

## The Dangers of Italian Americans Reading (Besides Going Blind)

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*ABSTRACT: What happens when a working-class boy in an Italian American family in the Bronx begins to love reading and gets absorbed in the world of books? This essay explores the fears and the hopes raised in one family in the mid-1960s and the ambivalence of success American-style. When books are scarce, they arrive with an aura around them of promise and danger, like visitors from another place and time. The article takes up the possibility that reading may represent betrayal, albeit perhaps a necessary one, and suggests that to become a scholar from a working-class background comes with pain, and that this pain may become a source of conceptual insight.*

**KEYWORDS:** immigration, books and reading, working-class households, the Bronx

It is the second of November when I sit down to write this, the day of the Roman Catholic feast of All Souls, when the living and the dead become present to each other, the living to the dead, the dead to the living, in special ways. This is not to say that they are inattentive to each other in ordinary circumstances. But there will be picnics in cemeteries today in some parts of the Catholic globe; in others, the living will have left food out last night for their dead. By means of such customs and practices, the living and the dead will become transparent to each other again for another year. The living will acknowledge their love for the dead and renew their promise to continue praying for them, although the day may also include unhappy memories, disturbing moments of regret and recrimination; the dead, in one way or another, will let the living know what they are thinking and what they need. On the second day of November, the speech of the Catholic living and the dead is filled with each other's words (Bakhtin 1986, 89).

This is an apt context for what I hope to do in this essay, which is to describe the haunting of an Italian American scholar from the ethnic working class—namely myself—and then to consider the consequences of this for his—my—scholarship. I hope readers will recognize aspects of their own experience, their own stories, in

what I write; if so, then perhaps the lineaments of an emergent anthropology of scholars—and maybe also of filmmakers, novelists, visual artists and poets—from the ethnic, specifically the Italian American working class will emerge in these pages, a framework for understanding the way Italian Americans do their work and, in particular, the way they think. The “working class” is not singular, I understand. Its membership, the kinds of work done, and workers’ politics, have changed in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I am writing about working-class life in a particular moment in time, the 1950s and 1960s; in a specific place, New York City; and about a particular population, first- and second-generation Italian American Catholics whose parents and grandparents immigrated, most of them from Southern Italy, some from the north, in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

This tale of haunting begins in the Bronx, the only borough of New York City that is attached to the mainland United States, in the late 1950s and 1960s, in a home that was without books. My father was twice an immigrant from northern Italy, first as a baby in his mother’s arms when she came to join her husband, his father, who was a chef at the restaurant in Boston where the city’s mayor and cardinal archbishop received supplicants in the evenings at their respective tables; and then again in 1946, having returned to Italy at the age of ten after the chef’s death of a heart attack in the stairwell of their Somerville apartment building and after enduring first the Allied bombing of his village, then its occupation by Germans, finally a stint in the American army. My mother grew up on New York’s Lower East Side. Her parents emigrated from Messina, although my Sicilian grandmother insisted to the end of her life that she was in fact born on the deck of the ship that had carried her parents across the ocean just after it had docked in New York’s harbor. In her eyes, this made her more of an American than her shoemaker husband, who never learned to speak a word of English, just as he had never learned to speak a word of Italian. My father was a manual laborer, my mother a secretary.

That this home was without books is a bit of an exaggeration; perhaps I said this to emphasize my cultural deprivation. There were two books in the house. One was a faded, dusty paperback copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton (1948). The other was an Italian book with a cover that terrified and fascinated me. It showed a Roman slave, as I imagined him to be, with a shaved and oiled head glistening under a stormy, lightning-streaked sky. The slave, if that is what this figure was, stood at what I recognized from devotional imagery was the blood-drenched base of Christ’s cross; in his brown hands was a silver chalice, thickly crusted with colored gems, and out of the chalice a dark green snake coiled, its forked, red tongue gingerly testing the holy air of Golgotha. No one in my family ever said a word about either volume. The two books were alien, mysterious things, fragments of another time and place somehow fallen to earth. I handled them with cautious deference.<sup>2</sup>

