(In)visibility: Cultural Representation in the Criticism of Frank Lentricchia

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**INTRODUCTION**

In an earlier article (1992), I proposed that literary representation of their own ethnicity by Italian/Americans has become a matter of choice, a postmodern prerogative that was not available to earlier Italian/American writers. The choice, in brief, is whether or not to visibly identify self and/or subject in writing as Italian/American. Those Italian/American writers who have chosen to deal with the Italian/American experience through Italian/American subjects are those whom I call the visible. Italian American writers who for a variety of reasons choose to avoid representation of the Italian/American as the major subject in their works are those I refer to as the invisible.

Two ways of reading the condition which set up this prerogative come through Richard Alba’s notion of the “twilight of ethnicity” and Michael Fischer’s notion of the “re-invention of ethnicity.” According to Alba, traditionally stable signs of Italian
American ethnicity diminish over time, inevitably disappearing entirely. In contrast to Alba, Fischer sees ethnicity as "something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual, something over which he or she lacks control." I argue that Fischer's is the more accurate way of reading literature produced by contemporary Italian American writers. Fischer tells us that ethnicity "is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided" ("Ethnicity" 195). His suggestion is that readers pay attention to "the juxtaposition of two or more cultural traditions" found in contemporary American writing. Thus, in the case of Italian/American writers, we need to examine the ways in which identifiable American and Italian traditions function in their works.

Critic Frank Lentricchia is a major literary and social critic of Italian descent who may seem to have passed into Alba's "twilight." Yet, as this paper will show, twilight has a way of obscuring signs which are visible during other times of the day. Lentricchia, as we will see, never totally transcends his ethnic background to melt invisibly into the American intelligentsia; one reason he has not been read as a proponent of an Italian/American cultural tradition is that until recently the necessary interpretative framework for reading signs of Italianità has not been constructed.1

I suggest that Frank Lentricchia can be read in a visible tradition of leftist, social criticism found in Italian/American literature.2 His experience of American life as Italian/American has placed him in a position of liminality, a position which, according to Victor Turner, "occasions the freedom to imagine alternatives" (Daly 76). Analyzing the function of the Italian signs found in Lentricchia's writings will help us to better understand the alternatives he has constructed through his culturally critical narratives.

In most of his work, Lentricchia relegates visible signs of his ethnicity to the margins of his discourse. While he rarely chooses to deal with distinctly Italian/American subjects in his writing, and by doing so privileges the American aspects of his Italian/American culture, ethnicity is a factor in all of his work. What follows is an overview of the ways in which Italian/American culture is used in his writing. Lentricchia may have suppressed dominant ethnic traits in his attempt to transcend ethnicity, but, as I will show, he has done so by writing over
a solid foundation of Italian/Americana, in a sense, by veiling his signs of ethnicity.

1. **THE CRITIC AS CULTURAL IMMIGRANT**

Nowadays the teaching of literature inclines to a considerable technicality, but when the teacher has said all that can be said about formal matters he must confront the necessity of bearing personal testimony. He must use whatever authority he may possess to say whether or not a work is true; and if not, why not; and if so, why so. He can do this only at considerable cost to his privacy. (8)

Lionel Trilling

"On the Teaching of Modern Literature"

Given the proletarian character and general illiteracy of the Italian immigration, it was not to be expected that the 'Little Italians,' would nourish intellectual pursuits. Educated persons were regarded with mistrust. (136)

Rudolph J. Vecoli

"The Coming of Age of Italian Americans"

By typical Italian/American measurements of success, Frank Lentricchia's decision to pursue a career as a professor and critic of American literature is not one that ranks highly. The idea that education should be utilitarian predominates even into third-generation families. However, Lentricchia revises this idea by seeing his becoming of a “traditional humanist” as “being where the *padrone* is in intellectual terms” (Salusinszky 189). In an interview with Imre Salusinszky Lentricchia emphasizes this:

