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Sacco and Vanzetti: The Italian American Legacy

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Sacco and Vanzetti: The Italian American Legacy

"Only silence is shame"

Bartolomeo Vanzetti

Introduction

In The New Science, 18th century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico identified what he called the mythic stage of history as developing after families and social institutions were established. During this stage an aristocracy would develop against which the common people stage a revolt that should enable them to gain greater control of their lives. Out of this struggle would rise heroic figures who replace the divinities of the previous age as models for human behavior. Vico notes that this shift occurred when Man moved away from an agrarian culture and into an urban culture, from a theology based on fear of the gods to one in which man would begin to struggle with the gods. Vico theorized that men rewrote the stories of gods as divine creatures in myths that gave the gods human qualities. The key to understanding this mythic mode lies in Vico's suggestion that "poets do not make ethnic myths; they simply record in allegorical poetic form, the histories of their people" (Bidney 274). Myths then are recorded realities that over the years become stories that change as the need for change arises in each generation.

I use Vico, not as a guide to reading Italian American histories, but as a way of envisioning the myths that result from the histories that have been fashioned out of recorded experiences. In many respects, Italian American culture is just beginning to create their own histories in writing. For a long time

much of what we might call Italian American history was passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth. And in this system of oral tradition, what doesn't get spoken, doesn't get remembered. This will help us understand why there is so little recognition of the story of Sacco and Vanzetti in today's Americans of Italian descent. This essay comes from a much more involved investigation I have been making into the way Italian Americans process their personal histories in relation to the public histories into which they are born and indoctrinated through the Americanization process.

Not long ago I addressed an Italian American organization and encouraged them to attend the conference at which this paper was originally presented. As soon as I mentioned the words Sacco and Vanzetti their faces went blank. Now being a teacher for over twenty-five years, I have learned to read a variety of meanings to a blank face. What I saw was not the blank that says, "I have no idea what you're talking about," nor was it the kind that says, "I can't hear what you're saying," or "I don't understand your words." No, it was the kind of blank that says, "I don't want to hear what you're saying;" it was the kind of blank that says, "This is something that does not relate to me." Like the first two words of the incantation for casting the evil eye, the names Sacco and Vanzetti, have sent and continue to send most Italian Americans running for cover. The memories of these two Italian immigrants have not been kept alive in Italian American museums, through anniversary rituals, or cultural celebrations. This year, were it not for the Italian Americans for a Multicultural Society and Nunzio Pernicone, there would have been virtually no Italian American presence

in public commemorations of the seventy-fifth anniversary of their execution. This essay is based on the research I have been doing over the past ten years into Italian American working class culture and the politics that emerge from its literary products.

On the Outside Looking In

Until recently, most of what has become public knowledge about Italian American culture has been the product of outsiders looking in. From fiction writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Henry James, to sociologists like William Whyte and Edward Banfield, much of the early information about U.S. Italians lacked a native perspective. The same goes for most of the information we have received about Sacco and Vanzetti. Most of what's been written about Sacco and Vanzetti as been culturally from the outside looking in, as though Italian culture had little insight to offer. This is not to say that I believe only Italian Americans can accurately portray accounts of Sacco and Vanzetti, but I do believe that events surrounding the electrocutions of Sacco and Vanzetti look differently from an Italian American perspective, a point of view that has been rarely expressed.

Vico set the ground work for a historiography that realized the role that imagination plays in the recreation of historical reality. Many of the writers who dramatize the events surrounding the arrest, trial and executions of Sacco and Vanzetti, utilize the elements of fiction writing to retell history. Among the most successful are Upton Sinclair with his Boston: A Documentary Novel of the

Sacco-Vanzetti Case, originally published in 1928, and republished in 1978 including the “Report of the Governor in the Matter of Sacco and Vanzetti,” and Governor Dukakis’s 1977 proclamation of Sacco and Vanzetti Memorial Day. Told primarily from the point-of-view of Cornelia Thornwell, a wealthy widow of a Boston Brahmin who comes to know Vanzetti after she leaves her home and passes some time among the poor. The logic of choosing her as the vehicle for telling the story works if you think about who the book buying and reading public was at the time, and whose opinion Sinclair was trying to influence. However, this choice does limit the access we get to both Sacco and Vanzetti’s perspectives.

