It was three years ago. After a few dozen multicultural books, I was starting to wonder if besides a few beat poets, were there any Italian American poets out there who talked about being Italian American.

I was browsing in a gay/lesbian bookstore when I saw it: Vendetta by Rose Romano. The word vendetta means revenge. And in this 48 page chapbook, Rose Romano takes revenge for all sorts of sins committed upon Italian Americans including our own sin of silence (omertà).

It's not easy being an angry poet when you come from a culture whose most profound statement of anger is silence.

She talks about the question of whether Italian American culture is patriarchal. On one side, there are the men talking about politics, economics and bocce ball. On the other side, there are the women in charge of the home and the family.

Doesn't the woman announce what will be done, only waiting graciously until the man finds a way to make it look like it was his idea.

Romano imagines an Italian American lesbian household. Her vision is clear; the old Crone or Nonna, the Mother and the Maidens sit and eat, feeding themselves and all around them. It is the image of the future of the ancient mother.

She said what trouble, eat, enjoy look at the sauce.

These poems are about bread, dieting, olive skin, survival, pain and love. These poems are honest, passionate and powerful. They demand inclusion into the multicultural canon.

VITTORIA REPETTO

Valentino and the Great Italians
According to Anthony Valerio
Toronto: Guernica, 1994

The very first observation concerning this book is whether to call it Fiction in the high modernist sense of the term, a story or stories narrated on the basis of certain widely accepted formal rules and rhetorical devices, and not rather something else, a literary construct, a writing that makes you think of an autobiography, creative journalism, or semiserious scherzi worthy of the highest journal tradition, pictures drawn through words, frames of life. The title of the book, at the typographical level even, creates a perplexity. I cannot decide where the title actually ends, so I must posit interpretations almost like scientific hypotheses. I have at least two possible meaningful evaluations: A) Valentino and the Great Italians, by Anthony Valerio, where the “by” is the convention for something like “Anthony Valerio is the author,” a social entity or category detached from its construct, from its product.” Hypothesis B) would instead read like this: Valentino and the Great Italians According to Anthony Valerio, where I introduce two things: “according” as an intended alternative to “by” in that it signals a more pointed direct rapport between the writer (the person) of the text (of the book) and the subject.
(theme, topic) of the text (the actual writing as activity, as being in the world with others). And I introduce a no-longer-author "real" person named Anthony Valerio, someone I have actually met, who doth exist and is in fact a legal resident of New York City. The reader is both informed and warned that whatever will be said about Valentino and the Great Italians is so only according to someone named Anthony Valerio. In this key one is tempted to call this book non-fiction, creative journalism. Or a book about the social imaginary of a binational, bicultural group, melding History with Fantasy.

The actual history of the famous Italians referred to in the book is well known, as historians and critics of every stripe have time and again sculpted all sorts of memorable and not always disinterested images of them. Here, though, they are four-dimensional. As happens almost predictably with great works of art, of the art of writing, Valerio's prose sustains different levels of perception in the world-within-the-text, and conversely suggests several possible critical viewpoints as text-within-the-world. The following are some of the possible preliminary hermeneutic gestures toward a fuller appreciation of Valerio's opera.

In a sheaf of short stories the author gave me to read, part of a planned volume Conversations with the Godfather, Valerio re/reads through the stereotype called Italian American. Yet in working with the common place, locus communis, Valerio makes us realize and accept that we do indeed dwell and dream in a common, known, habitual space. Only, it is uncannily so, reverberating with something else, not just a musical note—there's lots of music in these tales—but an echo, a stir, a smothered clanking, a persistent hum. The living space we inhabit daily is full of cultural icons, of tangible meanings. Working with the stereotype and making it come back to life, evincing its recognizability, stretching the logic of its typicality, rupturing in selected places its surface, its style. That appears to be one of the tasks this writer has taken upon himself. He ponders the genesis of recognition, of what lies behind a belief, a type. Mention something, an idea you have, 100 times and it'll slip from out of the shadows onto your feet, ready at your service; share a rumor as many times and you've created a conviction, a "truth" about a person, or event, or nationality. In casual conversations we may hear something like: Men are animals. For a particular character in the story, deep down, men are vicious, or untrustworthy, you can only trust them so far. Thus the character: "Especially non-Italian women are drawn to the animal in us." But what does a great writer do with stereotypes? He transfigures them. In the short story "Animal Magnetism," a man's pseudo-identification with the animal is turned into a phenomenology of male types, or if you wish a metamorphosis of male metaphors. "There's Jake the Bull. Sly the Stallion. Each and everyone of us is a fox. But the winds may be changing. Stallone has a script on his desk about the life of Giacomo Puccini." "Me? I'm an animal, too. I'm several animals in one. First and foremost, I am a chimp. No, not a chump, chimp." Further on, the character speaks as if he were a horse, then an elephant, a steer. All pretexts to set the narrative machine going, loci communes to retell the story of glorious sexual encounters, springboards to recover some moral or affective association with loved ones.