It is not for nothing that I tell you that my grandfather voted for Eisenhower and told me that what this country needs is a Mussolini. There was their experience shoveling the shit, and then there was the experience of the *padrone*: one or the other. There was no middle ground, and if you wanted to get away from where you were, the best thing would be to be where the *padrone* was. (189)

Raised in Utica, New York, by working-class parents who were children of Italian immigrants, Lentricchia’s move away from home became more than just a physical relocation to the land of the *padroni*. Of his experience in coming south to attend Duke University, he has said, “I stepped from an Italian-American context into another context that was culturally homogenous, but in a very different way. I could understand it, I could even admire
the cultural unity and rootedness of life; it was another example of where I had been” (Bliwise 2). But, as Lentricchia has revealed, the Duke experience would wrench him away from an undivided loyalty to his working-class, Italian/American background:

When I saw the racist thing, it also made me see that cultural unity is purchased sometimes on the basis of exclusion and destruction and domination of other human beings. That made me not want to be a great rooter for Italian-American ethnicity. That ethnicity was, yes, based upon our sense of being different and sometimes alienated, but it was also based on our sense that those outside us were to be suspected, not to be trusted. (Bliwise 7)

While in his interviews, and occasionally in the introductions of his publications, Lentricchia goes to great extremes to identify himself as Italian/American, he is very aware that by becoming an intellectual there exists the possibility to repress or forget “one’s roots and one’s awareness of difference and the impact of difference on literature” (Salusinszky 189). The body of Lentricchia’s work can be read as an attempt to create a middle ground upon which he can become a synthesis of Gramsci’s “organic” and the “traditional” intellectual. Lentricchia’s solution is to create an approach to reading and writing that not only reveals acts of power and the structures that create them, but also works to empower his readers.

Frank Lentricchia has made an enviable career out of the study and teaching of modern and contemporary literature. Unlike Lionel Trilling, Lentricchia seems not to mind the loss of privacy it has brought. In fact, he seems to thrive on the amount of attention his work has brought him, as evidenced by the many interviews he grants. However, very much like Lionel Trilling, he has built his position by challenging contemporary interpretations and theories of canonical literature. Like Trilling, Lentricchia has also shied away from the literature that comes from his own ethnic background. Lentricchia refers to Italian/American literature as eventually having only “archaeological significance” (Bliwise 7).

Until he takes on the introduction to and interpretation (better read as defense) of the fiction of Don DeLillo, Lentricchia does little work on Italian/American writers. While his earliest work does evidence signs of acknowledgment of his Italianità, it is during the mid-1970s, while he was working on his second book, a study of Robert Frost, that Lentricchia makes two brief appearances in the first two issues of *italian americana*. The first was a short review of John J. Soldo’s *Delano in America and Other Early*
Poems; the second was an intriguing essay which attempts to set the record straight on the origins of Italian-American fiction. What is most interesting in these two articles is the definition of Italian-American writing that he offers:

a report and meditation on first-generation experience, usually from the perspective of a second-generation representative; in such writing Italian-American experiences and values are delineated as they appear in dramatic interaction with the mainstream culture. In other words, a book of poems or stories authored by a person of Italian background is not ethnic in character unless the writer engages his ethnic heritage. I make these preliminary remarks because it is believed in certain academic and publishing circles that ethnicity in imaginative literature is a value, when in fact ethnicity is only a descriptive concept that helps us to classify, not judge, literature. (124)

This definition limits the impact, and thus the relevance of Italian-American ethnicity to the first two generations by keeping third-generation members like Lentricchia outside the experience. There's no doubt that this early definition is one that Lentricchia would probably have revised had he continued working on "ethnic" literature.