Like many Italian American boys in the Bronx of this generation, I played the accordion. At first, I took lessons at the neighborhood music store, taught by a sharp-dressing Italian American man with a thin pencil mustache etched across his lip. But then, suddenly, one day, this man disappeared, perhaps into the witness protection program, and somehow my parents found a new teacher for me, I have no idea how they would have done this, a Jewish woman, who came to our apartment for my lessons, like our doctor did for house calls. In this Bronx neighborhood, there lived a mix of lower-middle-class Jews and working-class Italians who for the most part got along together well. But the new accordion teacher clearly came from outside the neighborhood, from beyond the familiar streets, like the books in the apartment-without-books; maybe she was from “downtown,” as people in the Bronx referred to Manhattan. One day, at the end of a lesson, out of the blue—or out of “nel blu di pinto di blu,” as in the song my aunts and neighbors most often requested I play for them—my teacher asked me if I liked to read. I do, I replied, as if I were taking a vow, although up to this point all I had read were the sanguinous lives of the saints written for young people and Marvel comic books.<sup>3</sup> Have you ever heard of a book called *The Hobbit*, she asked me? I had not. I think you’d like it, she said. The next week she brought me a copy and the rest of this story is the history of my journey from Bronx-shire where it began to Yale University to my life as a professor. “I might find somewhere where I can finish my book,” the elderly Bilbo says to Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. “I have thought of a nice ending for it: *and he lived happily ever after to the end of his days*” (Tolkien [1954] 2014, 42).

Many years later, my younger son, Anthony, looking at the heaps of books everywhere in our apartment, said to me, “Your relationship to books, Dad, is like Smaug’s relationship to gold; you don’t just read books, you wallow in them; you hoard them.” This unintentionally coincidental observation—my son could not have known about the Jewish accordion teacher and *The Hobbit*—brings what might otherwise be a familiar narrative of second-generation triumph in this country by dint of hard work and education to a curious conclusion. Am I really a covetous dragon who fills his shadowy and fetid lair with great heaps of the thing he desires most of all, books, books, and more books, cradling them with my scaly body in blissful, fuggy sleep filled with dreams of books? The short answer is yes. When my wife, Christine, is away, her side of the bed inevitably fills up with books, a blanket of print to warm and comfort me on cold nights; our dog, Vinnie, settles herself down among them with a big huffing sigh, her long snout resting across the pages of an opened volume like a cold, wet bookmark. My son was lovingly teasing me (I think), but there is no getting around the fact that Smaug is a nasty villain. Strewn among the heaps of gold around him are the bones of dwarves, their broken shields and rusting armor, the ruins of their world. What had become of me?

By faithfully applying myself to books, I was fulfilling, or so I imagined, my father's dream for me. When I was in elementary school and then high school, my father used to come into my room in the early mornings, just before he left for work, before the sun had come up over the Bronx, to whisper to me that he loved me and that he wanted me to have a better life than his. His body smelled of machine oil and metal filings, a dark and ferrous smell, like blood. This scent never went away, not even on Sundays in church, when my father wore his suit. He put his arm around my shoulders and drew me close against his thick chest. "I am so proud of you," my father murmured in my ear, meaning proud of my good grades and of the nice things my teachers said about me. He had packed his lunch already, drunk his coffee, and eaten his toasted bread. "You'll never have to work like I do." Then he lifted his heavy and tired body off the bed.<sup>4</sup>

