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Realisms and idealisms in Italian culture, 1300–2017

Brendan Hennessey, Laurence E. Hooper, and Charles L. Leavitt IV

Italy is perhaps unique among the European nations in defining its origins culturally and artistically rather than politically. It is thus historically significant that, since such foundational works as Dante's *Comedy* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Italian culture has displayed a close association with the characteristics of what we now call realism: namely, verisimilitude and the depiction of everyday life. These realist techniques have often defined Italy's image, both internally and externally, and the notion of realism remains at the forefront of Italian cultural studies in the twenty-first century. At the same time, however, the desire for an Italian real has always co-existed and overlapped with an idealized conception of truth, from the Neo-Platonism of Pico della Mirandola to the nationalistic fervour of the Risorgimento and later Fascism. Even now, varieties of idealism continue to shape Italian thought, infusing historicist and realist narratives with teleologies – and an array of culturally determined axioms – that often remain unrecognized or unacknowledged, and thus effectively under-examined.

Indeed, despite the pervasive importance of both realism and idealism to Italian culture, their different historical instantiations are rarely juxtaposed or compared across time. Notions of the 'real Italy' (and of 'Italian realism') remain fundamental for scholars working in various disciplines, while the exploration of the ideal Italies constructed throughout history continues to inspire innovative work on virtually every period of Italian culture. We invited scholars from Italy, the United States, and the United Kingdom to a conference at Dartmouth College in spring 2016, asking them to consider the multiple manifestations of realism and idealism in Italy from the *Trecento* to the present day. We have collected their contributions in this special issue of the *Italianist*, which aims to explore Italian realism from a number of angles, critically assessing rather than accepting the many assertions of realism and the many projections of idealism that have characterized Italian culture from its beginnings.

One of the primary developments of the new millennium has been the rise of what has come to be called the 'New Realism'. In Italian philosophy, Maurizio Ferraris's New Realism has been hailed for asserting reality's autonomy from language, society, and the human mind. In place of the exhaustion and retreat of his mentor Gianni Vattimo's 'weak thought', Ferraris speaks of a turn to ontology as a boost to the philosophical metabolism that can provide the same nourishment to the twenty-first century that the linguistic turn delivered to the twentieth. New Realism aims to overcome postmodernism's conceptual frameworks, which have been designed to answer epistemological questions. Contending that 'nothing *social* exists outside the text',

Ferraris questions postmodernism's emphasis on the textual makeup of our social world. In this way, new realists avoid the claim that everything – squirrels, malaria, rocks – should be viewed as socially constructed, while continuing to focus on the polytextual grids and 'documents' that structure our increasingly hyper-mediated societies.

In his *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, Ferraris argues that Berlusconi's televised ascension to power in the 1990s demonstrated the concrete danger of Nietzsche's well-worn phrase 'there are no facts, only interpretations', guaranteeing that the political vacuum would be filled by the loudest, not the most reasonable, voice in the room.¹ The age of the Internet has only amplified the volume of this phenomenon, enabling another era of populist demagoguery to take hold in Italy, this time with Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement (M5S) at centre stage. Grillo's meteoric rise and cult of personality, M5S's calls for political and economic sovereignty, and the stoking of fear against immigration by some of its members recall the nativist nationalism of Italian Fascism. M5S's embrace of fringe ideological positions paints a troubling portrait of Italian national identity going forward, unearthing a disconcerting impulse buried just beneath a thin layer of present-day democratic order.

In literature, too, realism has taken on an unmistakably political significance, as in Roberto Saviano's 2006 memoir-novel hybrid, *Gomorra*, a landmark of the new realism. Saviano's moral stance on the Camorra is hardly clear, reflecting some of the issues that have plagued discussions of realism over the centuries. *Gomorra* is told in the first person and injects an ambiguous narrative voice that both undercuts the neutral status of the storyteller and problematizes *Gomorra's* standing as a work of non-fiction. Matteo Garrone's cinematic adaptation, *Gomorra* (2008), dramatizes the book's line of authorial uncertainty, recruiting a cadre of intermediaries to narrate fragments of Saviano's story, mostly in dialect. The opaque polyphony of book and film is also evident in the TV programme *Gomorra: La serie* (2014–present), a show that borrows from a constellation of generic codes to transmit the dark tones of the Neapolitan underworld to the expansive canvas of prestige television. Rather than constitute a straightforward resuscitation of realism, *Gomorra's* multiple iterations caution against oversimplified connections between artistic representations and their presumed referents, instead reasserting a turn towards dynamism, imagination, and elasticity that is typical of Italian artistic production at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

