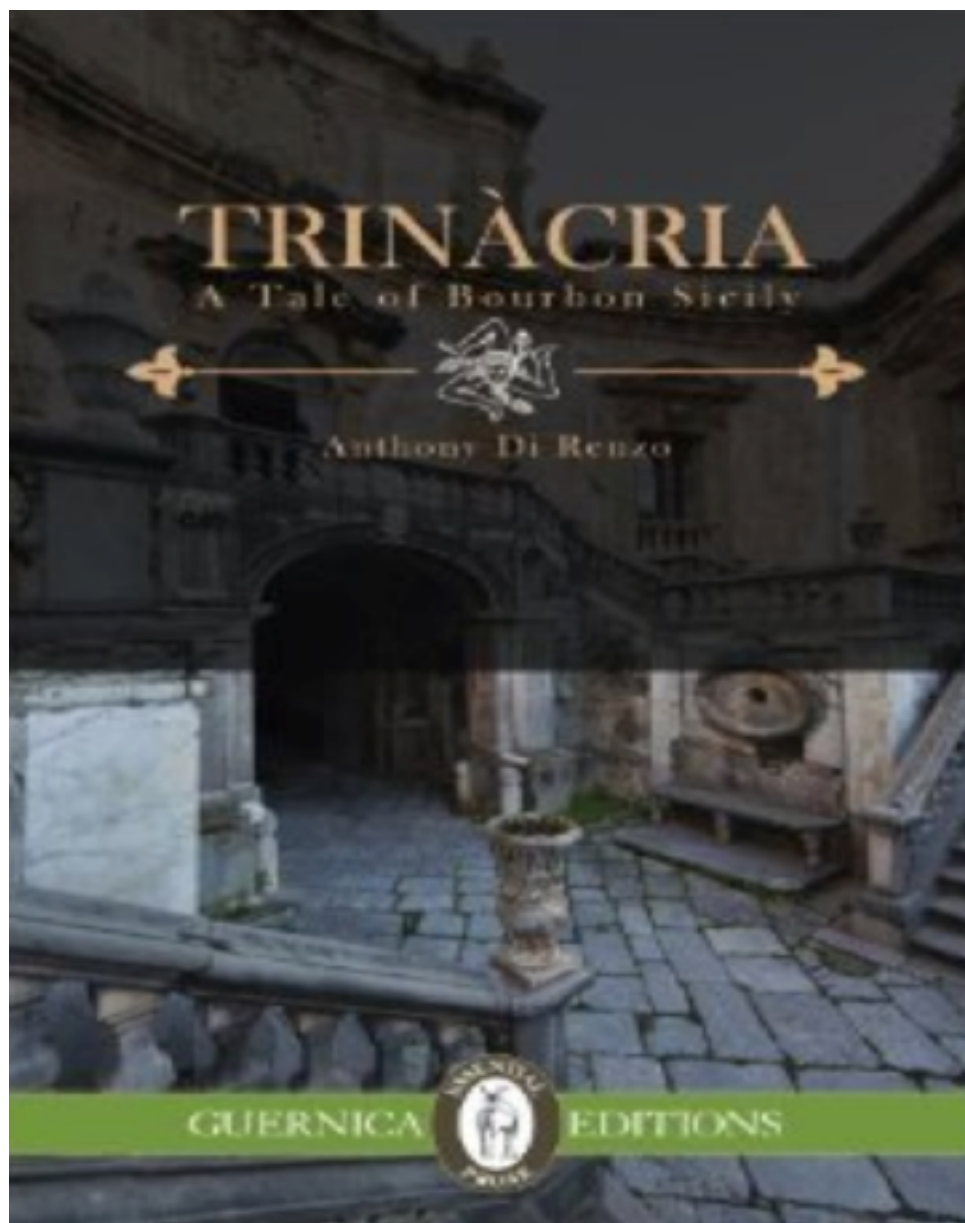




## **"Trinacria" - At Long Last! ... A Southern-Italian American (Pre-Ellis Island) Historic Novel ... and High-Brow Literature 'To Boot'**

Tom Verso (February 02, 2014)



This blog has persistently and repeatedly documented the FACT that the pre-Ellis Island history and culture of near seventeen million Americans of southern-Italian decent is virtually non-existent in universities, high and low-brow literature, film and television – with the exception of the