This is what my father did in the mornings: He shaved, had breakfast, made his lunch, and then he came into my darkened bedroom, which was the only bedroom in the apartment—he and my mother slept on a convertible couch in the living room—to lay down beside me to tell me my life was going to be better than his. Then he left on the long trip to the factory in New Jersey where he assembled huge, heavy valves, his back supported by a hard, leather brace. Twice a week he brought home from work his soiled navy-blue work clothes, wrapped up with twine in a tight bundle of coarse brown paper and still stinking of sweat. So that I did not have to have the life he did, my father climbed out of his fold-up bed in the middle of the night, stood on the freezing platform of the elevated train while the moon still hung over the Bronx; he rode the train into the South Bronx where he raced up the long flight of stairs at the 138th Street subway station to meet another guy from the shop, a German immigrant, who gave him a ride across the George Washington Bridge, talking at my father the whole time obsessively about the money he was angling to make in various schemes, his breath a cloudy sour stench in the car. What made it possible to endure all this, my father told me day after day, was the thought of me still lying in bed, hours before the school day began, and then of my success in America. The sons of Italian immigrants are never trapped by fate into killing their fathers in Oedipal struggles because in a distinctly immigrant version of the Freudian myth, immigrant fathers kill themselves. My father and I were bound together by the most intense ties of sacrifice, desire, hope, and fear, all focused on his aspirations of my doing well in school.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, though, that my father was dreaming of my success in America, my other relatives, the Sicilians, mostly, but the Tuscans too, were constantly and loudly predicting the dire things that would happen to me as a result of reading, of reading books, and of wanting books. Reference to such predictions in the narrative of second- or third-generation American success might serve as an acknowledgement of the mistrust of learning in some Italian immigrant families, in

which, it was said, it was more important to own a home than to have an education; ultimately, they underscore the narrator's eventual transcendence of such limitations. But as the evidence of my father's morning blessings suggests, he wanted his sons to make better lives for themselves in this country, as many immigrant parents did (and still do), even if he did not know precisely what this meant. To tell the story simply as being about the second generation's surmounting of the old ways is already to concede my identification with the myth of American success; it assumes that I see myself as having triumphed over whatever was being expressed by my relatives' contemptuous commentary on reading. But I cannot say for sure that they were wrong, or that I have triumphed, and I get less and less able to as time passes.

The older generation is gone now, and I have lived into the future they prophesied for me, so I am in a good position at last to assess empirically, with the evidence of my life, the validity of their cautions about reading. I hear them now across the years. What if they discerned in my reading habits and my love of books dangers to which I was oblivious but that were, in fact, really real? What if there were reason for me to rise from bed on those mornings with my father's blessings on my head as much troubled and confused as encouraged, sanctioned, and empowered? To put this another way, what if I have succumbed to the dangers of which they so insistently warned me? What if they were right?

So, what did they say? Look at him, they exclaimed aloud, seemingly speaking to the apartment's walls as if the walls were listening to them. Look at him, always with his head in a book! What are you doing to your eyesight, Robertino, my gentle Tuscan grandmother asked me with anguish and compassion when I lay on the great bed she had twice brought back and forth from Italy with a book over my face. *Poverino! Si diventa cieco!* This grandmother was forever offering me cool wet washcloths to press onto what she believed were my weary and weakening eyes. "Big shot!" other relatives said when they saw me reading or if—God forbid—I mentioned a book I'd read when we were talking at the kitchen table. "Listen to the big shot! He thinks he knows it all." "He's a know-it-all!" "That and fifteen cents will get you a ride on the subway," one of my aunts was fond of telling me, over and over, sounding like an angry parrot in the employment of the Metropolitan Transit Authority. She said it when I got my Yale doctorate, the value of this diploma slightly higher as a result of the increasing cost of tokens, by then sixty cents. In his moving autobiographical study of working-class life in England between the 1930s and 1950s, *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart calls such scorn "highbrow-hating," which he says is rooted in the older generation's fears and humiliation ([1957] 1970, 152). I am not so sure about this. I do know that no one ever spoke up in my defense; no one ever said, "Leave the kid alone!" Or even, "Let him read! There are worse things he could be doing!" Maybe they didn't think so.

My mother's fear of books was more literal: she refused to let me take books out from the public library, or any library for that matter, because, she said, the pages of these books carried germs. Strangers had handled them. If she could have ironed the pages, perhaps she would have relented, but she couldn't, so the prohibition on library books remained in force. Books carried disease and my mother did not want them crossing the threshold of the *domus*, the moral unit comprising family and everything that family absorbed, including the spaces and times of our everyday lives. To read was to expose the *domus* to contagion, according to my mother, speaking in her capacity as epidemiologist of the *domus*.<sup>6</sup>

My relatives used books and reading as auguries of the future, media to divine the divergent fate awaiting the younger members of the family. They used to say that the way to punish my brother, who is four years younger than me, was to give him a book; the way to punish me was to take a book away. They were adept at this particular form of divination by pagination. He's always with the books, my relatives would say about me in explicit comparison with my brother and my cousins. He, meaning me, they inevitably added, is no use when it comes to—and here they proclaimed a litany of all the things I was said to be no good at because I read books: fixing cars, changing tires, painting trim, plastering walls, hammering nails, sawing wood, hanging pictures, and much, much more. And sure enough, I *was* no good at these things!

