ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This collection of essays owes much to many: first and foremost,
to the participants of the first Italian Cultural Studies conference
held at Dartmouth College, October 1999.

Then,
to The Ramon and Marguerite Guthrie Fund, The Hewlett Foundation,
The Dean of Faculty at Dartmouth College, and The Paul
D. Paganucci Professorship of Italian Language and Literature;
to Elena Parati, who generously provided the photograph for the
cover;
to Deborah Starewich, without her there would not be this book;
to Anthony Tamburri, who supported this project from the very
beginning; and
to friends who make life worth living — you know who you are.
THE PLACE OF LITERATURE IN ITALIAN CULTURAL STUDIES

Rebecca West
University of Chicago

Notable in the recent volumes in English dedicated to Italian Cultural Studies is the relative absence of literary texts as objects of critical scrutiny; I say “relative” because some scholars have articulated their cultural studies-inflated research around particular works of literature, but they tend decidedly to be in the minority. In Forgacs’s and Lumley’s 1996 volume, *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, for example, Ann Caeser’s essay, “Post-War Italian Narrative: An Alternative Account,” does indeed consider literary production, but it is the exception to the other articles. Grazia Parati’s “Strangers in Paradise: Foreigners and Shadows in Italian Literature,” included in Beverly Allen’s and Mary Russo’s *Revisiting Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, takes up fiction written by recent immigrants to Italy, but it is the exception there as well. Several of the articles included in editors Robert Dombroski’s and Dino Cervigni’s 1998 volume of *Annali d’italianistica* on Italian cultural studies, are, however, readings of literary texts, including such canonical titles as Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* and Ungaretti’s *La terra promessa*. Interestingly, this volume is also rare in its inclusion of essays on texts and issues of earlier centuries for, as Deanna Shemek eloquently discusses in her piece on Giulio Cesare Croce, cultural studies-oriented work has tended to be almost exclusively centered on the twentieth century. In spite of some exceptions, then, it is the case that we have come to expect cultural studies to shed light on non-literary (and mainly contemporary) cultural practices and productions such as mass media, cinema, fashion, and popular written genres such as comics, advertising copy, and so on, veering away from past (and present) “high” culture in the form of novels, poetry, and plays. With its emphases on contextual, political, and ideological aspects of cultural production, and its goal of exposing the structures of power that underpin cultural formations and validations, the relatively new field of Italian Cultural Studies quite naturally has reached out to alternative forms, and stayed rather clear of the traditional and often canonical literary texts that have until recently been the bedrock of *italianistica*. In this brief essay I want to outline some of the aspects of the ostensible clash between high literary culture (and the pedagogical and scholarly directions it has supported in our field), and the emergent interest in cultural studies, with its extraliterary and broadly theoretical orientation, within the sphere of Italian Studies today. Given my own training and my experience as an Italianist over the last 25 years, I inhabit, as do, I believe, many others of my and older generations, what feels like a transitional space now in play between more traditional studies of Italian literature, and approaches under the rubric of Italian Studies, which de-emphasize and in some cases have an antagonistic relation to the study of literary texts *per se*. My role here is not that of an apologist for either “side” of the debate; rather, I wish to bring to the fore some of the stakes involved, and some of the questions that I believe many of us are asking about where Italian Studies might be headed in the future, and what role literature and literary studies might play in these studies.

First, I think that it is important to recognize the generational aspect of current reactions to cultural studies’ approaches in *italianistica*. It is fair to say that scholars of Italian working in North America who are forty and under, more or less, do not experience the same sense of seismic shift as those of us older scholars who were trained and began our careers in earlier decades (mainly the 1960s and 1970s, if we keep to those scholars still currently active). Young scholars today live and work in academic environments in which general theoretical discourse in many fields has concentrated for a decade or more on what the popular press likes to call the “politically correct”: questions of gender, so-called minority culture, postcolonial revisions of history, the importance of mass culture, and so on. This is younger scholars’ daily fare, so to say, and it may well appear absolutely unproblematic to burgeoning Italianists that their chosen field is caught up with these issues and approaches under the rubric of Italian Studies, which de-emphasize and in some cases have an antagonistic relation to the study of literary texts *per se*. My role here is not that of art apologist for either “side” of the debate; rather, I wish to bring to the fore some of the stakes involved, and some of the questions that I believe many of us are asking about where Italian Studies might be headed in the future, and what role literature and literary studies might play in these studies.

