

I participated in the meeting of the Fulbright distinguished chairs as a discussant and the reflections that I offer in this paper mainly stem from what I could hear in the speeches that came before me and that I had, in fact, to discuss, that is those of Roberto Antonelli, Francesco Bruni and Erminia Ardisino. Some of them were my teachers, in the real sense of the word or through their books, and I am particularly pleased to have been able to participate with them in this meeting.

The session we attended was devoted to literature: this topic is very wide, and in the division of the disciplines used in Italian universities, it would include many subjects, from classical literature to those in foreign languages, as well as comparative literature. However, the participants in this session are a romance philologist, a historian of Italian language, a historian of Italian literature, as well as the two discussants. So, essentially, the session was devoted to the status and the presence of Italian literature (and more generally of Italian studies) within the Anglo-American university.

The situation of Italian literature is very different from that of literature in general: while for example classical studies, for tradition and prestige that distinguish them, or those of comparative literature, do not seem to have suffered in recent years a depletion (as each discipline was called to deal with a more general crisis of the humanities), studies of Italian literature in recent years seem to have undergone a transformation, a decline and a loss of interest - and perhaps this decline is due to the same loss of centrality literature has suffered in recent decades -.

In these few pages, I will try to respond, by exploiting the topics and the findings in the interventions that have gone before me, the questions on which we were invited to reflect, namely, first, on what may be the prospects of international cooperation in the field of Italian Studies. To the other three questions (the experiences of an Italian scholar in the States that seem more important to communicate, the relations between the two traditions of research, the role of an interdisciplinary approach in these traditions; the possible mutual trade, in terms of method, between the Italian and American university systems), I will try to answer in the course of my speech.

I will start from this point and from a personal experience, that one of a user of the Hesburgh Library at Notre Dame. This place is a paradise for students and scholars with his fourteen floors of books on open shelves, with carts to carry them around everywhere, with the opening times we know (i.e. 24/7), with all its services up and running, with its efficient interlibrary loan system. A place of research, which one can only praise, and that is the very center of the campus, as often happens in American universities where I taught in the past or that I happened to attend, where the library, with its services, its cafes, its meeting spaces, is the true center of student life (and also of some professor's ones).

This topography is also the same at the Sapienza, my Alma mater, whose center is the Biblioteca Alessandrina, but the conditions of use of the two libraries are slightly different. The Rome one has few or no open shelves, the opening time is not convenient for those who want to study at night or also in the late evening (it closes at 7.30 pm). The reader may have trouble to get books and research materials, and he can obtain no more than two books at the same time and four per day: that is not exactly the same number allowed in the typical American college libraries.

This is not a criticism to the Alessandrina, which is efficient if compared to the average Italian public libraries: this difference, in fact, is due to the very different nature of the two libraries: the first is intended for research and consultation, the latter is primarily devoted to an idea of conservation. This does not mean that college libraries in the US, and Hesburgh in particular, are lacking historical collections (we can remember the copious Dante collection that was carefully studied by Ted Cachey), but a Special collections section is enough to safeguard them, leaving the rest in free consultation.

Apart from this first substantial difference, there is another one that immediately captures the beholder, something that can be found at the Hesburgh Library (and in other American university libraries) and that I have never seen in any Italian University library: the plaques in the main lobby that recall donations and bequests of book funds (or also an endowment used to buy books) from donors and their families.

In Italy, apart from the book funds left by scholars to the universities where they taught (the Bosco fund at the "Giorgio Petrocchi" Library at Roma Tre or the Monaci fund at the Monteverdi Library at the Sapienza, for example), this tradition is neither rich nor well formalized (and in general, donors or benefactors are very rare in Italian universities).

That series of plates very rich and original in their shapes reminding the endowments, all also specialized in some discipline, from Celtic to Italian literature, show together a collective and shared participation in the cultural growth of the university as part of civil society: something that in Italy is still far from being realized.

Of course, this presence pertains to cultural and social reasons, and mainly to the difference between the state university system, predominant in Italy (at least those from which almost all Fulbright distinguished chairs gathered here have come, I believe, are state universities) and the non-state system mainly (but not exclusively) of the American universities. Not exclusive because aside from the many, and excellent, state universities, most of them follow the guidelines of the different states in terms of equal opportunities, acceptance of minorities and disadvantaged social groups, etc., thus giving back to the community, at least in part, the quality they achieved through their careful management of fees and donations.

Let me start right from the point of private donations, and from the public-private issue, for some considerations that are outside the subject of the session, that is, the literature, and address instead from a general standpoint the comparison between the Italian and American university systems, in some aspects that I could perceive as the most important (this does not mean, of course, that are such). I state that my comments are based not on data but on impressions and beliefs drawn from the experience and on my reflections on the public debate.

In Italy, in recent years, there has been a debate on the role, functions and costs of public universities, which assumed, as it is often the case, the terms of a crusade, sometimes rather vibrant, against the university itself and against the so-called "barons" that – according to someone - govern it by using it for their power.