After reading the fine scholarship he presents in the essay "Luigi Ventura and the Origins of Italian-American Fiction," one can't help but say that Italian-American literature would have benefitted greatly by Lentricchia's continued participation as a critic. In this essay, Lentricchia criticizes Rose Basile Green, the author of the first and only book-length study of Italian-American literature, for making the "serious error" of claiming that Luigi Ventura's novel Peppino was first published in 1913. Lentricchia demonstrates that Ventura's novel was, in fact, first published in 1885, thus making him the "first published author of Italian-American fiction" (191). He follows this bibliographical correction with an illuminating interpretation of the work that sets forth a critical approach to Italian-American literature, the likes of which has unfortunately been used too infrequently ever since.

Whatever it was that caused Lentricchia to move away from Italian-American literature, right at a point when it was beginning to attract scholarship and criticism, is unknown, but perhaps his decision to avoid it can be attributed to the lack of status such marginalized literature has, and in many cases still has, in the academic environment of his time. However, as we will see,
Lentricchia's subsequent work, while not on Italian/American subjects, is certainly done quite self-consciously as an Italian American. In fact, while Lentricchia has only recently published his first autobiographical essay, by reading the Italian signs in his body of critical writing, we can, as I will show, read his criticism as a form of autobiography.

2. The Critic as Personality

Getting personal in criticism typically involves a deliberate move toward self-figuration. (1)

Nancy K. Miller
“Getting Personal: Autobiography as Cultural Criticism”

As Miller points out in the opening essay of her recent collection Getting Personal, Frank Lentricchia “gets personal” in his criticism when he invokes his working-class Italian background in his response to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s attack on one of his essays. Miller does no more than cite Lentricchia as an example of a self-figuring phenomenon found in a great deal of 1980s criticism which “at its best is at odds with the hierarchies of the positional [and] may produce a new repertory for an enlivening cultural criticism” (25). What follows is an examination of some of the autobiographical elements found in Lentricchia’s critical work, a description of his (re)presentation or (re)definition of the Italian American, and a demonstration of how this “personalization” works to enliven cultural criticism.

It’s not until his fourth book-length study, nearly twenty years into his career, that Frank Lentricchia begins using autobiographical references in his criticism. However, the seeds of these references can be found in his second book, a critical study of Robert Frost. Unlike his first study, The Gaiety of Language (1968), in which he states that “It is to the poems, then, that we must look if we wish to see the whole Stevens, the whole Yeats” (6), Lentricchia presents readings of Frost’s poetry that are framed in biography. He looks beyond Frost’s poems and into his letters and essays to illustrate the poet’s landscape of self. Essentially Lentricchia abandons the “New Critical” approach he used on Yeats and Stevens, for a more historicist reading of Frost. From this work, Lentricchia leaves the close reading of individual authors behind to go after a much larger prey: the history of literary theory in the United States. In his influential After the New Criticism (1980), Lentricchia takes on the individual authorities
who influenced his earlier approaches to literary criticism. He challenges the major schools of literary theory by identifying the hegemonic authorities they, one after the other, have become. By revealing their constraints he identifies the narrow tradition they have institutionalized. Like a calculating raging bull, Lentricchia runs through theory after theory, and the men associated with them, in his attempt to re-direct the course of literary criticism. He argues for the need for a socio-political and ideologically charged criticism that does not succumb to the elitism of New Criticism, the monologism of structuralism, the totalization of Marxism, or the social-political silence of deconstruction. Foucault is the only individual who emerges from this study as a possible model for a new critical theory, one that is a "picture of power-in-discourse that may move critical theory beyond its currently paralyzed debates" and toward a "polyvalence of discourses" (351). Lentricchia, by examining the achievements of individuals through biographical criticism, instead of approaching the historical task through the examination of periods and movements, ignores a Marxist maxim and enacts an anarchical approach typical of those Italians who, in Vecoli's words, have a "reputation for being notorious individualists" ("Coming of Age" 131).

In his next book, *Criticism and Social Change*, Lentricchia examines the possibilities for a socially responsible criticism found in the writing of Kenneth Burke. Lentricchia begins to create the politically responsive approach to criticism that he calls for in his earlier work, and at the same time reveals, in much more detail, the relationship between his own personal background and his critical stance.