Mafia.---Southern-Italian Americans are systematically led to believe that their history and culture is either rooted in northern Italy (which is categorically and unequivocally NOT TRUE! – northern Italy is a ‘foreign’ historic culture vis-a-vis the South), or that southern-Italians have no pre-Ellis Island history with the exception of the Mafia. --- In 2011, John Domini made a significant break with this distorted view of northern roots and myopic post-Ellis Island historiography, in his novel “Tomb on the Periphery”; where the discovery of an ancient Greek tomb drives a contemporary plot. Tacitly, he tells American readers there is much much more to Neapolitan history and culture than New York’s San Gennaro Festival. --- On the heels of Domini’s book, in 2012, what I would subjectively judge, a significant event occurred in the cultural history of southern-Italian Americana. Susan Russo Anderson was painting a picture of the Lower East Side, the landmark immigrant neighborhood in Manhattan, when (dare I say Athena visited her) she decided to stop painting and turned to writing “Death of a Serpent”, a mystery story set in 1860s Sicily. --- This low-brow ‘gum-shoe’ novel is what I would call a prototype historic novel. It is not true historic fiction in the sense of Sir Walter Scott (“Ivanhoe”), James Fenimore Cooper (“Last of Mohicans”), Manzoni (“The Betrothed”), etc. However, “Death of a Serpent” along with “Tomb on the Periphery” may be seen as a foretelling’s of the coming, in 2013, of the full-blown high-brow pre-Ellis Island southern-Italian American historic novel – “Trinacria”. The closeness in time, of these three very different novels by very different writers, yet all having a common historic South of Rome context, may suggest the birthing of a southern-Italian Americana pre-Ellis Island Patria Meridionale consciousness.

#### Preface - Southern-Italian American ‘Culture Warriors’

The history of culture-evolution is one of individuals, outside prevailing cultural milieu institutions (e.g. universities, media companies, political parties, etc.), producing ‘counter-culture’ works (literature, film, music, etc.).

Currently, the prevailing institutionalized Italian American culture takes two forms: Renaissance and post-Ellis Island historiography, exemplified by curriculums of the only two courses of study offered in the American university system (“Italian Studies” and “Italian American Studies”) Both of these university programs have one thing in common: the absence of the 3,000 year pre-Ellis Island history and culture of near seventeen million Americans of southern-Italian decent. The history and culture of Italy south of Rome is literally non-existent in the American education system from public schools through universities.

However, outside of the increasingly ossified university cultural milieu, a robust historically genuine southern-Italian American culture is developing by individual artist and scholars. For example, - 82 of the 190 Italian American Studies Association (IASA) members (43%) do NOT identify themselves as members of a college or university (per 2013 online membership list).

Donna Gabaccia in her keynote address to the 2012 IASA Conference noted the high number of presentations at that conference by “independents”

More specifically:

Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola in the “Godfather” trilogy presented the culture of Sicily.

Steve Chase followed in the “Sopranos’ Naples’ episodes”

John Domini presented Naples history and culture in his novel “A Tomb on the Periphery”

Victoria Sferlazza’s presentation at the IASA 2012 Conference “The Linguistic Status of Sicilian”

Joseph Privitera “Sicilian: The Oldest Romance Language”, etc.

Michela Musolino’s Sicilian songs in the ‘Sicilian Language’ (not dialect)

John Di Napoli’s “Magna Grece” website

Susan Russo Anderson’s Sicilian “Serafina Florio Mystery Series”

Gaetano Cipolla et al.’s many Sicilian language, history and culture publications (e.g. Arba Sicula, etc.)

What these and many other southern-Italian American scholars and artist like them have in common is a common theme:

We were Before Ellis Island!  
We are Not from Tuscany!  
Patria Meridionale is Our Homeland!



And, the most recent addition to this list of Southern Italian Culture Warriors:

Anthony Di Renzo

"Trinacria"

"Leave Sicily, but you will return.

Trinacria is our mother and always calls us home"

### The Words

Stephen King, in his biographical "Memoir of the Craft", recounts a conversation he had with another prolific writer Amy Tan. He asked her:

"...if there was any one question she was never asked during the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk - that question you never get to answer when you're standing in front of a group of author-struck fans and pretending you don't put your pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. Amy ... said: 'No one ever asks about the language.' " (p. xiv)

Accordingly, King wrote: "This book is dedicated to Amy Tan.

In that vain (i.e. language), the first think that struck me about Trainacria was the vocabulary.

Oh! My! What a vocabulary! A voluminous reader, I have an above average vocabulary.

Nevertheless, I found myself dedicating "Hail Mary Beads" on my Rosary to the inventors of the iPad; which was on my lap at all times open to a dictionary while reading Trinacria. If, as 'back-in-the-day', I had to resort to an unabridged book dictionary (and it would have to be unabridged) it would have taken me weeks to read the novel.