La differenza fondamentale tra le due vie è che mentre il marxismo ha sempre voluto conoscere se stesso ed ha sempre riflettuto sulle condizioni storiche che rendevano possibili le sue dottrine, oggi l’interesse per questioni che riguardano lo stato, i media, il razzismo, il patriarcato e il neo-colonialismo sembrano partire dalla premessa che il capitalismo sia una cosa naturale e inamovibile, che continua una
For older generation professors, and for their professors, however, daily fare has radically shifted, from the fairly predictable meat and potatoes of canonical literature and traditional critical approaches to it, to the highly seasoned buffet of non-literary cultural forms, and critical and theoretical approaches that condition many fields and are not at all specific to literary study (such as were philology, literary historical approaches, explication de texte, new critical close readings, stylistics, textual editing, and so on). The turn from literature to other aspects of culture has been invigorating for some older scholars in Italian, upsetting to others, and positively wrong to a few. Likewise, new theoretical approaches have colonized some, and repelled others. We all spend many years building up what might be called our personal “cultural capital” and it can be jarring, even overwhelming, to see that one’s academic “money” does not buy much on today’s market of ideas or, conversely, that one’s wares are not terribly saleable. Refashioning oneself intellectually is not seen universally as a proper use of one’s energies, especially given that attaining some level of expertise in traditional literary studies is by no means a short, simple process.

This generational aspect of today’s disciplinary and institutional debates concerning the directions of Italian programs is further complicated by the fact that many earlier generation Italianists in this country were Italian by birth and were trained in the traditions of their native country whereby professors of literature studied literature (and primarily canonical literature) with the tools of philological and historical precision. Grounded and secure in a long line of scholars, these emissaries of Italian literature in North America had no impetus to change their views of how Italian literature (material and epistemological) consti- tuces such a strong (material and epistemological) structure that it is not possible to escape its boundaries, and this is true to the point that it is better not even to talk about it. (Dombroski, “Attraversando il marxismo” 41)

The fundamental difference between the two directions is that while Marxism has always sought to know itself and has always reflected on the historical conditions that made its doctrines possible, today the interest for questions that have to do with the state, media, racism, the patriarchy, and neocolonialism has always sought to know itself and has always reflected on the historical conditions that made its doctrines possible today the interest for questions that have to do with the state, media, racism, the patriarchy, and neocolonialism has always sought to know itself and has always reflected on the historical conditions that made its doctrines possible today the interest for questions that have to do with the state, media, racism, the patriarchy, and neocolonialism has always sought to know itself and has always reflected on the historical conditions that made its doctrines possible today the interest for questions that have to do with the state, media, racism, the patriarchy, and neocolonialism has always sought to know itself and has always reflected on the historical conditions that made its doctrines possible today the interest for questions that have to do with the state, media, racism, the patriarchy, and neocolonialism.
ility on the part of literary scholars for whom a historically-conditioned erudition is essential. But, it is another of Shemek's points that may be even more relevant: "Cultural Studies practitioners also remind us repeatedly that they have no clear definition of their field" (87-88). What precisely it might mean to do cultural studies is not known in exact terms, then, except that generally there are "political aims and engagements," as Shemek puts it, while, on the other hand, it has been known in fairly precise terms for a very long time what doing literary studies can, does, and even should mean. It is, at least in part, a question of the known versus the unknown, in short, with all of the attendant anxiety stimulated by the latter. Rocking foundations is always anxiety-producing.

