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The writing and pidgin of occasional miners native to Emilia working in Pennsylvania and Illinois (1898-1914)

Marco Fincardi

From the Apennines to the Appalachians

I was inspired to write this reflection on the language of Po Valley migrants in the United States by my interview with Umberto Verzellesi, born on October 23, 1903, at Bridgeville, Pennsylvania, in the Appalachians, to parents from Gualtieri, who lived mainly “a Primrose, dove mio padre aveva lo *storo*,” [in Primrose, where my father had the *storo*] – in his mangled Italian “storo” meant a “store” or “un emporio dove c’era di tutto da vendere: là era così.”[an emporium where there was everything to sell: there it was]. Umberto told me, “L’italiano, noi figli non lo sapevamo, l’abbiamo dovuto imparare quando siamo ritornati in Italia, nel 1920. In casa parlavamo il dialetto di Gualtieri, e fuori l’inglese. Fino a 17 anni io con l’altra gente parlavo ancora in inglese, dell’Italia sapevo solo il dialetto dei miei.” [We did not know Italian, we children had to learn it when we returned to Italy in 1920. At home we spoke Gualtieri’s dialect, and outside English. Up to 17 years, I spoke to the other people in English, I knew only the dialect of my parents for Italian.]¹ Before opening the store, his father had worked as a miner, like many of the other Italians who immigrated to Pennsylvania from Gualtieri and from its neighbouring towns and villages. I was aware that the contemporary migrant support network drew mainly on links between families and people from the same village or local area, and only secondarily – and not necessarily always – on connections between compatriots or workmates, and my conversation with Umberto led me to focus on the differentiated languages that these migrants would have been required to master to some extent, building up a linguistic baggage comprising complex amalgamations and occasionally confused overlappings of different parlances to be used in the different contexts in which they found themselves.

The most valuable text documenting the language skills of these Emilian workers is a booklet that was published to denounce one of America’s worst work disasters caused by an irresponsible mining company which had failed to ensure safe working conditions in its mine in Cherry, not far from Chicago. It was written by Antenore Quartaroli, a 23-year-old migrant miner from Boretto, a village near Gualtieri.² In his written condemnation of social ills the young Antenore suggests that

¹ Interview of December 24, 1993, in Gualtieri.

² On the places of origin of these migrants, see. Marco Fincardi, *La terra disincantata. Trasformazioni dell’ambiente rurale e secolarizzazione nella bassa padana* (Milan: Unicopli, 2001).

the mining disaster was caused by the ruthless speculation of the mining company and by the “colpa di qualche cuore di tigre” [guilt of some tiger heart]³ but does not go any further in his social criticism. His booklet, published by the *Spring Valley Gazette*, a newspaper sensitive to union-related issues raised by the miners, makes no reference to a miners’ union although it does not seem likely that there would not have been any union organizations around 1909 in a coal town not far from Chicago like Cherry. He describes how on the day of the disaster the miners were sent down into the mine even though the electrical lighting system in the shafts had failed. Although the fire caused by the kerosene torches took a while to spread, hours went by before the miners in the galleries were warned. In the early 20th century, the rules on safety at work were rarely adequately enforced and matters did not improve when the workers in question were recent European immigrants rather than Americans or permanent residents. Although the families of the 259 miners who lost their lives in the disaster struggled to get compensation, a year later the Illinois legislature passed laws on safety in mines.

The author begins by explaining that he has no literary pretensions, merely a moral intent:

“Il lettore scuserà il compositore di questo libro se trova qualche errore perché io sono che un semplice operaio e non un romanziere però assicuro che ho scritto solo la verità.”⁴

He may have been advised to include this justifying comment by someone who had read his handwritten account, deliberately leaving the grammatical errors so as to maintain its authentic feel. The verse included at the end of his account is full of mistakes and the printer merely worsened matters: “Con questo lasio / Il mio scritto / Scuserete degli cuori [for “errori” or mistakes] / Quartaroli Antenore e il mio nome [*sic!*].” Antenore realizes that his written Italian is rather poor and that his English was not much better. In fact, when addressing a supervisor, possibly the only local in the group, he admits that he has only a shaky grasp of the language, a “rotto inglese”(literally, “broken English”).⁵ His text is an evident mixture of written and spoken language that has long been of interest to historians studying migratory phenomena.⁶ This kind of hybridization combines Italian, his original dialect, and the various foreign languages to which he was exposed on overlapping migratory routes. The author, who came from the Po Valley, spoke a dialect that was quite unlike the dialects spoken by the majority of his workmates from the same region – mountain folk from the High Modena Apennines (Frignano) and Bolognese from the

³ *Grande Disastro della Mina di Cherry, Ills. 13 Novembre, 1909. Scritto da Quartaroli Antenore Uno dei Superstiti, Otto Giorni Sepolto vivo nella Mina*, (n.p. Cherry: Spring Valley Gazette, Ill. USA, 1910), 1.

⁴ *Grande Disastro*, 7.

⁵ *Grande Disastro*, 4.

⁶ Emilio Franzina, *Merica! Merica! Emigrazione e colonizzazione nelle lettere dei contadini veneti in America latina 1876-1902* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979).

Upper Valley of the Reno. It was easier for these Emilian migrant workers to understand each other by speaking a mixture of Italian and professional anglicisms than by using their respective dialects.

