to face in acute form problems of language plurality: mostly of rural origin, they were not highly literate, they hardly possessed any standard Italian usage, and mainly spoke the local dialect they had grown up with; they had to combine all this with the dominant American English of their place of destination. The result of the contact between English and Italian, or more probably between English and Italian dialects, was a sort of pidgin language that became the marker of identity of Italian Americans. It has often been recorded, for example in lists of peculiar words like the one below, and investigated by scholars as a true medium for communication⁴:

aiscrima	< icecream
avenuta	< avenue
bordare	< board
farma	< farm
ti[c]chetta	< ticket
ho brocco una lega	< I broke a leg ⁵
teritù	< thirty-two
fociasènz	< forty cents
nu carre chine de pìpele	< a car full of people
non pusciarla	< don't push her
lu ràpece	< the rubbish <i>or</i> the garbage ⁶

Pidginization involves non only single words but the very texture of discourse. Code switching and mixing are common features, as the following sketch shows:

Na sera dentro na *barra* americana, dove il patrone era americano, lo *visco* era americano, la birra era americana, ce stava na *ghenga de loffari* tutti americani: solo io non ero americano; quanno a tutto nu mumento me metten[n]o mmezzo e me dicettono: “Alò spaghetti! *Iu* mericano men?” “No! No! Mi Italy men!” “*Iu blacco enze?*” “No, no!” “*Iu laico* chistu *contri?*” “No, no! Mi laico mio contri!”

⁴ Hermann W. Haller, *Una lingua perduta e ritrovata. L'italiano degli italo-americani*. Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1993.

⁵ Items selected from a list used by Haller, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁶ Items recorded by the present writer.

Mi laico Italy!" A questo punto mi chiavaieno lo primo *fait*. Dice: "Orré for America!" Io tuosto: "Orré for Italy!" N'ato fait [...] N'ato fait e n'ato fait, fino a che me facettono addurmentare, ma però, orré for America nun o dicette!

[One evening in an American bar where the owner was American, the whisky was American, the beer was American, there was a gang of loafers all American: only I was not American, when suddenly they were in front of me shouting: "Hello spaghetti! Are you American?" "No, no! I am Italian!" "Are you a black hand?" "No, no!" "Do you like this country?" "No, no! I like Italy!" At that point they punched me. They said: "Hurrah for America!" And me right away: "Hurrah for Italy!" Another punch [...] Another punch, and another punch, until they knocked me out, but I never said "Hurrah for America!"]⁷

This is not language taken from reality. It comes from a theatrical skit such as those performed by the Neapolitan Edoardo Migliaccio, known as "Farfariello" (1882-1946), who was popular on the Italian American music-hall scene during the first half of the 20th century. Such comedy skits or *macchiette* were musical sketches combining sung verses and spoken prose passages. Migliaccio impersonated and satirized all kinds of ethnic figures: Enrico Caruso, the band leader, the Irish American, the greenhorn or hick, the wet nurse, the opera *diva*, and many others.

The sketch above dates back to the early 20th century, and was not written by Migliaccio himself but by one of his collaborators, a Ferrazzano. As a marker of ethnic identity, this type of language was used not only on the Italian American stage but also in poetry. A journalist and writer from Philadelphia, Thomas Augustine Daly, used it to identify Italian immigrants in his collections of poems, as in the following excerpt:

An Italian King

You maka fun weeth me an' tease,
An' call me "Dago" eef you please;
An' mebbe so I what you call
"No good for aneething at all."
An' you weell theenk you speaka true
Baycause eet looka so to you.
Wal, mebbe som'time you are right,
But not w'en I gat home at night.
Ha! Dat'sa time dat I am keeng
An' I am good for evratheeng!

⁷ Hermann W. Haller, "The Dialects Abroad," in Martin Maiden and Mair Parry eds., *The Dialects of Italy*. London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p.401-411; quotations from p. 404.

I know; baycause Patricio,
My little boy, he tal me so⁸.

Daly makes visible some spoken features of the Italian American pidgin. For example, *ee* to mark the long pronunciation of what should be pronounced as short vowels *i* in *if*, *it*, *thing*, and so on; or the use of a vowel sound after such voiceless consonants as *k* at the end of a word.