Italian signs abound in Lentricchia's study of Kenneth Burke and Paul de Man. In true Vichian fashion and in an effort to avoid the abyss created by the French continental theory that has captured the attention of America's cultural critics, Lentricchia goes back into American philosophical history, advances his earlier thinking on Robert Frost, and turns our attention to "Pragmatism . . . the quintessential American point of view, the philosophical rationalization for a new adventure for history and culture founded on the rejection of the Old World and all of its encrusted precapitalist evils" (3). Lentricchia's argument, through which he joins the oppositional critical tradition established by Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, and Edward Said, is that "Criticism is the production of knowledge to the ends of power and, maybe, of social change" (11).
Lentricchia points his persuasive pen at the "we," the "traditional" intellectual whose "struggle must be against himself, against his own training and history as an intellectual, and against the culture that he has been disciplined to preserve . . . his very traditional personal history as an intellectual, if critically appropriated, will turn out to be one of the real sources of his radical cultural power" (8). This can be done, he says, by retrieval of one's "outsider experience" which can be "brought to bear in critical dialogue with the traditional confirmation he has been given" (8). While this is something that is more easily said than done, Lentricchia makes good on his promise to produce such a criticism, and while he has identified the approach in this book, it isn't until his next book that it is actually put into practice on literary texts.

During the 1970s, as the study of critical theory rises to prominence in English Departments through the advances of post-structuralist methodologies, biography, and thus socio-political contexts become almost irrelevant in critical readings. Against this tide, Lentricchia begins work on refining the critical approach he introduced in Criticism and Social Change. He starts by re-reading Foucault (the one hero in After the New Criticism) through Marx and publishes two lengthy essays on Foucault in the 1982 Spring and Summer numbers of Raritan. His next move is an examination of the work of William James, from which he publishes an article in the Fall 1986 issue of Cultural Critique. Lentricchia then returns to one of the subjects of his first book, Wallace Stevens, to demonstrate a critical approach fashioned out of his readings of Foucault and James. He publishes an essay on Stevens in the Summer, 1987 issue of Critical Inquiry in which he first situates Stevens' poetry in the context of Stevens' middle-class American male life, then moves into a critique of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s feminist criticism, which he calls "essentialist." It is at this point in his career that Lentricchia’s Italian/American self asserts a strong presence.

In their critical response to his article, Gilbert and Gubar begin their attack on Lentricchia’s criticism of their work by creating a cultural representation of Gilbert as, like Lentricchia, Italian American. They accuse him of mounting "a bizarre vendetta against our feminist criticism," and feel they must "break the code of omertà which might ordinarily bond one paisan with another" ("Man on the Dump" 388). They then present an analysis of Lentricchia's mis-reading of their work, even invoking Dante
along the way (402). At the end of their response, Gilbert and Gubar note that they have never been inclined “to fault Lentricchia for devoting so much of his energy to analyses of such hegemonic theorists as Bloom and de Man instead of exploring, say, the Italian-American literary tradition” (404), but they do suggest that his social construction as a male (what they call his “testeria”) has been such that “even though he’s a Marxist, he feels he must write about privileged poets and theorists; even though he’s a ‘feminist,’ he feels he has to attack feminists; even though he’s a ‘third generation Italian-American,’ he feels obliged to study such respectable New Englanders as William James and Robert Frost” (404).

Lentricchia’s response, published in the same issue, just after the Gilbert and Gubar essay, is entitled “Andiamo!”—Italian meaning, “Let’s go,” or “It’s time to move on.” Along with his written response he includes two photos: the one on the jacket of Criticism and Social Change (which Gilbert and Gubar refer to as part of the macho pose tradition in the manner of Whitman, Eldridge Cleaver, and John Irving), and another, quite different photo, taken later that same day, in which Lentricchia sits at a dinner table behind candles and decanters smiling in a seemingly wine-induced state. Along with serious responses to their criticism, Lentricchia includes the following comical dialogue between Italian/American father and son:

FL: Dad, what’s testeria?
DAD: Figlio! What happened to your Italian? It’s TestaREEa! Capisci?
FL: Yes.
DAD: Tell me.
FL: A store where they sell that stuff.
DAD: In big jars!
FL: Let’s go there! (410)

This dialogue, recalling the one that ends Ernest Hemingway’s coming-of-age story, “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” is a witty and poignant characterization of Lentricchia’s ethnicity.

