WORLDS IMAGINED AND WORLDS EXPERIENCED:
ITALIANS IN AMERICA IN VITA BY MELANIA MAZZUCCO
AND UMBERTINA BY HELEN BAROLINI

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of the Ohio State University

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2004

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ABSTRACT

Italian emigration and assimilation has long been a major topic in writings by Italian/Americans. Italian literature—that is literature written by Italians in Italy—has very few literary examples that deal with similar topics. This thesis compares two books—Umbertina by Italian/American writer Helen Barolini and Vita by Italian Melania Mazzucco—that are both dedicated to immigration and assimilation of Italians in America. In the thesis differences and similarities between the two novels are examined at length.

The role of autobiography and retrospection is very important in both novels. The two writers depart from their own and their family’s experiences to talk about the ethnic and gender identification process of Italians in America in general. The thesis contends that the Italian/American background of Helen Barolini has determined the greater emphasis put by this writer on the issues of ethnicity and feminism, issues that affected her personally.

Part Two demonstrates how the two books present different images of Italy and of America. For Italian immigrants, Italy invokes rather negative memories. America, imaginary place for Mazzucco and more realistic for Barolini, is a country where success can be quickly attained, but at the cost of huge sacrifices. Another finding is that female protagonists gain personal independence in America that would have been denied to them in Italy.
Part Three analyses the language and structure of both novels. Although stylistic and linguistic variety is present in both of them, the actual results of such variety are different. This is because of the different ideological messages of the two books: Barolini’s is very intense, while ideology is not so important for Mazzucco. Barolini, an Italian/American woman is still dealing with the problems she discusses in her novel while they are of lesser interest to Mazzucco, a young Italian who has not struggled in the same way with the problems of immigration and assimilation she writes about. The two books, nonetheless, make an important contribution to our understanding of the issues faced by Italian immigrants to this country through their different ways of presenting them.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Charles Klopp, for intellectual support, encouragement and stimulating discussions that made this thesis possible, and for his patience in correcting linguistic and stylistic errors.

I am grateful to Alison Rolf and Mary Laura Papalas for their help in editing and proofreading and for their suggestions regarding linguistic organization of this thesis.

I also wish to thank Jorge Hau for his enthusiasm and encouragement that helped me continue my research in moments of doubt and for his help in handling various computer problems.
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Area of Emphasis: Italian Language and Literature
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INTRODUCTION

“Your novel is our story, too [...]”, Helen Barolini was once told when talking to an Italian during the promotion of her novel “Umbertina” in Italy in 2001 (Making 59). The story her interlocutor referred to is a story of Italian/Americans,¹ an ethnic group among the largest in the United States. It is a story of evolution, a journey from being a poor and uneducated Italian into being an American aware of and at peace with his or her Italian heritage. Not for everyone, however, was this evolution a peaceful one. Italian/Americans have realized that what they and the generations that came before them built during such self-development was a separate Italian/American culture, with roots in Italy, but viable in the New Land of North America as well. Nevertheless, just as the title of the book by Andrew Rolle The Italian Americans: Troubled Roots indicates, Italian origins have not always been a serene and accepted heritage. Members of the Italian/American community for a long time did not want to talk publicly about their dilemmas. This silence was due to a code of silence, inherited directly in some cases from the Sicilian codice di omertă. This code, widely followed by the inhabitants of southern Italy from where most immigrants came, requires that secrets be kept inside a limited circle of relatives and neighbors. Italian immigration to the United States, which reached

¹ For discussion on how to spell Italian/American, see Tamburri, To Hyphenate 43-47.
its peak in the years 1880-1910, brought with it many similar rules of behavior typical of the Italians from the southern part of Italy. The contrast between family-centered Italian mentality and American individualism was the major cause for identity problems for many second-, third- and fourth-generation Italian/Americans.

With the emergence of studies on ethnicity, Italian/Americans started claiming their space in the dominant culture. They called their culture a cultura negata, to use, after Robert Viscusi, Gramsci’s term: a culture that had been excluded from the “forums of power” (Italian American Literary History 158). Like many other ethnic groups, Italian/Americans have also been attempting to call attention to their existence and to demand a share in this “power” that the dominant culture has completely appropriated. In doing so, they developed their own discourse. The debate around Italian America is particularly intense in the fields of history and literature, from which a significant amount of critical work has come.

When Gay Talese in 1993 published his controversial article with the self-explanatory title “Where Are the Italian/American Novelists?” in the New York Times Book Review, he implied that they did not exist at all (1). The reaction to his publication was immense. Many readers accused him of not having listened to the voices that had been describing Italian/American experience for a long time. Talese’s contribution to the debate certainly brought wider attention to a discussion that had been conducted at the very margin of literary discussion in America. Italian/American authors and critics spoke out immediately and put the names of critics like Fred L. Gardaphé, Robert Viscusi, Anthony Tamburri, Paolo Giordano, Mary Jo Bona, Helen Barolini, Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino, and those of writers such as Jerre Mangione, Pietro Di Donato, John Fante,
Mario Puzo, Tina DeRosa and others before Talese and the American public. Despite the limits imposed on the evolution of Italian/American literature and contrary to what Gay Talese has stated in his article, this literature exists and has received serious and critical attention.

What is this enigmatic Italian/American literature? Despite attempts to identify the most general characteristics of Italian/American literature, this turned out to be just barely possible (Tamburri, Rethinking 244). Italian/American identity is not well defined or stable. To the contrary, it faces a constant process of redefinition and reinvention. Therefore Italian/American literature also undergoes the same process of redefinition and changes from generation to generation. Topics in the writings by Italian/Americans and their attitude towards *italianità* change too. However, this *italianità* is a recurrent element. Italian identity is usually perceived as an obstacle to complete assimilation and Italian/American characters in fiction and memoirs are always alienated and have to go through a process of maturation to fully accept themselves.

Robert Viscusi in his essay already cited on Italian/American writing says that “the literary history uses the word ‘ethnicity’ to mean [...] the conscious reproduction of marks of exclusion.” The term “ethnicity” was borrowed from the social sciences in which these marks of exclusion are “signs of membership in a subaltern group that shares a common geographic, political, linguistic, or even genetic set of origins” (Italian American Literary History 159). Italian/Americans found themselves in the situation of exclusion from this “subaltern group.” Fred L. Gardaphé, J. Gattuso Hendin and E. Giunta go further, arguing that it is the woman writer of Italian descent who first succeeded in depicting the experience of otherness caused by challenges from both the
dominant culture that rejects their ethnicity and the ethnicity that itself imposes limits on
their gender. The particular situation of the Italian/American women, which can be
 traced back to the model of serieta in eighteenth and nineteenth century Italian culture,
gave birth to a considerable number of novels depicting this experience of a double
struggle for both ethnic and sexual identity.

At this point I would like to turn to Helen Barolini, a quotation from whose essay
opens this Introduction. Helen Barolini has appeared so far as the author of essays and as
a critic. Her Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian-American Women, which
won the American Book Award in 1985, is today considered a seminal work in
Italian/American literary criticism. Her writing, however, combines different genres and
discourses and also includes a cookbook and novels. Her most famous work is
Umbertina, published in 1979 and acclaimed as “a paradigm of Italian-American
literature” as it reflects three stages of the development of this literature (Kotsaftis 166).

Barolini, in her essays and critical activity, showed a strong interest in literature
by Italian/American women. She has devoted many pages to promoting and analyzing
their writing, proving constantly how wrong Gay Talese was. In her Introduction to The
Dream Book she states: “Italian Americans have a [...] task: to chronicle [...] the story of
a great journey of the Italian people to this country. It is an epic theme and it has not been
dealt with in Italian literature” (55). “The story of a great journey of the Italian people” is
the story Barolini’s Italian interlocutor I cited at the very beginning is referring to. This

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2 See Gardaphé, Double Burden 265; Hendin 204 and Giunta, Speaking Through Silences 288.

3 According to Richard Gambino (Blood), “a serious woman” will place the family’s needs above anything
else. Indeed, her ultimate goal will be that of marrying and having a family. Therefore, she is also expected
to possess skills necessary to improve the welfare of the family.
person, interviewing Barolini about the publication of Umbertina, was surprised that it was translated into Italian so late, only in 2001, twenty years after the book’s first appearance in the United States. Indeed, it is startling that in spite of the enormous number of Italians who left Italy for America, Italian literature has shown a very limited interest in their experiences. As Enzo Golino noted, this interest has been limited to short works by Edmondo De Amicis, Pascoli or Pirandello, which passed almost unnoticed, and by minor writers, like Raffaele Viviani or Francesco Perri. Generally, however, Italian literature lacks a complex literary account of this massive phenomenon and has completely neglected any investigation of the story that followed <http://www.rizzoli.rcslibri.it/rizzoli/_minisiti/vita/testorecensioni.htm>.

This unfortunate situation was recently interrupted. In 2003 Melania Mazzucco, known to Italian readers as the author of Il bacio della Medusa (1996), La camera di Baltus (1998) and Lei cosi amata (2000), published Vita, which immediately became a big editorial success and won the prestigious literary Premio Strega. Mazzucco’s Vita came out two years after the publication of the Italian version of Barolini’s Umbertina. They are both novels about the experience of Italians in America, seen from the perspective of two different authors from two different cultural and national backgrounds. How did they present this experience? In what aspects are their books similar? In what aspects are they different? What affected those differences? These and many other questions come to mind reading Vita and Umbertina. Before answering them, however, it is necessary to mention the most obvious differences and analogies between these two authors, because they will later have further implications.
Helen Barolini is a third generation Italian/American: she was born in 1925 and raised in the United States as an American; later in life, she married an Italian poet, and also lived in Italy. Melania Mazzucco, instead, is much younger; she was born in Rome in 1966. She has visited the United States, but only as a tourist. Therefore, her experience of America is not as direct as Barolini’s experience of Italy. It is important to emphasize that Barolini and Mazzucco come from completely different parts of the world: Barolini is American, Mazzucco–Italian.

Barolini, however, grew up in an Italian/American neighborhood in Syracuse, New York, a fact that has important implications for her work. As an Italian/American, she has faced dilemmas regarding the evolution and definition of her ethnic identity. This Italian/American discourse had a big impact on her writing. The Italian Mazzucco never had to search for her ethnic identity. She did not have to face conflicts between the values of her family and those of the dominant culture, because they are the same. Thus neither she nor her protagonists have had to deal with the problems of ethnic identity the way Barolini’s protagonists did.

Barolini published her book in 1979, Mazzucco hers in 2003. Barolini’s book was her first major literary accomplishment, while Mazzucco already had three other successful novels to her credit. Barolini, however, could draw on the tradition of Italian/American writing that has dealt with those topics, while Mazzucco’s novel is, as it has been pointed out in many reviews following the publication of Vita, the first Italian major fiction novel to talk extensively about Italian mass emigration at the beginning of the twentieth century, an episode that made Italian history, too.
At the time Barolini was working on *Umbertina*, feminism was becoming more and more present in public life and literary studies. Barolini has clearly been influenced by the feminist struggles of the time. Mazzucco, instead, lives at a time when issues important for Barolini (like importance of meaningful work, the burden of romantic love, equality between sexes, partnership in marriage [Mannino, *Review* 194]) are no longer quite as pressing in western society as they were for Barolini. Mazzucco can be considered a liberated woman who does not have to fight quite so hard for her rights, at least not as much as Barolini did.

These circumstances affected the literary choices the two authors made. Barolini in *Umbertina* presents four generations of Italian/American women: she starts with Umbertina who emigrated from Italy to America, skips the next generation and passes to Marguerite, who could also be identified with herself. The generation she stops at is that Tina, the daughter of an Italian/American mother and an Italian father. This diachronic overview demonstrates how the trauma of emigration and assimilation is transmitted from mother to daughter and how the quest for ethnic (and female) identity finishes with a “happy ending.” Mazzucco, who generationally could be identified more or less with Tina, focuses, instead, solely on the experience of the newcomers. She mentions the second generation, she also jumps forward to contemporary times, but the central topic of her novel is the love story of the two immigrant children: Diamante and Vita, a love story that lacks a “happy ending,” however, since the main protagonists split: Diamante goes back to Italy and Vita remains in America.

These differences are to be kept in mind throughout the following analysis. But these novels also contain some extremely interesting similarities. *Umbertina* and *Vita* are
both robust novels written by women. They also both talk about a similar experience of emigration, immigration and assimilation, but offer for their protagonist dissimilar conclusions. They confront issues of ethnicity, gender and politics. They also show what are often similar images of both Italy and America. The two novels take a retrospective look into this difficult past through the figures of the authors’ grandparents, assuming in this way a form that is also autobiographical. The past in both cases is blurred and only partially recreated. Moreover, the stories told by Barolini and Mazzucco treat many years and are developed over a wide spectrum of time. For this reason, both books have an epic character. Readers of these books have to deal with frequent shifts of place and time. The formal aspects in the two novels, such as their structure, language and style, also change throughout the narration. This variety of registers and complex structuring are applied differently in both novels. All those affinities, both in the narration techniques and in the actual stories of the protagonists, offer a sufficient basis for a comparison between the two works.

I believe that by contrasting Umbertina and Vita important aspects of Italian/American literature can be identified. I would like to consider how italianità changes and how much having a different cultural background influences the depiction of the experience of migration, assimilation and return. How those two women—one an Italian/American with the burden of being a hyphenated author, the other a much younger Italian discovering the unknown past of her family—are similar and different, will be at the center of my focus in the pages to follow.
PART I

JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF THE SELF
CHAPTER 1

INSPIRED BY GRANDPARENTS

"Becoming ourselves is part of our writing [...]," says Helen Barolini, echoing Pietro Di Donato in a 1999 essay (*Epic* 266). This quotation conveys the double dimension of the notion of literature. For Italian/American writers, like Di Donato and Barolini, literature has both collective and private value. Writing is perceived as a tool belonging to an entire community, which should be employed to understand that community’s character, customs and problems. But literature not only serves the group, it also has a private value for individuals, whether the authors or the readers. Writing is an extremely private search that can lead to a discovery of self.

Mazzucco’s standpoint in regard to literature is close to that of Barolini’s and Di Donato’s. In the interview with Maddalena Tirabassi she said: "[...] solo la letteratura riesce a formare l’immaginario di una nazione e a diventare la vera memoria collettiva." Mazzucco, too, sees writing as a service for the benefit of a group. However, for Mazzucco this group is the Italian nation, while Barolini writes on behalf of and for the Italian/American community—a minority group that exists within and is often in contrast with the dominant culture. While creating the collective memory of a nation whose culture is not threatened by any dominant values and thus does not have to struggle for
survival, Mazzucco conducts her personal quest, too. Moreover, the private dimension of her quest overshadows the collective one. She decided to write Vita “per riscattare l’emigrazione dell’oblio,” as she said in the cited interview, but first of all to find out truths about her family’s history and, through digging in the past, find her place in this history, too.

Both Mazzucco and Barolini look far back in the past in order to find in the experiences of the first immigrants to America the solutions to the questions that bother them now. Melania Mazzucco throughout her early life had believed that the roots of her family were in Piedmont. Only recently did she discover that, instead, they are to be searched for south of Piedmont—in a small town within the province of Minturno. Her family’s history hides a lot of secrets and Vita reveals one of them—that of her grandfather’s emigration to America. Barolini’s Umbertina does not investigate so closely the author’s family, even though the title character is modeled on Barolini’s grandmother (Greenberg 91). Barolini’s objective is to show the evolution of the Italian/American identity, the identity that could not be examined without describing the generation of the newcomers.

Indeed, writing well as an Italian/American requires the willingness to dig into one’s past, one’s origins, one’s family life and one’s inner world—a route that many Italian/American writers embark on to find answers to their uncomfortable sense of otherness. Therefore autobiographical accounts of experiences in America were among the first literary attempts by Italian/Americans, they gave rise to the further development of Italian/American literature (Gardaphé, Italian Signs 16).
One could call the incorporation of autobiographical elements into Italian/American writings narcissism; an accusation many critics put forward when asked about the accomplishments of writers of Italian descent. If we consider, however, that the quest for identity for Italian/Americans has not been yet completed, this focus on oneself is justified, since autobiography can be a way to accelerate the process of self-discovery. By connecting with the experiences of their ancestors, many writers of Italian descent find the strength and motivation to overcome their own feelings of alienation and, eventually, to face their identities and become reconciled with them. Thus they follow Michael Novak’s advice that “There is no other way but autobiography by which to cure oneself of too much objectivity” (Gardaphé, Double Burden 276). The rule of objectivity in literary research and writing has for many years required that writers and scholars stay away from investigating their own lives. This investigation, however, is necessary, especially for Italian/American writers, to understand themselves. It turned out to be necessary for Mazzucco, who is not Italian/American, as well. Mazzucco proved also that a successful novel could be based on the author’s autobiography.

While both novels are to some extent autobiographical, they are not autobiographies. They use facts from the authors’ lives and turn those facts into fiction. Mazzucco declares that “[...] nell’invenzione del rabdomante [...] stava il suo segreto, la sua vera identità–e la mia” (385). She says explicitly that the story she tells in Vita is the story of her family. Barolini does not make any explicit statements that would link the characters in Umbertina to herself or her relatives. Yet it is difficult to resist the notion that her work has at least been autobiographically inspired. In many of Barolini’s essays and stories she explicitly describes episodes and images as if taken from a family album.
Putting those autobiographical pieces together, one realizes how many facts from Barolini’s life have found places in her novel. The figure of the successful grandmother Umbertina, the marriage of Marguerite to an Italian poet, Tina’s interests in medieval Italian literature, and many other elements could be traced to the novelist’s actual family.

The difference in the way the novelists approach the problem of autobiography in their books lies in the objective of their writing. Before going on to discuss this matter, the manner in which autobiography affected Mazzucco’s Vita should be considered. Melania Mazzucco insists on the identification of the events presented in her novel with facts from her life. She points out the relation between herself and many of her characters, for example confessing in the Prologue that the life of Dy, Vita’s son, raised in the United States as an American of Italian descent could have also been her own story. A little further on she says: “La storia dei Mazzucco gravava su di me come colpa, che dovevo espiare” (44). She made this journey into her family’s past, because she wanted to situate herself in it. She admits this unequivocally: “E io volevo trovare il suo [Vita’s] posto, nella sua storia e nella mia” (137). Mazzucco, in reality, figures in her novel as a character herself: her own search for the truth about her family is one of the main topics of Vita.

Mazzucco tries to stick as close as possible to reality in the depiction of the migration experience of her relatives, a challenge that is too difficult to fully confront because that part of her family’s history has always been a taboo. Despite her efforts to remain historically credible, she was not able to reveal the complete truth about her grandfather’s past. His experience was only partially preserved by his offspring, and he himself was not willing to share it with anyone. As a result, memory, full of blanks and
based on the stories that circulated within the family, many of which were invented, was almost the only resource at Mazzucco’s disposal. She tried to fill in many of those blanks through extensive research, by visiting the places in Italy and in the United States from where her protagonists came, by consulting historical documents, letters and statements, by talking to family members; still, the total reconstruction of her grandfather’s experience was not possible. What preserved his memory were words for the most part, and those are too difficult to control, especially if spoken by so many people. Mazzucco found out, in the process of collecting the data, that the same story had many different versions, depending on who was telling it. The relatives she interviewed about the legendary Black Hand “raccontarono [...] con varianti e sfumature attribuibili al carattere del narratore (ingenuo e terrorizzato lo zio Amedeo, ironico e divertito mio padre)” (86). Mazzucco does not claim to possess an absolute knowledge of the historical facts; instead she over and over again indicates the obstacles she encountered before arriving at the truth. So much that she wonders at one point if the story of Vita really happened. She is, however, driven by the desire to find out. Her autobiographism is declared, which can be explained by the goals that she sets for herself writing Vita. Her objective is solely personal: to learn the story of her family, and, through digging in the past, to find her space in it, too. Perhaps because Mazzucco’s private quest does not pretend to be universalized, it makes hers a successful story that has appeal for a large public.

Helen Barolini has also turned to herself to look for topics of her writing. She chose for her topic the problems that bother women of the community she also belongs to. Contrary to Mazzucco, however, she aims at achieving a higher level of typicality.
Her intention is to use the lives of her protagonists as examples, to universalize them so that they are interpreted as typical of a certain group. By depicting four generations of Italian/American women Barolini would like to show the evolution of a whole community, and to give voice to their concerns. Barolini departs from autobiography because she wants her story to present an image not only of her own life, but also of the lives of many others.

The generation with which Barolini starts her novel is that of Umbertina who, however, is the protagonist of only the first part of the novel. There are two others, entitled respectively Marguerite and Tina. Even so, Umbertina is a dominating presence throughout the entire book. So is Diamante, Mazzucco’s grandfather. In fact, both novelists look at grandparents as heroic, almost legendary figures from the past. The grandmother Umbertina in Barolini and the grandfather Diamante in Mazzucco (who is also the author’s grandfather) are the two people with whom everything begins: both the story and the examination of the self. They are the first and the most important bonds to the past and through them the exploration of identity is traced by both Barolini and Mazzucco.