One summer when I was about eleven years old, my father and one of my uncles, my mother's oldest brother, built a brick wall in the backyard of our house that faced toward the dark and muddy waters of the Bronx River. My family had moved in with this uncle and his daughters after his young wife's death from cancer; my Sicilian grandmother decided this, the plan being for my mother to take care of her brother and nieces in addition to her own family. We moved to the nearby apartment building a few years later when my uncle remarried. The wall would be about five feet high and about ten feet long. All the tedious and glorious sensuousness of manual labor was entailed in this painstaking, exquisite work. First, they leveled the ground. Then, they dug a narrow trench that they used for marking off the shape of the wall with string and pieces of wood carefully placed in the earth. They mixed the cement until it achieved the consistency they were after, stopping now and then to test its gritty texture with a shovel or their hands. It was a hot, humid day, and soon my father and uncle were soaked in sweat. After a little while, they took off their shirts; my uncle deftly tied his white undershirt into a turban to protect his bald head from the sun. My mother brought out pitchers of brightly colored, icy Kool-Aid, dripping with condensation. Now and then, my father and my uncle sat down together to take stock of what they had already done and to discuss the next steps. The wall slowly rose as the day went on. They tapped each brick down with the blunt end of the trowel's handle; they smoothed the cement between the bricks,

carefully, lovingly, as if it were icing on a cake; they tested each row of bricks with a long wooden level, peering into the little green glass bubble at its center to see if the liquid inside fell evenly. And where was I when all this was going on? I was watching them from inside, through the living room window, in the company of my girl cousins, undoubtedly holding a book at my hip, while my brother, who was very young at the time, played outside, alongside the men, with stones and pieces of brick, building a little wall to mimic the big one. Our locations had been determined by our relationships to books and reading.

In this way, my relatives created the reality they predicted by predicting it. Their speech about reading and not-reading was verdictive, in philosopher J. L. Austin's terminology. "The giving of a verdict . . . commit[s] us to a certain future conduct," Austin writes in *How to Do Things with Words*, "in the sense that any speech-act does and perhaps more so, at least to consistency, and maybe we know to what it will commit us" (1962, 154). The division between manual and mental labor was absolute; my brother, my cousins, and I lived within its confines. But what were my relatives so afraid of that they were unable to stop themselves from predicting my ruin every time they caught me reading? If I were infected by books, what was the disease? If one of its symptoms were blindness, what would I not see? What in the world would get too small if I got too big?

These questions bring to mind an image of myself hiding out with a book in the back seat of our bulbous Plymouth parked beneath the trees outside the factory in New Jersey where every summer my father brought me for a day to show off his older American son to the other guys. Whatever his plans for these days, I spent them reading. Maybe this is to be too harsh on myself. What could a little boy do safely in a factory, after all? Did my father show me how he assembled and tested the heavy bronze and stainless-steel valves? Or how he punched the letters of his name with metal sorts onto a little plate he affixed to each valve identifying himself as its maker? What I do remember is serenely reading in the sparkling green light coming through the car windows from the arched canopy of trees overhead in the forest of Fangorn.

In due time, I left the Bronx, went off to a tree-shaded college in New England—where else—and grew my hair down to my shoulders. I had already registered for the draft that spring as a conscientious objector, a decision that humiliated my father and uncles, as they told me, before their neighbors. This is what came from too much reading, from being too smart; they never said so explicitly, but I know this is what they thought. I had added treason to the list of my shortcomings. In my first two semesters in college, I took philosophy and sociology classes in great lecture halls that looked just as I had eagerly anticipated such rooms to look, and in these rooms, I perched attentively on the edge of my seat, always high up in the last of the tiered rows of students, as if announcing to all that my purpose for being

