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Serafina Hager (NISA – Georgetown University)

Italian Language and Culture: A Sustainable Passion

While the 150th Anniversary of the Unification of Italy reminds us of the underlining aspirations of the Italian Risorgimento: the idea of "nationhood" of liberty, and of self determination, the anniversary offers a splendid opportunity to reflect, examine, and interpret the passion for our language and culture. We must not forget that our language, which united our country before the unification, is inherently linked with our cultural & literary patrimony and is embedded in a liberal arts education, a necessary core value in our global society.

Mazzini, at the out start of the Risorgimento placed language along with history, geography, popular traditions, and religion as the basis for a national identity. President Napolitano in his remarks in New York in March, 2011 reiterated Mazzini's belief and eloquently spoke of the necessity for a concerted effort to promote the Italian language: "La promozione dell'italiano rappresenta una priorità perché la lingua è il primo strumento per diffondere una conoscenza aggiornata dell'Italia, lontana dai clichés e dai luoghi comuni. Inoltre, la lingua italiana è una delle più antiche e nobili forze culturali che hanno unito il nostro paese ed assicurato la coesione dei nostri cittadini all'estero".¹

Indeed our language is "a cultural force". It is a critical ethnographical tool that informs the emotional discourse of identity and, a vital instrument that connects us with our extensive cultural tradition, and a means that connects us to others, an asset in today's global job market. Language is more than a cognitive concept and a tool for communication. The words we use are filled and bursting at times with meaning; Italian, I like to think exemplifies this attribute of language. While language bridges cultures, literature courses develop critical and creative skills, essential values required to succeed in the modern information economy that will lead to long-term profitability and to a life well lived.

¹ G. Napolitano, Speech in New York, March 2011.

Unquestionably, today Italy is linked with “The Made in Italy” brand, emblematic of the recognition Italian creative genius enjoys world over. It conjures images of glamour, high quality materials and products, scientific innovations, and culinary delights; indeed it fuels the continuous passion for all that is Italian. The appeal of “The Made in Italy”, so passionately embraced and so necessary for the economic growth of the export industry, compels us to ask two core questions. First to what extent the passion for the Italian brand is complemented by a passion for Italian language and culture studies and second to what extent students are aware and convinced that historical, philosophical, and intercultural perspective gained through a liberal education and language study will better position them in the long run to become leaders and innovators in every field. How can we ensure and sustain a solid future for our language and culture studies that goes beyond short-term profitability and is viewed as a fundamental basis of liberal education that leads to a profitable and rewarding life.

We talk so much of liberal education, but do we remember that liberal arts have Italian origins? Not a rediscovery is needed, but a renewed recognition and appreciation of the inherent value of our language and culture that gives our students a well-founded education. I am convinced that globalization is a force that compels us to collectively engage ourselves in the promotion of the intrinsic and pragmatic value of language and culture competency in today’s society. To achieve our goal I see two divergent paths that need to converge. The short-term approach, that primarily markets the AP in Italian as a pragmatic tool related to college credits, needs to come together with the long-term humanistic approach, tied to creative thinking, essential in today’s information economy where a well-positioned creative thinker is privileged. How can we reconcile the two?

During the last few years much has been accomplished in promoting Italian language. The introduction of Italian AP courses at the high school level has provided Italian with greater visibility and has placed Italian on equal stand with other languages such as French & Spanish. I applaud the extraordinary engagement of both the Italian Embassy under the leadership of H.E. Ambassador Giulio Terzi di Sant’ Agata and the work of AATI colleagues who make this possible. Kudos to Ambassador Terzi for taking a genuine personal interest in promoting the dissemination of the Italian language and culture by creating *The Osservatorio sulla Lingua Italiana* and the *Italy4kids* interactive website.

Indeed, the Italian AP is a major milestone. What is cause of concern is the recent direction advocates of the AP exam are taking in promoting a pragmatic, yet, shortsighted stand on the importance of studying Italian at the high school level linked with credits. In responding to today’s economic crisis, the published literature on the AP connects the value of the AP with “time & money”. There seems to be a pervasive emphasis on college credits associated with the AP exam which pleases the concerned parents faced with rising tuition costs, yet, influences a major decision on the part of students, who once they receive the credits, opt to place out of a university or college language requirement, and abandon the study of Italian. Furthermore, the pressure for a 4 or a 5 score on the AP exam is even influencing teachers who feel compelled to teach to the test.