The same effect comes from the songs written by Woody Guthrie for his Ballads of Sacco and Vanzetti recorded by Moses Asch in 1947. Twelve songs recall the events and decry the injustices, but lack an inner perspective that only an Italian sensibility could provide. Never, for example (and to his credit), does Guthrie imagine himself as Sacco or Vanzetti. In songs such as “Red Wine,” Guthrie recalls: “How a hundred and sixty witnesses did pass by/ “And the ones that spoke for them was a hundred and five. And his “Suassos Lane” points to the witnesses who saw Vanzetti selling fish, but none of the songs ever gets into an Italian American’s perspective. His “Two Good Men” proceeds:

Sacco was born across the sea
Somewhere over in Italy
Vanzetti was born of parents fine
Drank the best Italian wine.

But I'll remember these two good men

That did to show me how to live

Maxwell Anderson worked Sacco and Vanzetti into his plays Gods of the Lightning (written with Harold Nickerson) (1928) and Winterset (1935). Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem, "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" published in *The New York World* on August 22, 1927, speaks to the people who tolerated this injustice: "Let us sit here, sit still,/ Here is the sitting-room until we die;/ At the step of Death on the walk, rise and go;/ Leaving to our children`s children this beautiful doorway,/ And this elm,/ And a blighted earth to till/ With a broken hoe" (2).

Most of the published fiction about Sacco and Vanzetti depicts how the injustice against the two affected those who shared similar ethnic and social class characteristics as the writers themselves. John Dos Passos, journalistic champion of the cause, author of a Facing the Chair: Story of the Americanizations of Two Foreignborn Workmen published by the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee in 1927, recounts the events, provides some analysis, criticism and includes relevant testimony from the trial. Again, there is nothing, beyond the use of Sacco and Vanzetti's own words that can be said to express an Italian American sensibility to the events. Later on in his career Dos Passos comes back to Sacco and Vanzetti in one of the novels in his USA Trilogy. In "The Camera Eye (49)" of The Big Money, he presents a view of Plymouth to North Plymouth that sets up the area as a land of immigrants for three hundred years and, while he cannot present an Italian American perspective, gives us a glimpse as to why such a perspective would be difficult to achieve:

this is where another immigrant worked hater of oppression who wanted a world unfenced when they fired him from the cordage he peddled fish the immigrants in the dark framehouses knew him bought his fish listened to his talk following his cart around from door to door you as them What was he like? Why are they scared to talk of Bart scared because they knew him scared eyes narrowing black with fright? A barb the man in the little grocery store the woman he boarded with in scared voices they ask Why won't they believe? We knew him We seen him every day why won't they believe that day we buy the eels?" (443)

Even Howard Fast's The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti: A New England Legend published in 1953 focuses primarily on the recreation of the events. In 1977 Katherine Anne Porter published a memoir The Never Ending Wrong, recounting her experiences of the trials. William Brenn's A Tattered Coat Upon a Stick uses the perspective of prison guard Emmet Magawley who believes in the innocence of convicted murderer Bartolomeo Vanzetti. He rebels against the mandates of his tribe and stands, imperfectly, with Sacco and Vanzetti at the hour of their executions. For failing them, he is forever tormented by the inadequacy of his actions.

Perhaps the book that comes closest to achieving an Italian American sensibility is Paul Avrich's study, Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background. Avrich comes closest to presenting the events in a cultural context that takes into consideration the Italian experiences of both Nicolo Sacco and Bartolomeo

Vanzetti. Close, but not close enough.