The written interaction between Lentricchia and Gilbert and Gubar is quite interesting in that it causes both to bring out their Italian Americanness in ways neither Gilbert nor Lentricchia has done in the past. In effect, the exchange is a virtual Italian/American signifying match. These invocations serve more than the function of comic relief. They set up the attitude that
both have toward their ethnicity. First Gilbert’s self-identification as Italian American suggests a cultural tie between the two that gender differences can break. Secondly, she sets up the example of Italian/American literary tradition as something that a critic such as Lentricchia might have dealt with had he not been socially conditioned to deal with more culturally acceptable or privileged writers. The fact is that while Gilbert has contributed work to Italian/American anthologies, she, like Lentricchia, has yet to turn her scholarly or critical attention toward that tradition. What comes out in this exchange, besides the obvious attitudes toward gender differences, is that, while Lentricchia and Gilbert identify themselves as Italian Americans, such identification remains peripheral to their work. It is used to create a kind of scholarly theatrics, as Lentricchia’s imaginary dialogue demonstrates, for humorous, rather than serious, purposes. But something happens to Lentricchia after, and I do not suggest because of, this encounter. The following year, his philosophical and philological study of Foucault, James, and Stevens is published as Ariel and the Police. Dedicated to his Italian grandparents, this book opens with a personal anecdote against which he begins a re-reading of Wallace Stevens, an anecdote through which we can, in turn, re-read all of Lentricchia’s criticism in an autobiographical light.

3. ETHNICITY AND CULTURAL AUTHORITY

In “Anatomy of a Jar,” the title of his introduction, Lentricchia tells an anecdote of his own as a way of setting up his approach to Stevens and the poet’s famous “Anecdote of a Jar.” And like Stevens’ anecdote, Lentricchia’s “reveals the essence of the larger unspoken story, and in that very moment becomes exegesis of a public text; the unpublished items become published” (3).
One day, my grandfather, my mother's father, at age seventy-nine, while rocking and smoking (but not inhaling) on his front porch in Utica, New York, in mid-August heat (which he refused to recognize by wearing his long johns), directed his grandson's attention (who was then about thirteen) to the man sitting on his front porch across the street: not rocking or smoking but huddled into himself, as if it were cold, aged eighty. Gesturing with a cigarette in his hand toward "this American," as he called him (in Italian he inserted between "this" and "American," an adjective best left untranslated), all the while nodding and in a tone that I recognized only later as much crafted, he said: La vecchiaia è carogna. A story of biographical incident, funny if you can translate the Italian, but representative?

Probably in the mind of yours truly. You don't because though some in my family would—as would many first-generation Italian Americans, some fewer of the second generation, and fewer yet of my generation. My mother's father is dead, and those who remember him (and immigrants like him) in the right way, with necessary specificity, where do I find them? Soon this will be an anecdote for me alone because soon it will have no claim whatsoever to being what all we anecdotalists want our stories to be—a social form which instigates cultural memory: the act of renewal, the reinstatement of social cohesion.

Lentricchia sees this anecdote in opposition to the more mainstream stories of George Washington and the cherry tree, and as similar to Stevens' story in that its "representational power" is "equally in peril" (4). Such power, as he later suggests, is dependent on a "cultural authorizer." Lentricchia asks, "Who will renew my grandfather's cultural story? For whom can my grandfather's biography be important? What might it mediate?" (5). Lentricchia suggests that anecdotes depend on a stable outside narrative which cultural authorizers can create. He creates such a narrative by setting Stevens' poetry in the context of Stevens' life story. In essence, he recreates Stevens' story, and by doing so creates a cultural myth in the fashion of Giambattista Vico, who saw historiography as a process created by philology, philosophy, and self-reflection.