I now want to quote and discuss briefly a few of the comments regarding cultural studies to be found in the essays published in the April 1999 *Il lettore di provincia* mentioned above. The Italianists quoted are, with the exception of Robert Dombroski, Italian-born or Italian-American, and all are in their sixties, thus lending support to my belief that generational and identity-related elements may be conditioning responses to the new cultural studies-oriented directions in Italian Studies. It should be noted that, although all the panelists were male Italianists, Nasi explains in a note to his introduction that both Teresa de Lauretis and Teodolinda Barolini were invited to participate and had to decline, thus -unfortunately depriving the event of a female and feminist perspective. He further comments that the panel was not organized in order to provide an overall map of Italian Studies in the United States, for such a map would have had to include other generations of scholars (and this might be possible in future sessions). Rather, the panelists were simply asked to narrate their own experiences in order to explore "il rapporto fra il fare concreto del critico e la riflessione teorica" (Nasi 10; the relation between the concrete practice of the critic and theoretical reflection).

Professor Franco Fido of Harvard writes:

Paradossalmente, in questi tempi di stretta specializzazione, i cosi detti cultural studies, cioè in parole povere la tendenza a occuparci, da dilettanti, di discipline che vengono praticate professionalmente altrove, minacceano di privare i nostri studenti di un certo minimo di conoscenze linguistiche e filologiche necessarie, se non altro, a leggere un testo.

Fido's definition of cultural studies is unequivocally negative; according to him, such work shows an unfortunate tendency to venture into other disciplines in a dilettantish manner, thus potentially depriving our students of the very ability to read a text. He further connects cultural studies with the display of one's personal political and sexual dispositions, and suggests that there are other times and places outside of libraries and classrooms more suitable to the free expression of these preferences. A literary critic only needs "un minimo di gusto e di fiuto critico" [a minimum of taste and critical flair] in order to do what Fido sees as the proper task at hand: "situare un testo nel contesto storico giusto, e poi descriverlo il più precisamente e chiaramente possibile, usando ogni volta le griglie critiche più opportune" [to situate a text in the proper historical context, then to describe it in the most precise and clear manner possible, using in each case the most appropriate critical grids].

This approach to literary studies is commonsensical, solid, and apparently unassailable; yet its implicit dismissal of the critic's own situatedness, of any questioning of how criteria of "taste" and "rightness" have been and continue to be historically and politically adjudicated, and, ultimately, of just how loaded a phrase like "le griglie critiche più opportune" is, weakens Fido's own explicit dismissal of the potentially positive qualities of a cultural studies orientation.

Professor Paolo Cherchi's comments reveal much more about the specific personal causes often to be found behind the sort of rancor evident in Fido's piece, and speak precisely of this scholar's own "subject position" as one born and partially trained in Italy (Sardinia, to be precise), who then emigrated to the United States and made his career at the University of Chicago. Cherchi writes that

le esperienze lunghe e frequenti causano una certa resistenza e perfino un po' di rancore verso ciò che è nuovo perché le novità rendono in-

---

2Paradoxically, in these times of strict specialization, so-called cultural studies, that is, in plain words, the tendency to get involved as dilettantes in disciplines that are professionally practiced elsewhere, threatens to deprive our students of that minimal level of linguistic and philological knowledge necessary, if for nothing else, for reading a text ("Considerations on My Trade").
stabile la piattaforma dalla quale uno si abbia ad operare dopo averla
taticosamente conquistata. E i motivi di questi rancori potrebbero
essere molti perché innumerevoli sono state le novità che si sono viste.
((17))

Discussing the radical changes in scholarly perspectives and meth-
oodologies that have occurred specifically in the field of Medieval
Studies since the 1960s, Cherchi laments the abandonment of a
long tradition of criticism that was based on values (on concepts of
the beautiful, the useful, historical realism, etc.) in favor of the
structuralist emphasis on functions. He calls this shift "un vero
salto" [a genuine leap] that has resulted in the creation of "la figura
del 'teorico' che per tanti decenni ha creato piccole ed effimere
stelline, alle quali è andato il prestigio accademico" [the figure of
the "theoretician" that for so many decades has created little
ephemeral stars to whom academic prestige has gone]. Cherchi
concludes:

si può capire come la proliferazione di stelle, stelline e stellaccie abbia
accentuato il disagio di chi sentiva la pressione di riciclarsi ad ogni
lubro se non proprio ad ogni anno, e di chi si sentiva "formato" e
senza capacità di essere un "teorico" o senza il gusto di leggere tanta
teoria. Credo di non sbagliare di molto dicendo che il disagio che si
sentiva verso questa continua corsa alla novità sia di tutta la mia gene-
rarione. (20)