From the Inside Looking Out

So what did Italian Americans produce in the way of writing that covered the Sacco and Vanzetti experiences? We know that in many interviews, the writer, Pietro di Donato claims to have joined the Communist Party on the night of the execution, but di Donato never wrote a word about the two. Why? A contemporary of di Donato, Angelo Pellegrini, who did join the Communist Party in the early 1930s, included a rather lengthy reference to Sacco and Vanzetti in his memoir American Dream: An Immigrant's Quest published in 1986 when he was 83 years old. In a chapter in which he responds to legal decisions that he believes severely affected the way we perceive the American Dream, he concludes that "Anyone who has read the record with a mind free of all prejudice and bias, cannot escape the conclusion that the charge of murder for which Sacco and Vanzetti were tried was a mere pretext for sending them to the electric chair because they were outspoken radicals, agitators, and twice damned because they were marked by the Justice Department as alien agitators" (141). Pellegrini recites the facts of the case in an historical summary of the major events in an attempt to show that the injustice against two Italian immigrants has permanently scarred the soul of the United States of America serving as a memory of when "the conscience of America had been outraged and come to the aid of two humble immigrants.... That fact in itself was as much a part of the reality as the gross injustice that had send two men to the electric chair" (147).

While Pellegrini's essay ultimately waxes into sentimentality by chasing nostalgic notions of the American Dream, he does conclude that his experience with the case has left him disillusioned. And there is not a single word in the discussion of their shared national ancestry. Pellegrini never speaks as an Italian American. His testimony serves as witness to the injustice, but like most of the previous writing by non Italian Americans about Sacco and Vanzetti, there is a certain seriousness that cloaks the story, weighing it down so that the politics muffles out the poetry of the actual lives of the two Italian immigrant anarchists. There is a lack of humor, of sensuality, that could make these two men live beyond their politics.

For a long time it was rare to see an Italian in American history, and when they did appear they served as inspirations to the researcher to find out more about them. Such is the case when some Italian Americans encountered Sacco and Vanzetti in the pages of American histories. In cultures and communities that function primarily in the oral modes, silence becomes an organizing principle by which reality can be eliminated from cultural memory. Silence can erase a legacy of shame, can teach the lesson of shut up and assimilate. Italian Americans conditioned by history of oral traditions, especially in the Church, never incorporated the histories of Sacco and Vanzetti into their shift from becoming to being Americans. Sacco and Vanzetti were simply not acceptable ways for Italians to be or to become Americans. The writers I have discussed so far have all tried to show that they are indeed U.S. citizens and as such what happened to them could happen to any of us.

No one knew this better than the Italians, especially those who were brave enough to testify, only to see their testimony ignored, not believed. Sacco and Vanzetti, Forget about it. Today there is a strong trend in the writing of Italian Americans to reclaim the history of Sacco and Vanzetti, perhaps precisely because it has safely become mythic. Before I go into some analysis of two of the works, I'd like to briefly mention some of the works I came across in my research.

Of course there are the letters of Sacco and Vanzetti, which many writers use to gain access to Italian sensibilities. And there's Michael Musmano's work as their defense attorney, but it seems that the use of Sacco and Vanzetti in literary works skips a generation of Italian Americans and it is this gap that I'd like to address in the following discussion.

A few years ago, Neil Thomas Proto, a lawyer, presented a talk entitled "Sacco and Vanzetti and the Italian Experience in America" at the Graduate Club in New Haven, Connecticut, February 19, 1999. Proto documents the actions of Italians such as Aldino Felicani, a writer and newspaper editor who chaired the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee. Initially, he reminds us the committee was entirely made up of Italians from Boston's North End that that among their strongest supporters were leading figures in the worker's movement such as Carlo Tresca. But beyond documenting the Italian American presence, Proto reminds us of the ridiculed witnesses, the poor translations, and other acts that resulted in the fact that the testimony of over 70 Italians was not taken seriously. Proto points to one factor that led to the creation of a legacy of shame and public

silence about Sacco and Vanzetti: “Italian-Americans knew it was dangerous to support these two men. The Justice Department and local police had many people under surveillance. Lists were kept” (8). He concludes: “In a nation where Italians were lynched and their neighborhoods invaded with impunity, and greeted publicly with approval, the stigma and stereotyping by others endured and for many Italians, the response was further withdrawal and silence” (10).