The answers to Lentricchia's questions about the relevance of his grandfather's story lie in the tradition of Italian/American literature and culture, especially as that tradition moves from its basis in orality to a literary basis. His grandfather's story is redeemed and re-instated every time an Italian/American writer chooses to write that history in fiction or non-fiction. By writing that anecdote, Lentricchia, whether he realizes it or not, has answered his own questions. Though he goes on to tell Stevens'
story, through Foucault and William James (instead of telling the story of Tomaso Iacovella), Lentricchia, by recounting that anecdote, has set up an underlying discourse that not only haunts his approach to Stevens but sets up a non-canonical tradition through which we can and should re-read his earlier work. When Lentricchia quotes Vito Corleone as "a connoisseur of reason" who has something to teach the new pragmatists, in his earlier chapter on William James, he essentially authorizes the oral tradition of the experientially based culture of his grandparents. And when he turns to the work of fellow Italian American Don DeLillo, as an example of a counterdiscourse "working to undermine the discourses of abstraction and domination" (25), he finds the subject of his next two edited books; through DeLillo, Lentricchia finds a version of himself. In an interesting and less ethnically identifiable way, Lentricchia returns to Italian/American literature after a more than fifteen-year hiatus.

Through DeLillo, Lentricchia sees that the writing produced by an American writer of Italian descent has transcended the barrier of "archaeological significance" and has entered the contemporary canon in a way no other Italian/American writing has to date. Lentricchia, while never calling DeLillo a paesano, identifies with this writer in a way he cannot with the subjects of his earlier criticism. In essence, he finds in DeLillo's works the socially committed writing that Lentricchia's criticism will thrive on.

Besides his ten novels, Don DeLillo has been publishing fiction in mainstream literary journals and popular magazines for nearly three decades. He really needs no introduction to American readers. Yet, while his work has been the subject of many articles and one book-length study, Lentricchia entitles the republication, as a book, of a South Atlantic Quarterly issue dedicated to DeLillo, Introducing Don DeLillo. In his introductory essay, "The American Writer as Bad Citizen," Lentricchia aggressively takes on DeLillo's right-wing critics and sets the tone for the volume, which might, more accurately, be retitled In Defense of Don DeLillo. Lentricchia locates DeLillo in the most American of literary traditions, i.e., in the tradition of social criticism that has been the center of the works of such mainstream luminaries as Emerson, Thoreau, and Twain (5). What Lentricchia has been working toward in his theory and practice of American literary criticism, is precisely what DeLillo does with American literature: he keeps "readers from gliding into the comfortable sentiment that the real problems of the human race have always been about
what they are today” (6).

Unlike Lentricchia, DeLillo has kept an almost eerie silence about his Italian/American past. In the few interviews he has granted, DeLillo has given up precious little information about his upbringing. That DeLillo has joined the company of socially self-exiled, publicly silent, postmodern American writers such as Thomas Pynchon is not surprising. One interviewer tells of being handed “a business card engraved with his name and ‘I don’t want to talk about it’” (Anything Can Happen 79). The “it,” I believe, does not refer so much to his work, as the interviewer suggests, but to his name and all that goes with it. In that 1979 interview DeLillo constantly refers to his desire to “restructure reality,” to “make interesting, clear, beautiful language,” and to “try to advance the art” (82). All these desires lead to the possibilities of self-reformation. These desires, combined with the pressures that many ethnic/Americans face to assimilate into mainstream American culture by erasing all but the most acceptable signs of their culture, can help us understand the position DeLillo takes toward self-referential ethnicity.