I hasten to add, Di Renzo's use of uncommon words is not to be construed as 'flowery' (i.e. "flowery speech or writing using complicated and rare words instead of simple clear language"). It's been a long time since I've read Hemingway; however, I can't recall using a dictionary. I'm sure I must have, but certainly not very often.

Hemingway is renown for his quest for 'perfect declarative sentences', which were assembles of relatively common words.

When describing physical entities a writer can effectively use common nouns and adjectives. For example, from "A Farewell to Arms", an absolutely beautiful description in a middle school vocabulary:

"She had wonderfully beautiful hair and I would lie sometimes and watch her twisting it up in the light that came in the open door and it shone even in the night as water shines sometimes just before it is really daylight."

However, when writers are 'describing' abstractions like ethical and aesthetic concepts in a literary format, the appropriate words are not as obvious.

The prolific philosophy and literary writer Jean-Paul Sartre said: "I regard words as the quintessence of things" ("The Words", 1964, p.87). Understanding quintessence as "the most typical instance or representation of a thing"; if the things are non-material ethical/aesthetic abstract concepts, the writer struggles to find the right words that capture their "quintessence".

To my mind, Di Renzo's vocabulary is product of the complex historical, psychological, ethical and aesthetic cultural nuances he is trying to convey to the readers. Readers, such as southern-Italian Americans whose pre-Ellis Island historic cultural is unknown, indeed esoteric.

### The Historic Novel

I take the meaning of Historical Novel from "A Handbook to Literature" (Thrall, et el., 1960 p.223).

"The classic formula for the 'historical novel', as evolved by Scott ... calls for:

- 1) an age when two cultures are in conflict, one dying and the other being born;
- 2) into this cultural conflict, fictional personages are introduced who participate in actual historical events and actual personages from history
- 3) these fictional characters undergo and give expression to the impact which the historical events had upon people living through them
- 4) resulting in a picture of a bygone age given in personal and immediate terms."

### Proto-Historical Novel - "Death of a Serpent"

When Susan Russo Anderson, put down her paintbrush and pick up her pen, turning from painting a canvass of immigrant Manhattan's Lower East Side to writing the mystery novel "Death of a Serpent" set in 1860s Palermo, she took a quantum step towards writing a Sicilian historical novel. While the book (albeit a great crime story) did not meet the above four "test" (if you will) of an historic novel, it is significant as the birth of a pre-Ellis Island historic consciousness in the writer's mind. Further, the book in the hands of southern-Italian American readers will conjure that same sense of historic



cultural roots. It stimulates southern-Italian Americans: think about who you were, that you may know who you are.

### "Trinacria - A Tale of Bourbon Sicily"

Trinacria is a quintessential example of the Historical Novel in the tradition originating with Sir Walter Scott down to Hugo, Fenimore-Cooper, Manzoni, etc. Clearly, "Trinacria" meets all four tests of a historical novel.

#### The Plot / Narrator

The 'plot' (or story line) is a sequence of biographical events told in the first person narrative by the 'ghost' of Zita Valangurra Spinelli (1794 - 1882).

Similar to Domini's Tomb on the Periphery, Trinacria begins with an encounter with a skeleton. However, unlike Domini's novel, where the ghost of the skeleton 'haunts' the protagonist and affects the action of the plot, the ghost in Trinacria is the protagonist whose actions constitute the plot.

While the main body of the novel is Zita's first person narrative, in the Prologue to the novel she is introduced in the 'commentator' narrative style.

The 'commentator' tells us about a "Milanese" movie director who came to Sicily in the early 1960s to make an "epic movie" about the "Risorgimento" in Sicily at the time of Garibaldi's invasion.

Touring Palermo looking for filming sites and ideas, the Director visits "the famous catacombs at the Convento dei Cappuccini."

Walking through the catacombs he came upon what is described as:

"The most striking figure ... a shrunken harpy, dressed in the late fashion of the 'ancient regime' [i.e. the pre-Risorgimento Bourbon regime].

Zita Valanguerra Spinelli ... 19th century literary figure and caricaturist featured in the popular journal 'Don Pirlone' ... child prodigy ... captivated the Queen of Naples ... promoted Bellini's opera and supported the poet Leopardi ... partnered with wine merchants Ingham and Whitaker ... translated Lichtenberg's aphorism and produced a monograph on Hume ... Her 18th century Palermo 'Feste, Forche e Farina' became a source for Lord Action's two-volume 'The Bourbons of Naples.' (p.20) Thus, the novel's narrator is introduced in the Prologue, and a foretelling of the historic plot.