Even on this side of the ocean well-informed authors were aware of this kind of mixed language. While Daly was composing his pidginized verses in America, the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli shaped a long poem, “Italy”, around the theme of emigration, and used some of the emigrant speech:

“*Joe*, bona cianza!...” “Ghita, state bene!...”
“*Good bye*.” “L’avete presa la ticchetta?”
“*Oh yes*.” “Che barco?” “*Il prinzessin Irene*.”

“Good luck to you, *Joe*!...” “Ghita dear, goodbye!...”
“*Good bye*.” “But don’t forget your tickets now.”
“*Oh yes*.” “What ship?” “Princess Irene.” “Goodbye!”⁹

Pascoli adds a note at the end of his poem, explaining that “they [our migrants to or from the U.S.] adapt many English words as though they were Italian words,” and he lists a number of them: “bisini” (*business*), “fruttistendo” (*fruitstand*), “checche” (*cake*), “candi” (*candy*), “scrima” (*icecream*), “baschetto” (*basket*), “stima” (*steamer*), “ticchetta” (*ticket*), “cianza” (*chance*).

The question of identity as connected to language has been dealt with on a higher level of awareness by a number of acknowledged Italian American writers. In his well-known memoir *Mount Allegro*, Jerre Mangione (1909-1998) graphically depicted the origin of a frame of mind that is typical of immigrants and inextricable from the everyday idiom – the split in personality:

“My mother’s insistence that we speak only Italian at home drew a sharp line between our existence there and our life in the world outside. We gradually

⁸ Thomas Augustine Daly, *Canzoni and Songs of Wedlock* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1906), cit. in Gaetano Cipolla, “Thomas Augustine Daly: An Early Voice of the Italian Immigrants.” *Italian Americana*, VI, 1, Fall/Winter 1980, pp. 45-59.

⁹ Giovanni Pascoli, *Primi Poemetti* (1904), “Italy”, II, xx, 11-13. Engl. transl. by Joseph Tusiani, *Italian Americana*, V, 2, Spring/Summer 1979, pp. 141-59.

acquired the notion that we were Italian at home and American (whatever that was) elsewhere”.

This excerpt is taken from Chapter 4, where the author describes the relationship between the members of his family and the English language. He seems to hint that his mind underwent some sort of daily migration between home and the world around: the street, the school. Though U.S. born, Mangione thus absorbed a problem of identity which was closely connected with language, and which he developed through progressive stages, from Sicilian to American and eventually to Sicilian American (maybe Italian American). This is apparent in at least four books of his¹⁰ and rounded off in his vast *summa* of “Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience” entitled *La Storia*¹¹, which he compiled later in his life, as *professor emeritus* of English at the University of Pennsylvania.

Jerre Mangione belongs to a particular section of Italian American writers, that is to say the large groups of those authors who are somewhat inappropriately referred to as “immigrants” of second or third generation, and better described as Americans of Italian descent: they are the offspring of those migrants who left Italy and settled in the US during the great mass emigration of the 19th and 20th centuries. Their children were born, raised and educated in the US. Ultimately, the qualification “Italian” for these writers depends on the extent to which they absorbed the Italian culture from their family circles into their own frames of mind; or if you like, on the degree to which the Italian background was a shaping as much as characterizing force for them. Mangione is a case in point. Other American writers of Italian descent are not really so, nor are they especially keen to show off the Italian side of their identity.

One of them, John Ciardi (1916-1986), the translator of Dante’s *Comedy*, although American born, was also acutely aware of conflicting identities as connected to language. He wrote:

In my childhood it was always two worlds. I have always felt that when you

¹⁰ *Mount Allegro. A memoir of Italian American Life*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943 (5th ed. expanded, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981; in Italian: *Mont’Allegro. Una memoria di vita italo-americana*, a c. di Claudio Toscani, trad. Roberto Nagy, Torino, SEI, 1996); *Reunion in Sicily*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950; *A Passion for Sicilians: The World Around Danilo Dolci*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1968 (3rd ed. expanded: New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1985); *An Ethnic at Large. A Memoir of the Thirties and Forties*. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1978 (2nd ed.: Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1983).

¹¹ Jerre Mangione & Ben Morreale, *La Storia. Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992. . (Available in Italian version: *La storia. Cinque secoli di esperienza italo-americana*, transl. M. Teresa Musacchio, Torino, SEI, 1996).

have a second language, you have three things: the first language, the second language, and the difference between them.