We do know that like Lentricchia, DeLillo left his working-class, Italian/American home to attend college. Of his entire body of published work, only two of his earliest stories, set in “Little Italy,” use Italian/American subjects to depict an Italian/American experience. The Italian/American signs that do emerge in DeLillo’s later writing are almost always relegated to the margins of his narratives. Out of the ten novels DeLillo has published to date, seven contain characters that can be identified as Italian American. DeLillo, especially in his later works, suppresses and at times even erases (or has characters who try to erase) dominant ethnic traits in his characters; however, there is almost always an obvious ethnic character in his narratives whose very presence undoes or attempts to undo the knot of American identity. It is often through these characters that DeLillo delivers his most biting social criticism. As Lentricchia reminds us, “DeLillo’s heroes are usually in repulsed flight from American life” (“American Writer” 5). To date, Frank Lentricchia is one of the few critics to read the ethnic signs in DeLillo’s work. However, and most interesting in its own right, Lentricchia makes no reference to any of the Italian/American traces in DeLillo’s works. In his essay, “Libra as Postmodern Critique,” Lentricchia perceptively points to DeLillo’s characterization of Jack Ruby as “an escape hatch back to the earth of the robust ethnic life” (212).
Ruby’s private world remains “outside the subterranean world of power whose only exit is blood” (213). Counter to Ruby’s self, which is found in the private world of ethnicity, is Lee Harvey Oswald, whose historical self is lost in the public world of political action. America can make us all librans, as Lentricchia suggests (210), because it enables us to constantly re-form our selves. For DeLillo, ethnicity and a loyalty to it equals autonomous selfhood. Though DeLillo has successfully left the old world, for as Lentricchia says, “Writers in DeLillo’s tradition have too much ambition to stay home” (“American Writer” 2), his departure is guided by proverbs such as chi lascia la via vecchia per la nuova sa quello che lascia ma non sa quello che trova, (Who leaves the old way for the new, knows what is left behind but not what lies ahead), and he may belong more to the old world than one might think, especially when we recall some of the proverbs that guided public behavior in southern Italian culture: A chi dici il tuo secreto, doni la tua libertà (To whom you tell a secret, you give your freedom); Di il fatto tuo, e lascia far il fatto tuo (Tell everyone your business and the devil will do it); Odi, vedi e taci se vuoi viver in pace: (Listen, watch and keep quiet if you wish to live in peace.) When looked at in this light DeLillo’s writing is perhaps more closely aligned with the traditional southern Italian idea of keeping one’s personal life to one’s self. This is a cultural barrier that Lentricchia not only overcomes, but creatively leaps in his recent and most obviously self-revealing writing.

Lentricchia’s examination of modernism and modernist texts, while not dealing with Italian/American texts, paves the way through canonical literature for the incorporation of Italian/American texts. By using his Italian/Americanness to bolster his position as a cultural critic, negotiating a balance between Gramsci’s “organic” and “traditional” intellectual, Lentricchia validates Italian/American presence in American culture and opens the cultural door for new “organic” intellectuals to bring in the texts. In a way, he was, quite unconsciously perhaps, preparing criticism for the arrival of Don DeLillo.

4. CONCLUSION

By calling ethnicity—that is, belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group—an “invention,” one signals an interpretation in a modern and postmodern context. (xiii)

Werner Sollors
“Introduction” The Invention of Ethnicity
While the traditional markers of Italian/American ethnicity are absent in most of the work by Lentricchia, it is his sense of self as different, as other, which stems from his experience of life in America as Italian/American, that forms the basis for the social criticism we find in his writing, and offers us a way of reading his work that is congruent with the tradition of many Italian/American writers.

Lentricchia perches himself in a liminal position which enables him to be highly critical of cultural authorities. He presents writing that examines cultural myths in quest of the possibility of remaining an individual. He intensely examines, in his own words, “interiorized moments of impression isolated from social time and severed from all human contacts” (Ariel 152). That Lentricchia comes to DeLillo, as opposed to other figures in contemporary literature, is no accident, as their criticisms of contemporary life are informed by shared positions on the border between Italian and American culture. Even as Lentricchia examines mainstream America through its canonical characters, it is through his cultural criticism that he validates the presence of previously invisible folk of American culture.

