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Food for Thought

Claudio Fogu and Lucia Re

This “open-theme” issue of *California Italian Studies* presents a rich and diverse menu of innovative, multidisciplinary and comparative research in Italian Studies on a variety of periods and subjects, ranging from the fourteenth century to today. It should provide ample food for thought for those readers interested in critically advanced research on questions reaching far beyond the field of Italian Studies. Feminist and gender-based approaches are represented, along with food studies (Giannetti, Del Giudice); folklore and ethnographic studies (Del Giudice); social, legal and cultural history (Wieben); art and multimedia studies (Chiesa); architectural and urban history (Harrison); and comparative literary and philosophical studies (Vecce and Jewell).

Corinne Wieben’s “As Men do with their Wives: Domestic Violence in Fourteenth-Century Lucca,”¹ employs the methodologies of microhistory, legal history, and gender theory to examine a central problem in the religious and social tradition of medieval and early modern Italy: how to balance, in a society that forbids divorce, the claims of husband and wife in a dysfunctional marriage. Spousal abuse in the case studied by Wieben includes not only wife-beatings and male sexual violence, but virtual starvation of the wife by a husband intent on keeping “all bread and wine for himself.” Male authority figures emerge in a more positive light in the essay by Carlo Vecce, who suggests that *altore*, the Florentine word used by Leonardo da Vinci for “author,” may allude to the overlapping ideas of father, parent, and “the one who gives nourishment and life.” Covering a vast and contested territory of authorship, including ways of figuring and justifying (or questioning) the authority of “the Author” from Dante, Poliziano, Sannazzaro and Leonardo to Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, Vecce’s philologically sound and poststructuralist-inflected “La crisi dell’Autore nel Rinascimento” demonstrates, however, that the figure of the author was in crisis virtually from the moment of its emergence on the scene of writing.

In Laura Giannetti’s “Italian Renaissance Food-Fashioning or The Triumph of Greens,” we get an altogether different and rather non-canonical view of the Renaissance, based on . . . salad. Her essay, which relies on evidence from Renaissance paintings, literature, Galenic medicine and other forms of cultural history, argues that salad as a trope and signifier served as an indicator of social standing that became especially visible not only in social practices and writings on food and nutrition, but also in political texts of the period. On the basis of oral historical and ethnographic research, Luisa Del Giudice offers another interdisciplinary study of food practices, focused on the mid-Lenten custom of preparing “food altars” or tables for the poor in honor of St. Joseph in Los Angeles. This contemporary Sicilian-American ritual tradition is analyzed both in its ancient origins in southern Italy, and in its subsequent evolution in response to the history of migration, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic relationships, and social advocacy.

Los Angeles, and an Italian-American creation, are also at the heart of Thomas Harrison’s essay. In his analysis of one of the most perplexing architectural structures of the twentieth century, the Watts Towers, constructed by a Sicilian immigrant in downtown Los Angeles over a

¹ An earlier version of this essay, presented at UC Santa Cruz, received the first California Consortium for Italian Studies prize in 2008.

period of thirty-three years beginning in 1921, Harrison reveals the fascinating complexities of this visionary masterpiece of *art brut*. His reading illuminates the Towers' controversial reception and their social, spatial and political implications in the context of the history of Los Angeles's diverse urban development. The essay by Laura Chiesa focuses instead on the very different achievement of another Italian who arrived in America in the 1920s: futurist Fortunato Depero's little-known *New York – Film Vissuto* and his poems *Liriche Radiofoniche*. Chiesa traces both the artist's experiences in New York and the influences of those experiences on his literary and artistic production. She brings to light for the first time the multi-language "logic" sustaining Depero's work in New York, and the relationship between Depero's efforts and the larger project of the avant-gardes in the late 1920s.

Keala Jewell dissects the disturbing experimental work of a later master: the modernist novelist Tommaso Landolfi. She maps out the complex spatial, political and epistemic articulations of his uncanny "Gothic" short novel about the anti-fascist Resistance, *Racconto d'autunno* (1947), examining it in the light of recent transhistorical and comparative approaches to Gothic fiction, and drawing upon a wide range of theorists in gender studies, cultural and philosophical studies and New Historicism.

Arrigo Boito (1842-1918), author of the four short stories impeccably translated and introduced here by Nicolas Perella, is arguably one of Tommaso Landolfi's notable predecessors in the Gothic mode. Known outside of Italy almost exclusively as the composer of the opera *Mefistotele*, as well as for the librettos he created for Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff*, Boito is also an interesting writer of "dark," unsettlingly demonic and arguably "perverse" poetry and fiction, including the long poem *Re Orso*, whose protagonist is a cannibalistic monster. These stories, which apparently comprise Boito's entire production in the genre, will be of particular interest to students and scholars working on the imaginary construction of racial and ethnic difference, as well as on exoticism and Orientalism in post-unification and liberal Italy. The "food," in Boito's stories, is an odd and unappetizing array of foul-smelling drugs, canine flesh, and female blood.

Though they shared a passion for fantastic literature, Boito's sensibility is surely antithetical to that of Italo Calvino, the subject of our last text in this open-theme issue of *CIS*. Calvino in fact declined to include Boito's tales in the series of notable narrative texts (the famous *Centopagine*) that he edited for Einaudi in the 1970s. Although Calvino seems to have wavered considerably before making his decision, he called Boito's stories "interesting documents [. . .] of a cosmopolitan sensibility based on ethnic typologies [. . .] (and occasionally in rather bad taste)."² In contrast to Boito's unsavory diet, and despite his flirtation with images of sultry cannibalism in *Sotto il sole giaguaro*, most of Calvino's work exudes a healthy, sunny Mediterranean aura suggesting the scents, colors and flavors of the vines, olives and lemon trees of San Remo, where his botanist-agronomist parents settled when Italo was a child. And yet . . . as the documentation found by scholar-sleuth Stefano Adami in various Italian police archives and his reconstruction of the adventures of Calvino's father show, a fateful encounter and a conversation about grapes and viticulture with some Russians (on a train one day in 1907) led to a series of seemingly fantastic events, misunderstandings and escapes whose influence on Italo Calvino's life, writing, and especially politics, will surely provide food for thought for future scholars and critics.

² Letter to Remo Ceserani, December 26, 1976, in Italo Calvino, *Lettere 1940-1985*, ed. Luca Baranelli (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 1325.