Stereotypes and common places have been explored in hermeneutic philosophy by the Greeks and Romans within the context of a civil rhetoric, but after the Renaissance our culture
decreed them utterly unreliable, insidious, doxa in perilous contiguity with paradoxes, fodder for old maids and drunken salesmen. The value attributed to characterization slowly moved onto aesthetic terrain, creative pursuits, and in recent times modern middle-class moralists have been so arrogant as to think themselves above them, as that which denotes the uneducated, the faceless crowd, boors and bums and backyard social critics. None is too eager to begin a conversation by admitting candidly that he or she has a preformed opinion about another person, or artwork, or national origin. Stereotypes are rule-of-thumb notions that we acquire to pave the floor of our subliminal social and cultural maps, so that we can waddle and totter through the everyday with the aid of an automatic pilot, talking ourselves to exhaustion about how our four or five itineraries through existence are really what counts whereas everyone else's, especially the stranger you meet on the subway platform or the goofy looking bystander at the corner, really ain't worth his salt. If you can fence out your course, then so much he better, as everyone beyond is just a morass of inferiors, history docet: those natives, you know, they all look the same (one can find similar demeaning assertions in the Almirante's logbook, as in Captain Cook's, in Heart of Darkness, in General Westmoreland's view of the Vietnamese). Yet stereotypes have been unwittingly bestowed a founding and enabling force, connecting a cluster of traits which one may cast in the metalingo of the semioticians, or the sociologist, or worse yet the sophomore who took Psych 101 and armed with his "Freudian Primer" walks around the campus judging and labeling friends and taxonomizing the strangers from strange lands (often the neighborhood down the avenue). The common place is also at the base of prejudice, that preconscious response to another person's way of being which is, alternatively, imprinted, impressed, imposed on us as we grow up and which it would be foolish—scientists have made it their credo for centuries—to pretend one can ignore or devise strategies to neutralize them. This state of affairs can be observed at various levels, from the most physiological to the most psychoanalytical, that is, from mere neural response to sophisticated phenomenological reduction.

The interest and novelty of these tales by Anthony Valerio consists in part in the way he spins out prejudices on commonplaces and with a light hand unknot them in a variety of settings and situations, leaving us to savor the disturbing possibility that these stereotypes may indeed be, if not pre-determining the fate of certain encounters, then probably co-determining the unfolding of the semantics, disclosing newer understanding.

The stereotypes of course concern the Italian Americans.

What the Italian American characters say, and what is said about them, are part and parcel of the same cultural experience. Stereotypes and national or ethnic mythographies go hand in hand. You need plenty of the first to stitch a consistent quilt for the second. Italians are colorful, interesting, ambiguous, but not all alike. For the mythography to turn into a sensible network of recognizable icons, the images must be worked and reworked, they must be visited relocated reupholstered to suit the times, to speak to a different generation, to respond in tune with, or as an antithrope to, a waning or tarnished or demeaning picture.

Right from the first page of the first chapter (essay? article?) titled "The Sicilians," Valerio seductively engages:
According to Dante, Frederick was a wise and noble gentleman, and he chose as the seat of his throne not Swabia but Palermo. He preferred the southern clime, hot and dry, the cooling shade of the ombu tree, and he was entranced by the beach at Mondello, which still stands and has sand the texture and glitter of star dust.

It is hard to put down. His writing takes Italian American literature onto a new terrain, one which has not been explored so directly, so explicitly, so evenhandedly. Whatever can and has been said about certain highly visible figures of the Italian and Italian American cultural panorama is open topic for a different kind of telling. And with a low key and haunting humor. Valerio is a city writer, gracefully urban and ironically urbane, though the irony never takes the upper hand while the grace is polished and spontaneous. In his text you are at home, you recognize your stock of typologies, but somehow you are not angered oppressed or vilified by them: you are in the company of a seasoned storyteller whose short takes on village life, historical memory and popularized anecdote set up a realistic stage where his characters can interact/play with their attributed identities, their socially created myth, with a lighthearted and often also matter-of-fact attitude. But beyond the formal stylistic—to which we will return—the exploration of the stereotype is also, in Valerio’s hands, its explosion, its coming apart and reconstituting in a different key, wearing a different hat, sketching a picture which can be at once a corrective and a stimulus to further adventures. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through a narrative which intersects the lives of several of these mythical Italians.

