

Happy Birthday, Forum Italicum!

Mario B. Mignone (May 26, 2017)



The renowned journal of Italian literature, language, and culture, founded by Michael Ricciardelli fifty years ago, will be presented at the Italian Parliament, Chamber of Deputies this spring.

Looking at a chronology of Journals, in Italy as well as abroad, can be a useful exercise in understanding the cultural climate of a specific period in history. The difficulty of this exercise lies first in the vast number of periodicals produced, as well as in the short life of many of them and in the possibility of locating their files. [Forum Italicum](#) [2] offers readers a complete and easily accessible means for conducting this undertaking.



For a fruitful journey through our fifty year history, one should trace the intersections of all the paths of methodological and analytical approaches, the testimonies, the discussions and the exchanges of experience between those in charge of the cultural contours of the periodical and the collaborators, or even the consumers. Explaining the open and hidden synchronicities with the scientific committee is not always possible. But it is possible to browse through the editions of the journal one by one to understand its creation and to trace its evolution, highlighting the times that marked significant milestones. It is also important to examine the relationship between the means and content in the context of progressive digitalization, dates of publication, accessibility to the editorial staff, manner of distribution, economic means that regulate life; to mention only some aspects.

The birth

Forum Italicum was born at a particular cultural and social moment in Italy. It was also the time of rebirth of Italian studies in America. And in recalling the birth of Forum, we confront the complexities that characterized the spirit of its time. We explore its social, political, cultural, linguistic, and artistic-literary contexts and the intellectuals whose contributions to its pages stimulated debate, intellectual growth, and scholarly innovation.

The journal was the initiative of Michael Ricciardelli who, with courage and determination, envisioned it as an exemplar of the democratic idea of culture, with wide room for critical analyses and approaches to literary interpretation. Ricciardelli handled production and distribution by himself, without the help of a publishing house or large academic organization. The first four issues were published “under the auspices of the South Atlantic Chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Italian,” whose small membership did not guarantee stability. Ricciardelli realized the mountains that he would have to climb: the first issue, written on an Olivetti typewriter, was reproduced on a college photocopier and distributed free to friends.

In the first issue of 1967, Ricciardelli writes that the journal “welcomes contributions connected with Italian literature, art, and history, including short book reviews, artistic translations, and creative pieces in Italian, such as poems and short stories. Critical contributions should be in English or Italian. French, Portuguese, and Spanish contributions are also accepted.” He also thanks his department at Florida State University for covering the cost of “Xerox expenses.” Today, it’s endearing to hold that first hand-made issue and think about how it was “created.”

In the second issue, Ricciardelli further defined the journal as a “meeting-place where scholars, critics and teachers can present their views on the language and culture of Italy and other countries in relation with Italy... Young and hitherto unpublished scholars are encouraged to contribute their critical or creative works.”

The first issues affirmed this vision: the articles resist a single dominant perspective. We find papers by young scholars and by such great names as Gianfranco Contini, Giacomo Devoto, Bruno Migliorini, Silvio Ramat, plus stories by Michele Prisco and poetry by Carlo Betocchi and Mario Luzi. Later issues featured poets such as Giuseppe Ungaretti, [Eugenio Montale](#) [3], Luciano Erba, Piero Bigongiari, Margherita Guidacci, Maria Luisa Spaziani, Giorgio Caproni, Camillo Sbarbaro, Giovanni Giudici, Sergio Solmi, Diego Valeri, and Andrea Zanzotto. There was also original work by Elio Vittorini, [Italo Calvino](#) [4], Antonio Pizzuto, Carlo Bernari, Giuseppe Bonaviri, Nino Palumbo, Giuliano Gramigna, Giacinto Spagnoletti, and Dante Troisi. Even the editing committee included a shortlist of extraordinary names: Giacomo Devoto, Bruno Migliorini, Gianfranco Contini, Silvio Ramat, Oreste Macri’, and [Michele Prisco](#) [5]. This gathering of talent was a remarkable achievement for a new journal.

In North America, relations with Italianists such as Cambon, Cecchetti, Mancini, Rebay, Rimanelli, and Tusiani were strong. The journal became an important vehicle for the diffusion of Italian studies in North America and a haven for contemporary literature, then considered somewhat marginal.

