

ITALIAN LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE – three-hour meetings taking place monthly at the group leader's home.

Meetings will take place on the last Friday of the month.

A choice of times is given for the meetings:

Mornings 10.00 to 1.00

Afternoons 2.00 to 5.00 pm

Evenings 6.00 to 9.00 pm

Applicants wishing to secure a place on the ITALIAN LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE group please contact the group leader through the [website groups page](#) indicating whether they wish to join one of the day groups or the 6.00 to 9.00 pm evening group.

In your email please include a few words explaining what prompted you to join the ITALIAN LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE group and what your expectations are of the group.

Visitors flock to Italy because of its monuments, its splendid museums, and its art galleries, that still exercise a universal appeal on the whole of the civilised world. However, there is such a stark contrast between present and past, that foreign visitors struggle to reconcile the two.

Walking the streets of Rome, Italy's beautiful capital city, to visit il Colosseo, il Foro Romano, la Basilica di San Pietro with its splendid Cappella Sistina, i Musei del Vaticano, the fountains of Piazza Navona, la Scalinata of Piazza di Spagna tourist pay homage to culture that never was.

The key to this dichotomy lies in Italy's past and we shall look for it together, unearthing it from the tormented history of the Italian peninsula following the fall of the Roman Empire, when Italy reverted to being little more than a geographical expression.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPICS THAT WE SHALL ADDRESS AS A GROUP

I hope to use this introduction as a springboard for our first meeting.

I assure you that no prior knowledge of any of the topics introduced is necessary to join the group and make a valid contribute to our discussions. If any of the members asks a question and another member wants to contribute an answer, that would be great. If no one felt that they can put forward a satisfactory answer, we look for one together – as a group.

If you have a copy of one or more of the works written by any of the authors mentioned in these notes, please bring them along and give us your thoughts.

Please print a copy of these introductory notes and bring it with you at every meeting, because we will want to refer to them from time to time. If you don't have a printer let me know and I will print an extra copy. A presto!

Rosanna

INTRODUCTION

READING THE HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL CLUES

The key to the dichotomy between present and past lies in Italy's history, and we shall look for it together, unearthing it from the tormented history of the Italian peninsula following the fall of the Roman Empire, when Italy reverted to being little more than a geographical expression. A beautiful peninsula, which warranted it the name of "Garden of the Empire", the Sacred Roman Empire, blessed with the splendid climate of a fertile and varied land, surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea on three sides, south, east, and west.

To the north, where the Italian peninsula was joined to the rest of the continent Europe, the Alps, a continuous chain of almost impassable mountains marked its boundaries with France and Germany, all that was left of the empire inherited by the descendants of Charlemagne, protecting the peninsula from the worst of the winds that swept the across Northern Europe and contributing to the mildness of its climate during all seasons.

A COMMON LANGUAGE – Il Problema della Lingua

The Roman Empire that had unified Italy politically also promoted its linguistic unity.

It was highly advantageous for the Italic peoples as one by one they were conquered and annexed by Rome to seek citizenship of the Roman Empire, both in economic terms and because of the prestige that Roman citizenship carried; and being able to speak Latin fluently was a sine qua non condition imposed by Rome to all applicants. Linguistic unity, therefore, closely followed political unity in those territories that were the closest to the heart of the Roman Empire. All the languages spoken by the people of various ethnicities who inhabited the peninsula, generally known as “Italic people” were eventually abandoned in favour of Latin. In the case of the Etruscans, initially the Romans bowed to their superior civilization and Etruscan language and culture was studied, books written about it and Etruscan was taught to Roman children. Eventually, however, the Romans turned their attention to the Greek civilization. As Greek slaves replaced Etruscan ones as tutors of young Romans of good family, Etruscan became obsolete and eventually completely died out. As a result, we lost for ever the key to interpret that complex civilization that once populated much of Lazio, Umbria and Tuscany, and also pockets of Southern Italy.

Over the centuries Latin evolved incorporating Etruscan and Greek features and flourished. Throughout the Imperial Age of Rome, and poets and great orators were born, like Tullio, Catullo, Virgil and Cicero who were read, admired and imitated across the breadth of the Empire. Latin scientists recorded their observations of phenomena like the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, describing the effects of the cloud of poisonous gases that killed the citizens of Pompei and Herculaneum well ahead of the lava that destroyed their homes. Latin writers like Julius Caesar described historical events of which they were both recorders and commentators, but also instigators.