On the other hand, it is well-known that Ciardi reacted badly to an appreciation of his poetry by the poet Robert Lowell. Ciardi had published a poem in *Atlantic Monthly* about Italy and Mussolini – a satire of Italian *orgoglio* in those days – and Lowell sent him a note saying that it was the best Italian American poem he had ever seen. Ciardi's comment was:

“I thought, Does this son of a bitch think he is more American than I am? Where did he think I was brought up ...Had it been a Yankee name, he would have thought ‘Ah, a scholar who knows Italy’ ...”¹².

In fact, American writers born of Italian immigrants tend to look on themselves as American authors, even when their work is strongly influenced by their Italian heritage, and even (maybe especially) when their ethnic origin conflicts with social prejudice. In other words, whether it be their literary ambition or their American upbringing, they aspire to the mainstream of American literature. One more example comes from a woman writer, Helen Barolini (b. 1925), from Syracuse, New York, the author of the successful novel *Umbertina* and of an equally well-known *Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*¹³. In an interview with an Italian journalist Barolini claims the status of an American rather than an Italo-American writer:

In molte interviste mi è stato chiesto “perché sono una scrittrice italo-americana”, ma questa è una definizione che mi è stata imposta dagli altri: io sono americana, scrivo in inglese, ma il mio romanzo *Umbertina*, del 1979, è venuto fuori in un momento di piena consapevolezza etnica, successiva al movimento dei neri. Per l'editore è stato un vantaggio pubblicare un romanzo “italo-americano”, ma io lo definirei un romanzo “americano”, perché in America la cosa fondamentale è la possibilità di trasformazione. Tutti provengono da altri paesi, con culture, idee e religioni diverse, ma qui possono trasformarsi; è questo “l'esperienza americana”¹⁴.

Mangione, Ciardi, Barolini and many others are all Americans of Italian

¹² Cit. in Jerre Mangione & Ben Morreale, *La Storia. Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992, pp. 225 and 430.

¹³ Helen Barolini, *Umbertina*. New York: Seaview, 1979 (in Italian: *Umbertina*. Trad. Susan Barolini e Giovanni Maccari. Introd. Laura Lilli. Cava de' Tirreni, SA: Avagliano 2001); H.B. ed., *The Dream Book. An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*. New York: Schocken Books, 1985.

¹⁴ Interview by Flavia Panckiewicz, *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno* (Bari), 23 June 2001.

descent. Yet they have somehow absorbed the conflicts of their ethnic identity from their family backgrounds and original heritage. The question of identity was much more profound and clear-cut for those writers who were born in Italy and went to live in America.

As we know, over four million Italians, mostly from Southern Italy and from Sicily, arrived in the US between 1880 and 1920¹⁵. As far as “identity” and language are concerned, we must remember that what individuals brought with them in such mass emigration was not a feeling of nationhood (Italy was a comparatively young nation). Emigrants continued to think of their origins in terms of native region, locality or village. At the time of unification in 1860 and for the subsequent decades, Italy had not a uniform national language. The “Italian” language was the Tuscan literary tradition and was learnt at school from books, for those who could afford a form of education. The everyday language of the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula was the local dialect. Once in the United States they discovered that they had to join forces with other Italian immigrants. Out of such necessity may have grown their first awareness that they shared a common Italian heritage.

The beginning of Italian American literature is to be traced back to the period 1880 to 1920. The early immigrant authors came out of those masses; the first noteworthy product was a novel, entitled *Peppino*, by Luigi Donato Ventura (1845-1912)¹⁶. This story was published in English, in 1886, but most early Italian American writing was in Italian, and it was meant for circulation among Italian readers in America. In their use of the Italian language, such authors seemed to signal a developing sense of Italian identity that gradually replaced the local identity of immigrants. A popular writer of those early times was Bernardino Ciambelli (1862?-1931), who produced a whole series of crime stories in the form of books as well as *feuilleton*. A glance at some titles makes us think of a curious amalgam of the French writer Eugène Sue and the Italian minor author Carolina Invernizio:

La città nera ovvero I misteri di Chicago (1893-94)
I misteri di Mulberry Street (1893)
I Misteri della Polizia di New York. Il Delitto di Water Street (1895)
I drammi dell'emigrazione (1897)

¹⁵ An essential tool is now the two-volume project by Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi and Emilio Franzina, eds., *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*. Roma: Donzelli. *Partenze* [first vol.]: 2201; *Arrivi* [second vol.]: 2002.

¹⁶ Cfr. Rose Basile Green, *The Italian-American Novel. A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures*. Rutherford-Madison-Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1974, pp. 63-64.