#### 1) Two Cultures in Conflict

Even though Zita died in 1882, twenty-two years after the onset of the Risorgimento, she was mummified and dressed in the late fashion of the 'ancient regime'. Much of the narrative thought in the novel has to do with Zita, who, born into the pre-Risorgimento Bourbon landed aristocratic society, has nothing but contempt for post-Garibaldi bourgeoisie Sicily.

This cultural change is exemplified by the life of Zita's granddaughter's husband Ciccio.

"Although born a peasant and briefly replacing his father as overseer [of the Zita family estate], Ciccio had become a successful carriage maker. [In the manner of the bourgeoisie], borrowing cash, he converted our stable into a workshop ... he work wonders with gilt and ebony, glass and upholstery.

"The aristocrats having lost their coaches in the revolution [because they were symbols of the aristocratic society Garibaldi was destroying], were obliged to lease new ones.

"The gentry had taken every measure to save face. Some bribed the Red Shirts ... One countess slept with an entire regiment... Such pride may be admirable, but it cannot support an estate.

Without Ciccio's [bourgeois] income, we would have starved. (p.60)

#### 2) fictional personages ... actual historical events and actual personages

Zita, the 'fictional person' interacts with the 'actual people' and 'events'. For example,

"King Ferdinand and Queen Maria Carolina who were transplanted to Palermo to escape the French ... The Queen hated the French for guillotining her sister Marie Antoinette. (p. 52)

"[They] had fled Caserta to escape the Pathenopean Republic and had established a temporary court in Palermo. (p.72)

There is much discussion about Garibaldi and his invading army.

"Don Benjamin said '[not to worry] they were young bloods stirring up trouble that's all'.

"We had survived many upheavals; most recently the April riots, so we were indifferent towards the rumor of another invasion. Nothing fundamentally would change, except perhaps we would be forced to speak Turinese instead of Neapolitan. Back then, Turin manufactured revolutions rather than carriages [i.e. automobiles].

At various points in the novel, fictional Zita has extensive discussions with the "actual poet Leopardi".



3) fictional characters ...give expression to the impact historical events had upon people living through them

Though out the novel, indeed one may argue the theme, the fictional narrative either explicitly or implicitly references the affects actual historical events had on Sicilian society as a whole. Cutting to the chase, Zita says:

"I hated Garibaldi for wreaking my world. (p. 33)

4) picture of a bygone age

For example, the automobile vs. the horse carriage is a metaphor for the 'bygone age'. She reports from the "catacombs":

"...the traffic above us purls like a stream in a grotto. I would love to see these new machines. [But] what do these Northerners know about carriages?

They never parked at the Marina, in a carriage of ebony and gold, making love and eating jasmine-petal ices till town in the morning. They never defied Lord Bentinck's edict and drove through the Quattro Canti in a coach and six, the coins for the fine sown in the horses' plumed headbands... My great-grandson sells horseless carriages in America...(p. 26)

Conclusion



Zita Valanguerra Spinelli – Marchesa of Scalea – was also known by her ‘nom de plum’ Trainacria: the symbol of Sicily, consisting of the Gorgon Head and three legged Tricelion. Further, she had a “gorgon-headed walking stick”.

In short, Zita was the personification of Sicily – she was Sicily!

To know Zita is to know Sicily.

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#### Pedagogical Implications

Trinacria is an excellent novel per se: “a good read as they say”. Moreover, it is an excellent historic novel in that it not only is enjoyable reading, it provides insight into the actual history of Sicily in the nineteenth century.

If the Italian American prominenti spent less time complaining about negative images of Italian Americans in media and holding gala parties celebrating themselves; if they would use their prominence to affect the education of the southern-Italian American youth, then books like Trinacria and Tomb on the Periphery would get into the classroom.

Not to mention: wouldn't it be nice if the prominenti used their prestige to get South of Rome history and culture courses and curriculum into the university system.

What the Italian prominenti don't understand is that the greatest insult and damage to their people (i.e. southern-Italian Americans) doesn't come from media Mafia stories. The greatest insult comes from colleges and universities that denigrate us by ignoring us; implying that South of Rome history, culture and people are insignificant and meaningless.

**Source URL:** <http://newsite.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/op-eds/article/trinacria-long-last-southern-italian-american-pre-ellis-island>

#### Links

[1] <http://newsite.iitaly.org/files/37340trinacria1391084109png>