The Prologue opening Umbertina states this very clearly. Marguerite, a third generation Italian/American, when expressing her feelings of alienation to the psychoanalyst Dr. Verdile, is told: “Start with your grandmother” (19). Dr. Verdile, who knows how much Marguerite admires Umbertina, even though she has very few recollections about her, suggests that she seek the strength she is missing in her grandmother Umbertina’s experiences. That the Prologue concludes with the words quoted above is significant: Barolini is convinced that the experiences of the first
generation are crucial for understanding and resolving the dilemmas of successive Italian/Americans.

Grandmothers make frequent appearances in the productions of Italian/Americans, in particular those by female writers, who have rendered the grandmother emblem another "Italian sign," a solid characteristic and the subject—as Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino has noted—of at least one poem or short story written by most Italian/American women writers. In her analysis of the figure of the Italian grandmother, Mannino describes her as "a person with agency who is always engaged in some essential work [...] self-confident, nurturing and wise, and totally unlike the stereotype of the passive Italian grandmother" (Introduction, Revisionary 7). This could also be a description of Umbertina, an Italian woman from Calabria who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, leaves Italy for the United States. It is Umbertina’s strength and ability to break gender constraints in order to achieve certain goals that Marguerite lacks and this lack ultimately leads her to defeat. Marguerite is the opposite of her grandmother: she is confused, directionless and passive. In spite of the admiration she has for Umbertina, she is not able to follow in her footsteps and take control of her life. Her failure to discover who her grandmother really was causes her unhappiness and leads in the end to her apparent suicide, in a car crash caused by her recklessness. Marguerite’s daughter, Tina, however, does not make this mistake. She undergoes an evolution from not feeling fully comfortable with her mixed Italian/American and Italian identity into a very goal-oriented woman who is able to make even difficult decisions on her own and knows that such independence can be only beneficial. At the end of her quest she is much more like Umbertina: strong, independent and focused on her goals. A trip Tina makes to
Calabria—a place never visited by her mother—is an important step in her eventual empowerment. Later she adds: "she wasn’t strong enough to be herself. Only Umbertina seems to have done what she had to do in life" (358). One of those things to do was create a career for herself before making any marriage commitments. Tina is able to control her life, something her mother never could. And she recognizes that her great-grandmother has contributed to her success and is sharply aware of the link between their experiences.

Umbertina sets the model to pursue. By naming the novel after her, Barolini suggests that Umbertina could be an inspiration for all women, regardless of ethnicity. Although Umbertina’s message was ignored by Marguerite, it was not ignored by Tina. This message was symbolically embodied in the bedspread, which Umbertina was forced to sell to the social worker Anna Giordani to get money to be able to leave New York for a city in upstate New York. This bedspread reappears at the end of the novel, as a part of an exhibition of the “Anna Giordani Collection.” When she looks at the bedspread Tina, who does not know it belonged to her great-grandmother, reflects: "It was as if her old ancestor, the Umbertina she had fruitlessly sought in Castagna, had suddenly become manifest in the New World and spoken to her" (408). The bond between the two women, so distant in time, is once again made direct through the agency of this typically feminine work of art: a bedspread.

The grandmother is Barolini’s means of empowerment: as a woman, but what is more, as a writer. Umbertina serves the purpose of the story, as well as serving the writer herself, who "can break gender norms and write the story of a woman who achieved the American dream without losing her ability to nurture and care for her husband and
children” (Mannino, Revisionary 154). Not only is Barolini, thanks to the grandmother, able to break the code of silence, another legacy of the culture brought from southern Italy by immigrants, she can write as an Italian/American woman. She does so by thinking through the grandmother Umbertina, or through her own grandmother who, as she often stated, was her principal inspiration for her novel (Greenberg 91).

In Mazzucco’s Vita the characters are also driven by a search for the family’s past. The novel opens with the visit of Dy, the son of Vita—the title character of the novel, to Tufo during the Second World War. Tufo is the town from which Dy’s family had emigrated and Dy had always wanted to visit that village to find out more about his mother’s past. Like Tina, Dy, as an American, did not feel at home at all there. His return, though, is only one episode in Mazzucco’s book, and does not have nearly the significance, as does Tina’s visit to Castagna in Umbertina.

What is significant, however, is that Mazzucco was inspired to write Vita by her grandfather Diamante. Just as Umbertina is Barolini’s link to the past, Diamante is Mazzucco’s means of reconnecting with the past she had been completely unaware of. Throughout the entire novel Mazzucco is trying to reveal the facts about Diamante’s American journey. It is almost an obsession to learn as much as she can about this unknown part of her family history. Her focus, contrary to Umbertina, is on the experience of one generation only, that of her grandfather’s. Understanding his story from the beginning of the century helps her understand herself. Thus she invites the reader, and herself, not to forget, because “si diventa tristi quando si dimentica” (138). Writing a novel about her grandfather proves also an empowerment for Mazzucco as a writer. Hers is not the same as Barolini’s empowerment, however, because she does not
need her grandfather to help her assume power as an individual and a woman, because Mazzucco, unlike Barolini before she began to write, does not feel deprived of this power. Mazzucco does not bear the burden of being a female of Italian descent; she does not have to fight for recognition as a writer or for a feeling of being comfortable with her ethnic and sexual identity. For Mazzucco there is no need for this sort of connection between her grandfather, Diamante, and the generations in between, so she does not make it. For Barolini, instead, whether to preserve her Italian background or to forget it is an essential question, because, as Andrew Rolle said, referring to the attitude of the children of Italian immigrants, “this separation from one’s past [...] did involve a devaluing of selfhood” (31). Writing is a way to combat this devaluation of selfhood by reconnecting intelligently with the past.

While Barolini speaks on behalf of the Italian/American community and bears the burden of being a member of that community, Mazzucco speaks only for herself. While Barolini sees her writing in terms of a mission to effect change, Mazzucco’s quest is solely personal. While Barolini’s message is direct and insistent, Mazzucco is less interested in making an explicit statement. The inspiration they derive from their ancestors and the fascination these ancestors’ experiences have for them is what these two writers share. Interestingly the search for this inspiration brought them to two different places: it brought Barolini to the town of Castagna in Italy and Mazzucco to Little Italy in America. In these distant places, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the two stories began. They did not finish there, though. Instead, they had a huge impact on the succeeding generations. How and why? The answers are in the chapters that follow.
CHAPTER 2

ITALIAN OR AMERICAN: THE QUEST FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY

Grandparents play a crucial role in both Vita and Umbertina as the authors’ and the protagonists’ links to the past, the past that hides solutions to the problems of the present. And both novels continue the story initiated by grandparents. Vita goes beyond the years Diamante spent in America. Mazzucco tells us what happened to her characters after Vita and Diamante split. Then she goes on to the next generation, that of Vita’s son Dy and Diamante’s son Roberto. Finally she herself also appears as a protagonist of her novel. Barolini devotes equal space in her Umbertina to different generations of Italian/American women. Indeed, it was Barolini’s intention to demonstrate how the story of Italians in America, begun with Umbertina, evolved. However, she is particularly interested in the third- and forth-generation Italian/Americans; she left out the second-generation which is “so into Americanizing […], has no struggle” and misses “drama” and “tension” (Greenberg 95). Indeed, Umbertina’s daughter Carla is a good example of how total this adoption of American values was. She wants to be considered American and has nothing but contempt for her Italian roots. Marguerite remembers her father “separating himself from Italians of the North Side to make himself into a real American.” She also tells her psychoanalyst how this desired, but forced Americanization
provoked "conflict and bitterness" (19), because both her parents, despite their apparently comfortable lives, never really faced the truth about their identities.

Melania Mazzucco's second generation of Italian/Americans, represented by Vita's son Dy, is more present in her novel. This group is also the furthest she goes in time in the depiction of the Italian/American experience. Dy desperately wants to be American, too. Mazzucco, moreover, explains his reasons and shows the complexity of the conflict he personifies. Dy remembers becoming aware of his otherness, understanding "di non essere un americano vero. Di essere italiano per sempre agli occhi degli altri--anche se ai propri non lo era né lo sarebbe stato mai" (186). The painful experiences of intolerance, that many times turn into resentment against his parents led to a total denial of the Italian part of his identity and to a feeling of shame for his Italian relatives and himself. Dy stopped speaking Italian and Americanized his Italian name. In Mazzucco's novel there are numerous depictions of the tensions between Americans and Italians, typical of the early years of Italian immigration. Sometimes these tensions erupted into violence. The memory of slogans "Burn them--hang them" (187) and the demolition of his father's office remained as a scar that haunted Dy for a long time.

Carla and Dy, so focused on becoming first category Americans, ignored the Italian part of their personalities. They denied having any relation to Italy or Italian culture. Thus they embraced the notion of the "melting pot," propagated in American society as the answer to the multicultural character of America. According to this notion, all ethnic differences "melt out" in the dominant culture in the effort to create an American identity. The generations following the second one proved, however, that these
ethnic differences did not disappear at all. On the contrary, they were internalized and developed into an identity conflict.

The “melting pot” is probably the most recognized symbol of the United States. The term comes from the title of a play by an English writer of Jewish origin, written in 1909—a work of little literary importance, according to Andrew Rolle, that gave birth to “the massive distortion […], which perpetuated confusing explanations of what had actually happened” (Introduction xi-xii). According to this influential concept, the New Land was portrayed as accepting all newcomers, whose ethnicity would be absorbed fast and assimilated into American society. The “melting pot” implied a non-violent process in which all ethnic values at odds with the American ones would disappear so that a peaceful and trouble-free coexistence could be attained.

This mythology has been proven unsuccessful. Out of the disappointment it created, new studies, sometimes referred to as “new ethnicity,” have developed (Boscia-Mulé 49). Since the 1960s, a new way of describing multi-ethnic American society has been promoted, substituting the idea of the “melting pot” with the notion of America as “a kaleidoscopic, sociocultural mosaic.” This theory emphasizes how “the sociocultural dynamics of the United States reveal a constant flux of changes originating in the very existence of the various differentiated ethnic/racial groups that constitute the overall population of the United States” (Tamburri, Rethinking 243-244). Thus the concept of diversity has been embraced and appreciated.

One discovery that emerged from this new interest towards ethnicity was that cultural variety in the New Land did not disappear; on the contrary, many national groups did not assimilate and were not willing to abandon their ethnic peculiarities. Moreover,
the process of assimilation turned out to be more painful than had been suspected. Many immigrants, their families, and their descendants had to go through painful experiences and suffered feelings of depression and alienation. All these conclusions invalidated the optimistic vision of the "melting pot."

Another finding is that throughout the years ethnic identity does not simply preserve the features of those who first came to the United States (Tamburri, *Rethinking* 245). To the contrary, ethnic identity undergoes constant reinventions and reinterpretations, because every new generation is faced with new problems and is shaped by different circumstances. This explains the continuous interest by scholars and others for the problems of the various national communities living in America. The evolution of ethnic identities in many different ways suggests that the concept of the "melting pot" should be abandoned.

Italian/American circles were eager to embrace this reconception of the immigrant experience. Suddenly the issues haunting their communities turned out to be respectable ones, even though talking about them required very often breaking the silence that surrounded them. Instead of one identity suitable for everyone, there appeared numerous identities, all of them legitimate.

For that reason, criticism that focused on the literature written by Italian/American authors has also changed. The shifting identities of Italian/American writers affect their works in regard to their choice of themes and to the depiction of the protagonists. However it is also possible to distinguish a set of common features among
those works. One of these features is the existence of a character whose origins are Italian and whose *italianità* is in conflict with the dominant culture.

In terms of the history of Italian/American writing, Barolini's *Umbertina* is usually considered a classic. By replacing a single traditional alienated hero with multiplied female voices, the author emphasizes the progressive characteristic of the process: each generation described in *Umbertina* reflects a different phase of the evolution of Italian/American identity. The search for the self is pursued in two often interlaced directions—that for the ethnic self and that for the female self. This chapter will analyze the ethnic one. In the previous chapter, we observed how the two writers established themselves as authors by thinking back through grandparents. This time we will take a closer look at the protagonists of their novels.

As someone personally involved in the Italian/American dilemma of split identities, Helen Barolini devotes much more space to this issue than Melania Mazzucco does. Mazzucco, born and raised in Italy, did not have to question her nationality or ethnic personality. She apparently does not feel entirely secure about her own identity and her novel is an attempt to find out more about herself through her investigation into the history of her family. But hers is not a quest for ethnic identity, as it is in Barolini's case. Mazzucco is not threatened by the Italian culture that surrounds her in the way

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4 Tamburri in *To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate* divided the evolution of Italian/American literature in three stages (first-stage writer writes against the stereotypes, but within the rules of the dominant culture; second-stage writer demystifies stereotypes, criticizes the oppression and fights against restrictions of the dominant culture; third-stage writer speaks out as an American without abandoning his/her cultural and ethnic heritage) 30-31; Rose Bagle Green in *The Italian-American Novel* individualized five stages (1. "explanatory narratives," 2. "withdrawal into isolation," 3. "revulsion into non-Italian-American themes," 4. return to Italian-American themes, 5. fusion of the traditions of both Italian and American cultures) 62; F.Gardaphè in *Italian Signs, American Streets: the Evolution of Italian American Narrative* found three, basing his analysis on the philosophy of Giambattista Vico (1. *verro naratio*, 2. "mythic mode," 3. "philosophic mode") 20-23.
Helen Barolini feels threatened by the Italian/American and American cultures. In Mazzucco’s life there is only one culture that happens to be the dominant culture, too. Therefore she is not split between the two different cultures nor does she feel the necessity to make a choice between them. The burden of split personality did, however, affect Helen Barolini’s writing. Although Mazzucco must have been familiar with these matters, they are not at the center of Vita. Barolini, instead, deals with it at length. What interests her most is the way the Italian values clash with the American ones in one person or one family.

Mary Ann Mannino in her 2003 essay Stains from an Immigrant Past says that the depression, fear and mistrust toward the new environment that immigrants felt in the New Land were internalized as traumas of immigration and passed on to the generations of their children (316). The immigrants, who came to the New Land, mostly from the south of Italy, brought with them the values typical of the southern Italian peasant culture. This culture was based on strong bonds to the family and religion. This strong sense of community, developed as a defense against the reigning Italian authorities, provoked a conflict with the American Protestant culture and its emphasis on the individual. Moreover, a sense of civic responsibilities to entities beyond the family was foreign to Italian immigrants who, on the contrary, had never trusted any authority other than that of the family. This conflict, repressed by the first-generation and externalized by an attachment to material values by the second-generation, was finally recognized as such by the third generation. One representative of this group is Marguerite in Umbertina, considered by many and by the author herself to be the central character of the novel. “Marguerite is the quester, the searcher, the seeker [...] who first has some awareness
that there is a problem" (Greenberg 94). Thus Marguerite, even though she does not fully understand the conflict within herself nor knows how to deal with it, begins a search that will be continued and completed by her daughters.

Marguerite is an alienated person. Already as a girl, growing up, even "in her family she felt not familiar, but different" (149), because of the family's materialism and total devotion to the American way of life. In addition she felt distanced from her peers. This sense of otherness haunted her throughout her life. Marguerite tried to fight it, hoping that things would change and that with time she would learn to change or to accept life as it is. As a teenager, Marguerite wanted to satisfy her parents by adjusting her feelings to fit their ideals; later on, however, her actions were calculated to antagonize them, and, ultimately, escape from them. Many of Marguerite's decisions, like the unfortunate one to get married to Lennart whom she had just met, were not made carefully and only proved how little she controlled her own life. Attempts to escape from the suffocating bonds of the family are a recurrent motif in literature by Italian/Americans. The influence of the family, an inheritance from l'ordine della famiglia, often appears the first and most difficult obstacle that must be overcome in order to gain the independence that is so highly valued by American culture. This conflict is internalized by fictional characters, who must choose between obeying the rules of their family or accepting those of society. If they accept those of society, this is often perceived as a betrayal, especially if pursued by women.

Marguerite also suffered from the excessive pressure the family was putting on her. She disapproved of the uncritical acceptance of the American style that her family had adopted. She was taught and encouraged to behave as an American, to speak proper
English, to interact with non-Italian friends. She was aware, however, of her family's Italian roots. Ever since she can remember, she had watched with curiosity while numerous visitors at her house would speak an appealing language she could not understand. Family picnics were an excellent occasion for this. During those gatherings she would feel particularly attracted by "that mysterious old woman with whom she couldn't speak," whose image dominated her memory (150). She recalls the reverence the entire family would demonstrate towards her, but she also recalls being told, "it was not nice to look too Italian and to speak bad English the way uncle Nunzio did" (150). This inconsistency in dealing with the *italianità* provoked confusion that would only intensify in the future.

This love-hate relationship towards their Italian origins was typical of Italian/Americans. By in *Vita*, when he finally disembarks in Italy, expresses his contentment to be in the country of his grandparents, the country so present in the stories he used to listen to, in the flavors of the food he ate, and the smells which filled his family's kitchen; "il paradiso perduto e l'inferno della memoria [...]. Un luogo remoto, un nome straniero-che odiava, perché gli ricordava ciò che non era, che desiderava distruggere-per liberarsene definitivamente" (186). He wanted to understand the secret of this country that has always remained very remote to him, but that was also an obstacle in his becoming fully American.

As a teenager, Marguerite sensed the same incongruity, but "the Italian-American complex was too intricate a notion for her to unravel in that scene" (157), and it remained that way until the end, even though her sensitivity to the matter grew with time. Maybe she thought she would be closer to coming to peace with herself once she knew more.
about her Italian part, which is what she was ultimately advised to do by Dr. Verdile in the Prologue. Marguerite’s search, however, went in the wrong direction. Instead of personalizing it by searching for her own roots, by taking an attentive journey into herself, she neglected her inner voice and thought she could silence it by going to Italy and learning the Italian language—a decision that astonished her relatives.

Her American family was even more astonished when they learned that their daughter, whom they wanted to see married to an Italian/American and established in the United States, decided instead to marry an Italian aristocrat and poet from Venice. Marguerite thought that by marrying Alberto and establishing her life in Italy she would prove that she was completely autonomous from her Italian/American family. She also hoped to have found her place, a house where she could feel comfortable and not alienated. She learned, however, that trying to be Italian and to adjust to the Italian way of life was only a superficial solution. She discovered that she was “an ex-American, a non-Italian, a crossbreed” (184), and even considered herself a failure: both as an American and as an Italian.

Marguerite’s awareness that she did not belong to any place made her unhappy and ill at ease. She desperately needed to feel comfortable, but never learned how to achieve this. Her desperation resulted in constant traveling between the United States and Italy, seeking her place. She hoped that the place card at the Senior Banquet in college that said “Someday you’ll find your place in the world” would one day come true (154). Her daughter, Tina, remembered Marguerite as someone who “cared enormously for place” (305), who would work to make it perfect, even though in her married life she had to adapt to seven houses.
Marguerite died moving between two of those houses: the one in Rome and the summer one in the Marche, resigned to her fate, but without having resolved the problem of her split personality. Her death was almost symbolic. She was killed in a car accident, which might really have been suicide, since she was driving too fast, almost out of desperation, for the split within her between so many places in the world, in none of which she really fit.

Those Italians who decided to leave Italy for America intended to find a better place to live. It took them generations to become established and fully comfortable in North America. The first ones to come, like Umbertina and Serafino in *Umbertina* and Diamante and Vita in *Vita*, faced different problems than their children did. Those newcomers wanted to erase from memory the country they emigrated from, and focused their energies on achieving material success. They worked hard for their offspring and understood the necessity to raise them as Americans. When Umbertina was advised by a nun to let her children take Italian lessons, she answered: “Oh, no, Sister, not Italian! It is American our children need [...]. Leave the Italian to us at home, and teach them the language of how to do business in this country.” (93) Just before her death, Umbertina experienced a sense of fulfillment, because she had managed to make sure there was always “good food on the table and good linen on the bed” (130), two things she found most important. But Umbertina sacrificed her own generation for the sake of future ones. She did not like other Italians whom she heard complaining about their life in the New Land and about how Italians were treated in America. For her, accepting conditions in America was a part of the pact they had signed on the day they embarked on the boat.
Vita, like Umbertina, even though there is an age difference between these two characters, assumed from the very beginning that she would never return to Italy. As a girl she hoped she would eventually become an American woman. She managed to fit into American society and even achieved success. Not everyone was so accepting of this different world. Diamante dreaming that “un giorno imparerà la lingua dei biondi” (100), was not to withstand the hardships offered by America. He was unwilling to forget where he came from, despite the moments when he dreamed of bearing the name Diamante Roosevelt, which would help him conquer the world. It took him ten years to realize that he could not live in America. He went back, forgot his broken English, as many others like him did, and wiped the memory of the New Country from his mind. The clash of cultures proved to be too painful for Diamante. He failed to become American. Diamante in Vita and Serafino, Umbertina’s husband, in Umbertina both found assimilation in America more difficult than the female protagonists did. Indeed, Umbertina and Vita managed to become relatively independent and thus also achieved material success. While male characters in these books are more sentimental and nostalgic about the country they left behind, women characters hardly ever go back in their thoughts to their pre-immigration life. Their experience in America is more positive than Diamante’s and Serafino’s, because they are able to benefit from the American values of personal independence, something they were denied in Italy.