I Misteri di Bleecker Street (1899)
Il delitto di Coney Island ovvero La vendetta della zingara (1906-08)
La strage degli innocenti ossia I delitti di un medico (1908-09)
Il terremoto in Sicilia e Calabria (1909)
I Misteri di Harlem ovvero La bella di Elizabeth Street (1910-11)
L'Arcibanchettone (1911)
L'aeroplano Fantasma (1911-?)
I sotterranei di New York (1915)
La Trovatella di Mulberry Street ovvero: La Stella dei Cinque Punti (1915)
Il Natale di Caino (1926)
Il Natale di Abele e quello di Caino (1927)
Il Natale di un eroe (1928)¹⁷

Even though it was developing, the sense of an Italian self had to cope with an English-speaking environment. In search for an individual identity, a number of immigrants driven by literary ambition wanted to become accepted by the American cultural establishment. In order to achieve that, they took to learning and writing in the English language and became authors in English – some of them, recognized authors. Three names stand out in the early 20th century: Arturo Giovannitti (1884-1959), who arrived in the United States in 1901, Pascal D'Angelo (1894-1934), who arrived in 1910, and Emanuel Carnevali (1897-1944), in 1914.

Giovannitti was a coal miner in Pennsylvania, and in his hatred for wealthy industrialists, from a helpless immigrant became an ardent socialist. He and his friend Joseph Ettor, a labor organizer, took part in the textile strike of 1912 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, were falsely charged with murder, jailed, brought to trial, and eventually found innocent – the opposite of what was going to happen fifteen years later, also in Massachusetts, to the shoe worker Nicola Sacco and the fish pedlar Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who were tried and executed for a crime they had not committed. Giovannitti learned to use English to great effect; he was known for his eloquence. His poetical corpus is bilingual¹⁸.

D'Angelo, a shepherd and native of Abruzzi, left his pick-and-shovel work

¹⁷ Selected from Martino Marazzi, *Voices of Italian America. A History of Italian American Literature with a Critical Anthology*. Transl. Ann Goldstein. Madison-Teameck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004, pp. 322-23. (The original Italian edition is *Misteri di Little Italy. Storie e testi della letteratura italoamericana*, Milano, Angeli, 2001).

¹⁸ *The Collected Poems of Arturo Giovannitti*. Intr. Norman Thomas, Chicago: E. Clemente & Sons, 1962. (An ample bilingual selection is the volume edited by Martino Marazzi, with writings by Joseph Tusiani, Arturo Giovannitti, *Parole e sangue*. Isernia: Cosmo Iannone, 2005; see also the only-Italian edition of a single volume: Arturo Giovannitti, *Quando canta il gallo*. Pref. e cura di Francesco D'Episcopo. S.Eustachio di Mercato S. Severino, SA: Ediz. "Il Grappolo", 2005).

while in the US, taught himself English with the sole aid of an old pocket Webster dictionary, wrote poems which won a national poetry contest (that of the magazine *The Nation*) in 1922, and two years later succeeded in publishing an autobiography, *Son of Italy*¹⁹, where his incredible hardships are narrated. His book was highly praised by the American literary establishment, and soon forgotten.

Carnevali was a “bird of passage” rather than a proper immigrant. He lived in the United States only eight years. He had no knowledge of the English language when he arrived, and yet became an accepted member of the American cultural elite, and a friend to such literary personalities as William Carlos Williams and Sherwood Anderson. And Ezra Pound helped finance his return to Italy, in the hope he could treat his sleeping sickness (*encephalitis lethargica*). He published his poems in prestigious literary journals, in an avant-garde style that reflected the mood of the American writers who were trying to break with traditional writing²⁰.

These three authors are scarcely remembered if not totally forgotten nowadays. They stand out as creative writers in English among a large number of other Italian Americans who mainly wrote in Italian²¹. But the sense of identity did not necessarily become stronger in those who mastered English. Carnevali said he wanted to become “an American poet”, and he was successful in his ambition. However, in his case, mastering the new language did not enhance his sense of the self. Once he wrote to Giovanni Papini, in Italy: “I don’t have anything... I don’t even have a country anymore. I am the foreigner here. They like me and admire me, but I am a foreigner”.