As *Gomorra* investigates the ill effects of organised crime, new media today explore a variety of real issues facing the Italian nation through a mixture of realism and its sister, idealism. In the *New Italian Epic*, Wu Ming called on writers to embrace a principled mission of the artist in a new age of popular culture, rejecting dogmatic calls to rid realism of fantasy.² Migration literature has taken on a similarly flexible posture to this ethical stance. Indeed, arrival to Italian shores represents perhaps the most hot-button topic in Italian politics today, transforming a literary tradition from the 1990s (Pap Kouma, Saleh Methnani) with revived vibrancy. While new migration literature chronicles real human struggle, it likewise ruminates on the representational intricacies of mirroring the experiences of 'new' Italians. With the *ius soli* (birthright citizenship) law looming in parliament, such literature speaks to the broader question of an Italy in flux, with writers weaving insights into Italian demographic diversification with threads that are simultaneously objective and autobiographical.

As the essays in this special issue of the *Italianist* reveal, claims to a new Italian realism in literature, film, and philosophy often introduce rather than dispel myths of realism. Notions of verisimilitude and verifiability, crucial to ideas on representing reality, continue to be the source of heated debate in Italy. Realism's ideological underpinnings often occlude the creative tension generated between poles of realism and idealism, arguing that one cannot be seen without the other. In his contribution, Damiano Benvegnù takes up the oft-repeated characterization of dialect literature as a more accurate mirroring of real life through a reading of Gian Mario Villalta's new dialect poetry. Contemporary perspectives on dialect poetry continue to reinforce a mimetic facility first posited during the *questione della lingua*, yet Benvegnù argues that Villalta, like other new dialect poets, balances the socio-linguistic dialect of a language group with the distinct 'I' of the poet. In this way, dialect transmits the same metalinguistic, idealized qualities of the lyric tradition while maintaining contact with the origins of language and its community of speakers. Brendan Hennessey's article on special effects in two recent works by the filmmaker Paolo Sorrentino explores the expressionistic potentialities offered by digital cinema. He outlines Sorrentino's machine-enhanced deviations from the real that have escaped critics who prefer to apply established paradigms of indexical realism to the filmmaker's work. Rather than viewing formalism and decadence as politically suspect, Hennessey demonstrates how Sorrentino's works reflect the global transition from analogue to digital film, from the concrete to the pixelated.

In recent years, Sorrentino's *Il Divo* (2008), like Garrone's *Gomorra* (2008), has been celebrated not only as a herald of a new realism but also as a return to neorealism: 'un ritorno ai temi forti, alla realtà e all'impegno, alla denuncia politica e sociale, che riporteranno tutto il cinema italiano ai trionfi internazionali del passato più che remoto'.³ These films are presented as exemplars not just of a new realism, in other words, but of a neo-neorealism. In this sense, their realism is understood to represent not so much an unmediated glimpse of the real as an interpretation of the contemporary moment filtered through the lens of history, tradition, and cultural convention. It is worth recalling that the emergence of Italian neorealism was greeted in similar terms. Post-war Italian culture was said to mark 'il ritorno alla realtà nazionale', as Corrado Alvaro put it in 1946, and 'un brusco ritorno alla realtà', as Carlo Emilio Gadda described it a few years later, in the 1951 *Inchiesta sul neorealismo*, one of the first attempts holistically to analyse the new Italian realism of the post-war era.⁴ More strikingly still, the period immediately preceding the rise of neorealism was described in the same terms. Raffaele Cavalluzzi is among the many to note that 'la fase neorealistica è preceduta dal "ritorno alla realtà", avviato da una parte della narrativa italiana già negli anni Trenta'.⁵ In this light, it would appear that modern and contemporary Italian culture has continually sought to return to reality, and continually sought, as well, to break with an immediate past judged, from the perspective of the present, to have been insufficiently concerned with reality. It is that sense of continual return that inspired Lino Micciché to describe Italian realism as a 'fiume carsico', a current periodically emerging above ground, and periodically disappearing beneath the earth, while remaining, in Micciché's telling, always vital, always flowing, always waiting to surface again in order to re-invigorate Italian culture.⁶

The essays in this special issue suggest that the Italian tradition may be more akin to a wetland than a stream: saturated with realism but supporting a diverse ecosystem in which various forms, customs, and practices co-exist symbiotically. Charles Leavitt traces the continuing influence of Benedetto Croce – and the persistence of neo-idealist historicism – throughout the age of neorealism. Lucia Re reconsiders Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere*, a novel published in 1947 – at the height of the post-war 'return to the real' – and argues that it serves 'to deconstruct the assumptions of neorealism' by foregrounding questions of subjectivity, rationality, and identity in a manner more reminiscent of post-modernism. Ruth Ben-Ghiat looks to Italian realism before neorealism, examining the creative output of the years 1941–42 and arguing that it should be approached not as a neorealist precursor but rather as a development worthy of attention in its own right, one that facilitated what she calls 'an aesthetic of recuperation of the senses'. Taken together, these contributions point to the irreducible variety and hybridity of Italian realisms even at the moment of neorealism's greatest triumph.