If Diamante had stayed and married Vita, maybe their children would have had to confront the problems that Marguerite and Tina faced. Marguerite’s struggle was also unsuccessful, but only partially, because she prepared the ground for the generation of her daughter Tina. At the beginning of the third part of Umbertina, Tina confesses that
she is two different people: "The Italian part, when I get back to Rome, likes civilized comforts [...]. I like to get all dressed up and go shopping or have Mauro cut my hair. I dress in blankets and clogs when I'm in the States and sometimes don't comb my hair for days" (323). She is a hippie when in America and a "sybarite" in Italy. But her generation has made great advances compared to her mother's generation. It has made the most of the evolution of the Italian/American thinking and especially of feminism. Much the same could be said about Barolini's life. While for her it is difficult to be both Italian and American, her daughters have less difficulty having a dual identity (Making 56). Tina admires her American friends in Italy, Jason and Missy, for the confidence they have in themselves and their ability to define their goals and articulate their desires. Tina regrets not having this part of the American identity. She is not entirely at ease with her Italian identity—any more than she is with her American one. When she takes a trip to Castagna, the village from which her grandmother came, she feels like an intruder. Realizing this, Tina understands she must look forward and not backwards. This is how she comes to interpret her grandmother Umbertina's action: "There was no return. Umbertina's message in fact was: Leave, take a direction, go forward, do not look back" (398). This is exactly what Umbertina did at the beginning of the century and the solution for Tina's generation is not to identify with any ethnic group, but to look inside, into one's own personality and make decisions that are based on one's genuine needs and aspirations. Tina achieved a full acceptance of herself because she was focused and determined to understand what she wanted and planned, even though this meant she had to face family criticism and leave the boyfriend she loved. In the end, Tina's quest for ethnic identity, and thus for her happiness, was also a quest for personal identity. She made the passage
from Italian/American restlessness to Italian/American confidence by persistence toward her goals and respect for cultural diversity. In this way, Barolini identifies herself not as an Italian/American writer but as an American writer—her goal from the beginning (Mannino, Introduction, *Breaking Open* 7). Characters in Italian/American literature typically struggle with the prejudices of two cultures. In the struggle for identity that takes place in *Umbertina* and in *Vita*, the values of the American way of life seem to be those that empower the characters the most. The quest for the female, as distinct from ethnic, identity, however, will take entirely different routes.

For Helen Barolini, American literature is founded on ethnic variety, in which everyone is an outsider. Thus, this individual seen as an outsider “becomes a traditional American theme and a way to present a new American writing.” Moreover, Barolini legitimizes “the beauty of the hybrid as an American reality” (Mannino, Introduction, *Breaking Open* 6), as a proposal for both American literature and the standard within American society. As she states in the Introduction to *Dream Book*, “what prevents the positive use [of dual ethnicity] is defensiveness” (26). For this reason, writing about the problems of identity is a process of redefinition that should contribute eventually to the perfection of Italian/American writers. Therefore her *Umbertina* is so strongly concerned with the search for the ethnic identity. Her focus on this issue is quite insistent, much more insistent than it is in *Vita*. Barolini feels the responsibility as an Italian/American writer to confront this matter. She speaks again on behalf of the entire group.

Mazzucco, instead, deals with the ethnicity that regards her protagonists only. She herself is not involved in the conflict of ethnic identity. Therefore this is a marginal topic. For the same reason, she focuses on the experience of the early immigrants. Barolini is
more interested in the generations that follow, those whose dilemmas, because already internalized, are more complex. In both novels, however, the protagonists undergo an evolution: they come to America and have to find a compromise between the values of the Old and the New World. The ethnic evolution of the characters makes the two novels *Bildungsromanen*.

But they are also female *Bildungsromanen*. The problem of ethnicity is interlaced with the issue of women’s struggle for autonomy. The double dimension of the Italian/American quest for identity in the case of women, makes their battle longer, more difficult, but also more valuable for succeeding generations. While it was more difficult for male protagonists at the early stage of the Italian experience in America to assimilate, later on the female characters find themselves in a more unfavorable position. They are the ones who have to fight harder against the negative prejudices of both cultures.
CHAPTER 3

FAMIGLIA O IO: THE QUEST FOR FEMALE SELF

The titles of the two novels under investigation are significant. They are both female names of the characters appearing in the books—books written by female writers. These title characters, moreover, represent the generation of the newcomers to America who remained in the New World and thus initiated Italian/American history. Umbertina and Vita also have similar personalities: they are strong, independent, and determined to be successful. These personal qualities help them establish themselves in America and build their own independent businesses.

The female presence is very strong in both novels. Indeed, women are endowed with very special and important roles. In Mazzucco’s novel it is Vita, even though the figure of the grandfather is the author’s link to the past. The concentration on women in Barolini’s Umbertina is clearer: here we deal almost exclusively with female characters. This special attention to female protagonists is there for important reasons, especially in Umbertina. The process of gaining an ethnic consciousness and arriving at a reconciliation with one’s cultural and national background is conditioned by the understanding of one’s gender and of the constraints against which one has to fight to be able to fully accept one’s heritage. That is why it is important, for the purpose of the
present analysis, to examine the ways in which female awareness is attained. This process is a part of the overall development of the characters in the novels.

Problems of gender and ethnicity in their novels are connected because both characters share the same condition of otherness. This condition, however, has a larger impact on Barolini’s work. Mazzucco lives and writes at the time when female issues are no longer as great a burden as they were for Barolini. Therefore, while Barolini’s novel is also a feminist novel, the same cannot be said about Mazzucco’s *Vita*. In addition, Barolini belongs to Italian/American ethnic minority and, as it has been frequently pointed out in the criticism dedicated to Italian/American women writings, “Italian American women writers have explored the vital connection between being a woman and being ethnic in a world (America) which traditionally valued neither” (Bona, *Broken Images* 91). Writings influenced by Italian culture carry the burden of some very powerful and constraining codes of behavior, constraining especially for women. A particular role woman had in the Italian family, that of being “the core of the family, upholder of its traditions and transmitter of its values” (Barolini, Introduction 12), confined her at home and limited her powers to maternal and domestic functions only. This central position in the family, but marginal position socially, can be traced to the cult of Madonna in Italian culture. Traditional roles within the family were in conflict with the desire for independence and personal fulfillment, something American culture particularly valued. Women in Italian/American families were banned from the public sphere, and any attempt to refuse to obey those rules was considered a betrayal. Thus, writings by Italian/American women who actually did speak out are often referred to as a “literature of transgression” (Mannino, Introduction, *Breaking Open* 7). Maria Kotsaftis
wrote that the ethnic "setting brings the gender problematic to an aggravated culmination" (170), because the comprehension of one's ethnicity inevitably led to the realization of how unfavorable the position of females within this particular group was. Once women became aware of this gender discrimination, they raised their voices against it.

The statements quoted above were made in reference to literature by Italian/American women. Do they apply to Mazzucco, too? Are her female protagonists also victims of the roles traditionally designated for them in the context of Italian culture? Do they try to resist these roles? Are the values of American culture of any help in this struggle? What is the difference in the ways Barolini and Mazzucco address the problem of gender? To what extent is the gender issue really linked to or conditioned by the process of ethnic identification? These are the questions that come to mind in comparing the two novels.

In the crowd of unfortunates from Diamante's village who embarked on the Republic, the boat heading for America, there was also a little girl, Vita. There on the boat, during a long and difficult trip, a friendship between Diamante and Vita blossomed. The fascination they nurtured for one another from the very beginning marked their relationship, which quickly evolved into love. The two children became almost inseparable, and together experienced the first few years of their stay in New York. Despite the opposition of Vita's father to their relationship and after Diamante was forced to leave the city in search of a job in railroad construction, they pledged to one another that they would reunite and build their lives together. Providence, however, did not reconnect them until many years later, when they met again as strangers. After they
separated, they realized they would never meet again. In the end, they took different
directions. Vita decided to stay in America, while Diamante returned to Italy. Both settled
down, got married and had children, and almost succeeded in forgetting their incredible
childhood pact.

In reality, Melania Mazzucco, in reconstructing the past of her grandfather
Diamante, is also reconstructing the memory of Vita and of their love. She is trying to
unravel the forgotten mystery and re-enact through literature the fascinating personality
of Vita and find connections between her and the story of the author’s own life. By
following Vita’s story from when she was just few years old, Mazzucco shows how she
developed, both as an American and as a woman. By placing Vita and other female
characters in the story, Mazzucco addresses important issues related to the condition of
female Italian immigrants in America.

Vita is certainly the central character in the novel. She also has many
characteristics that make her similar to Umbertina, who at approximately the same time
also immigrated to the United States. As a little child, Vita already shows a strong sense
of dignity and pride. In spite of the servile and obedient position a woman has in the
Italian family, she does not hesitate to challenge her father’s authority. She questions his
behavior and values frequently, and her rebellion sometimes is directed against his
relationships with women. Even though her father, Agnello, is widely respected in the
Italian community of Prince Street and never openly criticized for the double life he is
living, Vita cannot accept his betrayal of her mother Dionisia, who was forced to remain
in Italy. She questions the rules that are accepted by everyone else, even by her mother
who “non può pretendere che il marito resti fedele alla moglie che non vede da sei anni.”
Un uomo è un uomo.” (51). Thus not only does she demonstrate her ability to think independently, but also she commits herself, even if unconsciously, to social change.

Umbertina does not want to be subservient to men either. When she, instead of her brother, bargains at the market in her native village in Italy, Beppino scolds her for assuming a role that traditionally belongs to the male. “I am the man,” he says, “Men have to deal in these things” (31); even though there is no doubt what Umbertina decided was correct. Umbertina behaves in a similar way toward her husband, Serafino, whose opinions about running their family store do not really count. She is, to some extent, a feminist character in the way she subverts gender positions, even though she does so within the constraints of society, history and the particular community to which she belongs. According to l’ordine della famiglia—family rules the Italian families respected—“the father is the head of the family, and the mother the center” (Gambino, Blood 6). Even though Italian women could only execute their authority within the limits of the household, Umbertina takes full advantage of this kind of supremacy. What is more, thanks to her vigor and decidedness, the whole family benefits. The business she opens, even though the credit is ascribed to male representatives of the Longobardi family, is hers, not anybody else’s and its success is hers too. Umbertina contributes the most to the family’s realization of the “American dream” in pursuit of which they all came to America. However, Umbertina has no ambition to transgress into the public sphere. She has always considered her position to be natural; “she knew the patterns of life […]. It was God’s will that girls should marry and work for their husbands and bear children, so that life could be endlessly repeated” (33). Moreover, Umbertina transmits this respect for the status quo to her daughters; she is not interested in changing her daughters’ life
for the better. On the contrary, "the future of the name and business was in her sons" (100). That is why she does not rebel when, after her husband’s death, all the credit for the thriving business is given by a local newspaper to Serafino.

Throughout her life Umbertina never openly questioned the correctness of her position. She never showed any awareness of the problematic nature of the female condition in society. Without objecting in the slightest, she inserts herself into "a men’s world" in which a woman’s role is that of a mother and a wife. While she never reflects upon her womanliness, Vita, by contrast, expresses much more female awareness. When she is pushed away by a group of boys who do not let her play with them because she is a girl, she concludes, "essere una femmina non è un difetto, ma solo uno svantaggio, il problema è essere una bambina" (55). Vita feels exploited after she takes over control of the household, because Lena, seriously hurt in an accident, is not able to work any more, and does not care about being "la padrona di casa," the way Umbertina did. Due to her hard work, "la sera muore di sonno, di stanchezza e di mal di schiena" (163), a sacrifice Vita does not want to continue, and which Umbertina, donna seria, did not mind, as long as it assured a future for her children. To Vita, domestic power is not sufficient; she wishes to move on to the world outside the privacy of the household.

Vita is not afraid of sacrifice, though. She proves her ability to work and seek success when she opens a restaurant, which soon becomes very successful. Certainly at that point she is much more mature, but over all, this is her own enterprise. She does not act according to the usual, family-oriented values. First she succeeds in business, and only later thinks about marriage. Vita does this more for herself than for anyone else. What has to be acknowledged, however, is the difference in the formation of both
women: Umbertina came to the United States as an already shaped person, while Vita’s personality was formed during the years she lived in New York. Growing up, she is in America infused with many American ideals, ideas that included individualism. She does not think highly of men who are “vili ed egoisti. Non voleva diventare la moglie di qualcuno, né dipendere dagli umori e dai capricci di un marito” (340). Vita preferred to be independent and did not conceive of a woman’s responsibility the same way Umbertina did. But she did not always think that way. Although her mother, Dionisia, who was among the few educated and literate people in her village, frequently emphasized the importance of education as a means of improving one’s condition, “Vita sapeva che se sei una donna, l’unica cosa che conta è il matrimonio che fai o che ti fanno fare” (108). Umbertina, similarly, did not attach much value to education. The idea that marriage is the only goal of a woman’s life was the baggage both Vita and Umbertina brought with them to America. Vita however, unlike Umbertina, understood with time and by observation that this did not have to be so for her. She went through a process of maturation, which is carefully tracked in Mazzucco’s Büdungsroman. And this process happened partially because her character was influenced by American ideals. Once again these prove beneficial for the protagonists, but only for those who belong to the first generation of Italian/Americans.

Both Umbertina and Vita are strong, persistent, and determined women. Their consistency is a secret of their triumph in the male-dominated world. But they both operate within this world, where women like Lena, Agnello’s lover and servant, are treated as objects and taken advantage of, and like Diamante’s or Caruso’s wives, who resign from their own career to devote themselves to their husbands, “come ogni donna
italiana avrebbe dovuto fare” (257). Vita matures, while Umbertina dies certain that her life “went as it had to” (127). However in a different way, Barolini’s work is also a *Bildungsroman*, as the female struggle is continued by succeeding generations of women. Carla represents the second generation, not described at length by the author. Carla’s generation accepted American values without criticism. A strong conventional romanticism is one of them, as Mary Ann Vigilante Mannino argues, for whom the ideals of romantic love take agency from women and impose female passivity (Mannino, *Revisionary* 135). Carla, for whom “love was a Gloria Swanson movie” (138) and who in life “wanted only to be courted, to dress well, and to marry” (144), is an example of how this romanticism was an obstacle to her independence as a woman. This romanticism is completely unknown to Umbertina, who never displayed her emotions and who, as she acknowledges herself, “had no time in her life for romance and daydreams” (54). Thus, American ideals, which were so beneficial for the generation of Vita and Umbertina, were harmful instead for the succeeding generations of Carla and, as we will see, of Marguerite, too. These ideals, though, are different: Umbertina and Vita took advantage of the ideals of independence and fulfillment, while Carla and Marguerite were negatively influenced by romanticism. The ideals, however, are all part of the dominant culture.

Vita, unlike Umbertina, found time for daydreams. Her daydreaming, however, was a result of her powerful imagination and not of surrendering to conventional romanticism. Thus she would often dream about being somebody else’s daughter. Compared to Umbertina, Vita was much more emotional and sentimental. Her relationship with Diamante was important for her not because she felt the necessity to
marry, but because she truly loved him, a feeling which never occurred to Umbertina. Over the years, though, Vita became more bitter and abandoned her earlier idealistic dreams and hope for love. Even though hers was a story of a success in terms of female autonomy and professional satisfaction, it was also the story of failure in terms of emotional fulfillment: Vita had to live apart from the love of her life, Diamante.

Marguerite, Carla’s daughter, suffered the impact of this romanticism too. Her struggle was thwarted largely by her inability to take charge of her life. Instead, she always expected men to act, and when left on her own, was incapable of taking action. Even when she goes to Florence, where she finally decides to build a life of her own after the official separation from her husband, Alberto, she cannot focus on the simple task of being on time for a job interview. She feels lost, and when she really does get lost, it is because the bus driver, on whom she was relying to help her get off at the right bus stop, forgets about her. Marguerite’s unsuccessful trip to Florence is somehow symbolic of her lack of independence. The only positive part of the trip is at dinner with a male friend, who shows Marguerite a lot of attention.

Men in Marguerite’s life are a measure of her value. They are her point of reference. Most of those whom she encounters are possible partners. All her relationships are dominated and manipulated by men, who always decide for her. In none of them does she show any initiative. She constantly compromises her ideals, believes that things will change, that she will adapt, that she will learn to love or to accept the situation, but she never actually does anything to change it, to shape her life in a way that is satisfactory for her. Marguerite is just waiting, like “Sleeping Beauty [...] until a prince comes along and kisses her awake giving her access to life” (Mannino, Revisionary 135). Marguerite
is like this Sleeping Beauty from the story she heard many times as a child: unable to take charge of her life.

Her “Prince Charming” comes from a wealthy aristocratic family from Venice. Marguerite is not convinced she loves him when she agrees to marry him, and, again, she shows her submissiveness when she acknowledges that “she needs a sensible, stodgy person like Alberto to help protect her against the romanticism of which she was always a victim” (172). Alberto, when they are engaged, quickly shows that he is the dominant force in the relationship. He promises Marguerite: “I will make a real human being out of you. We will live a life of art together” (177). He understands her weakness and is willing to share his power—something, however, he never does in the end. But ultimately it is Marguerite’s fault that she has not demanded more of this power.

Marguerite’s response to her dissatisfaction in her marriage is first to separate from Alberto. When that does not work, she gets involved in a secret love affair with an Italian writer, Massimo. Once again, as Marguerite admits to herself, she did not have control over the development of her feelings. Though she “searched her mind, her pocket agenda, she could not place the hour or the day. Only the reason [of her involvement with Massimo]” (234). Her hopes for a new life revive; she even has plans for fulfilling herself professionally, something she could do just for herself. Her idea of going to Calabria and taking pictures there never is realized, however. Marguerite invests so much emotion into her relationship with Massimo that it is only when it is too late that she comprehends that he has been using her as his connection with the literary world in Italy and in the United States, the world in which he wants to insert himself. She is aware that “if Massimo got the Strega prize, they’d be together again” (274). The next thing we find out about
Marguerite after we learn that he did not receive the desired award is that she has died in a car accident.

Marguerite’s struggle ends in failure. She dies, perhaps even has committed suicide, carrying Massimo’s child. Marguerite was brought to this point by her uncertainty, her lack of confidence and her inability to establish and claim her independence. This uncertainty was the effect of her education in a family where the ideal of marriage and romantic love as the only desirable target shaped the female personality. Marguerite became a victim of her insecurity as an American and as a woman.

But her failure, again, is not entirely useless. Marguerite prepared the ground for her daughter Tina, who learns from her mother and great-grandmother’s experiences. Tina’s situation is made easier, however, by the ideological ferment of that time, in particular in regard to feminism. The negative influence of American movies, American cultural icons, public schools and the family, which strongly conditioned Marguerite, was weakened by the ideas of the first wave of feminism as well as by Tina’s bi-cultural education. The fact that Tina was living both in Italy and in the United States resulted in her separation from the grandparents whose values had shaped Marguerite. But shifting between two countries—something that made Tina’s mother uncomfortable—did not bother Tina. She was aware of “being two people,” as she admitted in a passage cited earlier, but this was not problematic to her, because she grew up distanced enough from both cultures. As a consequence, she developed the ability to reconcile both her backgrounds.

Tina’s personality, however, evolves throughout the story. From an insecure and undecided college girl, she grows into a focused and goal-oriented woman. She manages
to do this, because she has learned from the experiences of her female predecessors. Tina is confused at the beginning, then shocked into maturation by her mother’s death. This is the moment when she truly becomes reunited with Marguerite. Reflections after receiving news of her mother’s death lead Tina to this conclusion: “I think I hurt her because I didn’t understand until now about loving, about being a woman, about choices” (290). Tina’s journey into her own female self begins at this point. She immediately chooses to leave her boyfriend Duke, because he was just “lazing around [...] or lying in bed and watching the world go by,” while she wanted “a lot—most of all I don’t want to end up like my mother. I don’t want to live thinking of what I might have done or what might have been” (295). Tina is deeply affected by her mother’s life and even more by her death, and does not want to repeat her mistakes.

Just like Umbertina, when she was leaving Castagna forever, Tina did not look back when she left Duke at the airport. She was heading to Italy, to visit her father and attend Marguerite’s funeral. Her stay in Europe was to be very decisive for her. It was a time of contemplation, of difficult decisions, of self-exploration; a period that ultimately shaped Tina’s personality.

After her mother’s funeral, Tina was unsure what to do. In Rome, she met Jason, an American whose parents were working in the Embassy. With him she went on a trip to Castagna, a trip of discovery in search of her grandmother, from whom Tina had inherited her name, given her in order “to give her strength in life” (287). But Tina did not feel connected at all to Castagna. On the contrary, she felt like an intruder there, though at the same time she certainly did find a connection with her grandmother. Through Umbertina’s strength Tina learned not to look back. She did not go to Castagna
with Jason, but with Ferruccio, a cynical, older Italian, with whom she ran away from Jason, because “the more she felt loving him, the more it angered her to think that love was entrapment” (358). The decision to leave Jason in the middle of her trip was a difficult one: the pressure that Jason was putting on her was a threat to her independence. Before committing herself to anyone, Tina wanted to build her career. She did not let anyone condition or manipulate her, the way her mother had. Thus Tina acquired power over her own future, and when she came back to Rome, she was able to reject her father’s proposals that she continue Marguerite’s job, working for him and translating his works. Tina, by this time, was strong enough to resist his pressure, because she knew that not doing so was one of the reasons for her mother’s unhappiness. She decided by herself, in spite of opposition from her father and her family in the States, to pursue an academic career. She finished her degree, and only later married Jason. In this way she proved that she inherited not only her great-grandmother’s name but also Umbertina’s power to achieve her goals. At the same time, Tina refused to be completely family-oriented, but made her profession and personal fulfillment her number one priority.