One can understand how the proliferation of big, little, and fake stars has
accentuated the discomfort of those who felt the pressure to recycle themselves
practically every year, and of those who felt professionally "established" and
without the capacity to be a "theorist" or without the taste for reading so much
theory. I nonetheless acknowledge with gratitude his uncharacteristically open-minded promotion and support of young Ameri-
can (and female) Italianists (such as myself) at a time (the early 1970s) when
many Italian-born male scholars were much less welcoming to us. And in spite
of his rather negative comments concerning new directions in Italian Studies in
the cited essay, he has also always been more than willing over the last almost
thirty years of our collaboration as colleagues to include and even encourage
the inclusion of non-traditional topics and approaches in our doctoral program
at the University of Chicago.

He notes that some scholars have continued to work within the
historician perspective, while some have capitalized on the situation
by writing guides or introductions to every new movement, and
some others have profited from the latest, most showy trend by
embracing it in view of a promotion or a grant. Finally, "C'è chi ha
fatto un salto ulteriore non solo lasciando la disciplina, ma abbrac-
ciandone altre come i gender o i cultural studies" (20). The move
into gender-inflected work or cultural studies is thus seen as a break
with literary studies, rather than another way of doing, among
other things, literary criticism. Nor does Cherchi appear to believe
that these approaches might positively modify and shape anew
philological and historiastic erudition. His view of cultural studies is
strongly conditioned by the idea (held by many of his generation)
that younger scholars have moved into this sort of research essen-
tially because it is "new" and "trendy," and, implicitly, less de-
manding than the development of a philological or historiastic
expertise:

E non credo di essere presumuo ne nel ritenere che la nostra italien-
istica si rivelasterebbe se il piacere per la ricerca erudita o filologica in
gettare fosse più diffuso... Basta sfogliare le nostre riviste per vedere
quanto spazio si conceda ai Galvino o qualche altro ultimo romantico
o poeta, e sappiamo a quale pezzo di stampo "filologico." I nostri stu-
denti sono convinti che un articolo su una metafora di Calvino abbia
maggior pregio della scoperta di una fonte di Boccaccio o di una bib-
liografia ben fatta. (33)

Extended and frequent experiences cause a certain resistance and even a little
bit of rancor towards that which is new, because newness renders unambieable the
platform from which one is used to operate, after one has attained that position
with hard work. And the reasons for this rancor can be many because the inno-
vations that are being seen are innumerable ['From Marx to Whom?']. I want
to add that, however much I may disagree with certain of my colleague Cher-
chi's perspectives on cultural studies, I nonetheless acknowledge with gratitude
his uncharacteristically open-minded promotion and support of young Ameri-
can (and female) Italianists (such as myself) at a time (the early 1970s) when
many Italian-born male scholars were much less welcoming to us. And in spite
of his rather negative comments concerning new directions in Italian Studies in
the cited essay, he has also always been more than willing over the last almost
thirty years of our collaboration as colleagues to include and even encourage
the inclusion of non-traditional topics and approaches in our doctoral program
at the University of Chicago.

"The Place of Literature in Italian Cultural Studies" • 19
Here, Cherchi moves from a general critique of the new critical and theoretical approaches to an implicit critique of the emphasis on contemporary authors and texts, a perspective that harks back to Deanna Shemek's already cited article in which she observes that cultural studies work has tended to center almost exclusively on recent texts, and that it eschews historical thinking. Her own work on Giulio Cesare Croce and on early modern texts in general, however, seeks to bring philology, history, and cultural studies together, rather than seeing them as irrevocably separate and contrasting. My own sense of the best recent work informed by a theoretical, cultural-studies oriented perspective is that it does succeed in combining erudition and "theory," as well as a respect for historical groundedness and revisionist critical views, the latter of which question precisely those "historical" orientations that have favored grand narratives, blindness to gender, and concepts of culture that are based on "high" cultural productions to the exclusion of other forms of cultural practice.