Let’s take just one example. The story "Frank Sinatra" begins this way:

I come to Frank Sinatra midway through my life when I’m happy with my woman, when I’ve learned to dance the tango and when I discover that Frank Sinatra lost his mother in a plane crash, depriving him of the opportunity to kiss her forehead one last time, run his fingers through her hair. Italian boys are not accustomed to their mothers flying. (15)

The narration moves on to talk about Sinatra’s Hoboken childhood, then the personality of Natalie Sinatra and a minihistory of organized crime, then the narrator tells a story to a priest about his troubled relationship with an Argentinian woman, then shifts without warning to a visualization of Sinatra’s youth and the importance of words, how they must be felt and understood. We read that the attention Sinatra pays to lyrics is in harmony with Enrico Caruso’s attitude toward them (17). As we read the narration shifts to a global view of Sinatra’s career, in a way praising him for having survived a “million leeches” and for not having followed in his father’s footsteps. It was his mother, the narrator informs us, who bought blue eyes the first p.a. system, mike and loudspeaker. The fact that she died on her way to seeing him sing suggests that the mythical singer carried emotional scars like any other of our fellow humans. The narrator sympathizes with the subject. There follows a digression on names, on naming sons like fathers and children like the saint on the calendar the day they are born. “A name day is a day of truth. Just as on their daughter’s wedding days all Dons grant any wish whatsoever, on their name day they are obliged to tell the truth.” (19) But the next sentence leaps onto a different plane. “The truth is that St. Anthony was not born in Padua, he performed his miracles there. He was born in Portugal!” And then, seemingly out of the blue: “The truth: is it possible for one man, even an Italian one, to romance the likes of the following women . . . ?” and then a
list of fifteen famous women Sinatra loved, from Lana Turner to Mia Farrow. Further on the narrator returns suddenly to his own life: “A name day is also a festive one, but the truth is I’ve been alone all day with northerly gales blowing pollen in through my window. Dark clouds are rolling over.” The next two paragraphs contain a tight dialogue, then we’re back to names and naming, the raffled social and personal life of Sinatra, anecdotes retold through the narrator’s father, who in turn brings him to speak again of Caruso and of how once he got arrested, something having to do with professionally unacceptable situations concerning his not showing up at concerts (perhaps to launch a singer to a captive audience), then the possible origins of the singer’s association with the underworld, memories of special encounters with in/famous types, all this narrating with a flair for spontaneity, quick strokes that allow the characters to fill out on the page quickly, in their humanity, pride fear twitches and taboos included:

“Tell me, how’s your uncle, Joey Gaff” Lucky Luciano asked me in the car.

“He passed on.”

“What a guy, Joey Gaff: flashy dresser, great driver. He was the best driver I ever had. In the old days we were tough, it’s true, but, you know, we loved to dance. Joey, me, George Raft, we’d dress to the teeth and go uptown and dance. George, he was the best of us.”

“Where did he learn the tango, do you know?”

“The tango was the rage. It was a new import from France. Valentino had danced it in The Four Horsemen.” (32)

Thus Valentino is part story, part history, part anecdote, part personal musing, part cultural geography. The naturalness with which Valerio shifts point of view, blends the sacred and the profane, the official and the officious, hard facts with volatile beliefs is remarkable and highly distinctive. His is not a narration of the unconscious, a stream-of-consciousness magma, but rather a conscious if bemused juxtaposition of mythography and desire, set in a continuity whose logic of framing is more attuned to casual, everyday, incidental exchanges between people. The syntax and the images are drawn from what we recognize as “normal” situations, or likely “conversations,” such as two friends meeting at a bar who wile away an hour by comparing Cuomo to Iacocca, Mario Lanza to Caruso, or how the Mona Lisa one night visited them in their beds. Fantasies of history, the imaginary of a cultural identity, the musical chords of our background. As suggested by the list of sources on the last page, one might be inclined to call these stories freehand sketches of Italian American, an as yet unseen or unheard mosaic which is freed from plot and morality, and which adds a seductive voice to the complex Italian American human comedy.

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**Poesaggio. Poeti italiani d’America**
Ed. by Peter Carravetta and Paolo Valesio
Treviso: Pagus, 1993

and

“**Italian Poets in America**”
Special double issue of **Gradiva**
Ed. by Luigi Fontanella and Paolo Valesio
Volume 5, Number 1, 1992-1993

I am here to present two anthologies that perhaps don’t need an introduction, because they themselves are introductions to a yet-unrecognized