In 1997 a raucous and rambling more than four hundred page account of the events appeared. The story is presented largely through documents of public record. Sacco and Vanzetti: The Verdict of History, written by Dr. Frank M. D’Alessandro, a medical doctor and amateur writer of fiction, is an example of how Italians of the next generation have begun to come to terms with the history of Sacco and Vanzetti. I would have come up rather empty handed today had it not been for a lead given to me by one of the foremost historians of the Italian American left, Nunzio Pernicone, who alerted me to playwright Louis Lippa’s Sacco and Vanzetti” A Vaudeville, first performed January 13 - February 14, 1999.

Brought to the subject after coming upon a letter his immigrant father wrote to his brother in Italy, dated August 30th, 1927, Lippa sees Sacco and Vanzetti as part of his own personal history, and by doing so, can connect them to his experience enough to see the events from a very different perspective than his literary predecessors: “The more I researched their history, the more incredibly absurd to the point of ‘tragic-comedy’ it became. All those weird

personalities—witnesses, judge, prosecutor—all those clowns and Keystone Cops events—struck my imagination as a kind of vaudeville” (“A Playwright’s Beginning” 4).

Lippa infuses the story with a sense of humor that heightens the horror surrounding the events of the trials and executions. The absurdity of the truth in this case is brought out by simply referring to court transcripts, newspaper reports, journals, letters and other personal accounts of the events. Early in the first act, Vanzetti recounts the history of his persecutors.

Vanzetti

They come and live in Massachusetts. And those in charge, those who have the power—they decide who is good and who is bad—who belong, and don’t belong—who go to heaven, who go to hell. And they call themselves—i Puritani. You know who i Puritani was? Sacco, you tell them.

Sacco

People who not suppose to laugh.

Vanzetti

Yes.

Sacco

People who never sing—never dance.

Vanzetti

Right.

Sacco

People who never make love—except quick, fast and done.

Vanzetti

I Puritani! They so sure they do the will of God, in His name. They hang their neighbors and burn them at the stake.

Sacco

I Puritani! The clean ones. They have so much love for God, they have no love left for the children of God.

(23)

As they recount the history of their case they enact typical vaudeville routines and stunts.

Vanzetti

So it don't look good for me and Nick.. Especially for Nick.

Because what Katz-a-mann do to make him look guilt—nobody can believe.

Sacco

Except in vaudeville! Drumroll, Professor!

Lippa presents the disappearance and the placing of manufactured evidence through stage devices such as magician's tricks. Lippa's mastery of the medium fosters the shift from history to myth, but until such work appears to larger audiences, I'm afraid that Italian sensibilities will still remain in the shadows.

Another brave work that has not received the attention it deserves is Dan Gabriel's Sacco & Vanzetti: A Narrative Longpoem published in 1983 by Gull Books of Brooklyn. Gabriel retells the events in nine sections, each containing a

metapoem that comments on the action. Like Lippa, Gabriel is brought to Sacco and Vanzetti through a member of his family:

there are years between
 us, but my grandfather
 was there with you
 in nation. i never
 know how he felt
 about you, i never
 asked. but you were
 all wops together:
 fruit peddlers, spaghetti
 benders, fish peddlers.
 you were all hated for your twisted tongue— (6)

But Gabriel, whose political consciousness was formed by the events of the U.S. of the 1960s sees his own writing of the story as a way of connecting the past to his life:

the memory of the act
 is not the act,
 but this thinking
 this pathos
 drives us to a
 re-creation,
 a correspondence

with the act: (7)

Human History—1

Sacco, Vanzetti,

Crono (my grandfather)

and me,

all sharing this

destiny one and

the same.

we are arm in arm

together,

not of the same mind,

so much,

but of the same heart.

a brotherhood, this

in origin.