During the discussion (now published under the title "Tavola rotonda" or "Round Table") among all of the professors present at the AAIS session at which these essays were first read, Professor Albert Mancini refers to Robert Scholes book, The Rise and Fall of English as a Discipline, and writes:

Un appello alla moderazione, questo dello Scholes, per una disciplina letteraria basata sulla retorica e sull'insegnamento del leggere e dello scrivere su un vasto arco di letterature, una disciplina che includa la letteratura ma non si limiti ad essa. Pertinentemente, ai docenti e studenti di letteratura, frustrati dalle peregrinazioni teoriche e forzature eseggetiche oggi di moda o preoccupati dalla eccessiva dipendenza ideologica della politica culturale dello establishment accademico, composto dagli ormai cinquantenni baby boomers del Sessantotto (the cultural left of Rorty), si offre ora un'opzione alternativa, quella d'iscribersi all'Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, il cui 2000 membri, stando a quanto si legge nell'invito a aderire, "share the belief that reading and criticism should focus on what writers have to say to us, and the distinctive ways in which they say it," invece che su battaglie ideologiche e campagne di riforma sociale di notoriamente dubbia efficacia pratica. E un invito esemplare. ("Tavola rotonda" 64)\[1\]

\[1\]Scholes' is a call to moderation, for a literary discipline based on rhetoric and

Whether one agrees or not, it is difficult to view the Association in question as one outside of "ideological battles," for its members are generally openly opposed to the current directions in literature departments, including gender studies and cultural studies, and the Association itself represents a desire for "reform," albeit more academic than "social."

In his summary remarks included in the essay "Metodi deboli e forti pensieri" [Weak Methods and Strong Thoughts], Italian scholar Remo Ceserani asserts that in his view it is essential to keep in mind in such discussions the fact that the shifts and changes in literary studies are part of a much greater picture of social change involving ideologies, forms of communication and of the transmission of culture, the university system, conditions of academic work, and so on. He speaks of a generalized "mercificazione della cultura" [commodification of culture] and of a "supermercato" [supermarket] of methodologies and ideas through which we now move in the academic environment. This "supermarket" effect results in many simultaneous and diverse choices rather than in a clear privileging of one or another approach to literature and culture. The round table question and answer exchange allowed the main participants as well as audience members to expound further both on the opinions expressed in the essays, as well as to respond to those expressed by Ceserani and other members of the audience. Robert Dombroski's responses are particularly thought-provoking, in my opinion. Regarding the "supermarket of methods' proposed by Ceserani, Dombroski commented:

on the teaching of reading and writing of a vast gamut of literatures, a discipline that would include literariness but would not be limited to it. Regarding this view, there is now an alternative option available to those teachers and scholars of literature who are frustrated by the theoretical wanderings and exegetical exaggerations now fashionable, or who are preoccupied by the excessive ideological dependence of the cultural politics of the academic establishment, made up by now of fifty-year-old baby boomers of the generation of 68 (the cultural left of Rorty): that of joining the recently formed (1994) Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, whose 2000 members, if one takes as accurate that which is written on the invitation to join, "share the belief that reading and criticism should focus on what writers have to say to us, and the distinctive ways in which they say it," rather than on ideological battles and campaigns of reform of notoriously dubious practical efficacy. This is an exemplary invitation ("Round Table").
In reality, when one thinks about it deeply, there is something essential that is missing in this supermarket, and that is self-reflection. It is believed that all methods are the same, and that we can choose, but the supermarket of methods is itself a method. The thing we perhaps do not take into account is the pragmatism that determines the laws of the supermarket. It is very difficult to get beyond pragmatism without asking ourselves questions that have to do with literature itself, but with the context in which these operations take place ("Round Table").

My discussion above of generational perspectives and the persistence of national origin and training seeks precisely to point to the context in which attitudes to cultural studies are currently being formed.