In this debate, the Italian public university (and thus the Italian university itself almost in its entirety) has been represented as a center of power; its professors as a group of self-established and self-legitimated class or caste that would govern for purposes of self or "familial" interest, rather than in the name of a higher public interest.

There is no need to underline that this image, so ably spread by the media mainstream, aimed to a substantial annihilation of the role and function of the Italian public university, which then in fact has been realized. As an example, the Italian public university will have virtually no decision-making role or address on the most important funding program promised by the Government for the next decades, the so-called "Human Technopole" intended to rise on the site that was the Expo and entrusted to an institute of technology governed by a private foundation.

One cannot fail to point out, however, that of the many reasons made in support of this defamatory design, one in particular was intended to take hold on the minds of Italian taxpayers: the opportunity to deduct funding for universities from general taxation and charge only the "real users" of universities, namely the families of students. Thus, an inevitable increase of tuitions would have been matched, according to the promoters of this idea (often repeated by major national newspapers, *Corriere della Sera* in the lead) in a greater equity.

The foundational argument, incredibly populist, of such a reasoning was that in the current system the working class has to pay for college for the children of middle class and professionals (as if the children of the working class could not, constitutionally, enter university).

This theory, which at once ignores the idea of community and that of social solidarity, does not even take into account the fundamental parameter of the independence of research, which can be ensured only when the projects and their results can be disclosed to all, and not to someone in particular (the lenders).

Even if a hybrid system is foreseen, in which the funding for research originated in a direct manner - though not exclusive - from a source directly detectable, that is, without passing through a redistribution of a neutral third party on the basis of certain parameters and clearly identified, it would be unlikely that the lender does not want to have a role on the decisions on research and teaching. Moreover, in US the donations are only a few times aimed at a particular research project, and in most cases the university administers and directs the funds of donations in total autonomy, with the only requirement, more moral than legal, to engage them in good end. Anyway, I have no knowledge of a Fund raising office in almost any Italian University.

In this debate, the United States have always been referred to as the paradise of free thought and non-state university, wealthy, and certainly working; but what is the real situation? It is of course not easy to analyze in a few lines, but we may say something on this point. First, as too often in Italy we tend to forget, many of the best US universities are public (Berkeley, Stanford, Michigan etc.). Second, very few non-public universities ignore the rules of the various states for admissions, which were mentioned above; this means that access to higher education follow more inclusive and "public" rules than we usually imagine (in our common view it is a census and private-only regime). The third point to remark is that the tuition in almost all American universities is certainly much higher than in Italian ones (or in general in Europe), but it often includes a number of services (such as housing) that in our universities represent an extra cost paid by the

families. It is certainly true that in the American model, the general taxation does not fund the university, or it funds it for a negligible amount (indeed, is there anything that the general tax funds, in the United States? Very few aspects of social life are due to state intervention).

Therefore, the idol of the private university (and the myth of its efficiency as long as private) that has substantiated the public debate on Italian university in recent years (a debate, to be honest, a little asymmetrical, since only the reasons of one side were admitted, with no chance to reply, to the mainstream of information), is an idol with feet of clay. We should say more correctly that the university is not effective if it is private, but if its components are efficient, from teachers to staff to students, regardless of whether it is public or private; and that a university. Such as it happened at Notre Dame in recent decades, can grow in the ratings quickly and overwhelmingly without changing its status, as long as it can find in itself the reasons of its efficiency: and these reasons lie in an innovative and intellectually independent research, and in not separating research and innovation from teaching.

In recent years, in the humanities, this separation between research and teaching has been too often encouraged in actions and strategic choices, and it has been often forgotten that the role of teaching in university is not equal to ensure that students learn the contents of the manuals (to ensure that, a teacher is not essential): its aim is a look to the future, teaching students to have a critical and innovative spirit.

As for the Italian studies, we must form spirits (and students) critical on texts and history - and we have to ensure that they have the capabilities and the operational tools, the technical and language skills, and enough historical knowledge, to bridge the distance separating us from the works and authors of the past.

This training goes through philology and lands to the criticism. Who forgets the first (and let me say that in many cases the American italianists do that, limiting their commitment to the critical pole of the studies), is not in the right position to perform the second.

If universities have or not this ability to form critical minds, they have it not because they are public or private, or because they list rigid curricula (as in Italy), or extremely free and open to student's choices (as in most American universities), but only if their teachers and students have this attitude.

It is also true that the Italian public universities in some cases are not fully at the service of their students as are, at least in the general opinion, the US universities. These are often perceived more as a university professor-oriented than student-oriented and/or student-friendly.

However, even if this is true, is this a matter that involves only drawbacks? Does a university oriented to the choices of students really produces innovation? Or does it rather wastes its energy in many courses with a little overall sense?

In the historical-literary disciplines, and with respect to the constitution of a collective identity based on the sedimentation of common sense in different periods, does make sense to allow a choice of courses and study topics not mediated by a "school" or by a "tradition" of the studies? Is this the risk that a choice of courses dictated by trending topics entails? If no student chooses to study, say, the fifteenth century, there will be a professor who will study it again? There is a risk of losing the knowledge of several centuries, and that the perspective on literary history will be incomplete.