i, a second generation

soldier, going back

to them—

to discover my

own source,

and possible
 the wrath of men
 to men. (19)

it is alive
 as a record,
 but also as
 theatre, as
 motion in light
 in time
 in the laser
 of time
 as flashes
 of memory
 as still life
 in photograph. (44)

Another contemporary poet Justin Vitiello, evoked spirits of Sacco and Vanzetti in his 1989 book of poetry Il carro del pesce di Vanzetti, poems in Italian later published in an English version “Vanzetti’s Fish Cart”. While the title speaks to the revolutionary tone of some of the poems, there is not a poem that speaks specifically of Sacco and Vanzetti. Poet and critic, Mary Jo Bona uses the legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti to connect to the poverty and public apathy of her grandparents in “To Sacco and Vanzetti, in America.”

Like all dreamers
You had potential for nightmare.
Your idea was beautiful,
in pastels, but raw in the
light of urban ghettos.

The workers, my grandparents,
were uninterested in self-
liberation.

Without “la famiglia”
what self exists? (212)
Calling attention to the
“Beautiful Idea” incurred
“malocchio.” They knew that.
They were undeducated, but not
ignorant of evil eyes, Carnegie, Morgan,
Vanderbilt.

Your movement for
utter freedom
clashed soundly with
the equality of “miseria”
here

and at home.

Again, it is clear that for writers like Bona, Sacco and Vanzetti become figures that they must be acknowledged and accounted for by reconciling their lives with their ancestors.

More recently, a young Italian American activist invoked the legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti to speak about contemporary injustices. On Friday, August 23, over 500 people attended a rally in Union Square Park, New York City, commemorating the 75th anniversary of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. Juliet Ucelli on behalf of Italian Americans for a Multicultural U.S. (IAMUS), gave a speech addressing what she called "the lessons of Sacco's and Vanzetti's lives and deaths for Italian Americans". She too connects those public lessons to her personal history:

Today, Italian Americans are integrated into U.S. society as White Americans. But that wasn't so in the early years of this century. People of Southern Italian background were considered non-White well into the 1920s. We were called aliens, wops--meaning "without papers," just like today's undocumented immigrants are called aliens. Nicola Sacco and Bartomoleo Vanzetti were derided as "dirty dagoes, reds" and "anarchistic bastards" (by their trial judge, Webster Thayer of Massachusetts). Anarchists were considered terrorists. Sound familiar? "My mother remembers her uncle saying, "Those men were murdered because they were Italian."

Today, Sacco and Vanzetti are long-dead and it's safe to feel

sympathy for them. And, many Italian Americans look back with nostalgia, from a comfortable position of white privilege, at this era when we actually were an oppressed national minority subject to persecution. But when Sacco and Vanzetti were facing execution and needing support, lots of Italian Americans--the establishment, some professionals, the wealthy--would have nothing to do with them. They didn't want to be associated with those radicals and "terrorists".

Ucelli goes on to pose a challenge to those who claim they would have supported Sacco and Vanzetti by asking them if they would stand up for Arabs, Muslims and South Asians who are being held without any constitutional rights. Ucelli makes the connection between the past and the present. She concludes her talk with: "Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti understood well that most wars are called for by the rich to protect their wealth, their oil wells, their sources of profit. We shouldn't forget what they knew. Long live the memory of Sacco and Vanzetti! Free the detainees! Free Mumia Abu Jamal! Abolish the death penalty! No to Bush's war!"

It may seem that the memory of Sacco and Vanzetti was bequeathed only to those on the left, and that to mainstream Italian Americans, Sacco and Vanzetti have become as useless as Millay's broken hoe. But we are beginning to uncover works produced by Sacco and Vanzetti's contemporaries, which, while not published during their lifetime, show us that while there might have been a public silence about the events, there was a private accounting of

solidarity with the pair and express of American shame for the acts of injustice.