Returning to the specific issue of literature and literary studies, it is useful to consider Paolo Vallesi's essay, "Il metodo come strada accidentata," in which he expresses the view that producing literature and critically writing about it can and perhaps should go beyond pragmatism without asking ourselves questions that have to do with literature as such; we find a myriad of attitudes, proposals, and questions regarding this supermarket, and perhaps should go strictly hand in hand, as in his own case:

...la grande tradizione degli studi letterari ha sempre favorito la coesistenza (in vari modi e misure, ovviamente) del crítico e dello scrittore nell'ambito della stessa personalità. ... Per mantenere una corretta prospettiva di collaborazione fra creazione letteraria e ricerca (prospettiva che ha anche importanti implicazioni didattiche), è necessario lasciare alle spalle un persistente (e ingiusto) luogo comune sul supposto solipsismo ed egozentrismo dello scrittore. In verità la creazione letteraria non coraggia — più precisamente, esige — tutta un'attività di servizio alla scrittura altrui: lettura e consulenza di manoscritti, animazione di riviste, iniziative in associazioni professionali, collaborazioni giornalistiche, costituzioni di gruppi di lettura, consultazioni per premi letterari culturalmente qualificati, ecc. (49-50).

While not arguing for the same thing, Dombroski nonetheless makes the related point that "la critica letteraria deve anche promuovere in tutti i sensi la produzione letteraria contemporanea. Deve dare un'assistenza agli scrittori" ("Tavola rotonda" 68; literary criticism must also promote in every way contemporary literary production. It must give assistance to writers). And Peter Caravetta makes the point that when one does criticism, one does it on something. And the question now is: What is that something? Literature with a capital L has been de-mythologized so that:

Il vero problema oggi è l'oggetto della critica. Oggi non sappiamo più veramente cosa siate un testo o si rifiutate al canone, e si rimane legati alle letterature nazionali, oppure si deve confrontare con tutti i testi che circolano, viaggiano, vengono da tutto il mondo, con i testi scritti in italiano o che sono prodotti nel cyberspazio. E l'idea stessa di letteratura ad essere messa in questione. ("Tavola rotonda" 69).

Caravetta's point seems to me to be one that has been rarely discussed in the context of debates on literary versus cultural studies approaches and, moreover, one that warrants very serious consideration as we-Italianists struggle with how to shape our programs and develop pedagogical strategies for now and the future.

In this admittedly very small sample of comments on and reactions to new directions in Italian Studies, including cultural studies, we find a myriad of attitudes, proposals, and questions regarding the place of literature and literary studies in today's academy. The

The great tradition of literary studies has always favored the coexistence (in different ways and to different degrees, obviously) of the critic and the writer.
questions that I find most interesting and perhaps even urgent are summarized as follows:

1. How do we define cultural studies per se and in relation to literary studies as defined in the past?

2. If we believe in a continued commitment to the study of literature as well as the study of other forms of cultural production, how do we now define literature and what texts do we include or exclude?

3. By what means do we promote what Robert Dombroski calls “autoirflessione”? Conferences, proceedings such as those quoted above, and other collective endeavors obviously play an important role, but are there other ways in which self-reflection can be forwarded?

4. Are there methodologies specific to literary analysis that we wish collectively to preserve or promote?

5. How can diffidence toward or resentment of cultural studies, gendered approaches, and other theoretical innovations be mitigated among those scholars whose training and orientation (historical, philological, etc.) condition them to react negatively to much of the work being done today by younger generations?

6. What do we think about the meaning, role, and future of literature today and into the new millennium, when visual culture and ever novel means of electronic and other forms of cultural production will continue to grow and perhaps replace traditional print culture?

7. Does literature have an epistemological and ethical function, and, if so, what specifically characterizes it and makes it different from other forms of knowledge and meaning?

These and other questions pertaining to literary studies and cultural studies have been debated most vigorously and publicly in the context of recent evaluations of and books on English departments, creating the impression that it is only in such departments that seismic shifts have occurred. In the November 4, 1999 New York Review of Books, for example, the words “The Death of Literature” are emblazoned across the cover, and when we turn to the article in question, “The Decline and Fall of Literature” by Andrew Delbanco, a chaired professor of the Humanities at Columbia University, we read that the MLA annual convention is where “thousands of English (sic) professors assemble.” The books reviewed in Delbanco’s article all concentrate on developments in English departments or English-language Humanities programs, and we read further that “English departments have become places where mass culture — movies, television, music videos, along with advertising, cartoons, pornography, and performance art — is studied side by side with literary classics.” This is, of course, true, but it is equally true that departments of foreign languages and cultures have moved in these directions, and yet very little public debate has ensued. Thus the fundamental importance of venues such as this one, in which we can begin to carry out a collective and collaborative consideration of our own field’s trajectory in recent years, as well as of the fundamental issues such a trajectory raises.

