FERRARO HIS WAY

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Few things seem more natural than to extrapolate from a favorite book to the identity of the author. If *Feeling Italian* is his best-known book, then we surely know who Thomas J. Ferraro is: a man in love with his ethnicity and its improbable saturation of modern American culture; a man driven to write, with breezy erudition and joyous analytical precision, by the endless paradoxes of ethnic "identity." But this is not who Tom is in any simple or inevitable way. It's something he had to find himself as or make himself into, through a process of self-discovery and self-creation. By happy chance, I've known Tom (with interruptions) across every stage of his professional life. Herewith, a few snapshots of this work-in-progress.

I first met Tom Ferraro in the spring term of 1980 when he took my graduate seminar on 19th-century American fiction. He was 22 or so (I was 32) and had just graduated as a star student from Amherst. Though by 1980 we were already in a deep recession in the academic humanities, the class was packed with smart young folk. If daunted by graduate school, they were not much inhibited, and my class was like a large litter of puppies climbing over each other in competition and play. Tom wasn't the only obvious talent in this scrum but he did have a distinctive personality. I can only describe him as *molto vivace*: brimming with energy, full of enthusiasm for new turns of thought.

How Italian was he feeling? Well, he had an Italian name and a somewhat Southern European appearance; but whatever may have been going on inside him, nothing about his presented academic identity carried much ethnic mark. He had entered the Ph.D. program in American Studies at a time when Yale's version of that program was still under the dominant sway of very distinguished Humanities programs: History, English, History of Art and Religious Studies. In 1979-80, these disciplines were still quite traditional in their understandings of their fields, though disruptive new questions had begun to gain ground—especially in English, the host site for deconstruction and

literary theory. But the disruption that was to dominate the next decade, the opening of the canon, was at best incipient at Yale at this date. African American Studies, though not yet a decade old, was already fairly well established, but women's writing was scarcely recognized as a legitimate subject. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's landmark *Madwoman in the Attic* was only published in 1979, the year Tom arrived at Yale.

Since we construct ourselves in and against the fields we find around us, when Tom composed his prospective intellectual identity in my class, it was as a student of classical American literature with proficiency in French theory. The seminar paper he wrote in May 1980 was on Melville's *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* in the light of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida.

We were always friendly, but in the next few years I did not always know in much detail what was going on with Tom: I only learned of his life-changing encounters with Italian New Haven from his talk delivered at Yale in March 2024 and reworked into the essay published in this issue. But he used to come by my office, and sometimes my house, and one day he came with an idea for a dissertation, on what had until recently been called immigrant fiction.

Literally inconceivable in 1980 and only barely so two or three years later, the envisioned project took the courage of a pioneer, and it took time for it to come clear. Mario Puzo and Anzia Yezierska were in it from the first, as I recall, but it took time to stabilize the body of principal exhibits, later expanded to include Henry Miller's "Tailor Shop" and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior.* Far more challenging was the task of figuring out what these writers added up to, what problem they opened for understanding. Werner Sollers's *Beyond Ethnicity* in some measure legitimized Tom's subject, but the hard questions of dissertation writing—what (if anything) do I actually have to say, what is this new understanding I am purporting to deliver to the world?—remained. Tom attacked the problem by writing and writing. I saw draft after draft of chapters as Tom labored to *express* his insight into being.

In the difficult job market of the 1980s, Tom had the luck to secure a two-year teaching position at the University of Geneva. I visited him there in Switzerland in the spring of 1987. Though the dissertation was now completed, he was still wrestling with

his topic, still did not feel "there." Where would such a person find a job? The answer came from Stanley Fish's English department at Duke, then notorious for its post-traditional bravado and cult of eccentric individual intellect, which hired Tom as a junior Americanist. I saw little of him from then on, but in 1993 I did happily receive a copy of his book *Ethnic Passages,* published by The University of Chicago Press.

One odd by-product of the opening of the canon is that, along with many new recognitions, this development has opened new paths of obsolescence for objects of literary study. Witness the fact that what were exciting and novel choices when this book appeared are virtual unknowns again now. Though Puzo's *Godfather* saga is known by heart by millions (but through films, not the book), it's been years since I met someone who had read Yezierska's *The Bread Givers* or Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep,* added when Tom turned the dissertation into book. (Roth is now always Philip, never Henry.) But the achievement of *Ethnic Passages* is still impressive. Against the rival reductions of conceptual confinement to ethnic enclaves or "escape" into assimilationist "transcendence," Tom explores how his authors seek to register ethnic backgrounds as a means to win access to a national community of letters, through the work of literary writing.