Although the teaching in the AP courses is contextualized in the culture, if students don’t continue their studies of Italian at the college level, the meaning of studying Italian language and culture is lost. Students fail to develop the writing and critical skills, a premium in today’s job market that upper-level courses in culture and literature provide. Furthermore enrollments

at the college level may drop. It is important to interpret and market the AP courses as truly an advanced placement tool that gives students the advantage to take advanced courses in Italian culture and literature at the college and university level and not simply take the minimum language courses required, place out, receive credits, and move on. An over emphasis on a narrow definition of profitability is eroding and undermining the true value and purpose of education depriving the new generation of university students from becoming empathetic and knowledgeable citizens of the world. I do not argue against profitability, but we can better promote the value of the AP and show how a humanistic and language education can prove to be profitable at various levels in the long term.

Understandably, parents, concerned about resources and the marketability of their sons' and daughters' degrees, are more and more involved with their children's educational choices, often fail to see the value of language studies and are even ashamed to reveal that they are studying languages. Parents need to be informed that language is a valuable complement to other skills needed in medicine, law, engineering, and finance since increasing globalization in all fields connecting to people has become even more valuable. I am convinced that a close and strategic collaboration between faculty members from colleges and universities and high school teachers, in particular those teaching AP curriculum can produce results. As teachers of Italian it is our responsibility to promote a lifelong passion for the language & culture that goes beyond the credit award and present language studies and the major as a complement to other major or regional specialty.

The AP question has launched numerous studies on enrollment which begs the following question. Is the teaching of Italian & Italian Studies in America on firm ground? If we look at the enrollment data published by the Modern Language Association (MLA) in the entire US in 2002 there were 63,899, in 2006 there were 78,368, and in 2008 80,752 students enrolled in Italian courses. From 2004 to 2008 there was an increase of 19%. This seems quite comforting; however, do we have data to show that these numbers are being sustained? I don't have any published data from the last two years; however, given the recent financial constraints ushered in by the global economic crisis, budget cuts have already targeted language departments. On October 1, 2010 the State University of New York, Albany, announced that it would close its programs in French, Italian, Russian and theater, effective May 2012, while at the University of Michigan the French Department was asked to place more importance on the teaching of language rather than literature. Speaking with colleagues from several colleges and universities there seems to be a dramatic decline in the number of first year students taking Italian, a smaller number of entering majors, a reduction of the number of courses for the major, introduction of more courses for the major taught in English, and the merging of Italian departments with interdisciplinary disciplines.

Moreover, in today's worrisome economic climate, if we ask students what they want to study in college, most of their answers show a mindset pointing to a practical and technical course of study that they are convinced will guarantee a job and pay well. Similarly, college recruiters and career centers are more & more focusing on the practical dimension of higher education influencing students' academic choices. Such a paradigm excludes the study of language and culture other than Chinese or Arabic, marginalizes the study of languages such as Italian, and fails to recognize not only the core value of an education for the public good, but the need for a foreign language and culture competency. It seems that the job market is the

driving force, rather than an informed public that understands the value of language study and its long-term profitability. These are all symptoms of an apparently alarming and fragile future for languages such as Italian and addressing this situation will require our full attention. I believe that if we engage our high schools teachers, faculty members from colleges and universities, the Italian government, and industry in an action-oriented dialogue on strategies to sustain Italian language, culture & literature studies we can increase and sustain the passion for Italian.

To succeed in our global society, I believe, a good scientific, technical, and professional education must be built on a value added program of studies that complements sectoral studies with language/culture studies. It remains our responsibility as teachers of Italian to speak out and join in a proactive and collective collaboration to ensure that our education system does not fail our students' and parents' expectations. A convincing strategy is to inform students that if they have a passion for Italian, they can continue their studies in Italian while double majoring in another discipline. We can market the AP courses as a means to enter the rewarding world of upper level courses where students' writing and critical skills are developed. Indeed, the AP credits can reduce the number of courses needed for a major or a minor, it can save "time" but should not lead to a dead end.

We must reiterate and show them a realistic four-year academic plan that incorporates Italian and complements other fields of interest. To achieve this we cannot solely rely on the counselors in the Deans' Offices to convey this program of study, we need to work with them. We can post on our departments' website the multiple possibilities and frame the major as part of the skill set. We can visit high schools and talk about curricular choices with prospective college students; and give them a realistic and data supported introduction to the value of studying Italian while pursuing a technical field. We can sponsor or co-sponsor with the Italian Embassy and Italian Cultural Institutes cultural opportunities to keep interest in Italian culture, art, music, theater, and cooking alive.