At the height of the Roman Empire, Latin culture shone across the civilised world through the media of its rich, elegant language until the language itself became synonymous with culture and civilization. When the Roman Empire came crashing down, however, a Babel of tongues resurfaced that corrupted the Latin of Rome into dialects so different one from another that the inhabitants of the peninsula, even 100 miles or less apart, could no longer understand each other.

Latin survived only as the language of the cultured, the language in which books and treatises would be written for centuries to come. Latin also established itself as the language of diplomacy across the whole of the former Roman Empire because it was the only language universally spoken and understood by their ruling classes. Latin as a live language, however, survived and was kept alive by the Catholic Church, the Vatican, the Church of Rome, in Italy and abroad wherever there was a Religious Catholic community. All members of the Catholic Church, bishops, priest, nuns, monks and so forth, necessarily spoke the Latin of Rome, the common language, used to celebrate Mass but also at meetings, conferences, and other fora of communication. If they originally came from different parts of Italy, however, while they would communicate with each other in the Latin of Rome, they had to turn to the vernacular of the town where they exercised their ministry to communicate effectively with their flocks. In Italy, by the XIII century, only clerics, notaries and ambassadors used Latin to communicate with each other and put their case before the Tribunal, everybody else relied on their local dialects. This was a serious problem if, as often happened, people involved in the proceedings were not cultured and were not local, as they would be speaking different vernaculars and mutual understanding was, therefore, compromised to say the least!

DANTE ALIGHIERI - Florentine first and above all - XIII century, Inferno I to X

Dante can be read in a Medieval key – as the prototype of Man of the Middle Ages, but also as a precursor of the Renaissance. As a politician in the XIII century, Dante realised what kind of threat Pope Bonifacio VIII represented for Florence, a powerful republic that the latter was determined to dominate economically and politically. It would be wrong to say that Dante had not eyes but for Florence and its survival as his breadth of thought was far greater, but we need to wait three centuries for Machiavelli to extend Dante's fears for Florence's freedom and independence to the whole of the Italian peninsula and islands. Another Florentine who, like Dante played an important political and ambassadorial role for the Republic in the XVI century, Machiavelli did not give the whole of "Garden of the Empire" much chance of surviving the century. From his personal and professional experience Machiavelli developed on Dante's reasoning, fearing that the whole of "Garden of the Empire" would be eroded and consumed by political strife, its soil poisoned by blood of the fratricidal wars between city and city, political parties or family against family, and all fomented by the pope of the day.

Dante was a great poet and thinker, with a breadth of knowledge that was encyclopaedic for a man of his time. Wishing to reach a wider audience than men and women of his culture and standing, Dante was the first writer to tackle the problem of what attributes a vernacular must possess to be regarded as a proper language, worthy of replacing Latin in every context.

Determined to write an amazing didactical work in verses; a masterpiece that would help those who had lost the right way to get back on track. He aimed to paint a vivid picture of Hell for his readers, so convincing that it would put the fear of God into them, and they would repent. Dante was the first writer who, as a linguist, promoted the use of the Florentine of his century, expurgated of its most idiotic features and adopted it to write his masterpiece, "The Divine Comedy". He was also the first to realise that for his readers to perceive his images of Hell as truly frightening, he must use a very realistic language, including vulgarities, rude images and swearwords, none of which was ever recorded in the written form. Lack of vocabulary did not constitute a problem for Dante who, whenever he needed a word and did not find it in the Florentine vernacular, invented it and, with the circulation of "the Comedy" being so wide, these contributions to language were readily adopted. This is one of the reasons why Dante is also known as "the father of the Italian language". Whilst widely read, many of the most erudite of his readers were terribly scandalized and for centuries some of them insisted that "The Divine Comedy" was anything but a masterpiece and Dante's example must not be imitated.

The Florence in which Dante was born was a rich and powerful city state that valued very highly its Republican independence. Therefore the Florentines became very interested in the initiative taken by the then German Emperor Frederic II, who moved his court to the beautiful island of Sicily, surrounding himself with Sicilian courtiers and commissioned them to write poetry in the Sicilian vernacular of the XII century in imitation of the one produced in Provence by the "Scuola Provenzale" that the emperor so admired. However, much as they found their attempts to write Provençal verses in Sicilian very stimulating, Florentine scholars and poets could not sympathise with the themes proposed by a poetic school that celebrated human virtues that the Florentines also admired, but that Provençal poets attributed exclusively to the aristocracy for whose benefit they wrote. The Florentine school of poetry was very proud of its republican spirit and liberties and, therefore, its poets sang the praises of the nobility of spirit that did not depend on an accident of birth but on man's ability to cultivate those virtues that the poet associated with it and improve himself for the sake of a woman to which the poet conferred the attributes of an "angel on earth" – La Donna Angelicata". Also, besides lacking originality, XIII century Sicilian poetry was written in a vernacular ill-suited to reproducing the rhymes and rhythms of the Provençal School of poetry. To a Florentine ear the rhymes created by the Sicilian School of poetry often sounded harsh. When Florentine poets recited verses written in Sicilian, words did not roll out of one's mouth sweet and round like they did in Florentine, so music of the language and the rhythm was lost. It was, therefore, not long before Florentine poets founded a new school of poetry, based in