there was to rise into the pure air of knowledge and truth. My roommate that first year was the only other Italian American in the incoming class, maybe in the whole school; this appeared to be the logic of our residential assignment, which was otherwise inexplicable.<sup>7</sup> On the football team, all set to work in his father's office after graduation, which he spoke of as if it were weeks, rather than years, away, and dating his high school sweetheart, a regular visitor to our room from a nearby women's college, my roommate was determined not to let college render him "not normal," his scathing term for anything strange and unfamiliar to him. This very often included me. Two Italian Americans living together resulted in our drab, concrete dorm room becoming the school's Little Italy; the tiny refrigerator I brought with me was always stocked with my roommate's mother's cooking, aluminum trays of veal parmigiana, meatballs and gravy, and baked ziti that he brought back nearly every day from his home, seventeen miles away from school. As if he wanted to make our room an even more familiar environment for me, my roommate was forever telling me that I worked too hard, read too much, that I didn't have enough fun; he offered to set me up with sweet-scented friends of his girlfriend, unlike the neurotic and anxious poets and writers I was otherwise seeking out, women who disliked my roommate as much as he disliked them. It looked like the old neighborhood was going to be harder to leave than I had figured on.

And so, it was. I was drawn fatefully that first year to classes and academic disciplines that would teach me how to reshape lived experience into theories, ideas, and abstractions; or so it seems to me when I look back at that time. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) struck me with the force of divine revelation, as did Erving Goffman's (1959) precise, systematic parsing of everyday behavior, and C. Wright Mills's fine-grained analyses of class and power. Almost immediately, I turned this newfound capacity back on the old neighborhood. I may not have known how to build a wall, but I sure as hell was learning how to analyze and describe, how to theorize, those who did. It was an especially vertiginous experience those first months reading Herbert Gans's (1982) study of Italian American boys in Boston, to see the old neighborhood (or one just like it) outside of my head, in front of me, on the page. It was through these books, literally, that I figured out my family was working class; with the help of these books, I diagnosed the hidden injuries in the bonds between my mother and father, aunts and uncles. There was something especially compelling, I remember, about discovering that the social relationships identified by the words "uncle," "cousin," "aunt," and so on were not inscribed in the nature of human existence but were instead fictive constructions of particular worlds, no more or less real than "hobbit," "orc," and "elf." I was reading the old neighborhood as if it were a book in my hand, which is how it felt in those first heady days of higher education.



Then in the winter, my Sicilian grandmother died, just after she had asked my uncle, her youngest son, who lived with her, why her long-dead mother was standing there in the living room, proving that death, like immigration, is a migratory chain, with those already dead sending for the living. Summoned to the Bronx, I went home for the funeral and was immediately caught up in the ancient rites of Sicilian mourning. In front of the open coffin, my mother moaned, What am I going to do now? How am I going to live? Looking on, her brothers tore their handkerchiefs with their teeth in grief; for three days in that room where their mother's body lay, these men alternated between severity and abjection. The Sicilian undertakers circulated quietly through the room, adjusting a single flower here, a single flower there, with exquisitely delicate meticulousness and somber poise. I did what I was supposed to do on these days because I knew what was expected of me; and if I forgot, one of the undertakers would remind me with a minty murmur in my ear. But throughout, I had an odd feeling of observing myself from a great distance, the oldest male in the second generation, and therefore the one of whom much was expected. Such torquing on these days in front of my grandmother's dead body was too much to sustain. If this world were fictive, then perhaps so was I; if it were not fictive, then why did it suddenly feel to me that I was standing on the proscenium of a stage behind which were hidden the ropes and pulleys that created the illusion of something called "the old neighborhood," including this funeral parlor with me in it? Is this what reading had done to me?

Evidently so: I had become the alienated, self-estranged reader of books and culture. I think here of Hannah Arendt's idea that social and political displacement offers a distinctive perspective for social criticism;<sup>8</sup> of Paul Mendes-Flohr's characterization of Jewish intellectuals in modern Germany as "cognitive insider[s]" but "social outsider[s]" (1991, 42); of political theorist Michael Walzer (1988), who inherited and then inverted this line of thought with the notion of the connected critic who is in and of and also not; of Isaac Deutscher's observation that Spinoza, Marx, Freud, and other modern Jewish thinkers lived on "the margins or in the nooks and crannies of their respective nations" (1968, 26); of Edward Said's (1979) reflection on the unique critical perspective of the exiled intellectual; of British psychoanalytical theorist D. W. Winnicott's account of the transitional state of being as "inside, outside, at the border" (1980, 11); . . . and then suddenly I find myself thinking, "yada, yada, yada."