In Umbertina the journey toward the maturation of a woman is spread across four generations. The process here is much longer and more painful than in Vita. Both novels are Bildungsromanen, in which female growth is conditioned by the two cultures: American and Italian. The way these cultures influence the female characters, however, is slightly different. While in Umbertina, total Americanization is perceived as an obstacle in the process, because of the harmful ideals of romanticism and materialism the culture holds out, in Mazzucco’s novel the power of American values helps Vita gain autonomy.
and develop independent thinking. In this respect, the ethnic quest is linked to and conditions development of female consciousness.

Vita’s growth as a female ends with success, while her search for sentimental satisfaction lacks a happy ending. In this way, Mazzucco separates the female quest from the personal quest of her central character, Vita, and brings them to opposite conclusions. In *Umbertina* this separation is impossible, because Barolini, still directly influenced by the feminist activism of the time, wanted to emphasize that female happiness is conditioned by her autonomy as a woman. Once more we can see that Barolini was more determined than Mazzucco to address issues of social change in her fiction.
PART II

THE WORLD AROUND US
CHAPTER 4

LA MERICA: IMAGE OF THE NEW WORLD

Diamante, Mazzucco’s grandfather, whose story is told in Vita, could not withstand the hardships of the New Land. He joined the numerous returnees who chose not to comply with the rules of America. During his long “exile” in the West, where he was performing various jobs, he fainted while watching a comedy show in Denver. Helped by a mysterious man identified as none other than Charlie Chaplin, Diamante woke up after few days in a hospital, diagnosed with nephritis. To him though, “la sua malattia si chiamava America” (363). Diamante was suffering because throughout all his adventures in America he had to force himself to forget his past and his roots in order to move forward and become an American. “Dimenticare [...] e diventare qualcuno che non conosci” (363), was the key imperative in America, a rule that immigrants had to obey if they wanted to build a new life there.

Diamante did not want to forget, though. That is why, when an employee of the Italian Embassy offered him the possibility of going back to Italy in return for the military service Diamante had to serve there, Mazzucco’s grandfather did not need much time to decide. He accepted the proposal and left America, resigning thus from pursuing the “American dream” and from a future with Vita. The disease of Diamante, in medical
terms identified as nephritis, for him was called "America." And despite the discrepancy between how this sickness was perceived by Diamante and by the doctor, they were not in disagreement about the prognosis of its implications for the future. This is the doctor's forecast of how the disease was going to affect Diamante for the rest of his life:

Della tua malattia, conclude il medico, non ti libererai mai. Guarirai, starai meglio, potrai tornare a lavorare—ma, se vivrai, la malattia tornerà dietro, te la porterai dietro, imparerai a conviverci, potresti farla finita solo se qualcuno ti donasse un rene sano e si prendesse il tuo malato, la tua inesauribile miniera di veleno. Ma questo non è possibile. Ti ci abituerai, alla tua malattia, la sopporterai, smetterai di temerla, sarà l'unica cosa che non potrai dimenticare—e, alla fine, la parte più vera di te. (363)

America was expecting Diamante to forget, an invitation he could not and did not want to accept. The same America, though, will become a memory he will never be able to get rid of, no matter how much he will try. This memory will return in the stories of his children and grandchildren, whispered by them because he will not allow them to talk about them openly, just as he will never mention at length his experience overseas. Eventually, this memory will resurface in a book written by Diamante's granddaughter Melania, almost like a hereditary disease that his descendants will have to recover from.

America as an incurable disease—the nephritis Diamante was diagnosed with—is not a common image. In fact, both novels present different pictures of this country, which depend on the spatial and time perspective from which one looks and on the kind of experience the New Land offers. The United States is not only the setting of the stories, but also an important protagonist in them. What is the image of America? Maybe there is more than just one image. Is there any difference in the way the two novelists perceive this country? Why do these perceptions vary? I hope to provide answers to these
questions through my analysis of how both the protagonists and the authors of Vita and Umbertina see America.

The first and most obvious observation to make is that the vision of America is filtered through the eyes of the protagonists: Italian/Americans or Italians. Their nationality is in most cases not evident. The newcomers are from Italy, but their sense of belonging to this country is limited. It is fair to say that after they immigrate they turn into a sort of a hybrid without a nationality: they retain the Italian language and customs, but they also make an effort to adapt to new standards and build their and their children’s future in the New Land. The identity conflict discussed in Part One of this thesis characterizes the generations that succeed: they are neither Americans nor Italians. This feeling was often and openly expressed in Barolini’s novel by Marguerite. What is more, even Umbertina articulates this sensation of being out of place, of being “adrift between the old country and the new, belonging to neither” (51). The particular and awkward condition of lacking a well-defined nationality makes Italian/Americans orphans, a definition coined by Fred Gardaphé in regard to literature by Italian/Americans: “the child of Italian and American cultures, had been abandoned by both its parents, making it an orphan of sorts or at least giving it the sense of being an illegitimate offspring” (Breaking and Entering 184). While Italian/Americans are indeed orphans, Mazzocco’s sense of nationality is not ambiguous. Even though she, like any other human being, can at times go through moments of insecurity and experience an identity crisis, the sensation of being an outsider in her own country is not a part of her experience. Indeed, a sense of insecurity about the origins of her family triggered the writing of Vita. This insecurity,
however, does not apply to her national identity. Therefore, even when her protagonists feel estranged in the New Land, Mazzucco does not speak through them.

Living between two worlds—the case for the main protagonists of Umbertina and Vita—allows them to compare the two, and by means of this comparison, to achieve a better understanding of both. Of course, the profundity of this understanding depends on the knowledge that one has about the two countries. Italians of the first generation are not entirely able to comprehend America because their interaction with the new country is limited due to their isolation in Italian communities. The second generation, instead, which tends to be very focused on Americanization, has a limited notion of Italy, based on the folklore and customs retained and passed on to them by their parents. Neither of this can be said, though, about Marguerite and Tina in Barolini’s novel. It cannot be said about Barolini either, as Anthony Tamburri acknowledged, “Barolini is one of the few writers of Italian descent who knows both worlds well enough to be able to offer such a vision” (Preface viii), that is an accurate vision or understanding of both Italy and America. The direct experience Barolini had in both countries gives her more credibility when she describes and compares them.

Mazzucco, instead, has never lived in the United States. In fact, she opens her novel with a quotation by Alain Resnais, “L’America non esiste. Io lo so perché ci sono stato.” This sentence resonates throughout her entire narration and explains her literary choices. For Mazzucco, America is at least partly an imaginary place. This is certainly true for the America of the times she describes in Vita—that is of the beginning of the twentieth century—times she could only imagine, never experience in person. Even

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5 Anthony Tamburri refers here to the vision of Italy, but this statement can be equally referred to Barolini’s vision of America, as she lived in both countries.
though she researched this period in American history by examining documents and visiting the real places she describes, a sensation of unreality and invention still penetrates Vita. Mazzucco knows this America from her research, from the stories told by her relatives and from some commonplaces and clichés. The image of America in Vita is mostly one from the beginning of the century. At the beginning of the novel, however, she also describes her own first visit to the United States and her impressions as a tourist in New York City, the place where her grandfather arrived and lived many years earlier. She confesses that she did not have “alcun desiderio di andare negli Stati Uniti” (40). When she came to give a presentation about her works, she made use of the opportunity to sightsee. She saw Little Italy, which made “un’impressione deprimante” on her, as an abandoned tourist site, ornamented with symbols of Italy, but inauthentic, because the Italian character of the place consisted only of superficial folklore. For the same reason, the second generation Italian/Americans could not be considered Italians any longer. After Little Italy she entered elitist and fashionable SoHo, a place that had been given “l’aggettivo irritante” of “cool” (43). She was appalled there by the high cost of apartment rents. Her astonishment was even more intense when it appeared to her that the Prince Street she was walking along was the one she knew from her family’s stories. At that moment she thought for the first time about writing a novel that would narrate the American experiences of her relatives.

Throughout the years between Diamante’s arrival on Prince Street and the author’s visit there, the area had changed immensely. When Mazzucco took her trip it was an expensive and sophisticated part of the city; at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, only Italians chose to live there, which at that time made it one of the
worst zones of the city. While in the year 2000 the rent for apartments reached thousands of dollars per year, in 1900 the conditions of living could not even satisfy the most elementary needs. This is the first impression the reader receives:

La casa di Prince Street è stipata di pentole, ciotole, bigonce, sacchi di farina, barilli e bauli. Diamante s’aggira a tentoni fra le gabbie di legno, dove gloglottano tre panciute galline, e il catino in cui agonizza una pianta di basilico, finché quasi si rompe il naso sbattendo contro la statua in gesso della Madonna delle Grazie patrona di Minturno. (19)

This description of a crowded building in disorder on Prince Street where Diamante has to live with other inhabitants contrasts greatly with the fashionable neighborhood that Mazzucco visited around the year 2000. America as experienced personally by the author of Vita is very different from the one her protagonists saw. This is not surprising considering that at that time the United States were a country under construction, or destruction, as Diamante and his young friends thought during one of their excursions in the city: “Ovunque guardi, impalcature, tettoie, scheletri di ferro alti trenta piani, gru, tavole, passerelle, tunnel, buchi, voragini profonde cinquanta metri […]. Tutto cade a pezzi, e tutto è nuovo” (75). Chaos and contrast were the qualities that best described their new country.

The children play in these construction zones and watch how the city grows. Its size and pace are overwhelming. This is reflected by the variety of cultural and linguistic practices Diamante encounters when he first walks through the city. One day on a mission to bury Lena’s aborted child, they all climb on the scaffolding of what is planned to be the tallest building in the world. Looking down at the lights and streets of New York, they feel the sky “illusoriamente vicino” and see the city “irreale, dipinta sul fondo
di una scatola” (77) and are thrilled by the height of “l’edificio più prezioso della città” (76). When they drop the box with the corpse of the baby, they symbolically make an Italian contribution to America, whose growth was also possible thanks to the sacrifice and death of Italian immigrants. “Hard work [...] and good bread” is Umbertina’s answer to a journalist’s question about the repayment Italians made to America for its generosity (136). The New Land was certainly very favorable to newcomers, who achieved rapid material success, as both Umbertina and Vita did. But this success did not happen without an effort and without victims. It required a lot of sacrifice that, indeed, not everyone was willing to make. For many, the America they found after they disembarked was very different from what they had expected it to be.

The best-known icon of the United States is that of the “American dream.” The vast land and grand opportunities offered by North America have been until now attracting crowds of people, who leave their native countries for a better life—for what by many is called the “American dream.” The desire to improve the standard of living in general has been the motive for immigration to the New Land, whether it was for materialistic or ideological reasons. Italian immigrants, the protagonists of Barolini’s and Mazzucco’s novels, had similar aspirations and expectations when they chose to leave Italy. The vast land of opportunity they had heard about from those who had gone before attracted them and gave them hope for a better future, a future that was denied to them in Italy. They envied the fortunate ones who would sometimes come back to Italy to show off their success, or send letters praising America and assuring their relatives about their happiness and the triumphs they had found there. Serafino’s first experience in the United States gave him prestige in the whole village after he came back. He “was a man who had
gone beyond the confines of this country and had learned something of men, and the world beyond. And he had brought back savings” (43), which made him attractive in the eyes of Umbertina, his future wife.

Serafino’s experience of America was immediate, not based on idealized fantasies. Unlike the dwellers of Castagna who lived their whole lives in the village, he was not enthusiastic and idealistic about the New World. On the contrary, he felt rather confused about it. While he had a name in Castagna, he was “less than nothing,” not even “a Christian with a name” in America. “It is a strange thing,” he says, even though exploited and highly underpaid, “still I saved money.” In America, concludes Serafino, “you have hell, but at the end you’re saved because you have money” (41), and it is this that makes this country such a desirable place. Serafino adds to his accounts of his trip the visions of hard work, isolation, exploitation and separation from his family, tales of inhuman living and working conditions and the dangers of contracting deadly diseases. But he also remembers the immensity and fertility of land and nature and he acknowledges that “for some people it will be a promised land.” Serafino thought he was not among those people. Even though he never planned to go back to America a second time, life forced him to do so. For the second time he had to go through the same experiences, this time, however, while in charge of a family as well.

The beginning was very tough for all of them. Umbertina, who wanted the most to leave Castagna, remembered frequently and with nostalgia the freshness of the air and the purity of the water in Castagna, so different from what they had to tolerate when living in New York: “an attic room under the roof, stifling hot, with a dormer window that let in what little light and air could filter between the taller buildings all around them” (63). It
was not much different from the house of Agnello on Prince Street, the street that in *Umbertina* figures as the street of Sicilians.

Umbertina’s dream was to leave the city and move to the country, where they could have their own house and above all their own land to grow basil, tomatoes, rosemary, and other produce. They eventually saved enough money to go upstate to Cato, where they settled down and finally achieved a hard-won success. It took them years, though, and a lot of sacrifice to do it. At the time it was common for men to work for various industries, mainly for railroad companies. Both Serafino and Diamante came to know the unpleasant working conditions that immigrants had to tolerate. For Diamante, after he left to work in the west, his life was made up of daily exhausting physical activity, overcrowded dormitories, and rudeness and mockery from his co-workers. Both Serafino and Diamante were underpaid, and, even though they worked hard day after day, they were always short of money. They could not save anything because the expenses they had to pay for housing or tools were inflated and in the end, instead of saving, they owed money to their agents. Umbertina complained about this unfairness and noticed how the old feudal relationships from Italy were reproduced in the New World. The old *baroni* were now called *padroni*: the enriched Italians who were “living and getting rich off the labor of others by taking from them part of what they worked for” (59). When Diamante decided to quit his job at the railroad, he found out that “tolte le spese [...] si trova indebito col caposquadra [...]” (250). Mazzucco, indeed, insists more than Barolini on a description of the working environment of her protagonists. While in *Umbertina*, this is only one episode on the road to success, in *Vita* this sacrifice does not lead to a positive conclusion. In fact, Diamante is so exhausted and worn out that he decides to
leave. Hard work paid off for Umbertina and Serafino, but not for Diamante. Mazzucco focuses so much on this difficult part of her grandfather's adventure, because it changed her life—it made Diamante go back and have children and grandchildren in Italy.

Apart from the exploitation by the *padroni*, the Italian immigrants also brought with them the old antagonisms between northern and southern Italians. The prevailing majority of those immigrants were from the South of Italy; in both books northern Italians have a completely different preparation and assimilate faster. They are often educated and refer to their southern compatriots as inferior beings. They also maintain the division of Italy: “se ne vergognavano [of the poor newly arrived Italians] e dicevano che in realtà l'Italia non è una, ma si compone di due paesi diversi e di due razze diverse—quelli di sopra sono celesti, bravi e affidabili, quelli di sotto latini maramaldi e puzzolenti” (*Vita* 150-151). In *Umbertina* interaction with northern Italians takes place through the social worker Anna Giordani. Anna Giordani helped Umbertina, visited her apartment in New York City and developed a respect for her strength and sense of dignity, even though in general “She felt in conflict about these people [southern Italians], who, politically, she had considered her countrymen, and spiritually her brothers” (66), but with whom she did not feel any affinity and whom she accused of creating a bad reputation for Italians.

Umbertina also respected Anna Giordani and was grateful to her for teaching her “the real facts of American life” (74), the most important of which was that “money was the key to everything” (67). This was her lesson. *Vita*, instead, during the first ten years of her American stay, learned “la fiducia in un domani migliore” (377), which led her to open a successful restaurant. The way Umbertina and *Vita* describe this lesson shows
how differently they think. Umbertina is much more practical and materialistic, Vita, instead, tends to idealize. It is evident, however, that while for men America was either a disease or a hell, women saw it in a positive way, because they were given independence and a new possibility to work for their own success. They were able to accomplish this, and in this way their sacrifices paid off. As a consequence their children could enjoy material stability and an easier life. Margherite, though, criticizes the Americanized money-oriented next generation. For her too, money remains the most important American value, to the point that “family talk was always in words of commercial transaction” (154). She, unlike previous generations of Italians, wants to escape from this materialist atmosphere. Her first step toward separation from her Americanized, but not American family is her study of the Italian language, a move condemned by her parents. They, like Umbertina before them, did not see any logic in learning the language of the country they were not going to visit any more. Umbertina wanted her children to learn “americano,” which was essential if they were to become successful. For Diamante in Vita, however, the better he knew English, even as a child, the more “la città perdeva fascino, potere e mistero” (112), an early sign of his resistance to America and a foreshadowing of his eventual departure. But learning English helped Vita. For every word she taught Diamante, she was rewarded with a kiss. During the “language” lessons their relationship developed. Vita, who was the teacher, thanks to her ability to speak words of English, acquired also the power that she could exert over Diamante: she, not he, determined the conditions under which these lessons could take place.

The acquisition of language was an important step in the process of assimilation. While some did not, the majority of the Italian immigrants remained in America. This
America, that became their country, changed throughout the years. So did their opinions about this country. We have seen how the poor habitants of Castagna perceived America as a promised land. But this was not the only notion that Italians had about it. Alberto, Marguerite’s husband, refers to Americans as “geese stuffing themselves to make intellectual foie gras” (176), trying too much to be acculturated, like “[...] those American Express ladies who go through the Uffizi and think they have to look at every single work in every room when it’s enough to go straight to Primavera and one or two others” (177). Marguerite defends herself by saying that Americans are still forming their culture, so that she, as an American, feels slightly ridiculous in Italy. The sense of superiority Marguerite’s Italian friends communicate comes from their disrespectful attitude toward American culture. They point to her American background any time they want to criticize her: “Incredible! A real American answer. You’re going to sacrifice Alberto and your daughters and lose your status as Alberto’s wife for something like integrity or whatever you want to call it,” was how Marguerite’s Italian friend Angela reacted when she learned of Marguerite’s decision to separate from Alberto (192). The cynicism of Italian intellectuals frequently contrasts with Marguerite’s genuineness. Tina has a similar impression of Ferruccio with whom she runs off while traveling to Castagna. On another occasion, the American tourists she accidentally meets one day at the Piazza Navona annoy Tina. She feels angry when they claim to speak Italian by saying some incomprehensible words or bragging that their roots are in the town of “Fudge” (Foggia). In this particular situation, Tina identifies herself more as an Italian and feels no connection with these Italian/American tourists.
The presence of Americans in both books is rather limited. In *Vita* they appear only marginally and are never endowed with distinct personalities. We find them in Barolini’s novel, but not in Mazzucco’s. Tina admires her American friends for how comfortable they are with themselves. They are the only figures whose nationality cannot be questioned and who have no identity problems. All others, both in *Vita* and *Umbertina*, are Italian/Americans. And it is mainly through their eyes that readers perceive North America, a true protagonist in both novels. The New Land is an important background that makes a significant difference in the lives of the characters, because they have to adapt to its rules. America is the cause of their evolution and the force that dictates the ideals to which they aspire.

Barolini’s America is a real place. Her description is realistic and from the perspective of an observer who does not romanticize. Even though it is a fictitious world, we find it an accurate reflection of the real one. Mazzucco’s image, although based on historical research, is more difficult to accept. The America she presents is a product of imagination as well, but the adventures and protagonists often assume a surreal character to the point that the difference between reality and dream is blurred. This happens when Vita dreams about her “true” father who is coming to rescue her, or when Diamante encounters Charlie Chaplin. The criminal organization known as Black Hand has also in Mazzucco’s novel a rather legendary characteristic. The plot is full of legends, because they also partially built the novel.

The space in both books, however, is bi-polar. The plot takes place in America. It also takes place in Italy. Therefore the analysis of the presence of Italy as a country is an important element in understanding the choices of the protagonists. Their *italianità*
affected their contribution to shape America, their new nation and the way they see the
New World. Italy is what they had left behind; America is what they left Europe for. Italy
is the past; America is their future.
CHAPTER 5

ITALIA: IMAGE OF THE OLD WORLD

Diamante found it particularly difficult to assimilate to the New World. He was not willing enough to accept its rules, but above all he did not want to forget what he left in the Old World. In the end, his search for a better life brought him back to Italy. He was not the only one having problems with assimilation. Among other Italians living in the same house, many expressed the same reluctance toward living in America. Agnello, the owner of the apartment building and Vita’s father, observing how his daughter was slowly learning American ways, saw her attitude as a betrayal of him and also of their roots. His thoughts explain how many Italians newly arrived in the United States felt:

E invece lui non voleva dimenticare le regole di quell’altro mondo da cui era costretto ad andarsene e in cui nemmeno voleva tornare, perché beffarsi di quelle regole sarebbe stato come beffarsi dei suoi sedici anni in America, delle sofferenze patite, e trasformarle in un sacrificio insensato. (119)

Agnello’s resistance toward total Americanization, the process which his daughter is undergoing, derives from his fears of losing his authority. The American values of independence and individuality are perceived by Agnello as a threat to his supremacy as a man and father. He is convinced that male dominance is an important part of his Italian heritage and he does not want to give it up. There are other aspects of this heritage,
however, and those are the direct reasons why he and many others left Italy. Agnello does not want to forget the misery he suffered there: the everyday conditions of starvation and abandonment by the state that finally convinced him to emigrate. His sacrifice in America makes sense as long as he remembers how much more miserable his life in Italy was.