Florence but with members scattered around the Italian peninsula, which adopted a beautiful language - derived from XIII and XIV century Florentine vernacular, and so harmonious that Dante referred to it as "Il Dolce Stil Novo".

That was how the Italian language as we know it today was born.

THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE – The long-lasting legacy of “the Three Florentine Crowns”, their inestimable gift to all Italic people.

Three Florentine men of genius belonged to the Florentine School of Poetry, Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarca, who eventually became known collectively as “the Three Florentine Crowns” – le Tre Corone Fiorentine”. It was these three who succeeded in elevating the Florentine vernacular to the dignity of a proper language. It was a language that, according to Dante’s definition, was fit to be used by the Church of Rome and in the Tribunals but could also lend itself to the writing of masterpieces in every literary genre known to man. A language that, while evolving through the centuries, would not lose any of its original attributes. It is thanks to Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarca that Italy today shares a common language. Individually, they succeeded in writing a masterpiece in each of the three genres - poetry, comedy and prose, that writers from all over Italy and even beyond were able to imitate and build on.

NICOLO’ MACHIAVELLI – XVI century “Il Principe”

Three centuries went by before another Florentine was born, Niccolò Machiavelli who acquired immortal fame putting into practice what Dante advocated in his famous treatise in Latin, “De Vulgari Eloquentia”.

Like Dante, Machiavelli divided his time between actively serving his beloved Florence in an ambassadorial role, and his intellectual and pursuits.

“Il Principe” (The Prince), Machiavelli’s masterpiece, written in Florentine at the beginning of the XVI century, is meant as a political treatise aimed to appeal to anyone with the necessary requisites to forge himself a large principality or an empire for himself.

Three centuries had gone by since Dante wrote “De Vulgari Eloquentia” in Latin advocating that from then on, any major work should be written “in volgare” and by now this had become an established practice everywhere on the Italian peninsula.

Machiavelli was in an even better position than Dante was to fully appreciate the disastrous consequences that the political machinations of a pope were having on the rest of the Italian city states, whose sole aim was to prevent the unification of many cities into vast states that would represent a threat to Papal power. Both Dante and Machiavelli were also aware that, unlike any other temporal power, as Head of the Papal States the pope held an extra trick up his sleeve. It was up to the pope to legitimize the coronation of the German Emperor as Emperor of what was left of the Sacred Roman Empire, and they would refuse to do so if they did not trust the German Emperor to defend the Catholic Religion. Even after his coronation, a German Emperor still would not want to displease the Pope and, if called upon to castigate any city state in his fiefdom that met with the disfavour of the pope, would be obliged to do the pope’s dirty work for him or be excommunicated; in which case he would be automatically deposed and another emperor elected. By the XVI century, therefore, while other states had been expanding and consolidating around a central power, the Italian peninsula had been left lagging behind. At this point it became highly probable that unless the Italian city states could also unify and become a nation, each and every one of them would eventually be annexed by one of the emerging powers: France, Spain, and Germany.

Il Principe must be seen in this context: Italy’s last chance to also unify and become an independent state, no longer a fiefdom of the German Emperor. A practical solution to a practical problem.

When Machiavelli wrote “il Principe”, Florence was still a free republic, but only just. The richest and most powerful families vied for power leading to strife, conspiracies, and purges, just as in Dante’s times. Machiavelli, like Dante, was first and foremost a Florentine politician and like Dante he had performed an ambassadorial role for Florence, until he was suspected of having conspired with the La Stufa family to substitute itself to the establish order. Though nothing could be proven against Machiavelli, it was felt that he could no longer be trusted to perform any political and he was obliged to leave Florence and retire to his country house. “Il Principe” is the result of his reflections.

