

The Verses and Battles of Arturo Giovannitti

Antonella Iovino (February 22, 2011)



The Italian poet and trade unionist is remembered on the 150th anniversary of the Italian Unification to relive his contributions of political activism and poetry to the American history

The [John D. Calandra Italian American](#) [2] Institute hosted a round table on Arturo Giovannitti on the occasion of the 110th anniversary of his arrival in America.

The event, moderated by Dean Anthony Tamburri, was strongly wanted by Silvana Mangione, vice-secretary of the [General Council of Italians Abroad](#) [3]: "Remembering authors like Giovannitti is important on the 150th anniversary of the Italian Unification to attest the role of Italians abroad and understand their 'culture of the return', towards which Italy must open itself to embrace a larger view of culture".

Enzo Amendola, secretary of Italy's Democratic Party (PD) for the Campania region added, "Giovannitti, as a poet and activist, was especially able to transmit the idea that working class



emancipation would allow everyone to participate in the building of the American society respecting human dignity". "It is by following such authors", concluded Gianluca Galletto, representative of the PD in the North American constituency, "that Italy becomes an independent community from a specific geographical location".

Talking about Giovannitti's works were Professors Joseph Tusiani, Fred Gardaphè, Robert Viscusi and Marcella Bencivenni. A controversial figure of early 20th century America, he led the Italian Socialist Federation and edited the radical weekly 'Il Proletario', in 1912 he was among the organizers of the [Lawrence Textile Strike](#) [4], in which protester Anna Lo Pizzo was shot and killed.

Giovannitti was accused, together with Joseph Ettor, of murder; they were released after 10 months of prison and a trial accompanied by a strong working-class mobilization in the name of solidarity towards the two leaders, that especially moved the American public opinion.

The first speaker was Prof. Marcella Bencivegni, who illustrated the different ways to read Giovannitti: as a political activist, as an idealist, a journalist, and a theologian in his early years.

The son of a pharmacist from Ripabottoni, in Molise, he had come to North America at age 17 and spoke Italian, English and French fluently. In New York he took part in weekly meetings of a cultural club on 5th Avenue with socialists, anarchists and intellectuals, to discuss philosophy, poetry and revolution. Giovannitti was a product and a producer of a similar radical culture.

The frequent mistake is dividing his activist spirit from his soul as a poet. On the contrary, the two natures feed on each other. For instance, in his play "Com'era nel principio di tenebre rosse" written in 1916 and performed in English on Broadway only once, is an anti-military work that describes the de-humanizing effect of war through the story of a young poet who becomes a ferocious beast to revenge the raping of his wife by a German soldier, which left her pregnant.

Fred Gardaphè explained that Giovannitti represented an important reference point for the different Italian-American authors that spoke to the public about the stories of the Italian-American working class. The use of the English language allowed them not only to show this new culture to America but especially to impress a new religious orientation in the English-speaking literary panorama. Christianity was the element that united Italian-American workers and which Giovannitti was able to speak about, influencing more recent authors such as [Pietro Di Donato](#) [5] and [Augusto Lentricchia](#) [6].

Reading the verses of the poem "[The Walker](#) [7]", written by Giovannitti in prison, Robert Viscusi showed the details of his radical spirit, rhymes of a man who didn't believe in the traditional forms of government, such as the Italian monarchy, and had come to America open to modernity, seeking a better and freer land.

Giovannitti's personality emerged from Joseph Tusiani, pupil and friend of the poet, as well as David Giovannitti, Arturo's grandson. He was an untiring reader and a sensible writer, tied to his homeland and his pupils by a "paternal love"; the strong values transmitted to his family are still alive today, 50 years after his death.

Alternating critical analyses, readings and direct accounts, the speakers offered a complete frame of the author, each one pondering upon a certain aspect of his life and works. Sadly, in spite of his large number of works, Giovannitti remains unknown to many. In the opinion of the speakers, the motivations are multiple: Joseph Tusiani explains that Italy itself was the first to ignore him, if one thinks that "The Walker", from 1914, was translated in Italian as "L'uomo che cammina" only in 1938. Marcella Bencivegni shows how in America he wasn't highly considered because of his radical ideals and, as adds professor Viscusi, with World War II he lost attention, since Americans stopped reading Italian works. But especially, concludes Fred Gardaphè, Italy's mistake lay in the inability to institutionalize its own culture. So, talents like Giovannitti are frequently abandoned to the fate of alternating currents.



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