If neorealism has often been identified as the mainstream in the hydric soil of the Italian tradition, this is due in no small part to its champions' successful effort to re-channel Italy's cultural heritage in their preferred direction. Reclaiming earlier realisms as forerunners and redescribing illustrious ancestors as realists, they constructed a cultural lineage that stretched back to the origins of the Italian language and culminated in the post-war 'ritorno alla realtà' that has, in turn, served as archetype for the 'ritorno alla realtà' of the new millennium. Pride of place in that lineage was granted to nineteenth-century *verismo*, and in particular to the work of Giovanni Verga, who was fashioned into a model both of realist representation and of political engagement.⁷ In his contribution to this issue, Alessio Baldini re-considers Verga's politics in the context of Italy's Southern Question, arguing that *verismo* was in fact a form of 'moral realism', an attempt to represent the variety and conflict of moral visions in post-unification Italy. The pluralism and perspectivism that Baldini identifies in Verga's writings has traditionally been ignored in most teleological accounts of the development of Italian realism. In her essay for this special issue, Monica Streifer draws attention to another element that has been left out of such accounts: the many innovations of Italian women writers. Streifer identifies in the work of Amelia Pincherle Rosselli a critique of nineteenth-century positivism, naturalism, and *verismo*, which laid claim to a disinterested objectivity while relying on an unexamined metaphysics. In Streifer's reading, Rosselli challenges this metaphysics from within, overturning gender as well as artistic normativity. There is reason to be wary of any narrative of realism's lineage that does not take up that challenge.

A similar wariness should accompany the efforts to extend the realist line further into the past. The methodological problems that confront any study of realism and/or idealism in pre-modern Italian culture go beyond the typical challenge of describing a historical milieu using critical terminology it did not recognize. Because cultural figures play such a large role in the Italian national symbology, and because of the historical context in which that symbology took shape, any point on the temporal arc of Italian literature and culture we choose to study will exist in relation to a single period in European intellectual history: approximately the time between 1781, when Immanuel Kant first used the terms *idealism* and *realism* to indicate opposing attitudes to the material or actual conditions of the world outside of one's mind, and 1871, when Francesco De

Sanctis's *Storia della letteratura italiana* established the major figures in Italy's national literary mythology and assigned them their roles in the drama.⁸

Since De Sanctis, in order to enter Italy's mythic pantheon, a literary figure has had to be of a certain type – politically engaged, historically conscious, concerned with creating an ethical standard for others.⁹ In short, modern Italian culture tends to idealize writers for qualities pertaining to realism, regardless of whether the writer in question was conscious of creating realist texts as we would now understand them. Boccaccio and Machiavelli are central figures in the Italian republic of letters precisely because of their realist tendencies.¹⁰ The reputations for libertinism and calculating Realpolitik, respectively, that they have among certain foreign readers are acknowledged but rarely taken seriously. This compromise between political ideals and social reality is something we find wherever a specifically Italian realism or idealism is identified; it helps to explain why a project such as this one must look both backwards and forwards from the foundational era of realist thought and art.

It is important to recognize that Italian literary identity was not always construed in the manner just described. Dante has always been recognized as a master moralist, most recently in Roberto Benigni's various televised recitations (2002–15), which are peppered with wry asides about Silvio Berlusconi and Italian politics.¹¹ But Dante's literary hegemony as a narrative poet dates from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – the very period in which realism, idealism, and Italian nationalism all emerged.¹² Before then, Petrarch and the lyric dominated conceptions of what was great about the Italian literary tradition.¹³ Moreover, as Amedeo Quondam has pointed out, the supersession of Petrarch by Dante, as proclaimed by scholarly Italian patriots such as Ugo Foscolo and Giuseppe Mazzini, is itself part of a wider tendency in Italian culture to transform contrasts of all kinds (linguistic, socioeconomic, religious, etc.) into contests for political and ideological legitimacy.¹⁴ Criticism on Dante and Petrarch since the Risorgimento has all too often been one such idealized instantiation of conflict for conflict's sake, with Dante in the leading role of 'realist' and Petrarch reduced to his 'idealist' antagonist.