Machiavelli’s life experience differed from Dante in that they were both exiled from Florence for political reasons, but in Machiavelli’s case he was able to look behind him at three at centuries of political strife that had weakened and destabilized the whole of the peninsula, as well as Florence. **Machiavelli’s “Il Principe” is based on a dispassionate appreciation of the facts known to him to that date, which led Machiavelli to conclude that only the pope could bring about the unification of Italy, or rather, his bastard son on his behalf: Il Principe Valentino. Il Principe Valentino, to whom Machiavelli initially dedicated “il Principe”, was not only a born conqueror and man of much cunning, but the son of a very powerful pope.**

When seen amassing an enormous principality, he would be seen by the Pope as acting both on his own behalf and on behalf of the Church, of which he naturally would stand as the most powerful and steadfast of allies. Here was at last a chance for Italy to stand up for itself and keep the wolves at bay; emerging nations able to bank on their own strength versus the weakness of the divided Italian city states in order to take them over. Was it bad luck or poison that deprived il Valentino of his father’s support before he could consolidate his extended Principate, bad luck that he could not prevent an old enemy from being elected as his father’s successor, and that he himself should be taken ill and die shortly afterwards?

All we need to know is that, where the future of “the Garden of the Empire” was concerned, Machiavelli’s analysis of its present and past led him to draw the right conclusions. Each of the great powers, France, Spain and Germany, cut itself a large slice of the cake and under their dominance Italy ceased to be the torch of culture that it was at the time of the Roman Empire and beyond.

CARLO GOLDONI – XVIII century- La Locandiera, La Villeggiatura

We need to wait a further three centuries before we come across another “Italian” writer whose appeal, like Moliere’s, crosses the narrow limits of his place and times.

I refer to Carlo Goldoni, native of the illustrious Republic of Venice, the only city state equal to Florence in status, political power, merchant power and patronage of the arts. The only city state to stand proud and independent over the centuries against the popes and the German Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, who coming as a friend and welcomed as an ally against the all-powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire, betrayed the city and annexed it to his own empire.

By the XVIII century, however, when Goldoni wrote his comedies, the “Serenissima Repubblica of Venice” had lost a lot of her composure and cool. Its sensible merchant bourgeoisie had started assuming the airs displayed by the international aristocracy that had become their close neighbours. Much of what had made Venice what it was, in terms of hard work, morality, dedication to duty, simplicity of customs was, by then, gone or going. These waning Venetian traits had formed the basis of the harmony that reigned among the various social strata, earning Venice the appellative of “Serenissima”, meaning serene, collected, peaceful and harmonious. This was fading into the past.

In his comedies, Goldoni portrays with candid humour the excesses of “la bella societa’ Veneziana, the beautiful people, and pays dues to the older generation, depositary of those social and moral values, whose responsibility it was to pass on to the next generation. Social satire, therefore, rather than castigation of human vices as in Moliere’s comedies. A satire that Goldoni’s public would find equally amusing in any of the localities that the comic writer planned to visit who,

seeing themselves and their friends through Goldoni's eyes, had a good laugh and perhaps tried to improve their ways. Needless to say, all of Goldoni's comedies are written in Florentine with the exception of one, written in the dialect of Chioggia – "Le Baruffe Chiocciate".

THE UNIFICATION OF ITALY - XIX century

In 1861 all Italian city states were annexed by the tiny, northern Italian Kingdom of Piedmont because it was the only state or city state that had not fallen under foreign rule. However, communications between the administrations of all the "counties" (regioni) in which Italy was divided, were next to impossible because unity of language and broken down and most "Italian" bureaucrats spoke nothing but their local vernacular; and the new Italian king was no exception.

"IL GATTOPARDO" by Tommasi di Lampedusa XX century

We shall watch the annexation of Sicily through the eyes of a Sicilian nobleman who witnessed it and saw another ruling class emerging in Sicily that did not have any of the attractiveness of the one that it was replacing. The story is told by Tommasi di Lampedusa, heir to his diaries, in a fascinating novel that inspired one of the best Italian film makers the homonym film *Il Gattopardo* "The Leopard", a classic masterpiece that we shall watch together in Italian with English subtitles. "Il Gattopardo" written by a descendent of the Prince of Lampedusa, is based on the memories written by his grandfather in a series of diaries that recorded the "liberation of Sicily" and the annexation of Sicily by Piedmont.

Piedmont was such a tiny kingdom, and its King did not speak Italian, only the local vernacular, but by 1861 it was the only territory in the whole of the Italian peninsula and its islands that had not fallen under foreign rule. "Il Gattopardo" reflects these political changes as seen through the eyes of a man of considerable intelligence, culture and sensibility. It is the viewpoint of a dispassionate spectator who sees a new order substituting itself for the old order, both aliens. Neither the Spaniards nor the Piemontesi spoke Italian, nor did the people subject to their political rule, each territory speaking fluently only its own vernacular.

