



ITALIAN  
CULTURAL  
STUDIES

*Editors*  
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THE PLACE OF LITERATURE IN ITALIAN CULTURAL STUDIES

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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-inflected 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 Caesar's essay, "Post-War Italian Narrative: An Alternative Account," does indeed consider literary production, but it is the exception to the other articles. Graziella Parati's "Strangers in Paradise: Foreigners and Shadows in Italian Literature," included in Beverly Allen's and Mary Russo's *Revisioning 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 just as English, French, Art History, and any number of other humanistic fields are. As Robert Dombroski has written regarding traditional Marxist thought and today's postmodern views:

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 costituisca una

struttura (materiale ed epistemologica) così forte che non è possibile uscire dai suoi confini al punto che è meglio non parlarne neppure. (Dombroski, "Attraversando il marxismo" 41)<sup>1</sup>

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 enlivened 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 at that) 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 liter-

<sup>1</sup>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 seem to take off from the premise that capitalism is a natural and unchangeable thing, that it constitutes 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. ["Going Through Marxism"]. (This and all subsequent translations are mine.)

ary culture should have been taught and transmitted to new generations of non-Italian scholars. When I was a graduate student at Yale in the late 1960s and early 1970s, no women writers were taught; no critique of canonical taxonomies of poetry and prose were proposed; and courses adhered to the high literary cultural line beginning with Dante and ending, more or less, with Calvino (although he was then seen as dangerously contemporary). When I proposed writing my doctoral dissertation on Elsa Morante, I was told in no uncertain terms that one did not write on such unimportant authors. I did often think of questioning the hegemony of Italian or Italian-American (male) voices in the form of authors, professors, and fellow students, for I could not but do so given my femaleness, and my non-Italian ethnic background. But I was quickly, if politely, silenced, and I did not act against this silencing until many years later. I dutifully read the classic texts, and learned the historical and philological methodologies, and I am glad I did so, for that reading and training have served me very well in the ensuing years. But there was already a part of me in those days that asked why everything was so male, so canonical, so unquestioningly nationalistic, so written in stone, as it were.

In April 1999, an issue of the journal *Il lettore di provincia*, published by Longo Editore in Ravenna, put into print a number of essays, edited and introduced by Franco Nasi, by scholars of Italian literature who are sixty or older, and have made their careers in North America. These pieces were first presented as talks at the 1998 American Association of Italian Studies (AAIS) convention in Chicago at a round table, organized by Paolo Giordano and Franco Nasi, entitled "La critica, i metodi: esperienze di lavoro" [Criticism, Methodologies: Professional Experiences] and they form a very important record of the experiences of older Italianists in the United States, that is, of some of those very colleagues who have lived through the great shift today from an almost exclusive emphasis on Italian literary studies to less strictly literary Italian Studies. One of the most evident elements in these essays is their authors' strong consciousness of cultural studies as a key term of reference today; furthermore, there is often to be discerned a defensive and, in some cases, hostile attitude to this term and what it ostensibly implies for traditional literary studies. Perhaps, as Deanna Shemek has suggested, this defensiveness might be due to the fact that "the cultural studies crowd has a decided, though unstated, aversion to thinking historically" (Shemek 87), which could account for hos-



tility 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 così detti *cultural studies*, cioè in parole povere la tendenza a occuparci, da dilettranti, di discipline che vengono praticate professionalmente altrove, minacciano di privare i nostri studenti di quel minimo di conoscenze

linguistiche e filologiche necessarie, se non altro, a leggere un testo. (29)<sup>2</sup>

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-

<sup>2</sup>Paradoxically, 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 abitua ad operare dopo averla faticosamente conquistata. E i motivi di questi rancori potrebbero essere molti perché innumerevoli sono state le novità che si sono viste. (17)<sup>3</sup>

Discussing the radical changes in scholarly perspectives and methodologies 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 stellacce abbia accentuato il disagio di chi sentiva la pressione di riciclarsi ad ogni lustro 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 io sento verso questa continua corsa alla novità sia di tutta la mia generazione. (20)

<sup>3</sup>Extended and frequent experiences cause a certain resistance and even a little bit of rancor towards that which is new, because newness renders unstable 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 innovations 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 Cherchi's perspectives on cultural studies, I nonetheless acknowledge with gratitude his uncharacteristically open-minded promotion and support of young American (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 historicist 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 abbracciandone altre come *gender* o *cultural studies*" (20).<sup>4</sup> 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 historicist 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 essentially because it is "new" and "trendy," and, implicitly, less demanding than the development of a philological or historical expertise:

E non credo di essere presuntuoso nel ritenere che la nostra italianistica si irrobustirebbe se il piacere per la ricerca erudita o filologica in genere fosse più diffuso. . . . Basta sfogliare le nostre riviste per vedere quanto spazio si conceda ai Calvino o qualche altro ultimo romanziere o poeta, e quanto sia raro il pezzo di stampo "filologico." I nostri studenti sono convinti che un articolo su una metafora di Calvino abbia maggior pregio della scoperta di una fonte di Boccaccio o di una bibliografia ben fatta. (23)<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>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 believe I am not wrong in saying the the discomfort that I feel toward this constant running after newness is [felt] by my entire generation. There are those who have made yet another leap, not only leaving the discipline, but embracing others like gender or cultural studies ["From Marx to Whom?"].

<sup>5</sup>And I don't believe that I am being presumptuous in maintaining that our Italian Studies would be stronger if the pleasure in erudite or philological research were in general more widespread. . . . It is enough to thumb through our journals in order to see how much space is given to the Calvino's or some other contemporary novelists or poets, and how rare is an article of the philological sort. Our students are convinced that an article on a metaphor of Calvino's is worth more than the discovery of a source in Boccaccio or a well-made bibliography ["From Marx to Whom?"].

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 contrastive. 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. Restructuring 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 letterarietà ma non si limiti ad essa. Pertinentemente, ai docenti e studiosi di letteratura, frustrati dalle peregrinazioni teoriche e forzature esegetiche 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* del Rorty), si offre ora un'opzione alternativa, quella d'isciversi alla *Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* di più recente formazione (1994), i cui 2000 membri, stando a quanto si legge nell'invito di adesione, "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. È un invito esemplare." ("Tavola rotonda" 64)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>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 doubtful practical efficacy. This is an exemplary invitation ["Round Table"].

In realtà, a pensarci bene, . . . c'è qualcosa di essenziale che manca in questo supermercato, e cioè l'autoriflessione. Si crede che tutti i metodi siano uguali, e che possiamo scegliere, ma il supermercato dei metodi è esso stesso un metodo. La cosa di cui forse non ci rendiamo conto è il pragmatismo che determina le leggi del supermercato. È molto difficile uscire dal pragmatismo senza interrogarci su questioni che riguardano non tanto la letteratura in sé, ma il contesto in cui queste operazioni hanno luogo. ("Tavola rotonda" 66)<sup>7</sup>

My discussion above of generational perspectives and the pertinence 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 Valesio'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 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 critico 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 lasciarsi alle spalle un persistente (e ingiusto) luogo comune sul supposto solipsismo ed egocentrismo dello scrittore. In verità la creazione letteraria incoraggia — 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, consultazione per premi letterari culturalmente qualificati, ecc. (49-50)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>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 not so much with literature itself, but with the context in which these operations take place ["Round Table"].

<sup>8</sup>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

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 Carravetta 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 demythologized so that:

il vero problema oggi è l'oggetto della critica. Oggi non sappiamo più veramente cosa sia un testo: o ci si rifà al canone, e si rimane legati alle letterature nazionali, oppure ci si deve confrontare con tutti i testi che circolano, viaggiano, vengono da tutto il mondo, con i testi scritti in italiano al di fuori dell'Italia o che sono prodotti nel cyberspazio. È l'idea stessa di letteratura ad essere messa in questione. ("Tavola rotonda" 69)<sup>9</sup>

Carravetta'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

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within the same personality. . . In order to maintain a correct view of collaboration between literary creativity and research (a view that also has important pedagogical implications), it is necessary to leave behind a persistent (and unjust) commonplace regarding the supposed solipsism and egocentricity of the writer. In fact literary creation encourages — or, more precisely, demands — a full complement of activity that serves the writing of others: the reading of and consultation about manuscripts, the creation of journals, initiatives in professional associations, journalistic collaborations, the creation of reading groups, consultations regarding literary prizes, etc. ["Method as a Bumpy Road"].

<sup>9</sup>The real problem today is the object of criticism. Today we don't know anymore what a text truly is: either we go back to the canon and remain tied to national literatures, or we need to deal with all the texts that circulate, travel, come from all over the world, with texts written in Italian outside of Italy or that are produced in cyberspace. It is the very idea of literature that has been put into question ["Round Table"].



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 "autoriflessione"? 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 assure 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 to be 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-à-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.

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#### WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT [ITALIAN] CULTURAL STUDIES, AND WHY (with Apologies to Raymond Carver)\*

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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.<sup>1</sup> She offered what she called "a very general question for 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.

<sup>1</sup>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>.