ON FEELING ITALIAN

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Having *Feeling Italian* on the table in front of me, open for slow and close reading, has been a blessing. I had read here and there in it in years gone by but work and family precluded the sort of cover-to-cover attention that retirement and the invitation to write this little piece have finally allowed. Being able to make out the dialoging between its chapters, to savor its cumulative style and passion, and to discern its historical arc has re-awakened and fortified my already considerable admiration. In my comments here I hope I can do justice to the present occasion, since compelling and infectious praise is the major tone of *Feeling Italian,* and the hallmark of Tom Ferraro's achievement as an author, an accomplishment that invites reply. For me, gratitude is the due response to such a gift, a gift *to us* as well as a gift *for* evoking the works that have engaged Tom's attention.

We first met in the Fall 1999, at a small conference at the University of Wisconsin. It had been convened by Gordon Hutner, the editor of the journal *American Literary History*, with an eye to fostering extended conversation among the participants rather than attracting a sizable audience. I remember Tom's presentation, a version of chapter two on the painter Joseph Stella, vividly, not only for his argument and insight, but particularly for his style, which is the key topic in *Feeling Italian*. In his conversation as well as in his presentation, he displayed a wide and swift argumentative reach, referential and methodological eclecticism, startling exegetical acumen, descriptive animation, and a candid expression of his enthusiasm for Stella's work.

In retrospect, I realize that, in the months that followed the conference, Tom had become, for me, a catalyzing example. The previous quarter century had been a time of great methodological and theoretical upheaval in academic literary study, resulting in an exciting stew of critical options. But the question of the critic's personal engagement with what he or she wrote about was often pushed aside, or even regarded as naïve or

impressionistic, as a kind of projection onto the text rather than an excavation of its actual character. By 1999, I had begun to find this aloofness constricting, largely in response to my students' desire to learn why the reading I assigned mattered. Tom's talk on Joseph Stella helped me to see that one might bring one's engagement into one's writing without sacrificing objective argumentation. Memory had turned that first encounter into an episode of Emersonian tutelage, a reassurance that, if one is making an argument concerning a feature of what Tom calls the artifact— presenting evidence, providing context, moving through a step-by-step demonstration of one's thesis—then letting one's passion show can warm up one's teaching and writing without compromising them.

But a masterful teacher like Tom (don't you wish you could take a class from him?) is not limited to explaining why you take an interest in or are moved by an artifact. Rather, he or she explains as well why you might be drawn to one that might otherwise have escaped your interest, or deepens your interest in one that you had previously given only a cursory or casual glance. It's difficult to select a sample of Tom's pedagogical ability from among all the promising candidates in *Feeling Italian* (a wealth, a manifold, a plethora). I'll settle on that woebegone slice of pizza in Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*. Tom explains what's wrong with it: "Filmed at a distance, this slice is parsimonious by New York or anyone else's standards: it's not vivid, has no oozing milky cheese or tomato red sauce, and above all no bubbles in the crust (a sure sign that Italians have given up the standards)" (167). Then he explains why these failings are worth thinking about: "What is ingenious or insidious about Lee's direction is that he never lets us see the wonder of great pizza. We get paeans to the hard work that goes into it as well as to its happy affect among customers, but we are made privilege to neither the anticipatory sensuality of its production (no dough is tossed) nor to the realized sensuality of its consumption" (167). In other words, we don't get to feel Italian, which turns out to be the defect Tom feels in a movie he greatly admires, a hiatus, the site of a bridge left unbuilt: "Recall the scene in which the Puerto Rican IccyMann scrapes snow-cones from a magnificent block of ice, then loads them with Caribbean syrups for big-eyed kids—and you've got the point" (167). The injustice of this omission

waits about thirty pages for a rejoinder, in chapter ten, "Table: *Cine Cucina*," Tom's hymn of praise to the wonder of Italian cooking and eating as it is depicted in another film:

Big Night is a story about cooking and eating Italian that is told and acted and shot and proffered in the Italian spirit of cooking and eating. On screen *Big Night* portrays the rhythms of preparation, ex-stasis, and rehabilitation that constitute la buona cucina—an ethos, really a gestalt; the actors and production crew go about the official business of making cinematic illusion with the pleasurable anticipation of delivering, in fact, "the real thing; and we the moviegoers feel we've been given that genuine cucina feeling, if only for the movie moment" (183-84).

Feeling Italian is just such a magnificent performance, itself a wondrous specimen of the art of ethnicity. I've been debating with myself about saying that so directly because the word *performance* often tends to mean putting on a public show, with an accompanying innuendo that the person beneath the makeup is a different story. "No man," as Napoleon is said to have once remarked, "is a hero to his valet." But in *Feeling Italian* Tom rejects the desiccated antinomy that underpins that view of performance: the mode of living and feeling he praises is performative but not therefore false or hollow. Rather, as the book's subtitle announces, there's an art at play in daily Italian-American life that feeds into performative styles such as Sinatra's or Madonna's, a mode of dynamic encounter between the participants in such quotidian locales as a street, a kitchen, a church, or a construction site: "art as equipment for living is an Italian-American attitude … the kind of art that mattered and continues to matter in America is the kind that counsels and consoles, challenges and enriches people day-to-day" (205, 206). I can also certify that in person Tom does that too.

Tom's close study of such "blueprints for thought and action," and his own inventive recourse to them, challenges another misleading either/or, the supposed opposition between cultural heritage and creative initiative that haunts the writings of Emerson and his gang. He proposes instead a more dynamic notion of tradition, seeing it as an archive of resources that one can draw upon in acts of improvisatory creation, "working in American contexts in significantly Italian ways, using Italian or Italian-

American materials to create an Italianate sensibility in the United States" (207). The early immigrants "knew themselves not as Italians but as members of a particular family, perhaps a town, at most (after arrival) a dialect-defined region, but nothing more" (3). *Feeling Italian*, it turns out, is an epic:

> It was not until they had dealt with nativist suspicion and wonder in the United States, so new (ethnically hostile priests, health crusaders, cartoonists drawing them as monkeys) yet so familiar (Sicilians were called Africans in Italy), did they think of themselves as a unit, and it was not until they had committed to stay and acclimated to the urban working classes did they feel they were, in truth, Italians—Italians of an American stripe, Italian Americans. But of course that identity, however emergent, wasn't merely relational: it reflected and reinflected folkways and folk desires shared across Southern Italy, whatever their differences (Calabrians more stubborn than Neapolitans? go figure), then brought to bear upon life in the United States, the medium of social aggregation and cultural convergence. Italian-like feelings were turned into the feeling of being an Italian: this is a historical dialectic of representation and self-representation, yes, but it was lived in the blood, the flesh, the soul. (3-4)

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