'Realism, Characterization, and Salvation from Dante to Petrarch', by Laurence Hooper, uses the close examination of a technical literary issue, characterization, to show how much the two poets share on a literary theoretical level, albeit each has his own distinctive poetics. The essay concentrates on third-person characters who achieve salvation, especially the beloved, whom both Dante and Petrarch place without reservation in Paradise. Thus, despite the many differences between the two poets' work, each of these literary autobiographies is built around a realist core: an unwavering faith in the value of literature centred on the life, and afterlife, of a historical person.

While the Risorgimento interpretation of pre-modern Italian culture is certainly partial, it has some merit when applied to texts like Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* (c. 1305), Machiavelli's *Principe* (1513), or Galileo's *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* (1632). Each of these works of Italian culture *avant la lettre* attempts a systematic treatment of a complex issue – the illustrious vernacular, princely power, and the scientific study of astronomy, respectively – despite a context of political fragmentation and foreign domination that challenges the very roots of their field of study. Two scholars as diverse as Eugenio Garin and Roberto Esposito have found in the intellectual culture of pre-Romantic Italy the hallmarks of what we now call artistic and political realism:¹⁵ a concentration on the particulars of society and history; an acceptance of the

limited effects of human action; a view of intellectual labour that privileges ethical and civic engagement over abstraction and metaphysical speculation. Garin's work identifies a consistently civic cast to Italian philosophy that is its distinguishing intellectual feature.¹⁶ Building on these insights, Esposito delves into the finer metaphysical implications stemming from the unwillingness of thinkers such as Machiavelli, Giordano Bruno and Vico to accept the existence of a pure Cartesian *res cogitans*, or mental world, divorced from the material world (*res extensa*).¹⁷

Vico's distinctive approach to comprehending what he calls the *cosa civile* is the topic of David Marshall's essay, 'Giambattista Vico, Aphorism, and Aphoristic Machines'. Marshall reflects on Vico's serial, accretive use of aphorisms in Book I of the *Scienza nuova* (1725–44), which he reads as another Italian idealist–realist hybrid. Here, Vico gathers together the intellectual fragments that will serve as axioms for what follows, thereby creating what Marshall dubs an 'aphoristic machine'. Each of the maxims, *sententiae*, and adages arrayed in Book I is grounded in the particularity and attention to detail characteristic of realism, while seeking to establish the universal rules and judgements of idealism. It remains to the reader to activate this 'aphoristic machine' through ideation in order to conceive of the world in way that is at once historical – tied to observable truths – and historiographical – presupposing a human process of construction and conceptualization.

In 'Realism and Prophecy in Machiavelli and in Italian Political Culture', Maurizio Viroli takes a geophilosophical approach to political thought in Italy, reminiscent of Esposito's work on Italian philosophy.¹⁸ Viroli acknowledges Machiavelli's realism regarding the limitations that historical circumstance imposes on the human will and intellect but argues that the received wisdom has overstated its importance for subsequent political thought in Italy. More significant in an Italian context, for Viroli, is the secretary's countervailing 'prophetic spirit', his exhortations to his countrymen to strive against the limits of reality and to become deserving of political autonomy.

The production of literary realism in Italy continues to be a theatre for contending ideals of artistic engagement with claims to historical foundation. Roberto Saviano is an author whose life and work intertwine in a manner reminiscent of a Dante or a Machiavelli. Furthermore, Saviano is clearly conscious of the tradition he is joining: the text of *Gomorra* implicitly likens his story to the *Inferno* and the author to Dante, and this was made explicit in the title of the follow-up work *La bellezza e l'inferno*.¹⁹ In a preface to the tenth anniversary edition of *Gomorra*, Saviano explains how he conceived of its realism while writing.

Ho scritto *Gomorra* [...] soprattutto con un intento letterario: raccontare la vita attraverso uno stile che mettesse insieme il rigore della realtà e la suggestione della letteratura, il fascino del romanzo; la concretezza del dato e lo slancio della poesia. [...] Desideravo con tutto me stesso cambiare la realtà che avevo intorno, una realtà che mi faceva schifo. Abbattere il potere di cui scrivevo.²⁰

The process he is describing, the shaping of literary history by the present, but also the shaping of the present by literary history, exemplifies Italy's idealistic relationship with realism, which remains a potent cultural phenomenon today.