And so things might have stood—how many academic careers have stalled out after a first book?—were it not that Tom has such driving curiosity.

By the most unforeseen of chances, I was appointed the new president of Duke in December 2003. When I arrived, I knew only a handful of people, including Tom, by then a celebrated teacher. He was his hospitable self, and in my first Durham summer he and Beth had us to their house, where Tom, being Italian, cooked bountifully. There, I saw the work-site for a book Tom had almost finished, whose existence I had only dimly suspected. By the next spring—my inscribed copy is dated April 26, 2005—I had in hand *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America*.

What an extraordinary self-expansion! It would be hard for me to name a book whose progress from its predecessor volume constitutes such a self-liberation. Though the author of *Feeling Italian* is still an alert close reader, he now feels free to range across the entire landscape of cultural creativity: literature, painting, film, popular music, television, cooking, here, there, and everywhere that Italianness has permeated, and to

speak of each with confident mastery, learned yet never stuffy, witty yet never demeaning.

Together with the marvelous treatments of Frank Sinatra, Frank Stella, Puzo, Francis Ford Coppola, and all the rest, there's something like a theory of ethnicity in this book, but there's no dogma, no Ferraro's Big Idea. Instead, we are exposed to a mind endlessly catching new permutations, reminding us that ethnicity is an inherited reality imbibed from a culture of origin; *and/or* an imputed identity, a thing you might be labeled or pigeon-holed as (which does not mean stereotypes are untrue); *and/or* something you can perform in self-presentation, an expressive act that can be strategically shaped and chosen for a great variety of purposes, including contradictory ones. In short, ethnicity is not just a social fact; it's also an art, a projection of creative power into the world.

The great achievement of Tom Ferraro's career is to have made himself the person who could write *Feeling Italian*. It's not easy to think like oneself or write like oneself. By the time of *Feeling Italian,* Tom's prose sounds like the self he is and no other. Through the activity of a mind never at rest, never interested in halting or consolidating a position, he has become not just a great elucidator but a significant practitioner of the art of ethnicity. His key work in college was on Emerson (definitely not an Italian), who wrote in "Self-Reliance:" "Do your work and I shall know you." Do *your* work: do the work only you could do. Well, he did, and we do. Or, if you prefer the lyrics of Frank Sinatra, there's this: "To think I did all that/And may I say, not in a shy way/Oh, no, oh, no, not me/I did it my way."

But good journeys (passages, ways) do not end when they reach high points. Just when we thought we knew the full measure of Tom as a scholar and a writer, he pulled us back. After I stepped down at Duke, Tom sent a copy of the new book he had finished, *Transgression and Redemption in American Fiction* (2021). This is a kind of big, field-spanning book that was written in the generation when American literary study was new but not much in evidence since the '60s, least of all in the field-fragmenting days of the post-canonical. In a way that takes its own courage in modern times, this book frankly embraces the texts once deemed the greatest and most distinctive in American

fiction: *The Scarlet Letter, The Wings of the Dove, The Great Gatsby, The Sun Also Rises*. Coming after a dozen scholarly vogues and benefitting from them all, this work also returns to an older style of scholarship, classic close reading. Yet it has a profoundly new take, finding within these texts a continuing imaginative engagement not with Christianity but specifically with Marian Catholicism, the semi-pagan merging of sacred sexuality, divine fecundity, holy physical violence, pageantry, transgression, redemption.

Or, to put it another way, having studied how Italianness projected itself from one of the most self-enclosed of American ethnicities into the mainstream of popular culture (think pizza and *The Sopranos*), Tom completes the journey by finding Italianness (of a sort!) inside the very temples of the WASP American literary canon, lodged there as a potent, ever-tempting imaginative alternative. "Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans," Hawthorne writes early in *The Scarlet Letter*, "he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with each other to represent; something which should remind him, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood, whose infant was to redeem the world." The whole point of Puritan Boston, one might have thought, was that there would *not* have been a Papist in the crowd. A Catholic lens is interpolated subjunctively, through the figural power of language, giving us to see the adulteress and the child of her transgressive sexuality as not sinful but divine, the vessel of holiness itself. It's quickly negated—the pair are the Madonna and Child "but only by contrast"—but not before flashing a glimpse of a radically other ethical and religious universe, one marked Made in Italy, the land of the Old Masters.

The book is a remarkable sequel, continuous with *Feeling Italian* but in no way derivative from it. But why should we presume that even this is Tom's last book? The guy has been on a journey, and, it appears, he still is.

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