This validation is most productive and obvious in his recent essay “My Kinsman, T. S. Eliot.” Through a series of juxtaposed autobiographical statements, critical reflections, narrative scenes, and quotes from Eliot’s essays, Lentricchia demonstrates the powerful effect writing can have when autobiography meets biography and criticism. The central message of this writing is that the experience of reading, no matter what theory one uses, is the experience of making connections, connections between people, between cultures, between places. This creative criticism, or critical creativity, is a tour-de-force through which Lentricchia reminds us that fiction, like criticism, is as much about concealing the visible and it is about revealing the invisible.

Notes

1. One useful framework for interpreting this phenomenon can be found in Edward Said’s “Secular Criticism,” from The World, the Text, and the Critic, in which Said presents an interesting way of analyzing the relationship of a critic to his or her tradition. His notion of “filiation” and “affiliation” form two “formidable and related powers” that engage “critical attention”: “One is the culture to which critics are bound filiatively (by birth, nationality, profession); the other is a method or system acquired affiliatively (by social and political con-
liction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation)" (24-5).

2. There is little written on the subject of the leftist tradition in Italian/American literature. See Arthur Casciato’s “The Bricklayer as Bricoleur: Pietro di Donato and the Cultural Politics of the Popular Front” and my forthcoming articles: “Italian/American Literary Responses to Fascism” and “Left Out: Three Italian/American Writers of the 1930s.”

3. Until recently my hunch was that few of Lentricchia’s high school class, especially those of Italian/American descent, went on to college, and of those, even fewer have chosen careers in the humanities. This hunch was recently confirmed by Lentricchia during a dinner conversation.

4. Gramsci defines the two as follows:

Intellectuals in the functional sense fall into two groups. In the first place there are the ‘traditional’ professional intellectuals, literary, scientific and so on, whose position in the interstices of society has a certain inter-class aura about it but derives ultimately from past and present class relations and conceals an attachment to various historical class formations. Secondly, there are the ‘organic’ intellectuals, the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class. These organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong. (Prison Notebooks 3)

5. For more on Trilling’s attitude toward Jewish/American culture, see Mark Krupnick’s “The Gentleman and the Jew,” Chapter Two in Lionel Trilling and the Fate of Cultural Criticism, see especially pages 31-32.

6. In the contributor notes he is said to be working on compiling an anthology of Italian/American fiction, a work that if it had been produced would have been the first of its kind.

7. In an interview with Imre Salusinszky, Lentricchia states: “I think it’s easy to become sentimental about what I’m talking about [his Italian/American background], and that’s one of the reasons why I don’t talk about it very much. I feel impelled to write an autobiographical essay once in a while about this stuff, and I’ve always held back, because I fear this goddam sentimentality about it” (Criticism in Society 182-3). In “My Kinsman, T. S. Eliot,” Lentricchia has finally let go and written an essay that is part fiction, part criticism, and very autobiographical.

8. His dedication to Bernard Duffey is written in Italian “e tu maestro.” In his acknowledgments he thanks people with a “Grazia,” which should read “Grazie.” However these are but minor signs of Lentricchia’s italianità The photo on the back, which has been the subject of quite a number of remarks and essays, is not the typical academic photo and is more in the tradition of the Neapolitan street tough who has caught the eye of a camera-toting tourist.

9. I owe this observation to Christian Messenger, who pointed it out to me while reading an earlier draft of this essay.

10. See The Dream Book and From the Margin. I am sure that if both Lentricchia and Gilbert would have turned their attention to this tradition proposals for an MLA Italian/American discussion group might have not been rejected two years in a row.

11. Lentricchia presented a dramatic reading of this essay at the 1992 annual conference of the American Association of Italian Studies conference.

Works Cited


---. "Introduction: The Invention of Ethnicity," in *The Invention of Ethnicity.*