While studying engineering, science, business, or pre-med, most students can easily double major or minor in Italian that will enhance their intellectual understanding of the other, enhance their writing and critical thinking, and help to give meaning to their life. We must show them that the knowledge provided by language, culture, and literature studies will make them better doctors, better engineers, better attorneys, better bankers because as Aristotle stated, it is through language that we understand the very soul of people and through our imagination place ourselves in the place of the other. We must resist the trend that reduces education to a collection of number of credits, but use the credits as the incentive to venture into the enriching world of literary and cultural studies.

We must show that students will be better positioned in the long run to become leaders, innovators in every field, and have access to a variety of jobs in trade, economics, and human rights that require a specialization in the field as well as regional and linguistic specialty. Having the regional specialization in addition to the field-specific skills makes one significantly more marketable in an ever-globalizing world. We know that no sector is untouched by globalization. Students and parents need to be convinced that being able to connect with others via language and cultural understanding is ever more important.

In addition we need to target the large community of Americans of Italian descent and convince them that they should encourage their children and grandchildren to learn the

language of their ancestors. Apparently, barely 10% of self-declared Italian Americans speak Italian. The early wave of Italian immigrants felt compelled to give up their language to assimilate into the culture of the New World. They felt marginalized unless they assimilated. This is no longer true. We are all very proud of the recognized accomplishments of the Italian American creative genius, hard work, and leadership that accounts for their contribution and recognition in every sector of American life.

If the majority of the children of the third generation of Italian Americans were strongly encouraged to study Italian and combine Italian studies with their other fields of interest, our enrollments would certainly double. Let us work with organizations such as the NIAF and together engage their members in identifying Italian studies for their children as one of their priorities and urge them to continue to establish undergraduate and graduate scholarships for Italian studies. It is also critical to develop a systematic outreach program with multinational firms involving the “Made in Italy” products or the tourist industry that will create internships for students of Italian leading to possible future jobs and careers.

In her book *Not for Profit; Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Martha Nussbaum, the renowned University of Chicago professor, argues that in today’s pluralistic, diverse society, we need our students not only to study the humanities, but also foreign languages “a neglected aspect of learning for world citizenship is foreign language instruction. All students should learn at least one foreign language well”². Americans, Nussbaum laments, are complacent about languages, used to thinking that English is all they will ever need to know. Therefore, “the world’s schools, colleges, and universities have an important and urgent task: to cultivate in students the ability to see themselves as members of a heterogeneous nation and to understand something of the history and character of the diverse groups that inhabit it.”³ We can add that as human mobility expands foreign languages are ever less ‘foreign’ and thus, even more important.

Martha Nussbaum, who sees the value of language and literature studies, brilliantly and convincingly argues for the need to include the humanities in the curriculum to ensure that future citizens ask questions, think critically, and resist authority. She warns us that if this “thirst for national profit” continues, “nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements”.⁴

We have a significant role and a stake in this enterprise; however, by showing the confluence of the pragmatic and the profitable with the profound and enduring value provided by the study of our language and literature we can sustain the passion for our language and develop well rounded, successful young citizens. It is the humanities, more than any other discipline

² Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2010, p.90.

³ M. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, cit., p.82

⁴ M. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, cit., p.2.

that provides students with the sensibilities and insights that lead to the understanding and respect of the other so much needed in today's pluralistic workforce.

We must not marginalize the humanities, but emphasize the essential role of our language and culture inherent in the humanities. In our narrative of the importance of the study of Italian we must include the transcendent value of the study of literature in our life, the power of the imagination, and the creative and critical skills' developed in the literature classes, so indispensable in the technical and professional fields. It is in difficult times that companies look for creative innovators able to re-invent themselves, respond to new demands and technological advances that will help overcome the pressure of short-term profitability that leads to a narcissistic society.

I am much aware of the challenges our new generation is facing. Entering first –year students are filled with anxieties. Many are leaving home for the first time, are confronted with new independence and responsibilities, are worried about making friends, succeeding in their studies, and are pressured by parents to think in practical terms of an education linked to a guaranteed future job. They are very vulnerable and need guidance. This is the time we as faculty members can intervene and share with them how the study of literature in addition to language is a necessary tool for success in the work force and for a better life.