The attitude of Italian immigrants toward their native country was ambiguous. The emigration of Italians was almost a necessity if they wanted to survive. Most of them did not want to go back to Italy any more, because they did not see any hope for improvement. On the other hand, the baggage of values and codes of behavior they brought with them and of which they were not entirely aware, rendered their stabilization in the New Land much more difficult. To understand these difficulties it is necessary to first comprehend what influenced their mentality. The key to understanding this influence is in the source—in Italy. Looking back on their national origins can explain not only the attitudes of those who first arrived in America, but also of those who were born and raised in Italian/American communities.

The conflict between American and Italian values, in particular the clash between the ideals of independence and personal fulfillment of the mainstream culture and those of family and community exported from Italy, has been the major problem in the process for complete assimilation. We have seen how it affected the formation of Italian/American identity throughout various generations, especially for women. We saw representations of the United States presented in the two novels and the social and economic conditions that influenced the American experience and the reproduction of some Italian patterns in the New World. It is time we analyzed in detail the other side of the hyphen. By concentrating on the image of Italy, both through the description of the
country itself and through the behavior of its inhabitants, we can understand better the migration experience—the main topic of both *Vita and Umbertina*.

The image of Italy that we have today is of a country of art and culture. Thinking about Italy equals thinking about the origins of Western civilization. Following this logic, Italians are often considered the bearers of this high culture and ambassadors for art. The Italian immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century certainly did not perform this mission; rather they “knew little or nothing about the heritage of Italian culture,” Helen Barolini once commented, calling them “non-Italians” (*Making* 51). They were mostly peasants from the southern part of Italy, which had only recently been annexed in the process of the unification of Italy. Instead of awareness of the impact of Italian culture on world history, these individuals brought their folklore. These customs hosted their “founding myth, [...] the memory of how the rich expelled the poor [from Italy] into a world invented for them by the great Amerigo [...], [but where] there was no chance that these new arrivals could identify themselves with the ruling peoples,” as Robert Viscusi described it in an essay that calls for reappraisal of the Italian tradition of *cantastorie*. These “*cantastorie*, history singers who explain the quality of our life that includes the past of our people” preserved the folk culture in the oral tradition that has never been written down. This folklore, however, is precious, because it links the past to the present. The tradition of *cantastorie* existed among Italian/Americans and was identified by Viscusi as the origin of their literary practices (*Tamburri, Giordano and Gardaphé* 5).

A part of this “founding myth” of Italians in America is their aversion toward their native country. We found its expression in Agnello’s thoughts quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Those characters, who represented the generation of
newcomers in both Vita and Umbertina, shared Agnello’s feelings. After Serafino’s first experience in the United States, he was determined to stay and live in Italy. The money he earned by working hard overseas was enough to assure him a good start: he married, bought land and a house, thinking that the future of his family was secure. But he overestimated his financial resources and, due to high taxes and exploitation by the baroni, he was soon impoverished again. This eventually forced him to leave Italy for good. No matter how much he struggled, in the end he had to admit, “Italy doesn’t want us—it makes us bandits or beggars in our own country. It pretends to give us land in exchange for our money and work, then takes it back with taxes and interest while the rich are exempt” (47). United Italy—the dream he fought for with Garibaldi’s troops—let him down. Serafino discovered that his sacrifice in the battle for the unification was useless and did not change anything in the lives of simple people like him or his neighbors in the same village. Once again history made it clear that no authority was interested in helping these people who were abandoned and their struggle ignored. Having been tossed about among different rulers who never kept their promises of improving their subjects’ lives, southern Italians developed a strong distrust toward any form of authority, a behavior transported later to America. When Diamante and Vita get lost one day in the city, a policeman stops them. This encounter reminds Vita of the distrust for the police they all held in Minturno. This police “non portavano mai buone notizie. Quando […] le autorità- fossero guardie, carabinieri, sindaci, politici o borghesi di Minturno—si azzardavano a venire verso il paese, i ragazzini di Tufo li bersagliavano di sassate” (35). To Umbertina Rome “was only the place where the baron, the pope, and now a king lived, all equally indifferent to the fact of her existence” (28). Her father
referred to the capital as a “ladro governo” that took bread from the mouths of the poor […], taxed the poor man’s working mule but not the rich man’s carriage horse […] made land distribution available only to those rich enough to buy quantities” (29). Diamante would certainly agree with Umbertina’s opinion; he also remembers that telling lies in Italy was a common practice: “le dicono tutti, per primi i proprietari della terra, i maestri e i preti” (143). The habitants of Minturno would agree with these views of Rome, which they talked about as if it were a very remote place. In Vita, Melania Mazzucco brings back a memory of the brigante Musolino, a criminal sought by the Italian police and worshiped by the poor, who saw in him “il simbolo della ribellione contro una legge male interpretata e male applicata, delle rivendicazioni dei poveri e degli oppressi” (145-146). Musolino, who was eventually captured and imprisoned, became a hero for the poor, because he rose up against oppression. It was after this incident that Diamante promised not to continue his father’s life, in this sense anticipating his future search for a better life. This is how Diamante’s brother recalls their oath: “Diamante ed io rispondemmo: caro padre, puoi essere certo che noi quando saremo grandi troveremo il modo di non essere braccianti di Tufo come te, ma andremo a lavorare lontano—e se sarà possibile a fare l’impiegato o la carriera nelle armi” (146). To maintain his oath, Diamante had to go much further than he had thought. And even when the Italian state paid for his return, he still doubted that it was truly interested in him as a citizen, because so far “il stato italiano non aveva offerto mai niente” (366). Although he remained indifferent toward any institutionalized authority in Italy, after his return, he tried to make a career in public institutions: “Ho provato a fare parte di qualcosa, ci ho provato con la Guardia di Finanza, con la Marina, con la Guerra—non mi hanno voluto […]. Ci ho provato con la
politica—ma non è servito, ho scoperto soltanto quanta gente è disposta a fischiattare per dire chi sei a quelli che ti aspettano per ammazzarti” (236). Partially because of his disease “nephritis-America” he was not able to reinsert himself into Italian society and the sense of being an outsider remained. In the end, maybe as a compromise, maybe for the sake of the isolation in the position he found, he accepted a job working for the national railroad company. Ironically, his principal job in America had been building railroads.

The strong belief that Italy was completely indifferent to its people convinced villagers from both Mazzucco’s Minturno and Barolini’s Castagna to leave. Some of them, like Serafino or Diamante, left nostalgic and sad, others, like Umbertina and Vita, never even questioned the justice of their decisions and were determined to never go back. There was a firm conviction in many immigrants that Italy did not want them and that they had “niente a cercare laggiù” (Vita 179). Umbertina, who did not even turn around to look for the last time in her life at her native village, cut all her bonds with Italy. She kept in touch with her family, but never sent money back, as many others did, and was focused on organizing her life in the new country and did not want her children to speak Italian.

Despite the aforementioned feelings toward Italy, however, the immigrants experienced a severe culture shock when they realized what sacrifices America demanded from them. The life they had to face made them revise some of the opinions about their home country. In some of them it even caused longing for the old ways, which eventually convinced them to go back. They started comparing the two realities, and this comparison often put Italy in a better light. Even a simple lack of city squares in New
York City reminded the children in Vita of their hometowns and the beautiful piazzes, any respectable town had. Umbertina, in spite of being convinced that leaving Italy for the sake of their children was the right thing to do, often remembered Castagna. With time, however, the native village of Castagna was becoming more and more unreal and faded in her memory to the point that, when asked, Umbertina could only describe it as “quiet...quiet as the woods and the ruined abbey in the valley” (69). For Umbertina, Castagna was a closed chapter in her life, which she would hardly ever open again. Only just before her death did the memory of her origins come back and she died whispering the name of her town in Calabria and craving a glass of water from its spring.

Diamante, instead, goes back. He does this, though, more because he could not stand the misery of his life in America than out of longing for his homeland. Even though his life after he returned was always the life of an outsider, he could say: “Eppure mai una volta–mai–ho desiderato tornare indietro” (236). He destroyed everything that reminded him of his past, however, fearing that any recollection of America would cause regrets. This is how he also made it difficult for his family to remember America and pass on the memory of his experience to the next generations.

For Diamante, Italy was Tufo. Indeed, he admitted: “l'Italia non l'aveva mai vista” (354); the reality he knew was that of his native village, which once again confirms the lack of a sense of belonging to a nation that many emigrants had. After his return, however, Diamante felt very displaced and found it difficult to adjust to the old rhythms in Campagna: “Che ero? Un estraneo. Uno straniero,” the condition he thought he had left behind by leaving America. In the end, he built his life in the capital and rarely visited Minturno. He admitted, though: “l'America ha fatto di me una persona
rispettabile, un borghese” (236). Umbertina and Serafino never went back, while other protagonists of Umbertina, except for Marguerite, only visited Italy.

Instead, Umbertina’s family created their own Italy in America, selectively preserving those elements and customs that suited them in their new American lives. Mazzucco calls this reconstructed Italy “un museo, un teatro” (43), as she walks through Little Italy in New York City. It is a place that does not exist any more in Italy, artificial and antique, run by the Italian/Americans who “custodivano il ricordo di una memoria persa” (43)—whose image of the country of their origins had no equivalent in reality. Like other Italians, she did not feel any affinity with this community. Sandra Gilbert, a well-known feminist writer who only recently has begun to talk about her Italian origins, described this sensation very well from the perspective of an Italian/American. She remembers a trip taken with Italians, who accused her of an “impertinent familiarity […] with the ways of a culture that, from the perspective of ‘real’ Italians, is not my own” (139). Indeed, Italian/Americans are not Italians. However, many of their customs and characteristics originated in Italian mentality, though after immigration they underwent an evolution into a new and different Italian/American mentality. I would like to trace those Italian qualities and see how they influenced Italian/Americans.

Among the codified set of rules transported from Italy, there is, as previously mentioned, il codice di omertà, the code of silence. It derives directly from the culture of southern Italy; indeed, it is usually associated with criminal organizations from that region. However, its implications go beyond the mafia, because this code is an intrinsic part of southern mentality. According to this rule, silence protected the privacy of the family and the community and everyone who did not respect it was considered a traitor.
Because of the imperative to keep family secrets out of sight, Melania Mazzucco for a long time believed that her ancestors came from Piedmont. Later, when she learned of their real origins, she encountered much difficulty tracing their and her own history. For this same reason, her grandfather was extremely resistant to talking about his American experience. This silence covering the family’s past, however, had different causes in Mazzucco’s family from those in Italian/American families. Diamante’s silence was due to his emotional attitude toward his American adventure. He wanted to forget, because it was very painful for him to remember. For Barolini, instead, it was forbidden to talk about family secrets because they were to be kept inside the household and because in the family there was a strong distrust of outsiders.

For the sake of protecting the privacy of the Italian/American community, for a long time their members were very unwilling to accept anyone from outside. They all lived in the same neighborhood and married among themselves. In fact, Umbertina was very careful about the choice of the future spouses of her children and her first requirement was that they had an Italian background. Umbertina’s children all accepted her arrangements. Marguerite, however, out of opposition toward her parents, had a short-lasting marriage experience with Lennart Norensen, a “Nordic” friend of her cousin. After a week, her parents annulled this marriage and offered her, instead, a trip to California, later exchanged for a trip to Italy. Marguerite was the first to have broken this unspoken rule that obliged children to marry within the Italian/American community. Her daughter Tina no longer felt this obligation because of the accomplishments of the previous generation as well as her own successes in life. In Vita, which describes mostly only the first stage of the immigration experience, the main female character never really
considers marrying a non-Italian. In fact, when Diamante is gone, Vita gets involved with two other friends she knew from Tufo: first Rocco, and then Geremia, her future husband.

Many sociological analyses have commented that it was more difficult for women to transcend the limits of their Italian/American heritage. Italian/American women began marrying outside their community later when compared to the men. This is because of the particular position of females in the Italian family and the female ideal of seriousness, another code exported from Italy that has already been discussed in Part One. The family, once defined as a “bulwark against the mainstream culture and a scene of intense, dramatic cultural changes” (Hendin 204), has been a frequent topic in Italian/American writing. The importance of the family for Italian/Americans often contrasted with American individualism and was one reason for women’s confinement at home, since they were the main pillar of the family. This is true for both Vita and Umbertina, as well as for Umbertina’s daughters. Umbertina, throughout her life, worked and sacrificed for the family and her accomplishments in business were always credited to her male relatives. Vita’s restaurant was a success for her, in which, however, she used typically female skills, like cooking. Rocco, an Italian boy from Tufo, in the group of immigrants in New York, openly admits that he does not want to have a family, because he was told at school that “gli italiani sono crocifissi alla famiglia come Cristo sul legno della croce, e questo gli impedisce di progredire” (59). He had learned a lesson in America, where everyone operates independently: “Ognuno per sé, è questo che ha imparato in America” (59). The struggle to break free from the family, although waged with different intensity, marked the lives of both Marguerite and Tina, but it was Tina who consciously managed
to lead her life completely independent of family ties. Even though Tina felt pressured by her grandparents or her father, she had enough distance from them and strength of her own to oppose all of them.

Diamante, unlike Rocco, was very respectful of the ideal of the family. He loved his parents and never had the courage to lie to them. Indeed, he worshiped them to the point of comparing them to Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph. This association is relevant, because family and religion were related to each other. The central position of a woman within the family comes from the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary. In general, the Church was another bastion of Italian/American culture that was imported directly from Italy. Both Mazzucco and Barolini allude to this several times. Such allusions, however, are more explicit in Umbertina. When the social worker in New York City, Anna Giordani, suggested that Umbertina should send her children to reading and writing classes, she objected because they were run by the vangelisti and she wanted her children to be part of the Catholic faith. Most of Umbertina's choices in life were made in accordance with the Catholic religion.

Elements of the Italian heritage that contributed to the creation of the Italian/American attitude evolved also into a set of stereotypes. These stereotypes often hurt the image of this community in America. As Richard Gambino stated, "Italian/American identity is in danger of being dissolved in a sea of inauthentic myths" (Crisis 270). One of the strongest stereotypes of Italian/Americans and Italians is that of a mafia gangster. While in Umbertina there is no allusion to any criminal activity by Italians, some of Mazzucco's characters, like Rocco, do become involved in crime. The threat of the Black Hand, a famous and legendary criminal group at the beginning of the
twentieth century, is present and directly affects Agnello’s business. What was more hurtful, though, to the image of all Italians as *mafiosi*, as Mazzucco found out reading the newspapers of the time, was its diffusion into widely held views by Americans: “Della malavita italiana si parlava con esagerato terrore che incute un fenomeno sconosciuto: ‘human butchers’, ‘bunch of bananas’” (326). The Italian/American criminal underworld is an attractive and perhaps exciting episode in the history of Italian America. It contains many legendary figures, like Rocco or Buongiorno (the owner of the funeral home where Rocco and Diamante worked), who fit well in the story told by Mazzucco. Barolini does not focus so much on the element of adventure in her novel. Instead, as a part of the Italian/American community, she is particularly interested in combatting the stereotypes that hurt this community. The mafia stereotype is one of the most famous stereotypes associated with Italian/Americans. Indeed, American society reduced their image of Italian minority to mob and cuisine and many, for a long time, thought that the *Godfather* was the only result of cultural practices by Italian/Americans. Barolini’s objective is to build awareness that there is more than just that. For that reason, the criminal activity of Italian/Americans is not as extensively portrayed as it is in *Vita*.

Mazzucco, when in Little Italy in New York City, was advised not to use the word “mafia,” which proves the sensitivity of Italian/Americans to this stereotype. While walking through this museum of Italy, as she calls it, she had the impression that she was in an Italy that no longer exists. In fact, members of the Italian/American communities kept very limited contact with the country of their origins. In Mazzucco’s novel, it was only when Vita and Geremia went to a movie theater one day, many years after they left Tufo that they thought back about their town, which they were reminded of by a
documentary shown before the actual movie. The title of the documentary was *Notizie da casa*, which made them wonder "Ma casa di chi?" (348). The film was about the earthquake in Irpinia and about the Italian campaign in Libya. Geremia, who "non si era mai interessato alla patria e si era accorto di averne una solo quando l'aveva persa" (335), represents a common attitude by Italians who left. Even though they from time to time would remember to support Italy, for example by sending financial help during the Libyan campaign, in general they preferred to keep distant. The second generation, which was completely cut off from the homeland of their parents, hardly ever showed any interest in it. Carla, Umbertina's daughter, went to Italy for her honeymoon, but Italy for her was only a tourist attraction. Neither she nor any of her peers demonstrated any affinity with Italy. On the contrary, they did not want to have much in common with it.

When Marguerite communicates her intention to study Italian to her parents, her father said: "Why Italian? […] Where will that get you?" (159). Her decision to marry an Italian from Italy and stay in Italy was not welcomed by them either. Dy, Vita's son, was sent Italy as soldier during the Second World War. Hoping to find there the history of his family and also to become reconnected with his mother, he was disappointed and felt out of place. Dy left convinced that "questo luogo che non è luogo non è niente per lui" (8).

While he is able to talk to those who remained in Tufo, but everyone he mentions to them had left years before. When Tina in Barolini's novel goes to Castagna in search of her great-grandmother, she does not feel any connection with the town either. Moreover, a priest she encounters there whom she asks about her relatives who emigrated gives her a bitter response in which Tina senses a tone of hostility toward her: "They left because of *miseria* and they forget the others still here in *miseria*" (386). The priest is articulating a
feeling of abandonment of the village, this time by those from the village who had become successful.

Marguerite’s case is very different from those of the other characters. She, by marrying an Italian, has the most direct experience of Italy. But she still considers herself American and is intimidated by the rich and very ancient culture which surrounds her. Marguerite’s husband, with his sarcastic ways, intensifies this sensation: he treats her like a child who needs to be educated and enlightened. Because of Marguerite’s low self-esteem and identity problems she envies Italian women for their self-confidence: “the Italian women, how sure they were of themselves, how well they dressed and carried themselves; and she despised her soft, round, childish face and Italian-American uneasiness” (171). While interacting with the intellectual environment in Italy, Marguerite frequently noticed the differences between Italians and Americans. She found Italians much more cynical and concerned with external forms and diplomacy, the latter particularly obvious on the occasion of the numerous literary awards given each year in Italy. The same cynicism is a characteristic of Ferruccio, who accompanies Tina during her trip to Castagna. His behavior is also a good example of “racial purism” (Tamburri, Semiotic 90) toward southern Italians, the problem that has eternally vexed Italy and was later transported to America and whose echo we find in both novels.

The image of Italy in the two books is not significantly different. Barolini, whose Umbertina stretches across more years than Mazzucco’s book, also presents a more contemporary picture of Italy. She is more accurate and detailed in her portrait of Italian/Americans. Mazzucco, as someone who is not involved personally in the quest for identity, does not put so much emphasis on the difference between Italy and America and
certainly for that reason her image of Italy is less developed and profound. Anthony Julian Tamburri in an essay devoted to the image of Italy in *Umbertina*, said that two major issues are highlighted: gender and the question of the South (*Semiotic* 92). The latter is part of a more general issue of social tensions that impacted a lot the life of Italians in America. The problems of gender and discrimination are widely treated in the two novels under investigation here and are of major importance. These issues, differently handled by different generations, reveal the ideological standpoint of the two writers.
CHAPTER 6

QUEST FOR A BETTER LIFE: THE PRESENT VERSUS THE PAST

Helen Barolini has frequently made statements about the ideological and literary messages she tried to convey in *Umbertina*. In these statements she indicated how to read and interpret her novel and also objected to some judgments critics made about it. She repeatedly criticized labeling her works Italian/American, since she considers herself an organic part of American literature. She pushed her objections further along these lines by shifting the focus of the novel from the problems of identity her hyphenated protagonists face to issues of gender. In fact, in an interview she gave in 1993, Helen Barolini found it curious that *Umbertina* has been termed an Italian/American novel, because she would like to call it above all a feminist novel, since “it pertains to more than just ethnic issues” (Greenberg 97). These are some indications of Barolini’s objectives in *Umbertina* as well as of her interest in the social issues of the time.

Melania Mazzucco has not attached any straightforward ideological significance to her novel. *Vita* is certainly not an ideological vehicle as compared to *Umbertina*. An important difference between the two novels lies unquestionably in their inspiration. As I have mentioned before, Mazzucco’s intention was very personal. She does not exhibit any commitment to bettering society in it and she does not consider her or her family’s
story to be exemplary for any group. The issues of national identity, of family or church as obstacles in gaining independence or the problem of the conflict between two different contrasting societies, did not affect her personally the way they did Helen Barolini. However, as we have seen, many of those issues are present in Vita too, even though they are pushed more to the margins of the central story, which is that of the love of Vita and Diamante. The importance of their ideological message is something that sets the two books apart. In this part of my thesis I would like to look more profoundly at the ideological issues that play such an important role for Barolini, and consider as well how Melania Mazzucco confronts these same matters. It may be that Mazzucco does actually include matters in her book that go beyond just a description of a love and adventure story from the beginning of the century.

