

ITALY AT WORK: REPRESENTATIONS OF LABOUR IN ITALIAN CULTURE

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Work can be many things: domestic or public; paid or unpaid; cerebral or physical; unfulfilling or all-consuming; life-long or temporary. It enters almost all dimensions of human experience and profoundly impacts our relationship to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us. In *The German Ideology* (1845–46), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels write that humans ‘begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation’.¹ For Marx and Engels, then, work stems not only from a need for sustenance, but also from a desire for self-actualisation. Almost two centuries later, in the radically altered social landscape of 2021, it is worth questioning the extent to which this framing of work is still applicable to contemporary conceptions of selfhood, entangled as they are in a society in which fragmented processes of production are followed by rapid forms of consumption, and in which age-long balances between human beings and the natural environment are being irreversibly compromised.

During the 1950s and 1960s, on the pages of the literary journal *Il menabò*, (founded and edited by Italo Calvino and Elio Vittorini), Italian intellectuals engaged in a public debate on the connection between literature and work, with specific attention devoted to *letteratura industriale*. Responding in part to the championing of *littérature engagée* by Jean Paul Sartre and other post-war writers in the francophone sphere, both Calvino and Vittorini acknowledged the need for a new kind of fiction and poetry which was able to address the harsh reality of factory work and the consequences of Italy’s process of industrialisation. They imagined a literature which was capable of analysing the anthropological impulse behind labour, and the ways in which work (or a lack thereof) shapes individual human experience. These were the very years in which many Italian intellectuals were engaging closely with Antonio Gramsci’s notion of *impegno*, namely the responsibility that writers and artists have to address social issues and to give voice to underrepresented human experiences.² In addressing the nature of factory work, Italian writers in the 1950s and ’60s thus productively crossed boundaries between political, social, and artistic domains,

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. by Christopher John Arthur (London: ElecBook, 1998), p. 61.

² See Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni dal carcere*, 4 vols (Turin: Einaudi, 1975 [first published 1948–51]), esp. II, 954–1386.

fostering a discourse whose relevance reaches far beyond the specific context of its production.

Recent years have seen a notable increase in critical engagements with the concept of work in the field of Italian Studies, particularly in the wake of the recessions caused by the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–08 and, more recently, in response to the ongoing instability brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Recognizing the timely relevance of work, the 2020 Society for Italian Studies Postgraduate Colloquium ('Italy at Work: Representations of Labour in Italian Culture', 27 November 2020) invited postgraduate and early-career scholars to engage with representations of labour, alienation, and unemployment across all areas of Italian Studies. The wide range of topics presented at the colloquium demonstrated clearly that Italian culture has a long and underexplored history of engaging with the concept of work, from the Middle Ages to the present day. This inaugural volume of *Notes in Italian Studies* collects the findings of the 2020 colloquium, alongside newly written contributions, and represents the (unpaid) intellectual labour of a generation of scholars for whom many of the subjects they write about here—precarity, exploitation, alienation—hold a particular relevance.

The volume opens with two notes on the function of work in Dante's *Commedia*. In 'Waiting and Working in Dante's Ante-Purgatorio', Caroline Dormor draws attention to descriptions of the pilgrim's physical exertion in Ante-Purgatory which seem to undercut its usual characterization as a zone of stasis and delay. With reference to Virgil's explanation of the spiritual logic of the mountain in *Purgatorio* IV, whereby the souls undergoing purgation experience increasingly less pain as they climb the mountain and the weight of vice is lifted from them, Dormor argues that work takes on a necessarily redemptive quality in the opening cantos of *Purgatorio*, troubling the strict division between Ante-Purgatory and Purgatory-proper. In 'Dante's Winemaking *Hapax Legomena*: Textual and Theological Labour in the *Commedia*', George Rayson discusses passages in *Purgatorio* IV and *Paradiso* XII which draw on the theologically inflected language of winemaking, focusing in particular on the significance in each instance of Dante's choice to deploy *hapax legomena*, words which occur only once within the poem. These *hapax*, Rayson argues, are metonymies for the work of poetic creation; but while winemaking *hapax* in *Purgatorio* are tied to cultivated processes of growth and maturity, in *Paradiso* they perform the theological labour of subject-making.

Bridging the gap between Dante and the twentieth century, Simona Di Martino's note explores the depiction of the figure of the wet nurse in both poetry and prose, from Vittorelli to Pirandello. Through an analysis of Vittorelli's poem 'La

³ A number of recent critical works have investigated the relationship between work and literature in the Italian context. See, in particular: Giorgio Bigatti and Giuseppe Lupo, *Fabbrica di carta. I libri che raccontano l'Italia industriale* (Bari/Rome: Laterza, 2013); Paolo Chirumbolo, *Letteratura e lavoro. Conversazioni critiche* (Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 2013); Raffaele Donnarumma, *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014); Giuseppe Lupo, *La letteratura al tempo di Adriano Olivetti* (Roma/Ivrea: Edizioni di Comunità, 2016); *Letteratura e lavoro in Italia. Analisi e prospettive*, ed. by Carlo Baghetti, *Nótos*, 4 (2017); Alessandro Ceteroni, *La letteratura aziendale. Gli scrittori che raccontano il precariato, le multinazionali e il nuovo mondo del lavoro* (Milan: Calibano, 2018).

nutrice' and a selection of short stories from Pirandello's *Novelle per un anno*, Di Martino shows that, unsurprisingly, the individual identity of the wet nurse was consistently subjugated to her role as a domestic labourer. This absence of individualized identity is a literary trope which remains fairly consistent across the centuries, Di Martino argues, until the eventual disappearance of the figure of the wet nurse with the invention of formula milk in the late nineteenth century. Without a need for their labour, wet nurses gradually disappear from the pages of Italian literature.