While advising students who opt for a technical major we can discuss and design with them a realistic four-year curriculum that includes the study of Italian and guide them in their journey into the world created by our great authors. It is through fiction that we can connect with our innermost desire for a just world and become leaders and innovators in every field. We have all experienced the power of good literature that transports us into a world that reflects universal values and aspirations that unite people of different cultures, ethnic backgrounds, and faiths. Mario Vargas Llosa, last year Nobel Prize winner for literature, expressed it beautifully in the lecture he gave at the Nobel Prize ceremony, entitled *In Praise of Reading and Fiction*. He passionately spoke of the power of “reading that changes dreams into life and life into dreams”...Good literature helps us to understand life better, erects bridges between different peoples and by having us enjoy, suffer, or feel surprise, unites us beneath the languages, belief, habits, customs, and prejudices that separate us”.⁵ “Thanks to literature, to the consciousness it shapes, the desires and longings it inspires, and our disenchantment with reality when we return from the journey to a beautiful fantasy”.⁶

Our journey into the world of the writer beckons us to question what is missing in our life and in our society and urges us to effect change. The fictional representation of life evoked by the great writers helps us understand life's unpredictability, question injustices, makes us better leaders and citizens, and hopefully, contribute to a better world. Of course we can read these texts in translation, but while a good translation can capture the meaning of the text, it can never translate the beauty and melody of our language.

Our own Italo Calvino in his *Memos for the next Millennium*, published posthumously, argued vehemently that literature redefines life and that imagination must be preserved at all costs. Because: “ci sono delle cose che solo la letteratura può dare coi suoi mezzi specifici”.⁷ In

⁵ http://w.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2010/Vargas_Llosa-lecture_en.htm

⁶ M. Llosa, Nobel Prize Lecture, cit.

⁷ Italo Calvino, *Lezioni Americane: Sei Proposte per il Prossimo Millennio*, Garzanti, 1988, p.93.

his lecture entitled *Visibility* Calvino also urges us to safeguard the world of the imagination for the next millennium. He recalls his own childhood journey into that world through the cartoons images without the balloons which led him to imagine and live the life of the protagonists:

“passavo le ore percorrendo i cartoons d’ogni serie da un numero all’altro, mi raccontavo mentalmente le storie interpretando le scene in diversi modi, producevo delle varianti, fondevo i singoli episodi in una storia più ampia.... Immaginavo una serie in cui personaggi secondari diventavano protagonisti”.⁸ This imaginary iconography that literature projects on the screen of our mind allows us to recreate reality and empathize with the other.

As educators and teachers of Italians, proud of our extensive literary and cultural legacy, it is essential for us to promote the study of our literature accessible through advanced courses in the language. More than ever, in today’s practical world, the transformative experience that good literature and the humanities provide is irreplaceable. Successful alumni in the world of finance, business, and medicine after two decades still write me to tell me the extent to which their exposure to great Italian literary works has influenced their life and their careers.

We must reach out to parents, particularly during their visits to campuses and during parents’ weekends, to discuss with them the significance of studying language and culture. They need to hear that students’ writing and critical acumen is enhanced, that they learn to think, and ask questions, all prerequisites for success in any field and for becoming responsible citizens. I am convinced that we will also alleviate some parents’ anxiety who mistakenly believe that the study of languages and literature is “an unnecessary frill” and a waste of time.

Undeniably, in today’s interconnected and interdependent world events in the East, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe touch the lives of everyone on our planet. Our multicultural and diverse community requires that we prepare our students to be knowledgeable of other cultures, other traditions, other religions, and other ethnic groups. And it is the study of language and culture that raises our consciousness, helps us bridge the differences, see commonalities and shared universal values in a civil society.

Finally, we must not underestimate the power of Italy. Italy remains one of the world’s largest economies, a close military ally of the US, a major player in European affairs, and a country whose cultural appeal allows it to bat above its weight. Global businesses have significant presences in Italy and Italian scientists and engineers continue to produce highly innovative products (the DaVinci surgery machine, CERN, biological inventions, aerospace); these researchers are globally engaged and being able to connect with them, thanks to language, is an asset. Though the country faces political upheaval and economic turmoil today, I am hopeful that the country will emerge stronger with a renewed emphasis on the skills, talents, and ambitions of individual Italians.

Through our collective collaboration and our commitment to inspire and nurture generations of future students to pursue their passion for our language and culture we can sustain this passion, prepare them for the job market, and be better informed and empathetic citizens of the world. I view the celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Unification of Italy as a call to action. Let us not be complacent, let us engage our efforts, including fundraising toward our goal.

⁸ I. Calvino, *Lezioni Americane*, cit., p.3.