Literature has not disappeared from the academy and the work carried out there, any more than it has disappeared from the everyday lives of countless readers. If literature and the study of it are to remain alive and significant for scholars, students, and non-specialist readers, it seems to me that we professional readers of cultural texts of all sorts will assume a future for literature and its study precisely by asking hard questions about it, and about our own attitudes, beliefs, and goals. I am not convinced personally by the argument that one should continue doing what one was trained to do simply because that expertise was hard won through years of work. Medical doctors must undergo years of training, to use but one analogy, yet we certainly would not want our illnesses treated according solely to techniques and medicines of the past. For myself, the experience of so-called “retooling” has been greatly stimulating and necessary to my continued intellectual and pedagogical engagements. I have not discarded the texts and approaches I learned at the beginning of my career, nor have I stayed with them exclusively, in a defensive stance vis-a-vis new approaches, or different sorts of texts. I go on loving literature and literary studies, while learning the joys of studying film, photography, and non-canonical textual productions in their relation to so-called “high” literature. I see few colleagues around me who have not similarly transformed their work over the years, even those who express diffidence for newness and transformation. In sum, I see a place for literature in cultural studies; indeed, for me the real question is not the place of literature in our work as Italianists (for I believe that there will continue to be a place for it), but rather the what of it, and the why and how of our future investigations into literary texts, which are among the most humanly and socially meaningful forms for the creation and dissemination of images of ourselves as thinking beings. And as humans, individually and collectively, we both
shape and are shaped by the political, ideological, gendered, social, and religious realms in which we live and work. Italian Cultural Studies can and should develop its own specificities, which I do not believe will ever be very far from the bedrock of literary and historical concerns that informed the work of essential figures such as, for example, Gramsci and Pasolini, as well as so many other earlier thinkers and writers who engaged, avant la lettre, in what is now known as “cultural studies.” A complete reconciliation of traditional methodologies with current theories and emphases is not possible, but more discussion of their points of intersection and potentially fruitful interaction seems to me to be one useful way to go on investigating the what, why, and how of literary studies in Italian Cultural Studies.

Works Cited


Maria Galli Stampino
University of Miami

One of the most baffling traits of Academia, if we are to believe those outside it, is its relentless and consuming desire to analyze and scrutinize its own goals, training, colleagues, ideas, and assumptions. It will then be with great surprise, if not alarm, that an outsider will face the following considerations, spurred by a relatively heated electronic exchange having as its subject-matter the state, scope, and meaning of teaching and researching “Italian” in the late 1990s and early 2000s, around the globe. These messages reveal a sudden, and perhaps to some shocking, discovery: the field has changed, even beyond recognition, due to unforeseen forces and unexpected elements at play. A careful linguistic and rhetorical analysis of the form and content of these postings will reveal that some (or even most) practitioners of the field of “Italian Studies” depend on deeply-held, if not essentially untouchable, assumptions that are perceived as under attack by the upstart non-discipline called Cultural Studies. Building from this analysis, I will offer reasons for the relevance of this new field, and its implications specifically for Italianists.

Late in September 1998, Irene Marchegiani Jones posted a message on the non-monitored “italian-studies” circulation list. She offered what she called “a very general question to everyone involved in Italian Studies.”

I would like to thank Gema Pérez-Sánchez, Gabriella Romani, Robert L. Strain, Jr., and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions and their encouragement.

According to its Welcome page, “Italian-studies is an on-line list that provides a forum for scholarly discussion of Italian language, literature, history and culture. It is sponsored by the Department of Italian, University of Exeter.” Its first posting appeared on December 5, 1996, In September 2000, there were 532 list subscribers, and the average number of messages posted in a month is 67 (according to the List Information page). In December 2000, the list migrated to another provider. All the messages cited here are now at <www.jismail.ac.uk/lists/italian-studies.html>.

Italian Cultural Studies • VIA FOLIOS 29