The radical transformation of attitudes to work throughout the twentieth century also provided fertile ground for Italian poets. In her note 'Il lavoro nella poesia magrelliana. Appunti stilistici', Ilaria Cavallin reflects on the representation of work in Valerio Magrelli's lyrical production from 1999 to 2014, focusing in particular on the topics of alienation and capitalist greed. Through an analysis of metaphors and semantic domains, Cavallin shows that Magrelli's lexical and stylistic choices concur in casting a dark shadow on the poet's understanding of work. In his note entitled 'Altri indizi di guerre civili. La fabbrica in una pagina critica di Andrea Zanzotto', Massimiliano Cappello explores Zanzotto's interest in the labour conditions of soldiers and factory workers. Cappello concentrates in particular on Zanzotto's review of a text by poet and labourer Ferruccio Brugnaro, and on the relationship between Zanzotto and Brugnaro, all of which gestures towards an understanding of political *impegno* as an interrelation of theory and practice. The factory thus becomes a place where literature encounters the reality of work, where a parallel can be drawn with the reality of war, and where poetry acquires a crucial and nuanced relevance in the process of representing and understanding the multivalent experience of work.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a number of Italian intellectuals turned their attention with new vigour to the important connection between industrial labour and its representation across different artistic media. In her note 'Pasolini's Work-Poet: A Composite Genealogy', Margaret Scarborough discusses Pasolini's conception of what he calls the 'poeta-operaio', a figure who lives the experience of industrial labour actively and antithetically, resisting its drudgery and alienation in order to reclaim his humanity. Scarborough traces the complex intellectual hinterland of Pasolini's composite figure, citing influence from Charlie Chaplin, Herbert Marcuse, and Simone Weil, among others. In 'The Road to Cosmic Labyrinths: Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco in *Il menabò*, 5', Andrea Brondino addresses literary and cultural responses to Italian industrialization, with a specific focus on the positions of Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco in the debate surrounding industry and literature. Brondino raises questions regarding the avant-garde and postmodernism, complicated by both Calvino and Eco in ways that show the influence of the language and imagery of industry on Italian literary debates and production in the early 1960s. Brondino's note also highlights similarities in Calvino's and Fredric Jameson's approaches to cognitive mapping, as well as in Eco's and John Barth's analyses of exhaustion. Ultimately, it argues for a renewed understanding of the cultural role of Italian industrialization within broader intellectual debates.

Mohamed Baya, in his note entitled ‘An Arabo-(It)alienation: Work and Migration in *Immigrato* and *Divorzio all’isلمamica a viale Marconi*’, considers the subject of work as filtered through the experience of migration from North Africa to Italy, while also highlighting the relevance of irony and parody in engendering a heightened understanding of these themes. Baya discusses two major novels of so-called *letteratura della migrazione*, Mario Fortunato and Salah Methani’s *Immigrato* and Amara Lakhous’s *Divorzio all’isلمamica a viale Marconi*, and analyses how the experiences of migration and low-paid labour described in these two novels emerge in their full critical potential when the harsh reality at stake encounters irony, both as a mechanism of defence and as a form of resistance to that reality.

The volume concludes with Michele Maiolani’s exploration of ‘Primo Levi’s Anthropology of Work’. In his note, Maiolani focuses on Levi’s conception of work as a starting point for reflections on human identity. Through close readings of *La tregua*, *La chiave a stella*, the short story ‘Gli stregoni’, and the essay ‘Una bottiglia di sole’, Maiolani argues that Levi’s anthropological interrogations of work form part of a broader questioning of what defines humankind and separates it from animals. This final contribution navigates the threshold between humanism and post-humanism, seeking to frame the crucial relevance of work within ever-changing dynamics that need to be questioned today more than ever.

On a final note, we would like to take this opportunity to thank all the people whose generous assistance has made this inaugural volume of *Notes in Italian Studies* possible. Establishing and editing a journal during an epoch-shifting pandemic has been no mean feat, and that we have managed to bring it to fruition is a testament to the strong spirit of collegiality in the field of Italian Studies in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Particular thanks must go to Simon Gilson, Claudia Rossignoli, Emanuela Patti, Teresa Franco, and the rest of the Executive Committee of the Society for Italian Studies for their enthusiastic support, to Erica Bellia for her role in co-organising the 2020 SIS Postgraduate Colloquium, and to Caroline Dormor for her beautiful cover design.

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