In 2001 writer and critic Frank Lentricchia donated his grandfather's journals to the SUNY-Stony Brook Special Collection archives. Augusto Lentricchia was a worker who kept detailed journals and diaries of experiences as an immigrant and radical thinker. In poetry and prose he recounts experiences of his life. In those journals were a number of references to Sacco and Vanzetti that represent an untapped source of history that may help us understand why Italians repressed public displays of disgust at the way their fellow countrymen were treated. Lentricchia pasted newspaper photographs into his journal and wrote a number of poems about them. I have translated three poems, one before and two after the execution. They appear here for the first time in publication.

Sacco and Vanzetti condemned to death

By the electric chair the 10th of July

The worst crime in the world

Is a wake-up call for the people of the world.

The infamously crude and heartless judge

Knows they are innocent.

He, a servant of Capitalism,

Pays no attention to the protests of the people.

In the name of God, and the law

He says, Justice has been served.

The herd of people sleep while

The bourgeoisie will not be defeated.

Sacco's wife leaves the courthouse

With her baby in her hand

After her husband has been condemned to death

By that villain Judge Thayer.

Simply because they were subversives

Trying to make a better world

They will have their lives taken away

By an inhuman and traitorous judge.

It is clear that when

The judge speaks of them

He speaks cruelly and with prejudice while

To the condemned a great mistake has been committed.

Everyone knows we shouldn't kill,

but try to educate the people.

Letting things like this happen makes you

barbarian, prejudicial and wretched.

I can frankly tell you that there is not
Another judge as barbarous as you.
You send tremors across the face of the earth.
You are unjust as you condemn innocence.

Rosina pensive and sad remains
As someone lost in this world.
Then every hope remains chilled,
Casting humanity into depression.

The governor has promised
To save the two from death,
But his pardon yet has not been given
For an idea, Ai! Barbarians

A cry will come from their tombs
To the governor and say
Why should the rebels die?
If the world is this way, it is imbecile.

April 12, 1927 A. Lentricchia

Sacco and Vanzetti
For a true and human ideal

Nourished by their hearts
To correct the errors of the world
With school, not with arms and steel.

Here is the barbarian brutish capitalism
Hurled against these two
In the secret court and spent light
Two apostles of socialism are condemned

After seven years in the shadows of death
Comes the horrendous specter of the electric chair.
Judge Thayer with skeptical irony
Decided the fate of two men.

Ignoring the protests of the world,
Of the proletariat still divided
Trampled and still derided
By that wicked pest called Capitalism.

Alas! If one of these days
They must pay for this injustice
A cry then will surpass mountains
The sleeping then will be right

But when will this happen? Wait
Whenever a person has a good brain
The rough will begin the debate
Ok, how beautiful will be the vendetta.

I want to be there
To enjoy the moment
And then perhaps to die content
Comforted by emotion ardent.

This would be the recovery of it
How beautiful a glorious death
Surrounded by the shade of a red flag.

August 1927

Rest in Peace
You martyrs of free thought
Strong as rocks against the sea
The echo for you hates every sound
Yet the deaf you made to love.

In the choir the people scream revenge
They don't know the end that waits for them

They drop their guard by little oaks (Iecchini)

It seems that mankind will never rest

Until we have revenge

They go to learn the time that they mock

Everyone resolved for that in a hurry

Cio in their chest has a human heart

To make revenge for Sacco and Vanzetti

August 25, 1927

I imagine that what we have found through Augusto Lentricchia represents what many Italians from that period might have thought, felt, and expressed in Italian to those who could understand them. As the Italian language became more and more repressed, especially during the period of World War II, those sentiments were buried under the weight of learning a new language and trying to make a living in a new world. And while it seems there may have been a great gap in the public literary response to Sacco and Vanzetti, Augusto Lentricchia shows us that the feelings were strong, expressed in private, and left to future generations to bring to the public.

Today, there we are beginning to see the results of the work of Americans of Italian descent to reclaim the legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti. Robert D'Attilio, writer, historian and website director of a most impressive Sacco Vanzetti Project that you can see at saccovanzettiproject.org and Anton Coppola's creative use of

the myth through the fine art of opera. All and all these artists are reclaiming a history that helps them make sense of who they are as individuals and who we all can be if we do not deny the legacy of these two men.

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