Yada, yada, yada? It comes upon me suddenly, unsought, as if from outside me; it seems disrespectful and dismissive of these thinkers, which I know I am not. Yada, yada, yada? Big shot! Now it gets clearer. Spinoza, Marx, Freud and \$2.75 will get you a ride on the subway (today)! This always happens to me: I read, I think, and then just as I get ready to interpret, to make the move to abstraction, dreadfully,

the yada, yada, yada comes. This is the haunting. It turns out that all those early years when I appeared to be ignoring my relatives by reading, I was in fact hearing them over the tops of the books in my hands. I had internalized their complaints, so much so that after I left the old neighborhood, and even now, as I write this, trying to come to a conclusion here, when they are all gone, I hear them still. You thought you were going to get away? I heard their complaints because their world was mine too, however buffered by books my presence in it was. But where does the yada, yada, yada leave me in the world I live in today? I think. I read and I think. The philosopher Theodor Adorno, as quoted by the anthropologist Michael Jackson in a discussion of radical empiricism, wrote, “To think philosophically means as much to think intermittently, to be interrupted by that which is not the thought itself” (Jackson 2013, 23). This is my conclusion: yada, yada, yada is the sound of the old neighborhood interrupting me, and so interrupted, I think. The interruption becomes epistemology; it becomes methodology.

The yada, yada is here to remind me that these theoretical accounts of the critical intellectual’s alienation are derived from painful histories, disrupted lives, and from the sorrow of exclusion. There is flesh and blood, war, and narrow escapes across frozen borders within the abstractions. The yada, yada, yada reminds me that theory ought not to occlude the daily struggles that produced theory itself, the life experiences of these emarginated men and women, with all their loneliness, self-contempt, addictions, fear, the despair of not being recognized by others, frustration, and shame. Just as my relatives were afraid I was doing by reading, to ignore all this is to lose the tragic dimension of such lives that is both their weakness and strength. The haunting is trying to keep me from the hallucinations that philosopher Richard Rorty says are generated by theory that is not anchored in lived reality (1998, 94).<sup>9</sup>

Lived reality, in the shape of my relatives and our neighbors, kept breaking into my work over the years. I set out to write about Catholic attitudes toward suffering and pain in the United States in the 20th century, and alongside Susan Sontag, there is my Uncle Sal with cerebral palsy, a man who so loved Saint Anthony and Saint Francis that he wanted to be buried in brown robes of the Franciscan Third Order and yet who also believed that neither saint understood him because they were not confined to a wheelchair as he was. I could not write the history of devotion to Saint Jude in the United States without my mother and aunts, their friends and neighbors, crowding in on me, insisting on themselves. Here we are! Stop reading! Look up! Look out! Likewise, wanting to write about Saint Gemma Galgani I write about my Tuscan grandmother’s devotion to this holy figure who bled from her hands and feet every Friday afternoon starting at three o’clock and who believed that Jesus showed his love for her in the pain and suffering he inflicted on her, which led me to questions about the circulation of pain in Italian American families and the complicity of the saints in it.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes I imagine what it would be like to think without such interruptions. Sometimes I also imagine what it would be like to have joined my father and my uncle at their work of building the wall. Is there a way of thinking of my work as being akin to, not alien from, their work? “Work is usually a sweaty and messy business,” Finnish architectural theorist, Juhani Pallasmaa writes. “I personally want to see the traces, stains and dirt of my work, the layering of erased lines, errors and failures, the repeated re-tracings on the drawing.” “These traces,” Pallasmaa continues, “help me to feel the continuity and purposefulness of the work, to dwell in the work, and to grasp the multiplicity, the plasticity, as it were, of the task.” Pallasmaa is talking here about the processes of drawing and designing buildings and in this he helps me build a bridge between my work and my father’s and uncle’s work of making the brick wall. Writing is also a sweaty, messy business. I too want to leave the errors and failures of my argument exposed, its contradictions, hesitations, uncertainties offered to the reader. Every theoretical conclusion I reach for is upended, qualified and reconfigured by the lives of the Italian working-class immigrants who cautioned me against becoming a big shot. Then these erased lines are duly recorded in my work. Readers are given a choice of conclusions; they are challenged to recognize that what they see in what I have written will arise from the intersection of their lives with the text, that instead of standing behind the widow looking out at the work being done, they are being asked to join it (Pallasmaa 2009, 109–110; Hiller 2017).