The choice of courses (and of their topics) in American universities is certainly freer than in Italian ones: it is hard to explain to an American colleague what a scientific sector is, what is a "SUA sheet", what you need to do before the establishment of a degree course and what are the (many) requirements to fulfill. One may argue that all these conditions are aimed at the conservation and to limit innovation, but also, from another point of view, they can be read as ensuring a unified vision of the humanities and their overall sense.

This freedom from the "school" and the tradition of the studies - at least, so it appears to an observer used to see generations of scholars as a "replica" of their masters, and the masters of their masters, all grown within the same university, and self-perpetuating themselves - has nevertheless a number of positives, which can be put in parallel with its basic historical reasons.

First of all the academic mobility, which is something totally missing in Italy. Sometimes I think that it would be enough to write two paragraphs of a law to overturn completely the Italian academy. It should say: 1. It is not allowed to become a Ph.D. at the University where you graduated; 2. it is neither allowed to become a professor in the same university in which you graduated or got a doctorate.

These two conditions, that are sometimes operating (anyhow *de facto*) in American universities, the system could dismantle the Italian system (but it is not sure that it would make it better). The "tradition" and "school" have been, at least until twenty years ago, extremely important in Italy; even today, as noted by Roberto Antonelli, many literary studies, especially in areas where their tradition is stronger like Dante studies, tend to relate more to the history of the discipline, highlighting how the scholar arises in relation to it, than with the object of study.

Some American colleagues have actually this perception of our studies: according to them, they are too rich in philology and too poor in interpretation. For them, our annotated editions are at best a useful tool, while for many of us, always operating in relation to the tradition of studies in which we are, this is sometimes the very core of our activity.

This close relationship with the past tradition of the studies makes sometimes the Italianists self-referential: many scholars of my generation think sometimes to live at the time of their masters, and struggle to understand how the public role of the academic is nowadays faded, since the professors have been replaced in public debates by other most charismatic figures.

There are many reasons for this. The first and most important, in my opinion, is that literature is no longer able (not that it is not capable) to create a shared sense of the world. Thus, the role of the one who knows how to interpret critically the hidden meaning of poems and novels is accordingly extremely decayed: in practice, the role of the professor of literature has lost centrality along with literature itself. Moreover, when anything trends to get “social”, included the writers that are sold and read only if they pass through a “smart curation” of their image, the role and the public image of professors, whose role and consideration is based upon strictness – that is sometimes connected with slowness - is clearly declining.

In 2013, during my stay at Notre Dame within the Fulbright program (a period that was of the utmost importance for my studies and my overall growth as a scholar), I could take part to a very interesting conference organized by the International Institute of Advanced Studies. It was devoted to the role of the “public intellectuals” in various countries around the world and in their different professional roles.

Among the people who exert an influence in the society of their countries by virtue of their thought, writing, or speaking, professors or academics were scarcely represented. Diplomats, Philosophers, Politic leaders, Artists, Bloggers, Scientists and Historians were considered among the cases studied at the conference, whereas the “professor of literature” was not. For an Italian, whose national identity has been literary built by literates, poets, or professors (or both, like Carducci), this absence is shocking: however, it compels us to deal with a rethinking of our role. The professional academic world is not considered intellectual or not enough to have a public role, notwithstanding our ambitions. Our influence stops certainly in Italy and maybe in America, just at the border of the campus.

Finally, I would like to dwell on the very detailed description of Italian Studies in America traced by Erminia Ardissino in her speech. In our view, the Italian Studies is the discipline that studies the linguistic expression of a cultural or national identity.

Nevertheless, I have the impression that this aspect is not so evident when viewed from the other side of the ocean, where scholars are looking more at the great themes, including Italian literature in their surveys, than at the historical role of literature in the constitution of an identity. In any case, the identity is an old paradigm that should be eliminated – in my view, also in its new and “minor” forms connected to the migration literature - from our vision of the discipline, if we want to share with our American colleagues common research projects on humanities: “human” has no borders, no identities apart from the human one itself.

From the recognition of Erminia Ardissino, however, it appears that Italian Studies in America are intellectually very much alive, although numerically in contraction; and that this reduction brings about the scarcity of studies and editions on several centuries. The risk that these gaps should increase in the coming years, for the reasons mentioned above, is rather concrete.

Finally, let me close my remarks with a memory: I had the honor to meet in person a true public intellectual and a pillar of American culture of the twentieth century (and beyond), Father Hesburgh, at the dinner that followed the Keeley Lecture of 2013, to which I was kindly invited with other visiting scholars. I also met in that occasion Mr. Nanovic, the mentor of the institute that welcomes every year a Fulbright chair. I retain a wonderful memory of that evening: from the top floor of the building that bears the name of father Hesburgh, we were all close to the sky, resting on fourteen floors of culture and knowledge.