The impression that time stopped at some unspecified moment overwhelms Mazzucco in Little Italy. The reality she encounters there seems to have ignored the passage of time and the changes that the world, in this particular case Italy, has undergone. Little Italy is little more than an artificially preserved mausoleum, and as Mazzucco admits, no Italians really live there any more: “Gli italiani se n’erano andatì–erano scomparsi, si erano confusi ed annullati nell’America che avevamo intorno.” In reality this is a walk-in cemetery and people who worked there or stayed “[non] provavano la minima nostalgia per il passato” (43), whether they thought about the past in terms of Italy or of America. Probably few of them miss the old times, considering how much sacrifice and suffering they had to go through. At the end of the twentieth century the children of Italians who immigrated decades ago are much better off than their parents or grandparents. The sacrifices their ancestors made most certainly have
paid off. All have homes, professions and families as Americans and have clearly benefited from all the changes that were made partially possible thanks to their grandparents and great-grandparents. These offspring of parents have been promoted in the social hierarchy: they are no longer peasants with no skills or education, but members of the middle class.

We have seen how the image of both the United States and Italy is rather negative in the two novels, more so than commonly. The cruel reality of hard and unrewarding work that we see in them contrasts with the myth of America as a land of opportunity and rapid success. America needed the immigrants and partially owes to them the infrastructure and economical success of America today. These immigrants came from different parts of the world; at the time the two books take place, others also emigrated from Greece, Poland, Germany and Russia, though Mazzucco insists that Italians were “la minoranza etnica più miserabile della città. Più miserabili degli ebrei, dei polacchi, dei rumeni e perfino dei negri” (42). As Anna Giordani eloquently put it once, talking to Umbertina, Italians settled where all other minority groups had refused to live, they accepted the jobs that others had rejected, they did not mind working under inhuman conditions or helping break organized strikes and they were the most resistant to education. For these reasons, too, their assimilation process lasted longer than that of other minorities. Because of this they also gained a reputation that would, for many decades into the future, close many doors to the bearers of the Italian last names, as Baroìni and many other Italian/Americans testify.

There is no doubt that there was discrimination against Italians. Many Italian/Americans have complained that this discrimination continued to affect the image
of their community years after its external forms disappeared and such prejudice developed into more internalized, veiled expressions. This is perhaps why Tina reacts with anger anytime she hears her friends call her an Italian/American. She objects to this label, because she considers herself the daughter of an American mother and an Italian father. “No mix. You didn’t want any part of melting-pot Italian” (359), as Jason once characterizes her attitudes. In the same conversation with Jason, though, she starts talking about her “southern part,” because at that moment she is becoming more and more aware of her emerging Italian/American identity. She acknowledges, “my mother’s family just wasn’t up to my father’s side, so I ignored all that part” (359). She preferred to identify herself with her father’s Venetian aristocratic family, because they were the WASPs of Italy. There was nothing to be proud of on her mother’s side: they were not educated, they did not have a long history to look back on. Instead, their short history in America, which had its origins in the peasant, conservative Italian culture, contained many shameful moments. Dy in Vita, who is a representative of the second generation, keeps a more vivid memory of this discrimination. He remembers acts of violence against his family, which is why he does not want to be considered Italian/American. He changes his name, to eliminate the first and most obvious indicator of his origins.

Italian immigrants were constrained to live in ghettos. When both Vita and Umbertina came to America, almost every large town had one. In New York City, moreover, different streets were populated by Italians from different parts of their homeland; when Umbertina was first introduced to the city she learned that Prince Street was where Sicilians lived, Neapolitans dominated Mulberry Street and Calabrians were on Mott Street. These inhabitants hardly ever crossed over the borders of their ghettos
and entered the “American” streets. *Vita*, however, contains an example of such an incident. One day Vita and Diamante, by accident, without even noticing how, got lost and suddenly realized they were in an unknown part of the city. The difference between this part and the one they lived in was obvious; they saw around them “palazzi con facciate di marmo, e i pedoni portavano bombette e mazzarelli da passeggio di canna di bamboo” (34). The view was breathtaking: expensive stores, clean streets, rich and elegant people. Even though they tried not to stand out in the crowd, they were noticed immediately. The passersby pointed at them angrily, making it obvious that the Italian-looking children were not welcome or allowed in those parts. A policeman started chasing them and they managed to escape only thanks to a black janitor, who showed them a way out through the stairs. By doing so, the black rescuer empathized with them, as one who was a victim of discrimination too. In fact, the situation of African/Americans and Italians at the time was often compared.

The only protagonist with a political awareness of exploitation is Domenico Saccà in *Umbertina*. He is the one who helped Serafino’s family to move to Cato and that is why he is their good friend. Domenico often expresses his disappointment with America. His first concern is the unfairness of American employers toward Italians. He frequently complains about this and calls for change. But his criticism is directed toward Italians, too, because they are partially to blame for this situation. He accuses them of inaction and thus of complicity in their mistreatment. Saccà is the only character in Barolini’s book who talks explicitly about politics. Saccà questions the idea of voting Republican, as most Italians do, convinced, like Pascuale Lupizzi, that “they’re the ones who have the money and they’re the ones who give jobs” (90). As a socialist, Domenico casts doubt on
the conviction that Republicans are truly concerned with workers but believes the opposite—that they are against assuring them any rights. He understands instead the necessity to take a political action and give political representation to Italians, so as to defend their rights against common prejudice: “You have to become citizens and get the vote so that we can all protect ourselves” (98). Saccà takes action and opens an association to help Italian workers. Part of this association is a fund to support families whose men were killed at work. His movement, a sort of a predecessor of a labor union, does not stir any interest among Italians, though, which convinces Domenico to go back to Italy. In the end, Umbertina and Serafino persuade him to stay, but he will never really adjust to America.

Domenico Saccà is Barolini’s spokesperson for social issues. But his is the only moment in which Barolini actually makes a strong statement about the social situation of Italian immigrants. Even though there is no equivalent to Domenico in Vita, the presence of social and political issues in Mazzucco’s novel is more persuasive. Vita contains many examples of discrimination, but there is no consciousness among the protagonists. Mazzucco devoted more space to pictures of workers’ horrible conditions. These pictures, straightforward and realistic, indicate a political awareness on Mazzucco’s part, which is hardly ever expressed by the protagonists. Again, we can see that the responsibility that Barolini feels makes her message more direct than Mazzucco’s more subtle suggestions. This reconfirms the judgment that the presence of a message that must be conveyed is what sets the two works apart.

Umbertina is also a novel that raises gender consciousness. It has more than one spokesperson: Umbertina prepares the groundwork for Marguerite and Tina, who both
struggle with gender issues. Many gender issues in Barolini’s book have been mentioned in the chapter devoted to the search for the female identity Barolini’s female protagonists experience. We have documented her criticism of the romanticism embedded in American culture and her emphasis on the importance personal and professional fulfillment. At this point I would like to return to these issues and do a further analysis of some of them apart from the Italian/American background of my earlier discussion.

Marguerite is not successful in her search, because it is a long process that sometimes requires generations working to build a common awareness. As a member of the first generation to experience feminism, Marguerite did not have any canon of works on which to rely. Her biggest accomplishment probably was recognizing how much she desired professional accomplishment, which at some point she even prioritized over her family. When her father scolds Marguerite for not thinking enough about her children and, instead, filing for separation from Alberto, she silently answers: “First me, this time” (209). It is a very important moment in the book, because for the first time, and one of the few times, Marguerite makes a truly feminist statement. Unfortunately, she dies partially because feminism came too late in her life and had not yet won some other rights that women would be granted in the years to come. Marguerite is not given any choice when she finds out she is pregnant by her lover Massimo. She feels impotent and, as it is suggested but never confirmed by the author, responds by committing suicide. One of her last entries in her diary says: “What do women do in Italy...or anyplace? What is this terrible thing that happens to us in our bodies where we grow our own punishment, this living thing in our guts which is the proof of shame, guilt, sin, anger, frustration, lust” (312). Her only solution in this case was to have a “backroom abortion” or “a quick trip
to England or Switzerland” (312), because in both Italy and America, abortion was illegal. She also thought of killing herself, even though this was never made explicit in the novel. Pregnancy is a symbolic legacy her daughter Tina inherits from her mother. Just at the moment when she reads Marguerite’s diary, she realizes she is pregnant by Duke. Barolini deliberately makes Tina understand her condition through empathizing with her mother. It is clear that Marguerite symbolically passes the feminist struggle to her daughter and endows her with a mission of change. And there is certainly a difference in the way Marguerite and Tina tackle their unwanted pregnancies.

Barolini in an interview put it this way: “Marguerite is pregnant and despairs, ‘what am I going to do next?’ Tina becomes pregnant and has an abortion, and just [snaps her fingers (Barolini)] like that” (Greenberg 98). Tina has an underground abortion, which is a horrible and very humiliating experience for her. In fact, she imagined herself as “one of those carcasses hanging in all the meat markets of Rome” (343), while being in the doctor’s office, or rather in a butcher’s shop—another association she makes. She is angry, because she “has to pay the fiddler” (345), as her mother joked in her diary, too. Her thoughts—ideas which could very well be part of a feminist manifest—best express her feelings and attitude: “she hated the pope in his long unsullied skirts, or the fat-bellied old priests who told women they sinned, or the pigs in Parliament who daydreamed of women to fuck as they deliberated on laws that violated their bodies” (343). So Tina thinks, but her sister Weezy is the one who would certainly say it out loud. She is a real feminist and a social worker. She also offers Tina help in getting an abortion through a well-organized network, but Tina refuses, because she does not feel at ease in the feminist environment. Tina is not a declared feminist, as her sister is, so she prefers to
take care of the matter more discreetly. As Barolini has made clear, Tina operates well in 
the male-dominated world of academia (Greenberg 99). Her role is, implicitly, to make a 
difference there, where the hierarchy is still defined and monopolized by men: “They 
hesitate with women cause they’re scared we’ll quit and get married, as if a woman’s 
education didn’t become as integral a part of her life as a man’s [...] That’s the unfair 
part—but that’s real and I’ve got to live with it and live around it” (320). So she manages 
to insert herself in this hostile environment, receives a doctoral degree, and starts an 
academic career.

Thanks to the diachronic perspective in Umbertina, we can see how consecutive 
generations of women benefit from the evolution of feminist consciousness. What was 
unthinkable for Umbertina is perfectly normal for Tina. While Umbertina is insensitive 
toward education, her daughter Carla sees the need of it and sends her children to college, 
even though her mother did not let her continue her own education. Tina does not hesitate 
to have an abortion, something unacceptable to Marguerite. This evolution is hardly 
noticeable in Vita. In fact, at the time presented in Mazucco’s novel, there was no room 
for liberated female consciousness. The author does signal her standpoint indirectly, 
though, by portraying the situation of women in the Italian/American community, in 
particular in Agnello’s house. The way Agnello treats his lover Lena is the most obvious 
and striking expression of the female subdued position. Lena is not only Agnello’s lover, 
but also that of many other men in the same house, including Diamante at some point. 
Moreover, she is Agnello’s servant, which is why she refers to him as to her owner and 
boss. Her role is to take care of the house and to sleep with Agnello. When she first gets 
sick and afterwards gets injured in an accident, he immediately thinks about replacing
her. Indeed, this is why he had Vita join him in America. When he realizes his daughter is not as strong as he had expected her to be, Agnello is openly disappointed and angry. He worries about who will clean the house and cook for its residents, since Lena was not able to do it any longer because of her pregnancy. Agnello’s reaction to this news was not the happiness of an expectant father; on the contrary, he calls it a “catastrofe, in primo luogo perché non ci si può fidare di una che non è tua moglie, in secondo luogo perché un figlio nuovo lo devi mantenere finché compie almeno dieci anni” (30). He is indifferent toward Lena and her feelings because, for some men at the time, the position of women was that of an object. Therefore, when Lena had a miscarriage, Agnello was not upset at all. Mazzucco chose to portray this incident by using very shocking, realistic, even naturalistic, images of Lena “seminuda, reggomitolata sul letto matrimoniale, con le mani, la bocca, i capelli—e tutto il resto—impiastriati di sangue” and of the fetus rejected by Lena’s body compared to “l’innominabile cosa rossa che galleggia nell’acqua torbida del catino” (71). Equally appalling are the practices used by the women trying to extract the remaining tissue from Lena’s womb so that an infection does not develop:

La vicina ha infilato dentro di lei il tubo di gomma con cui Lena innaffia i vasi di basilico. Ci soffia dentro e poi aspira e indirizza il tubo nel secchio. Il tubo si colora di rosso e il secchio comincia a riempirsi. Lena ha lo sguardo inesspressivo, inchiodato sul soffitto, come se ciò che accade non la toccasse. Collabora, bellezza, spingilo fuori, si spazientisce la cicciona, se ti resta dentro ti viene l’infezione e muori. (72)

By means of this shocking description, Mazzucco again calls attention to the scandalous conditions in which immigrants lived and, in particular, to the unfavorable situation of women at the time. Luckily, the practices have changed through time and in
contemporary western society most women do not have to risk their lives the way Lena had to.

Another indicator of changes on the socio-cultural level, that affects women in particular, is Marguerite’s attitude toward sex. Neither Umbertina or Carla mention the importance of that sphere: Umbertina has a very well-defined notion of the female role in society and sexual pleasure has no room in a woman’s life. Carla’s sexuality, instead, is completely repressed by the puritanical values and romanticism she was exposed to when she was raised in America. Marguerite is much more extroverted when it comes to experiencing sex, even extramarital sex. She is able to separate sex from love, even though it is often through sex too that she wants to inspire a love relationship. For Marguerite sex “was her ID card” (158) that would assure her an entry into feeling loved and appreciated, but she had no illusions about it: “If love were unattainable, there was always sex; and if it meant she got less, it also meant she’d be asked less, be less hurt” (158). She certainly did not love Lennart, her first husband, but she married him, out of rebellion against her family and to receive attention. This rebellion was also part of Marguerite’s liberal attitude toward sex. In fact, her marriage was ultimately based on sex. Moreover, Marguerite is far from romanticizing sex, which she, on the contrary, describes as nothing more than just a physiological activity: “There it all was: ingesting, voiding, vomiting, copulating, laboring, farting, nose picking, pimply skin, bad breath” (159). Sex was one of the necessities in both men’s and women’s lives, neither more nor less important than the others. She confirms that by experiencing “sex pure and simple” with Alec, whom she met on the boat to Europe: “Sex with Alec was something she didn’t have to think about—could keep her feelings from” (160). Again, sex is not related
to love or considered a female obligation toward men, as it was for previous generations. Marguerite did not have nor want any deeper love relationship with Alec. It was different, though, when she met Gillo, an Italian scholar on a scholarship in England. Marguerite developed feelings for him, even though she had doubts about the nature of their relationship. Still, the sex relationship with Gillo left her rather indifferent, so much that she asked herself: “Is this better than Len?” (163). Moreover, after their first intercourse, she was more concerned with how to “get back to her place in full daylight in her torn and too-dressy clothes” than with the emotional implications of what had just happened (163). Sex was what she missed in the relationship with Alberto. In fact, there is very little information about their sexual life in Umbertina. Marguerite expresses her sexual desire toward Alberto when she is at her psychiatrist’s office: “Sometimes I just want to say to Alberto, ‘Oh, come on and sleep with me tonight’” (5). She is afraid of doing this, however, because she is afraid Alberto would not sign the divorce papers. Her attitude, though, once again proves that she separates emotions from sex. She felt finally satisfied with Massimo, whom she truly loved. In fact, her thoughts after every sexual contact were far more different than before with Gillo: “To die like that—entwined, indissoluble, not alone” (254). They also demonstrate, however, that by means of sex she was trying to obtain something: company and love, which in the end Massimo proved not to be able to provide, since he was using Marguerite for his own selfish purpose. In conclusion, what is important to notice in Marguerite’s sexual life, whether it was satisfactory or not, is that she attached great importance to it and consciously wanted to take pleasure from it. Marguerite thought about sex a lot, while Tina did not, because she felt sexually fulfilled. Sex for her was not problematic, as it still was for Marguerite. The consciousness,
though, that a woman can also need and have sex for pleasure is another achievement associated with feminism.

The times in which Vita takes place pre-date feminism as a movement. Indeed, Vita did not need feminism to enjoy sex. While it could have made a difference for Lena, humiliated and taken advantage of, Vita makes choices on her own when it comes to her partners. Even though she promised herself to Diamante, when he is gone, she spends nights with Rocco. Her behavior is void of inhibitions. She is not ashamed of demanding and expressing her desires: “Rocco capi che Vita non voleva essere baciata con tenerezza, non voleva un bacio circospetto e rispettoso—ma voleva essere baciata davvero” (273). Not even that they are in a funeral home stops them both from giving in to their passion. Just before Diamante’s final departure from America, Vita and Diamante spend a few nights together, uniting themselves in a symbolic marriage. They both succumb to their passionate love, without concern for the social prejudice of that time.

Mazzucco did not directly use the ideology of feminism, because of the historical background in Vita, but first of all, because she, as a woman, does not feel the necessity to consider this topic. The society she comes from, even though much must still be done to achieve equality, has made progress in developing women’s rights. When Barolini wrote her novel, instead, the feminist struggle was still important. Once again we can see how the background of the two authors influenced their writing.

Barolini is a declared feminist and makes her novel a feminist manifesto. Mazzucco, even if she declares herself a feminist in real life, does not make it explicit in Vita. The happiness Barolini’s female protagonists attain is determined by their feminist awareness. Mazzucco’s Vita has no notion of feminism. Even so, her actions or her
happiness are not conditioned by whether she has embraced the ideas of feminism. In fact, what she cares about the most is her love for Diamante. She feels free to express her emotional and sexual desires, regardless of the times she is living in. Therefore Mazzucco’s female character, perhaps because ideologically free, may seem more genuine and authentic to today’s readers. Vita achieves success on feminist terms, but not as a human being whose principal desire in life was to love. Is this the future that today’s woman, having been liberated from male supremacy, will have to face? The answer to such a question is beyond the scope of this thesis.
PART III

LITERATURE AS A MEDIUM
CHAPTER 7

MAZZUCCO’S PAROLE: LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE IN VITA

A love for words inspires Melania Mazzucco throughout her entire novel. Fascinated and respectful of la parola, she has become a master of the language. Language also reconnects her with the past. Without the words that created the stories in her family Vita would have never been written and Mazzucco would still have believed that her family roots lie in Piedmont and not in Minturno. Words have an amazing, often magical power in Vita. But they can also prove to be misleading. Mazzucco’s protagonists recognize the power of words, as well. The “americano” Vita learns in school provides her with a valuable skill that distinguishes her from others: Vita “aveva qualcosa che mancava a tutte le altre femmine del quartiere: le parole.” Diamante, who had “un dono che sul momento gli sembrò inutile: la lingua italiana” (87), understood the importance of knowing English. Therefore he asked Vita to teach it to him. Vita agreed, but she also requested that every word of English she teaches him be exchanged with a kiss. Thus it is through words that the young Diamante and Vita discover their love for each other: “Job, train, bed, fire, water, earth, hearth, hurt, hope. Un bacio sui capelli, uno sulla guancia, un altro sul naso, sulle mani, nell’incavo di un gomito, sul collo, sulle palpebre, sulle ciglia” (112). Finally Diamante gives Vita a kiss on the mouth, without
even remembering in exchange of what word in English: help, work, cry or maybe kill, live, pray. As they discover language, the two children discover also their sexuality. In addition, they begin to discover their new American identity.

Words are Diamante’s treasure. In fact, he takes them back with him on his return to Italy, as his only luggage: “Le parole, Diamante le mette nella valigia—l’unico bagaglio, l’unica ricchezza che si porta via dall’America” (382). He could abandon anything else and leave it with Vita in America, but not words. These are too precious to him.

Mazzucco feels much the same. She inherited her attraction to words from her grandfather. Toward the beginning of her book, this author confesses that being deprived of words is for her “la povertà assoluta” (41), something she experienced when she went to England at the age of eighteen for an English course. The huge number of stories and legends Mazzucco inherited are nothing less than the words Diamante brought back with him: “la leggenda che di generazione in generazione si arricchisce di particolari, nomi, episodi” (383). Vita narrates these legends, which hide the truth somewhere very deep, but in which it is easy to lose oneself. Indeed, Vita understood when she went back to Italy to find Diamante that in his family “tutti si perdono nelle storie degli altri per dimenticare la propria” (229). Telling stories is an intrinsic part of the Mazzuccos’ identity.

Invention is intertwined with the truth and it eventually becomes truth, according to Mazzucco’s father Roberto who “sapeva che ciò che viene raccontato è vero” (11). His daughter continues turning stories into truth. Not only do words develop into truth; they are also converted into literature. Mazzucco said in an interview with Maddalena
Tirabassi that “solo la letteratura riesce a formare l’immaginario di una nazione,” a nation that in her view has so far neglected the experience of Italians in America. Mazzucco is contributing to this imaginary by writing Vita—a title that refers to the proper name of one of the main protagonists, and by writing “vita”—the life of Vita, Diamante, Rocco, Geremia, Agnello, Lena, Nicola (who in America becomes Coca-Cola), and many others of the sixteen million Italian immigrants who arrived in America between the years 1840 and 1940.