ITALY STRIVES FOR LINGUISTIC UNITY

Once Italy achieved political unity the new country turned to Alessandro Manzoni for his expert advice as to how best to achieve a linguistic unity. This Northern Italian writer, a staunch supporter of the movements that had been fighting to bring about for the political independence of Italy, wishing to write an historical novel set in XVIII Lombardy that would appeal to the whole of Italy, had already given the linguistic issue some considerable thought.

Over two centuries had gone by since Goldoni has written his comedies in Florentine in order to be able to tour and represent them all over Italy; nevertheless, Manzoni found himself in an identical situation to Goldoni's: if he wanted his work to appeal to a contemporary Italian readership, he must write his major work in Florentine.

There were, however, additional problems that Manzoni must resolve who, like Goldoni, was not a Florentine, to write an historical novel set in XVIII Lombardy that would be read and appreciated across Italy and abroad as Manzoni belonged to a literary school that was very strict in the matter of dialogues, prescribing that writers of historical novels must make their characters speak in a manner that sounded as natural as possible: "il verismo" (true to life). Therefore, the Milanese writer started by confining himself to imitating the literary models available to him, all of which were based on the works of Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch.

But, since his epic novel was set in the XVIII century and that the main characters were two humble peasants, Manzoni could not be satisfied until he went to Florence and heard how people really spoke in Florence and was able to update his dialogues and his prose incorporating some of the linguistic changes that had occurred over a period of almost five centuries and, like Dante, creating new words to fit his subject matter whenever he considered it necessary. This process

Manzoni described as “washing his clothes in the river Arno” (“Sciacquare I panni in Arno”), a phrase now become proverbial.

Just as Boccaccio’s “Decameron” stood for nearly six centuries as the linguistic example for all prose writers to imitate, Alessandro Manzoni’s “I Promessi Sposi” (“The Betrothed”), in the XIX Century provided them with a more complex and up to date model. But the linguistic unity of Italy was only achieved with the advent of television.

In the interim, at Manzoni’s suggestion, an education program was launched by the new state that relied on Florence to provide all other regions with as many primary school teachers as possible, to be seconded to schools all over Italy to teach children of every region to speak and write Italian, using Manzoni “I Promessi Sposi” as their textbook.

PIRANDELLO XX century Così’ e’ – se vi pare; Il gioco delle parti; Essay on Humorism

Last but not least we will explore Pirandello, the author of a vast collection of short stories collectively known as “Novelle per un Anno” and a series of psychologically very complex comedies. More recently Pirandello was identified a precursor of Sartre’s existentialism, however it is his conception of “Umorismo” that defines his art, whereby Pirandello always sympathises with his characters, peti-bourgeoisie for the most part, on whom life administered blow after blow, each time steeling themselves to pick themselves up, hiding their existential pain behind a mask. As a playwright I dare to say that Pirandello is unparalleled in that his techniques are so innovative that they work very well even today, and his in-depth psychological study of all the characters in his plays so challenging to performers that they have been performed everywhere and found very inspirational to both professional amateur companies, both in Italy and in the UK.

Pirandello was not a Sicilian or an Italian in perception: he is not a product of an Italian culture. Born in Sicily from a reasonably wealthy family, like the majority of Sicilian men of his social condition, Pirandello completed his university studies in the “capital! And by “capital” we do not mean Torino - the capital of the Kingdom of Piedmont, nor Rome, the new capital of Italy, but Vienna the good old capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In Vienna Pirandello would come in contact with a European that would broaden his horizons, stimulating concepts like the Ego and the Alter -Ego, Conscious and Subconscious, Freud’s Psychoanalysis,

As Pirandello himself put it, he was “born of Chaos”. A play on words, certainly, as his place of birth was Contrada Caos, in the province of Girgenti, in Sicily. Like all the sons of well to do families of the Sicilian bourgeoisie, Pirandello continued his studies at the University of Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with which Italian universities could not compete in prestige. There Pirandello became passionate about Freud, but whose belief in the unity of human personality Pirandello rejected as a myth that he sought to disprove time after time. As Pirandello saw it, there are as many of us as there are people who perceive us as father, friend, co-worker and so on. For ourselves, however, we are no-one.

Pirandello’s is the last writer whose works are written in Italian that carry a universal appeal. None of the writers that came after him achieved this because none shared the same breadth of thought. No matter how well they wrote, they restricted their subject matter to themes typically Italian in conception and inspiration, like the Italian Mafia and its historical origins; the cultural and economic differences between the industrialized North and the agricultural South, and, above all, how people’s lives are still defined by poverty, superstition and tribal customs that the Catholic church encourages that seem impossible to eradicate, even today.