In actual fact, what might appear as the happy ending of the classic American success story may often conceal an innermost process of negotiating between one’s identity and the world around, or indeed between multiple identities, in the face of the conflicts and compromises of everyday life. Long after Carnevali’s case, another Italian American author wrote:

¹⁹ Pascal D’Angelo, *Son of Italy*. New York: John Day Co., 1924. (Curiously enough the book has had not one but two recent Italian translations: *Son of Italy*. Trad. e note di Sonia Pendola. Introd. Luigi Fontanella, S.Eustachio di Mercato S. Severino, SA: Ediz. “Il Grappolo”, 1999; and *Son of Italy*. Transl. Filomena Piera Giammarco. Torre dei Nolfi, AQ: Ediz. Qualevita, 2003).

²⁰ *The Autobiography of Emanuel Carnevali*. Compiled by Kay Boyle. New York: Horizon Press [1967]. (A patchwork of everything by Carnevali that the compiler could find. But see also the Italian selections of Carnevali’s works *Il primo dio. Poesie scelte. Racconti e scritti critici*. Ed. Maria Pia Carnevali, with an essay by Luigi Ballerini. Milan: Adelphi, 1978, and *Voglio disturbare l’America*. Ed. Gabriel Cacho Millet. Florence-Milan: La Casa Usher, 1980).

²¹ On Giovannitti, D’angelo, Carnevali and other outstanding Italian American authors cfr. Luigi Fontanella, *La parola transfuga. Scrittori italiani in America*. Firenze: Cadmo, 2003.

Two languages, two lands, perhaps two souls. . .
Am I a man or two strange halves of one?²²

These two lines by Joseph Tusiani are popular and often quoted when dealing with Italian American literature and the immigrant syndrome. Tusiani is another case of a person who was born and grew up in Italy, and who later settled permanently in the United States, and learnt English to become a recognized Anglo-Saxon author. He is one of those who straddle the English and the Italian languages. Tusiani is not just bilingual; he is a quadrilingual author. He writes creatively in two more languages: in Latin – he is an appreciated Neo-Latin poet – and in the dialect of his native Gargano land²³. And typically, he does not only have a mere writing ability in such idioms: he can fluently speak all four of them, and write in one or the other equally well.

A sense of identity is obviously not peculiar to migrant people. Negotiation of one's identity may be seen as a general feature as we develop our lives. Indeed, we can think of ourselves as relating to a number of subsequent identities, in terms of gender, of age and of stages in the course of our lives; in terms of family status, of economic status or of linguistic, cultural and ethnic background. We may suffer from split personality, for example, when we feel the gap between us and our students, their habits, their way of thinking and speaking. If we try to bridge such a gap, we temporarily readjust our own self to external conditions: we are renegotiating our own identity in the face of life conditions.

An enormously deeper process naturally takes place in the mind of the migrant. The author I have mentioned, Tusiani, is also a renowned translator of Italian poetry into English – he has translated virtually all major Italian authors from Dante to D'Annunzio –. He has conceptualised his entire life experience, including both migration and writing, as the metaphor of translation. In one of his poems he says:

To comprehend my life, I think of it
As a translation from a flowing past
Into a flowing present, from a birth
Utterly unintelligible, to
An altogether signifying sound
Which I call language, life and love of it²⁴.

²² Joseph Tusiani, "Song of the Bicentennial," *Gente Mia and Other Poems*. Stone Park, IL: Italian Cultural Center, 1978, p. 7.

²³ See Cosma Siani, *Le lingue dell'altrove. Storia testi e bibliografia di Joseph Tusiani*. Roma: Cofine, 2004.

²⁴ Joseph Tusiani, "Heritage", *La Parola del Popolo*, Vol. 65, No. 116, March-April 1973, p. 71.

Here the author seems to restore his own identity torn apart by the migratory event in the formula: “language, life and love of it”. Once more the importance of language is stressed in the search for identity. This seems to be all the more emphasised in such a reflection as the following:

“...once a migration takes place, the migrant may never be quite sure where home is, ever again. What ensues is a permanent mobility of the mind, if not the body, a constant dual or multiple perspective on place [...] For those who come from elsewhere, and cannot go back, perhaps writing becomes a place to live”²⁵.

Coming from social scientists and not from men of letters, such a statement just reaffirms the importance of language in human life to consolidate one’s identity.

²⁵ *Writing across Worlds. Literature and Migration*. Ed. Russel King, John Connel, Paul White. London and NY: Routledge, 1995, pp. XIV, XV.