A Changing Social Environment

Just one year after Forum Italicum was born, when Italy’s 1968 cultural revolution erupted in a climate of intellectual ferment and partisan scholarship, Ricciardelli wanted the journal to avoid the



stifling cage of ideologies, writing that “there is no method that is the best of the possible methods” and that the journal was open to any serious, critically responsible submission.

America at the end of the ‘60s was also being transformed. The democratization of culture was opening universities to new social groups, including Italian Americans. A new multiculturalism reinvigorated ethnic identities, and Italian Americans pushed for the teaching of Italian language and culture in colleges and universities. The growth of ethnic studies also promoted a fresh interest in Italian language and cultural studies.

Forum took advantage of these changes. In addition to university libraries, there were now subscriptions from new Italian studies instructors who appreciated how the journal encouraged contributions from “unpublished” young scholars. I, for one, had my first research paper published in Forum; for me, as for many others, it was our professional baptism. Reflecting its commitment to intellectual diversity, Forum offered a platform to non-traditional academics, immigrants and children of immigrants, faced with the demand to “publish or perish.”

One of Ricciardelli’s innovations was the publication of single-subject issues, including Homage to Pirandello in the First Centennial of his Birth; and Homage to Giuseppe Ungaretti; Settecento Revisited. These issues, featuring scholars of different perspectives, attracted great interest, and led to the creation of an independent series of monographs.

Even as the journal reached a respectable number of subscriptions, it was not easy to survive without institutional support. Ricciardelli, reluctantly moved the journal from the State University of New York at Buffalo: first, to the University of Texas at Austin, where [Gian Paolo Biasin](#) [6] was a key collaborator; then to The Ohio State University and Albert Mancini. In 1986, Forum moved to Stony Brook University, where it remains.

At [Stony Brook](#) [7], the journal enjoyed the support—including a full-time assistant—that greatly advanced editing, publishing, and distribution. The structure of the journal remained more or less the same, with a gradual reduction in pages granted to “Prose,” “Poetry,” and “Translations.” By 2000, these sections were almost gone, but a new “Archive” section was created for important unpublished and rare material.

At the same time, the book series “Filibrary”, launched in 1990’s, was earning its place in the field. Its forty-one volumes offer a rich variety of topics and perspectives, often interdisciplinary in nature, and reflecting evolving interests. Journal articles also changed with the times, paying increased attention to women writers and to works about women, to the literature about migration, and to film and film related to literature.

Meeting the Challenge of the Digital Age

The Internet posed the greatest challenge. Like other journals, Forum had to deal with the reality of new technologies of communication. When one thinks of the speed of the internet, or the impact of social networks, blogs, and multimedia, one sees the extraordinary adaptations that scholarly journals had to make.

The journal had already published three print indexes (in 1981, 1990, and 1990). In 2006, Forum Italicum, with the support of the library at Stony Brook University, began the full-text digitalization of every issue in order to make it accessible online and to the world.

The result was as anticipated: more scholars began citing our articles. In 2013, our increased presence in key citation indexes attracted the attention of SAGE Publications, which offered to become our publisher and distributor. SAGE publishes a thousand journals, many among the most prestigious in their fields, and today Forum is one of the most respected journals in its field, present in libraries and drawing contributions in practically every country.

All this was possible thanks to the Editorial Board, coordinated by Sebastiano Martelli and Franco Vitelli, and our anonymous peer reviewers whose critical work helped assure authority and relevance. Special issues of the Forum were developed in the network of personal and professional



relations built by Ricciardelli, such as a 1989 special issue dedicated to the scholar [Glauco Cambon](#) [8] and one in 1992 dedicated to the writer Carlo Bernari.

50 More Years!

The new series of Forum Italicum began with [SAGE](#) [2]. Special monographic issues, edited by guest scholars, included Italy from Without, Linguistic Identities of Italian in Italy and North America, Music, and Society in Italy and Lucania within Us: [Carlo Levi](#) [9] and [Rocco Scotellaro](#) [10]. Because of its scope; its interdisciplinary vision; the expertise of its editors and authors; and a commitment to comparative studies, Forum Italicum is posed to take further leaps in quality and standing across the next fifty years.

* [Mario B. Mignone](#) [7] is SUNY Distinguished Service Professor and Director of the Center for Italian Studies at Stony Brook University.

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[7] http://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/eurolangs/people/Mignone_Mario.html

[8] <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/04/08/obituaries/glauco-cambon-professor-67.html>

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