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Notes

1. Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* (Bari: Laterza, 2014).
2. Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic: Letteratura, Sguardo Obliquo, Ritorno al Futuro* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009).
3. On these films as a 'ritorno alla realtà', see Natalia Aspesi, 'Quel bianco e nero populista e un po' melò non è mai stato la voce del dissenso', *La Repubblica*, 8 June 2008 <<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2008/06/08/quel-bianco-nero-populista-un-po-melo.html?ref=search>> [accessed 15 October 2017]. On the contemporary 'ritorno alla realtà', see also Raffaele Donnarumma and Gilda Policastro, 'Ritorno alla realtà? Otto interviste a narratori italiani', *Allegoria*, 57 (2008): 9–25; Christian Rivoletti and Massimiliano Tortora, 'Presentazione: Forme del realismo nella letteratura italiana tra modernismo e contemporaneità', *Allegoria*, 71–72 (2015): 7–9.
4. Corrado Alvaro, 'Le occasioni perdute', *Il Campo*, 1, no. 3 (1946), 149–52 (p. 149); Carlo Bo, *Inchiesta sul neorealismo* (Turin: ERI, 1951), p. 9. The anonymous introduction to Bo's *Inchiesta* is attributed to Gadda, and reprinted, in *I quaderni dell'ingegnere*, 3 (2004), 72–73.
5. Raffaele Cavalluzzi, 'Neorealismo: Dimensioni spazio-temporali di un'utopia della realtà', *Italianistica*, 2–3 (2002), 71–75 (p. 71, emphasis mine).
6. Lino Micciché, 'Il cinema italiano sotto il fascismo: Elementi per un ripensamento possibile', in *Risate di regime: La commedia italiana 1930–1944*, ed. by Mino Argentieri (Venice: Marsilio, 1991), pp. 37–63 (p. 38).
7. Vitilio Masiello, *Verga tra ideologia e realtà* (Bari: De Donato, 1972), pp. 13–15; Romano Luperini, *Simbolo e costruzione allegorica in Verga* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989), p. 127; Tullio Pagano, *Experimental Fictions: From Emile Zola's Naturalism to Giovanni Verga's Verism* (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), pp. 25–26.
8. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 426; 'Il paradigma dell'identità nazionale: De Sanctis e il romanzo della Storia', in Amedeo Quondam, *Petrarca: Un italiano dimenticato* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2004), pp. 220–72.
9. See Francesco De Sanctis, 'Postilla [to the 1883 edition]', in *Saggio critico sul Petrarca* [first pub. 1869], ed. by Niccolò Gallo (Turin: Einaudi, 1964), pp. 9–11 (p. 9).
10. On Boccaccio see, for example, Charles L. Leavitt IV, "'Il realismo di un nuovissimo medio evo': Boccaccio in the Age of Neorealism', *Le tre corone*, 3 (2016), 135–55. On Machiavelli see, for example, Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God*, trans. by Anthony Shugaar (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 208–94.
11. See Ronald de Rooy, 'Dante all'insegna dell'Unità', *Incontri*, 26, no. 2 (2011), 64–72; Stefano Jossa, 'Nella terra di Dante', in *Letteratura, identità, nazione*, ed. by Davide Bellini and Matteo Di Gesù (Palermo: Duepunti, 2009), pp. 41–58.
12. See 'Alfieri's Prince, Dante, and the Romantic Self', in Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 124–40 (first publ. in *Italica*, 80, no. 2 (2003), 175–94); Andrea Ciccarelli, 'Dante and the Culture of *Risorgimento*: Literary, Political, or Ideological Icon?', in *Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento*, ed. by Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 77–102 (esp. pp. 78–80).

13. See 'A proposito di identità nazionale, di Petrarca e di Dante' in Quondam, *Petrarca: Un italiano dimenticato*, pp. 35–82.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41, citing Loreto di Nucci and Ernesto Galli della Loggia, Introduction, in *Due nazioni: Legittimazione e delegittimazione nella storia dell'Italia contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003), pp. 7–16.
15. Eugenio Garin, *L'Umanesimo italiano: filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1965); Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).
16. 'La virtù se è seria virtù, è sociale, è incremento dell'umana città, cui non può essere indifferente o estranea la fecondità, la riuscita degli atti', Garin, *L'Umanesimo italiano*, pp. 57–58.
17. Esposito, *Living Thought*, p. 71.
18. Following Esposito, I adopt the term 'geophilosophy' from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (1991), trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 85–113, in light of the refinements to adapt it to an Italian context in *Living Thought*, pp. 12–21.
19. Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra: Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno del dominio della camorra* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), p. 134; Saviano, *La bellezza e l'inferno: Scritti 2004–2009* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009).
20. Roberto Saviano, 'Dieci anni di Gomorra', in *Gomorra: Viaggio nell'impero economico e nel sogno del dominio della camorra* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016). Ebook edition.