I thought I was going to leave the old neighborhood, in other words, but in fact, over the years, I have been drawn more deeply into it, by the very things that were meant to lift me up and out, reading, research, writing. I have practiced an epistemology and methodology of the yada, yada, yada. Entering through the yada, yada, yada, my relatives would not allow me to turn their lives or the lives of people like them, in the present and in the past, into abstractions, and in turn, this prevented me from being an abstraction myself. I am in the work, no longer in the aerie above the classroom, where I had first sought refuge, but in the middle of it all. For this, for the haunting, in the end I am grateful to them, however much, however regularly, they infuriated me. I am the interrupted, haunted scholar from the Italian American working class.

“Roads go ever on and on,” Bilbo sang as he and I set out on our parallel journeys years ago, “over rock and under tree . . .” He was on a path that would take him across the Misty Mountains through Mirkwood and on to the Lonely Mountain. I was heading toward books, more books, reading, religious history, hermeneutics, theory, and more books. Eventually, a profoundly changed Bilbo makes his way back “at last to home afar,” where his kin fail to recognize him and where he finds everything at once familiar and utterly and irrevocably changed. This is how “home” came to feel to me too. Perhaps this is the fate of the scholar who hails from the

Italian American Catholic working class: he struggles to be existentially, intellectually, and politically faithful to a world that no longer recognizes him. But perhaps this becomes our unique angle into history and culture, this business of standing in between worlds, the academic and the old neighborhood (wherever that has moved to), completely at home in neither.

## Notes

1. I thank the members of the Italian American Studies Association for inviting me to join them at the 2017 annual meeting in Washington, D.C., where I presented an earlier version of this essay as the conference's keynote address. My gratitude to everyone for the warm welcome I received, especially Samuele Pardini, who two years ago first broached the idea of my speaking to the group. My older son, Clarence Orsi read the earliest draft of the essay and his comments guided me in revising it. Tim Noddings, a graduate student who works with me at Northwestern University, provided essential research support in tracking down lost references, which included finding an online copy of the 1971 *Trinity College Handbook*.  
I give a fuller account of the lives of these men and women and their children in Orsi (1996), where I am concerned with white working-class Catholics of other ethnicities as well.
2. Merton's autobiography was published in 1948 and became an immediate bestseller.
3. The song referenced is "Volare," written by Franco Migliacci and Domenico Modugno, released as a single in February, 1958, sung by Modugno. It was hugely popular in Italy, where it won first prize at the Sanremo Music Festival in 1958, and then throughout Europe and around the world, wherever there were Italians, which is almost everywhere, eventually selling more than twenty-two million copies.
4. I describe this scene as well in Orsi (2010b).
5. See the chapter titled "Sacrifice and Betrayal" in Sennett and Cobb ([1972] 1993, 119–50).
6. On the origins of the idea of the domus and for my use of it here, see Orsi (2010a).
7. Or so it seemed to me, and perhaps to everyone else on the first floor of the dormitory; but as it happens, in an entering class of 395 in 1971, there were twenty-three students with Italian surnames, including my roommate and me. See Trinity College (1971).
8. My understanding of the centrality of the idea of the state of finding oneself outside, even if one lives inside, a nation or community, as a source of moral and political critique and creativity in Hannah Arendt's thought is indebted to Omer (2013).
9. Rorty writes, "Disengagement from practice produces theoretical hallucinations" (1998, 94).
10. I refer in this paragraph to Sontag (1978) and Orsi (1996, 2005).

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