The semantic complexity of Melania Mazzucco’s title looks forward to the complexity of the novel itself, both in structure and in language. Vita links the experience of individuals with that of an entire group. It has some characteristics of a family saga, since it focuses on the adventures of the author’s grandfather. According to Francesco Galati, the novel is also an epic, the “epopea di quella che fu l’avventura dell’emigrazione italiana in America,” because it shows an entire spectrum of experiences with which many immigrants could identify. Enzo Golino, in his review of Vita, even alludes to an affinity between Mazzucco and Manzoni in the way facts are interlaced with imaginary events and in “quell’innesto tra destini individuali e fenomeni collettivi.” Although the analogy may have been carried too far, there is undoubtedly something of a historical writer in Mazzucco. She has proven it with her previous books in which historical events are entwined with invented ones. In Il bacio della Medusa, Mazzucco transports the reader to Piedmont at the beginning of the twentieth century, La camera di Baltus, like Vita, presents different historical periods: late Quattrocento, Napoleonic times and the contemporary world, and finally Lei così amata narrates the story of a historical figure, Annemarie Schwarzenbach. Mazzucco mentions her name in
Vita, too: preparing material for Leicosi amata she visited hotels, nightclubs and mental clinics where Annemarie had been before she was expelled from the United States.

The research for her third novel brought Mazzucco to Prince Street where her future, fourth literary adventure began. A similar investigation precedes the writing of Vita: with the help of the Bellonci foundation and the Casa delle Letterature di Roma, Mazzucco did research in the archives of Ellis Island, of Tufo and Minturno, and those of the Italian state. She spent hours in libraries in Rome and New York and even more hours talking to her relatives. Indeed, the results of this exhaustive research are very accurate: “a partire dallo sbarco a Ellis Island, alla vita nel Lower East Side, vi si trovano le descrizioni degli storici e dei sociologi dell’epoca sul lavoro a domicilio, l’evasione scolastica, il lavoro dei minori...” Tirabassi noted in her interview with Melania Mazzucco. It was a long and arduous process of delving into the documents and memoirs before Mazzucco’s own story could gradually emerge. Mazzucco decided to structure her narration according to the way her research moved forward. Vita, therefore, lacks a linear chronological order. “Io stessa non ho scoperto le vicende e i segreti dei miei personaggi con un ordine lineare, e volevo che anche il lettore le scoprisse a poco a poco con me,” Mazzucco told her interviewer at the Book Fair in Turin. Moreover, the events in Vita were reconstructed by memory in a process which does not always respect the rules of chronological order.

As a result, the narration of Vita contains numerous, different time frames. The first time level starts in the year 1903 when Diamante and Vita embark on the Republic and begin their voyage to America. On this time level we follow the adventures of Vita, Diamante, Rocco, Geremia, Coca-Cola and others up to the moment when Diamante
admits he has been defeated in America and returns to Italy. Another level is that of Dy, Vita’s son, who during the Second World War comes to Tufo, his mother’s hometown, and finds it completely razed to the ground, because it was on the front line. Later on, perhaps twenty years after the war, we witness a meeting in Rome between Vita and Diamante. We also move to the year 1997 and through the writer’s eyes see contemporary America. There are many other episodes that happen in between, for example Vita and Geremia’s marriage or the business correspondence between Dy and Roberto. Mazzuco moves back and forth between all of these time frames, revealing her story only gradually.

In addition to the complex time structure of *Vita*, the work also has various thematic levels. There is the story of the Italian immigrants: their struggle to assimilate in the New World, the appalling living and working conditions with which they contended in order to survive, their involvement with criminal organizations and their eventual material success. These experiences create the background for the central love story of Vita and Diamante, a story of reciprocal discovery, begun on board of the *Republic* and continued throughout their American adventure. Theirs is a story of a failure, because Diamante and Vita (*promessi sposi* to invoke Manzoni once again) never manage to become reunited as spouses after Diamante’s return to Italy. On the third level, Mazzuco conducts her own, very personal quest of discovering her ties with her family’s past. The narrating subject distinguishes these overlapping thematic levels. While the first two levels are narrated in the third person, the third one, to emphasize the personal character of the search, is told in a first person, who represents the writer.
The multiplicity of time levels and plots in Vita is accompanied by the complexity of the language. The characters in the novel are not the only ones to explore the language. Along with them the author herself experiments with words and explores linguistic possibilities. She renders every word rich, sophisticated and meaningful. The language, like the structure of the narration, is not uniform, but multidimensional. Its variety reflects the process of researching and writing.

There are thus many different types of writing in Vita. For example, at the beginning of the novel, after introducing Vita and Diamante to the reader, Mazzucco quotes the letters of immigration officials who complain about the massive arrivals of Italians—mostly illiterate, unskilled peasants and criminals. These letters, gathered under the ironic, English title Welcome to America, show how much hostility was directed toward the newcomers, in some cases even suggesting that American ports should be closed to them. Throughout the entire narration Mazzucco, in order to support her story with documentation she found during her research, refers frequently to her sources. She quotes a paragraph from the 1909 journal Rivista di Emigrazione where she found a note regarding “caso Vita” to describe living conditions on Prince Street (102). A very favorable review of Vita’s restaurant, excerpted on page 138, tells us about her later success. A failure is documented, instead, in the correspondence between Dy and Roberto in which they list products they could import or export to their countries: respectively the United States and Italy. These and many others are quotations from original documents Mazzucco unearthed. There are other examples of diversity in style, for example during the interrogation of Vita by the police or in the threatening letters sent by the Black Hand.
These cited or paraphrased forms of narration reflect the variety of materials Mazzucco used in her research, the research that gave the structure to her book. The use of dialects also enriches the linguistic spectrum in *Vita*. Moreover, the dialectal variety harmonically coexists with the elegant Italian of the narration. However, when Diamante hears for the first time his “zio” Agnello speak, Agnello uses the language “che gli sembra familiare, eppure gli è sostanzialmente estranea” (25). Agnello’s dialect is not the same as that which people in Tufo used in the years Diamante was growing up; it contains words Diamante has never heard before. Words like “giobba” (job), “Novarco” (New York), “frutostando” (fruit stand), “grinoni” (greenhorns) or “polismen” (policemen) hinder Diamante’s comprehension. Soon he learns them, too. This new dialect, which Enzo Galati calls “broccolino,” was born from the fusion of the two worlds and the two different languages. Thus Italian, or rather the dialect of Minturno, adapts to English. This adaptation is an important step in the discovery of the language in *Vita*, a process that is central to the experience of America by Diamante and Vita and in their experience of one another.

Enzo Golino talks also about a comic effect that the incorporation of English into Italian may often have, for example in the nickname of Nicola, in America called Coca-Cola after the famous drink. This brings us to another aspect of the language in Mazzucco’s novel: the variety of linguistic registers. Coca-Cola is not the only name that induces a smile. Similar humorous effect results from such names as Strappadenti Senzadolore or Pinzette Tentatrice, which are all present in the episode that involves Agnello “at the dentist.” Indeed, the entire scene makes one laugh. Agnello, in pain because of a toothache, gives himself up to the self-proclaimed doctor Strappadenti.
Senzadolore. This dentist without certification employs a group of female dancers—"una sorte di Veline dell’epoca," as Enzo Golino called them—who dance in front of him until the ribbon attached to a leg of one of them and to Agnello’s aching tooth extracts it from his mouth. Strappadenti adapts a very "sophisticated" and humorous expedient.

Golino continues his analysis of the language in Vita by quoting another episode: the endurance dance competition Diamante and Vita win also uses the comic register. This episode, however, in the way it reminds one of Horace McCoy’s They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?, contains elements of the grotesque, another register Melania Mazzucco uses. The best example of the grotesque is when Diamante, teased by Rocco, sneaks into a cemetery to steal a watch from the wrist of one of the dead. The watch is not there; so instead Diamante takes the dead man’s shoes.

Finally there is the register of tragedy—in the description of Lena’s miscarriage for example. This description is very naturalistic and thus shocking. Naturalism and realism, without any attempt to romanticize, characterize many moments in the novel, in particular the ones that deal with the struggle of the characters to find jobs and their sacrifices to keep them. The realistic style, though, contrasts often with the atmosphere of magic and imagination which makes some of the episodes hard to believe. Vita is considered to possess some magical power after she manages to bend a knife in front of Diamante and Coca-Cola. After this incident they all endow her with a mission to change their lots in life: “Lei, proprio lei avrebbe permesso a tutti loro di abbandonare per sempre Prince Street. Li avrebbe spostati-letteralmente, come faceva con i bicchieri e le fibbie dei calzoni” (127). They believe this is the purpose of Vita’s appearance in their lives.
Vita's skills are not strong enough to benefit everyone. They are, however, sufficient to magically change her own life, even though this happens only in her imagination. She fantasizes that her father is not Agnello, but a prince from Minturno who one day learns about her existence and comes to save her. This fantasy reveals not only the nature of the emotionless relationship she has with her real father, but also her nostalgia for home. Later, she exchanges the mysterious prince of Minturno with the famous Caruso, which reflects her growth as a teenager. At that time she wants to identify with this figure of the emerging popular culture, idolized by everyone in the Italian community.

Magic seems to have been involved in a mysterious rescue of Diamante by a comedian who turns out to be Charlie Chaplin. Later on in his life, Diamante "non perse neanche un cortometraggio di Chaplin, né lo abbandonò quando Charlot divenne famoso [...]. Diamante gli rimase fedele [...]. Lo segui come un compagno d'avventura, il misterioso fratello che non aveva mai incontrato" (361). Throughout his entire life Diamante remains convinced that he owes his life to Charlie Chaplin and in the movie The Immigrant he sees his own story. Therefore he also takes his son to watch it a few times and in that way, through Roberto, this legend survives through Mazzucco's generation, the last one of the family lineage, because there is no one else to pass it on after her.

Thus this discussion brings us back to the legend that is the basis of the story of the family and the story of Vita. Imagination is omnipresent and becomes literature. "E anche la letteratura è la vita," Enzo Golino concludes his review of the novel. The complexity of the language and structure in Vita is a part of life and literature, and of
reality and fiction. By employing this complexity in her novel Melania Mazzucco has emphasized this complexity of both experience and of art.
CHAPTER 8

BAROLINI’S WORDS: LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE IN UMBERTINA

In *Vita* the discovery of language is an important experience for the protagonists. Diamante, Vita, Agnello, Rocco, Coca-Cola and others need language for the purposes of simple daily communication. In *Umbertina* the title character also insists that her children learn “americano” for she understands the necessity of language for the process of successful assimilation. But the acquisition of English is not emphasized as much by Barolini as it is by Mazzucco. The process with which the second generation of Italian/Americans has mastered the language of the new country was fast and smooth in *Umbertina*. Language as a means of communication for Barolini’s protagonists is not a central or pressing issue, as it is in Mazzucco’s novel.

Saying that the issue of language is of no interest for Barolini, however, would not be true. She is a writer; therefore she is concerned with the linguistic dimension of her works. Edvige Giunta in “Blending “Literary” Discourses: Helen Barolini’s Italian/American Narratives” demonstrates how Barolini “utilizes diverse spheres, even nonliterary ones, as spaces for authorial expression” (116). Barolini is a fiction writer, a critic, an essayist, but she also published a cookbook titled *Festa*. The importance of her cookbook for an understanding of *Umbertina* is that it shows how Barolini uses different
genres and registers to find the best way of expressing herself. A recipe is, in reality, "a narrative strategy" (Giunta, "Blending" 119) in which an author expresses her femininity through the fusion of life writing and food writing (Giunta, "Blending" 117). Here the Italian/American perspective is important. In Festa "Barolini negotiates her position between American and Italian culture" (Giunta, "Blending" 119). Cooking has always been a significant aspect of the Italian heritage, which, indeed, also quickly became a part of American culture. In Umbertina, the cultural background of the author influenced aspects of language and structure. Barolini's mission in her novel is to show the evolution of the Italian/American community and culture and thus build an awareness within this community that has often failed to appreciate its own cultural background. Barolini's principal objective, however, is that of building a canon for Italian/American literature. By considering the stages of the development of Italian/American writing, she faces this challenge and thus redeems writers, especially women writers, who, without such a context, seem to be writing "out of a void" (Bona, "But Is It Great?" 247). Because such little importance has been traditionally given by Italian/Americans to reading and writing, many writers from this community chose to write only for themselves. This attitude hindered a broader dissemination of literature by Italian/Americans. In fact, the silence of this community eventually gave rise to the question posed by Gay Talese in his controversial article.6

In reality, Italian/American literature had existed well before Talese's article was published. It simply did not receive attention or recognition. This insufficient attention, even ostracism, and the strategies to fight against this attitude are recurrent topics in

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6 See Introduction 3.
Helen Barolini's writings. Indeed, Mary Jo Bona has said that the canonization of Italian/American literature, so crucial for any literature, really started with Barolini ("But Is It Great?" 246). The best example of Barolini's attempts to find writings by Italian/American women and bring them to a wider attention is certainly her Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women. By means of this anthology, which brought Barolini a good deal of attention, she gave those writers who so far had thought they were isolated in their writing a sense of belonging to a group with which they could share their experiences.

In Umbertina not only does Barolini build an awareness of an ethnic and female identity, she also faces the problem of how to communicate this issue through language. Her novel deserves to be called a "paradigm of Italian/American literature" (Kotsaftis 166), not only because it traces the evolution of the ethnic identity of the main characters, but also because it traces that of literary language. In presenting three generations of Italian/American women, Barolini identifies a different writing style that is particular to each generation, and thus divides this development into three stages. Maria Kotsaftis, in an essay published in Adjusting Sites: New Essays in Italian American Studies, treats this issue extensively. Indeed, she defines these three stages in Umbertina as "expressive" and "premodernist" in the part devoted to Umbertina, "modernist" in Marguerite and "postmodernist" in Tina (166-168). The following analysis of the narrative styles in Umbertina is based on Kotsaftis' conclusions.

In the first part of the novel, the narration is mainly concerned with the surrounding world. The narrator, a traditional observer who possesses sufficient knowledge of the place of action and of the protagonists, presents objectively the space in
which the characters move. The reader finds images of Italy and America, accounts of life in Calabria, New York and Cato, and a portrayal of Umbertina. Very rarely, however, does the narration go beyond a simple, superficial description of the reality of that time. In fact, very little space is devoted to Umbertina’s, or any other characters’, feelings or thoughts.

The change in narration is noticeable with the first paragraphs of *Marguerite*. While Part One begins with a realistic description of Umbertina’s physical characteristics, in *Marguerite* the narration focuses immediately on Umbertina’s granddaughter’s sense of otherness. Marguerite—her thoughts, feelings and fantasies—is the central character and the central topic of Part Two of *Umbertina*. Therefore, the narration that follows Marguerite’s flow of thoughts and emotions does not maintain a traditional organized structure. On the contrary, it is often characterized by chaotic and fragmented sentences that imitate the spoken language. As a result, Marguerite, or the narrator who in reality conveys Marguerite’s thinking, uses a larger variety of registers. Marguerite can be ironic when she talks about her daily routine in Rome: “Get breakfast, kiss Weezy and send her off to school, talk, move, act, dress. Affront a new day. Action” (202). She is very straightforward when she talks about sex with Lennart. In fact, this rather naturalistic, down-to-earth description with references to human physiology could disturb many readers’ traditional sense of decorum. Finally, the narration sometimes reaches vulgarity in Marguerite’s choice of vocabulary.

The description of the space in which Marguerite acts is also developed, but this space is almost always filtered through her mind. Marguerite’s perspective is so dominant to the point that she can be even confused with the narrator. The narration, though
conducted, as in Umbertina's part, in the third person, loses its objectivity. Moreover, the "narrational zooming" (Kotsaftis 167) is so insistent that in chapter sixteen it changes into first person narration and then switches again to third-person narration in the following chapter. The author focuses all our attention on Marguerite and, most importantly, on her struggle to define her ethnic and sexual identity. Marguerite, the center of the "modernist" section of the novel, is also "a prototype of the modernist (anti)heroine," because she fails to resolve the inner conflict of her contrasting personalities (Kotsaftis 167).

The third part, which is devoted to Tina, represents the third stage of ethnic writing, called by Kotsaftis "postmodernist." This postmodernism expresses itself mainly in the "plurality of centers that exist side by side and can be taken as temporary subject positions" (Kotsaftis 168). Indeed, Tina, as opposed to her mother, does not deal with the problem of conflicting identities, because she manages to reconcile these identities. She feels comfortable everywhere and moves easily between different spaces. Moreover, along with these shifts from one place to another, she is able to adapt her flexible personality to the "center" in which she is currently residing, whether it is America or Italy, an academic environment or a high society banquet. Thus Barolini's writing, and writing by Italian/American authors as well, perhaps arrives at a moment when it is possible to go beyond strictly ethnic issues and treat more universal topics.

The structure of Umbertina turns out to be more complex than it originally seems. Although the novel is divided chronologically, this also reflects the evolution of ethnic identity and of the language with which to talk about this identity. Even though this structure preserves chronological order, there is one exception from this rule: the
Prologue. Instead of starting chronologically with the generation of Umbertina, Barolini decides to present Marguerite first, and then move back in time to the early 1900s. The Prologue is a very important part of the novel, because it foreshadows the two main issues of the novel: ethnicity and feminism. Moreover, the Prologue identifies Marguerite as the central character who will be the most affected by the unresolved issues of ethnicity and feminism. Her failure, however, will also be crucial for the accomplishments of succeeding generations.

The Prologue takes place in the office of the psychiatrist Dr. Verdile. It was Alberto’s idea, we find out later, for Marguerite to seek a doctor’s advice. Alberto took Marguerite’s request for a separation as capricious and thought that the problem would be solved with one or two such visits. By acting in this way, Alberto proves how unwilling he is to try to truly understand his wife. Even Dr. Verdile, despite his professional knowledge, fails to understand Marguerite. Instead, he oversimplifies her fears and fantasies. When Marguerite confesses her desire to have sex with Alberto, even though they are about to separate, he encourages her to do so. “It’s something all women have always been able to do. It’s a classic stratagem, no?” is his response (5). In fact, Marguerite thinks: “She felt distaste for his masculine presumptuousness. Did he think she would fall into the trap of letting him persuade her about her female role? The hell with the minor roles, she wanted to be a person as much as he” (5-6). Marguerite speaks out about her aspirations for fulfillment as a woman, for independence and equality. She even corrects herself linguistically by substituting “no-man’s-land” with “no-woman’s-land.” In this way the theme of feminist struggle is introduced.
In the second part of the Prologue, Marguerite pays a visit to Dr. Verdile once again. This time they talk about her dreams, in particular about one that involves Marguerite’s sense of foreignness at school. The dream leads them to a discussion about her family: her strong grandmother and Americanized parents. When Dr. Verdile finally ends the visit with what may be considered the most important words of the novel: “Start with your grandmother” (19), Marguerite’s quest for ethnic identity begins.

The Prologue breaks the schematic organization of the novel and anticipates the content of the succeeding chapters. The voice of the author is very strong in the Prologue, as well. She tells of her fears as a writer who has no literary tradition. As in Marguerite’s dream, Barolini feels she is “a foreigner” in the dominant American establishment. Dr. Vedile directs his advice at Barolini, too. To be able to write well as an American writer, she needs to look back, find her identity in the past and recover her cultural background. This process can also happen through the recovery of the language of the ancestors.

These ancestors, however, spoke in dialect and there is no dialect in Umbertina. Nor are there examples of “broccolino,” so present in Vita. Indeed, the only remembrance of the linguistic fusion between Italian and English is groceria—the grocery store run by the Longobardi family. Instead, the novel includes words, expressions or proverbs in standard Italian. Almost every page contains a word or two in Italian, usually incorporated harmonically into the English text. There is a sort of negotiation between the two languages, in which the author attempts to find an English eloquence that will “comprehend and welcome the language of the fathers” (Viscusi, “De Vulgari Eloquentia” 22). In Umbertina this inclusion of Italian into the narration plays a different role at different points in the book.
One of the functions of Italian when it is incorporated into English narration is that of “invoking and celebrating the power of mythical Italy,” as Robert Viscusi in a 1981 essay “De Vulgari Eloquentia: An Approach to the Language of Italian American Fiction” has noted (24). Viscusi labels the presence of Italian in an English text “liturgical.” Italian words, expressions or sayings appear throughout the novel to remind the protagonists of the place that for some of them, for example for Umbertina or Serafino, no longer exists. In this way these terms re-enact the past. However, the connotation that the Italian language has in the first part of the novel is mostly negative, because the past these protagonists re-enact is painful. Indeed, Italian is usually used to call up the signs of oppression, which made them all emigrate. Italian comes back in conversations about signori, fattori, baroni, ladro governo, miseria, contadini, la banca, la posta, la polizia, la politica, terroni, meridionali—all associated with the misery of the Italian peasants, their distrust toward authority and the sharp social divisions within Italian society. The native language of the protagonists of Part One is also a sign of belonging to the community: the word paesano, used refer to other members of this community, indicates immediately the familiarity and confidence toward compatriots who share the same experiences.

Italian reality is also invoked in Marguerite and Tina. The formality of Italians, attached to their titles, is signalized by the appearance of dottore, professore, eccellenza, signorina. The image of Italy is enriched with places that can be defined only with Italian words, like liceo, trattoria, caffé-bar, tavola calda. Most importantly, though, Italian is constantly used in terms of endearment: papà, amore mio, tesoro, mia cara, bambina mia, and in expressions of emotions: Ti voglio tanto tanto bene. This insistence on using
Italian when talking about feelings is a sign that both Marguerite and Tina consider their Italian component an important aspect of their personalities. Moreover, English often seems to fail in emotions. Indeed, emotional distance characterizes Marguerite’s relationship with relatives with whom there is no exchange of affection reflected by the language.

Perhaps one of the most significant uses of Italian in *Umbertina* is when Tina quotes Dante: “Era già l’ora che volge il disio ai navicanti e ’ntenerisce il core” (348). We thus see how the Italian of peasant immigrants from the first part of the novel has evolved to the highest level of eloquence and nobility in the third part. It is not surprising that Tina successfully concludes this evolution, since she also emerges as a fulfilled Italian/American woman. This moment in the narration demonstrates the intellectual growth of Italian/Americans and Tina in the novel symbolically completes this growth.

This change from the simple, familiar speech of uneducated immigrants into the literary erudition of Tina is an example of the “diplomatic” role language plays in Italian/American fiction. Once again I am using a term coined by Robert Viscusi in the essay cited above. Viscusi points out how this evolution of language skills and registers “exerts a pressure upon idiomatic English of the narrator, moving it upward in tone, so that it treats even minor details with poetic vision” (36). In *Umbertina* this diplomatic character of the language also strongly influences the narration by upgrading it from a simple descriptive “premodernist” style into a more complex “postmodernist” one.

The diplomatic quality of the language is the highest level to which, according to Viscusi, the “Italian/American” language should aspire. There are three others: “it [the language of Italian/American fiction] must be liturgical, to call up the power of lost Italy.
It must be patriarchal, to emphasize a continuity that often seems to have been broken. It must be heroic, to reflect the nature of the immigrant enterprise" (24). Viscusi’s search for the best means of expression of Italian/American experience was inspired by the same attempt undertaken by Dante in his De vulgari eloquentia. Indeed, the Italian/American writer, like Dante centuries before, must “set out deliberately to devise a rhetoric that can employ the vernacular as the tool of self-conscious literary art” (Viscusi, “De Vulgari Eloquentia” 21). For Viscusi, Italian/American fiction must develop English speech that will echo their vernacular, that is the language, or the dialect, of their ancestors. Helen Barolini accepts this challenge in Umbertina. This “premodernist” vernacular in Part One of Umbertina—her point of departure—progresses into a more complex narration that reflects well the nature of the characters and of their inner conflicts. It is undoubtedly “self-conscious” writing, as well, because done intentionally by the author.
CHAPTER 9

PAROLE AND WORDS

The English language has a substantially different emotional connotation for the protagonists of Vita that it does for those of Umbertina. We saw how learning new words simultaneously triggers the emotional and sexual maturation of Vita and Diamante. Thus the English they do not even speak becomes their language of affection with which they also communicate their need for physical contact. The power of the American idiom that participates in the progress of their relationship is stronger than that of their native tongue. Moreover, American English brings them closer to experiencing America and symbolically stimulates the evolution of their new identity, because the experience of language is a crucial step in their cultural assimilation.

Even though the assimilation of the protagonists of Umbertina is much more complete, English for them lacks the emotional weight that is so powerful in Vita. Instead, Italian is mostly their means of articulating feelings. While Umbertina and Carla are very reserved in talking about what they feel and, indeed, they never use affection terms, Marguerite uses Italian in such situations. Even when she consults Dr. Verdile, who speaks English, she chooses to speak Italian during her visits to him: “He (Dr. Verdile) spoke English, and she had thought this necessary until she discovered from the
moment of their first meeting that it was she who preferred not to use her mother tongue in analysis [...]. Am I avoiding my mother, she asked” (16). In fact, English was associated with the emotionally cold atmosphere of her American house. Only Tina is able to use both languages comfortably in affectionate exchanges: she speaks Italian with her father and English with her fiancé Jason.

The way characters experience English is particularly meaningful in the case of Umbertina, because it conveys the author’s attitude toward the language of America. Barolini, who wrote in English, communicates her own diffidence for her native language as a means of artistic expression. She, as an Italian/American, still needs to work out the ideal idiom with which to write literature. There is no Italian/American literary tradition Barolini could rely on. On the contrary, Barolini participates in generating this tradition writing Umbertina and diversifying the linguistic and stylistic form of her novel. Mazzucco’s novel is not homogenous either. However, she enthusiastically embraces an already existent and rich literary tradition and does not struggle to find the perfect language the way Barolini did. Mazzucco is more comfortable with the language she uses and has trust in words. She expresses this best by linking the sexual experience and that of language in the relationship between Vita and Diamante. The engagement these two characters have with English that they discover in America symbolizes the engagement that Mazzucco has with the language of her own literature. It is a very personal, emotional, visceral and, above all, exciting engagement.

Barolini discovers literary idiom with Tina. This author’s struggle is a vehicle for transporting a message, too. Indeed, in both novels the formal aspects hide clues for the interpretation of the two works. In the last two chapters I analyzed these aspects
separately, because the two novels differ substantially as far as structure and language are concerned. However, it is also possible to trace analogies on this level.

The multidimensional structure and the lack of chronological sequence of *Vita* reflect the progress of Mazzucco’s research. The three narrative styles in *Umbertina* echo the evolving nature of Italian/American identity, culture and literature. Even though, on the level of linguistic and formal organization, the two novels are very different, these formal stratagems are tightly connected to the messages conveyed by Mazzucco and Barolini.

Their writings produced formally different results. However, some of the writing experiences that are at the origins of the two novels have similarities. They are both based on the careful research that both Mazzucco and Barolini conducted before they actually started their novels. I have mentioned the sources Mazzucco consulted. Helen Barolini also encountered difficulties in finding out the truth about the immigration and assimilation of Italian/Americans. Just as for Mazzucco’s family, her relatives were also very reluctant to talk about their experiences. Indeed, it was typical for the entire Italian/American community to repress these hurtful experiences in their desire to Americanize faster. Barolini received a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts in 1976 that helped her research Italian/American history. She also went to Italy and visited the places she talks about in her novel. Like Mazzucco, she too conducted oral interviews with members of the Italian/American community (Greenberg 104). In this respect, Barolini’s work resembles that of Mazzucco—they are both researchers.

The character of this research, however, especially that based on the oral interviews, was different. Mazzucco relied mostly on her relatives, Barolini instead talked
to members of the Italian/American community. While she included episodes from her family’s history, because she grew up listening to them, or even living them, her conscious inquiry was mostly focused on interviewing people with whom she did not have bonds of kin. Through these interviews she was attempting to unravel the history of Italian America and, above all, to understand the complexity of the Italian/American identity conflict.

Pieces of Barolini’s family life are very present in the novel, however. There is the tin heart inspired by the real one that Barolini’s grandmother brought with her from Calabria (Greenberg 91). In the novel we find the same story of the tin heart Umbertina kept as a reminder of her life in Calabria. This tin heart, a gift from a shepherd she used to know and talk to as a goat girl, functions later as a symbol of everything she left in Italy. This small object stands for the poor and uncertain life she might have had with a man she loved, the life she exchanged for stability and a secure future for her family in America. The same tin heart Umbertina had brought with her from Castagna reappeared years later on Tina’s shoulder bag, during her trip to Castagna. This tin heart made Tina think for a moment that “she was part of the place” (385), and helped her make a connection with her grandmother. Thanks, in part, to this tin heart that survived different generations Tina discovered her Italian roots.

The presence of this tin heart is important for the meanings it carries. However, there is another object whose importance is even larger: the bedspread. It is a “multigenerational symbol” (Giunta, Writing 42) that reappears in all three parts of the novel. To Umbertina, this bedspread is an extremely precious item that she cherishes as a treasure and the only luxury she can afford during difficult times. She reluctantly gives it
up to obtain money that allows them to start a new life away from New York City. This bedspread returns later in the novel: in Marguerite’s memories and materially in an exposition Tina visits. It thus becomes a symbol of the Italian/American legacy and of the strength transferred across generations. It is also the symbol of the powerful femininity that speaks through this very potent, but typically feminine object. Edvige Giunta considers Umbertina’s bedspread a poetic strategy, too, because of how this material item associated with domesticity is endowed with a great many meanings (Writing 44).

Another example of a small, but meaningful, detail that embraces the femininity of the protagonists of the two novels is the smell of rosmarino they emit. This is also a smell strongly associated with italianità. This aromatic plant, so widely used in Italian dishes, represents the strength of those who use it, as an old Italian saying mentioned in Umbertina reminds: “in the house, where rosemary thrives, the women of that house are its strength” (45). Rosemary grew in Umbertina’s garden and was frequently used in her kitchen. It was apparently used by Vita, too. In Diamante’s memory “Vita sa di rosmarino” (254). She also smells like salvia and pinoli, mentuccia, zucchero and cedrina—all smells from the kitchen, where women were usually stationed.

Domesticity, however, does not play a central role in Umbertina or Vita. Barolini hardly ever situates her female characters at home. They usually act outside the privacy of the household, which fits perfectly into the feminist context of Barolini’s novel. Women are no longer limited to performing within the walls of the house. Umbertina spends most of her time working in the family’s store and supervising the work of her employees and family. Marguerite never manages to develop any affection for any of the many places where she moves. Tina, like her mother, lives between different worlds and
different houses. Moreover, the sphere in which she comfortably operates is the academic environment. The house is not her priority. Still the importance of the bedspread in the novel—this highly domestic element that reappears through the narration—indicates the connection between traditionally female spheres of creativity and writing. For Umbertina there were two things she particularly cared about: “good food on the table and good linen on the bed” (130). Food, a component of another highly female and domestic realm, plays an important function in Umbertina. It is significant in Vita, too.

In Vita the characters’ actions also have an outward direction. The house is seen as a place of oppression from which Vita wants to liberate herself. However, Vita’s success is due to the traditionally female activity that happens in the equally traditionally female space of a kitchen. Vita opens a restaurant, surprising those who thought like Diamante: "Chi l’avrebbe mai detto, quella selvaggia di Vita era diventata la migliore cuoca di Prince Street" (168). Vita did not have time to learn the art of cooking from her mother, but she developed it in America, and it was the secret of her success. Thanks to this domestic activity, Vita gained her independence.

Whether it is a tasty dish or an ornamented bedspread, creations of the domestic, female talent are important in both novels. However, this artistry has many more implications for Barolini, maybe because she is more determined to emphasize the female dimension of her characters. Umbertina’s bedspread, one of very few objects that contain multiple meanings, is an instrument to reconnect creatively with the past. It serves as such for both the protagonists and the author. Vita lacks important recurring material items that would be filled with a particular message. Instead, words are given similar
power as the most significant bonds to the past. Therefore, the fragility of the world reconstructed through words is frequently stressed in her book.

The way domesticity is present but limited in the two novels offers another example of how they are both similar, but different. This domesticity is emphasized differently, but at the same time it is related to the female characters. It takes a very material, tangible form in the bedspread in Umbertina and has a rather elusive character in Vita. Regarding the structure, narration, and linguistic aspects of the two novels, the balance between the differences and similarities is similar: they are essentially different, but there is frequently a way to find a relation between them. Thus the structure of Umbertina and Vita, though so different, in both books is complex, multidimensional and reflects the idea of a search and gradual discovery. The same notion of discovery inspired the linguistic choices: Barolini looked for the best means of expressing the evolution of a language that would narrate the Italian/American experience in literature, and Mazzuco looked for the best registers to reconstruct for herself the experience of her grandfather. It can be concluded, however, that also on the structural and organizational level of the novels, the writers' different objectives affected their linguistic choices.
CONCLUSION

For some time, Italian emigration to America was a non-existent topic in public discourse. This experience was absent from literature, too. Both in Italy and in America the only genres that featured tales of emigration or immigration were autobiography and memoir. Italian immigrants in America woke up from this state of cultural hibernation around thirty years ago. Italian/Americans were not the only minority that demanded to be given a voice in the dominant discourse. Other ethnic groups joined them in the process of emergence from cultural silence. Indeed, ethnic diversity and the multicultural society of the United States accelerated this process.

Italy is facing a similar process of opening up to diversities right now. In fact, in the last few years, this country has become a country of immigration, too. Immigrants from different places in the world are bringing with them their cultures and their different attitudes. Thus Italy is in a position similar to that of the United States and must develop a cultural policy that will incorporate the cultural needs and expectations of newcomers. Learning about the migration and assimilation experience of others can be helpful in understanding what problems new immigrants in Italy face. Italian emigrants from the beginning of the twentieth century might be the first point of reference for contemporary Italians who wish to learn about the problems and successes of the assimilation process.
Melania Mazzucco was one of those who saw the need to look into the emigration experience of Italians to America in the new political and intellectual context in Italy. In an interview with Maddalena Tirabassi she says: “Dal momento che siamo divenuti un paese di immigrazione queste storie non sono più private ma fanno parte di una storia collettiva—non solo passata, e ancora bruciante.” It is important that Italians listen to the stories of those who have experienced emigration to understand others who experience the same now and also to understand themselves. In the same interview, Mazzucco admits that one of her reasons for writing Vita, a book that tells the emigrant story, was to participate in building this historical awareness.

Mazzucco, with her 2003 novel, breaks the silence surrounding the emigration of Italians to America. She does so thirty years after Italians/Americans broke this silence in the United States. There had been other Italian writers who tried to bring these experiences to wider attention many years before. However, there were no critics who would do the same and therefore there was a very limited critical interest for the literary accomplishments of Italian/Americans. From this void one critical work emerges, that of Filippo Fichera, who in 1958 published Letteratura italoamericana. In the first sentences of this unique overview of Italian/American poets, he says: “È tempo che i letterati d’Italia onorino il nome e l’opera dei fratelli d’America i quali rappresentano una parte ben notevole di noi, ed hanno diritto al ricordo e al plauso della Patria” (7). Fichera’s invitation to reevaluate and learn to appreciate the literary productions by compatriots from overseas has never been really embraced by intellectual circles in Italy. Melania

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7 See Introduction 6.
Mazzucco has changed this, in part, by elevating a story of migration to a topic worthy of literature.

To Fichera, Italian/American writers “sostengono la qualità di italiani” (7) outside the national borders of Italy. Indeed, this Italian quality, *italianità*, characterizes literature by Americans of Italian descent. The *italianità* of Italian/American writers, however, can be both similar and different from that of Italian writers. Thus the depiction of the Italian experience in America—the topic of the two novels under investigation here—bears both similarities and differences, which can be traced to differences in the personalities, lives and education of Barolini and Mazzucco.

A motive that recurs in Italian/American criticism is the invitation to “script one’s lives into fiction” (Mannino, *Revisionary* 42). It is, however, a very universal slogan that could be adopted by many writers, not only those who confront issues of difference and ethnicity. Both Barolini and Mazzucco have embraced this slogan, something especially evident in the case of *Vita*. In Part One we saw how the two writers “script their lives” into their novels by personalizing, with different intensity, their stories. By involving their own or their protagonists’ ancestors in a story that takes place in the present, they both acknowledge the importance of the past in understanding today’s world and that of the future. This is Mazzucco’s message for an Italy that should “guardare allo specchio”—a mirror that reflects the image of thousands of emigrants who left for America hundred a years ago—to find solutions to the problems of mass immigration the country is facing right now. This message is also valid for Italian/Americans who can, just as Tina did, come to accept their Italian heritage without compromising their needs as Americans. Such an attitude, which adopts only those values of the old culture that are compatible
with the new one, has been referred to in social studies as a “new ethnicity” (Boscia-Mulé 43). Therefore, the experiences of ethnic identification Barolini talks about in her Umbertina, can be universalized and could help other of the many minorities, so widespread in the United States. Edvige Giunta suggests also that the experiences of Italian/American women in particular have already been meaningful to women of other marginalized groups, for example African American or Asian American (Writing 7).

Even though Mazzucco and Barolini initiate their investigations in similar ways, that is thinking back through the figures of grandparents, both immigrants to America, they go in different directions and have different interests while exploring the past. The issues that Edvige Giunta found helpful for other minority groups in America are almost completely absent from Vita. This is because, as I have stated many times throughout my analysis, Mazzucco is not directly influenced nor involved in the female struggle in the context of ethnic self-discovery. Rose Basile Green in one of the first anthologies dedicated to Italian/American fiction said: “the successful ethnic writer should have both immediacy with and distance from his personal cultural environment” (372). Barolini has had a very intimate contact with both Italian and American cultural environments. Living between these two countries and comparing them, she has also developed a great deal of distance toward them. Mazzucco, however, has been more successful in finding a balance between being immediate and keeping a distance in her depiction of the Italian/American experience. Her immediacy originates in her family’s ties to America, ties Mazzucco tries to reestablish in a way that makes her writing very personal. At the same time, she manages to give a frank and unbiased picture of the migration experience of her grandfather and other Italian emigrants from Tufo. She has no objective other than that of
telling a story (or stories) and turning this story into literature. Mazzucco does not feel any ideological commitment or responsibility toward an entire community, the way Barolini does, a responsibility that could distort her representation of immigrants' lives. Barolini, instead, does not manage to distance herself from her Italian/American origins. She speaks on behalf of other Italian/Americans, especially Italian/American women, and aims at completing the mission of liberating members of her community from their schizophrenic condition. In Mazzucco's *Vita*, there is only a story to perpetuate and the writer. In Barolini’s *Umbertina* there is a story, the writer and the obligation to trigger changes. This obligation influences Barolini’s novel significantly. While the same obligation possibly distorts the image of the emigration and assimilation experience in *Umbertina*, the lack of such responsibilities toward community or ideology perhaps renders *Vita* more authentic and universal.

This conclusion can be applied also to the topics discussed in Part Two and Part Three that deal with the spaces and worlds in which the characters operate and the formal strategies used to describe these spaces and characters. One notices that in the description of Italy, to which Mazzucco dedicates less space, judgments about this country are rather negative. Italy is a place of regional and racial antagonisms that has no future—at least not for people like Vita and Diamante. America for both Mazzucco and Barolini, instead of being a paradise, requires much sacrifice before success can be attained. Apart from a few differences that can again be traced to the origin and the force of the ideological beliefs of the two authors, the images of America and of Italy are similar in the two books. However, one important difference is in the way the image of these countries is presented. Barolini’s depiction of the two countries is realistic and generally accurate.
Mazzucco’s America is an imaginary and legendary, almost mythic place. This leads to a conclusion similar to that just drawn in regard to representation of ethnic and gender matters. Mazzucco focuses on literature per se, not on the potential social, political or intellectual effect it can cause. Even though Mazzucco’s works can ultimately convey messages that go beyond their strictly literary value, still the beauty of the language and fascination with her story as such are the priority. Barolini, instead, uses literature more instrumentally, as a means of communicating with readers and effecting a change in them and in their lives.

One of Barolini’s characters, Umbertina, commented once to the nun Carmela that culture is a luxury her generation cannot afford. First they have to “make a living” and “the culture will come after” (93). Umbertina’s belief could be applied in part to Barolini’s writing: indeed, first the Italian/American communities have to resolve their own problems and become comfortable with their cultural and national identity. Only after that will they be able to create and develop high quality cultural practices. Mazzucco seems to have arrived at this luxury: she can afford to write excellent literature without being preoccupied with “making a living”–that is solving more urgent dilemmas.

Both Vita and Umbertina are consciousness-raising novels. Critics have many times used this definition in regard to Barolini’s book (Pippino 108). The Italian/American writer raises the consciousness of her community, especially among the women in this community. She speaks for herself, but she also speaks on behalf of other Italian/American women who might have dealt with problems similar to those of the protagonists of Umbertina. Mazzucco raises consciousness, too. Her focus, however, is on herself–on her private quest. She admitted to Tirabassi that “questo libro ha dato un
senso di appartenenza” to her—a sense of belonging to the family and to the town from which her family originated, an important fact she had not been aware of for a very long time in her mature life. Reestablishing bonds with the past and with Tufo through literature was part of personal homage to those who lived in Tufo and left for America and to those who are still there. In fact, Mazzucco has been honored with the title of cittadina onoraria of Tufo and Minturno.

Has her book given “un senso di appartenenza” to other Italian readers of her novel, in particular to those whose relatives emigrated in America? Many of them have probably listened to stories of emigration, just as Melania Mazzuco did. Many have written memoirs and autobiographical stories that circulated only within a close circle of relatives and were never published. These stories of immigration usually encountered a similar fate across the ocean. In fact, Italian/Americans for a long time remained silent about the experiences of their parents and grandparents. But books like Barolini’s Umbertina have made them aware that they are not isolated in feeling alienated and in confronting the kinds of conflicts Barolini’s protagonists faced. These novels and anthologies have shown them that there are others with whom they can share their experiences. Both Barolini and Mazzucco contributed to breaking the silence around the issue of Italian emigration and immigration, an issue that on both sides of the ocean was considered taboo. “The lives of the obscure,” which Virginia Woolf called the most interesting topic to treat in literature (De Salvo 63), finally stopped being so obscure, in both public and private discourses. Hopefully, this analysis, made from the point of view of someone who is neither Italian nor American, and thus has no immediate contact with
either side of the hyphen, will contribute to undoing the mystery of Italian immigration to America.
SELECTED LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED


-----. “‘But Is It Great?’: The Question of the Canon for Italian American Women Writers.” Mannino and Vitiello 239-64.


Gardaphé, Fred L. “Breaking and Entering.” Ciongoli and Parini 175-89.


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