The multi-ethnic mine

On November 13, 1909, Quartaroli and many of his companions remained trapped for eight days with practically no means of survival in the galleries that were gradually filling up with a mixture of poisonous gases and at risk of imminent collapse. My interest in Quartaroli's writing does not concern the disaster but involves an analysis of the peculiarities of the vocabulary used to describe the mining environment. His Italian is also inaccurate because he either omits the accents or places them in words that do not require them. His use of language is particularly interesting because the mining terminology drawn upon italianized Anglo-Saxon terms that could easily be understood by Italians from other regions or even by immigrants of other nationalities. Despite his frequent use of distinctly dialectal expressions, Quartaroli wishes to use a language that will be understood by other Italian immigrants to the United States. He therefore uses English for a number of common mining terms, adapting the words by adding a final vowel according to the system used by Emilian children to translate the Celtic-Latin expressions used by their families and communities when they started going to school. This became a habitual linguistic practice among his Italian colleagues when they lived in francophone or anglophone environments. For example, Quartaroli often writes "timbro" when describing the wooden props used to support the galleries or wooden beams used in construction, and "rocco" to refer to rock; both are clearly adaptations of *timber* and *rock*. He basically creates neologisms, caring little that these words already existed in Italian with completely different meanings.

Similarly, from the title onwards, he refers to the mine as "mina", even though *mina* has a different meaning in Italian, linked to mining activities and military uses. Nor does he always describe the miners using the correct Italian term, on one occasion describing them as "i *mini* compagni più forti di mè."⁷ He uses several other words transposed from English with a different meaning in Italian. For example, he refers to both the point where galleries meet and the coal face where the miners cut the coal from the seam as "piazza", from *place!*; on one occasion he reveals its links to *workplace*, writing "passare tutte le piazze di lavoro."⁸ He refers to the *descending cage* as "Cag per discendere" as well as "elevatore."⁹ The entrances are "*entra*." It is not clear where he gets the term "cambio", which he uses to describe the sites where the tubs were loaded and unloaded, and where

⁷ *Grande Disastro*, 13.

⁸ *Grande Disastro*, 7.

⁹ *Grande Disastro*, 4, 30.

the teams wait to receive supplies. In any case, a simplified language was not only required for the workers of varying nationalities but would also have been required for the organization of work in the mines because of what has been described as “the changing ethnic composition of the American working population.”¹⁰

Describing the miners’ personal equipment he uses the expression “lampa”, from the English *lamp*, referring both to lanterns and the lights worn in their caps, whether carbide or oil-wick lamps. His term “picco” may come from the English *pickax* or *pick*; in this case there were similarities between the dialect word and the English term, because in Emilia this was a tool used by bricklayers and known as *pikk* or *pékk*. Quartaroli often mentions the “baracchino” that every miner took down into the pit, sometimes hanging on their arms, using it to hold drinking water; it also had a lid that could be used in an emergency to collect dirty water so as not to die of thirst. This object was a mess kit, a lightweight metal tin with a lid that could be used as dish, plate and cup, that was widely used in the army during the 19th century for soldiers’ rations. By the 20th century, it was commonly used by workers to consume frugal meals during breaks between shifts, beginning with inhospitable environment of the mines where labourers never left the galleries to eat during their breaks and had to live alongside mules and rats. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was called *gamèla* in Emilian dialect, or, as here, *barachìn da suldâ* (literally, soldier’s mess tin).¹¹ Mess tins were first used in Italy by the soldiers of the Kingdom of Sardinia and were known by the Piedmontese dialect term *barachìn* later adopted by workers in Turin and becoming diffused in the dialects of the Po Plain. Quartaroli calls the lunch pails used by the labourers “*bocchetta*”, from *bucket*. Referring to the action of changing the direction of the fan ventilating the galleries, he writes “hanno cambiato rivoluzione al ventilatoio,”¹² virtually copying a specific mechanical term used in English (*revolution*) while slightly distorting the name *ventilator*, a device that he would never have encountered in Italy and whose Italian name would have been unknown to him. Nevertheless, when he transcribes the message left by a French companion killed by asphyxiation, he writes the word “ventilatore”¹³ correctly, because it resembles the original French word *ventilateur*. The result is a slightly confused hybridization of the languages that these miners had learnt while working in different places around the world; hardly surprising among immigrant workers. Although he uses the correct English term when first mentioning the greatest danger threatening them – “*Black*

¹⁰ Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (June., 1973), 531-588 Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1847655> (Herbert G. Gutman, *Lavoro, cultura e società in America nel secolo dell'industrializzazione 1815-1919* [Bari: De Donato, 1979], 29).

¹¹ Angelo Guastalla, *Dal dialetto guastallese alla lingua nazionale* (Guastalla: Torelli, 1929), 32, 106.

¹² *Grande Disastro*, 4.

¹³ *Grande Disastro*, 32.

Damp,”¹⁴ a mixture of gases making the air impossible to breathe – he follows it with an incorrect translation in brackets (“aria ossigenata”), going on to use this term in the rest of the book.

Gestures and words of a composite worker group

This text gives us a glimpse of the communication and behavioral codes adopted by workers who require a pragmatic linguistic base facilitating the activities of dishomogeneous ethnic groups within industrial organizations. Quartaroli frequently draws upon Anglo-Saxon terms when describing situations encountered by the group of miners. When recalling how his team remained trapped in the smoke-filled galleries, he uses the word “imprigionamento”, from *imprisonment*. Describing the group he writes “eravamo agli estremi” and writing of himself, “ero agli estremi,”¹⁵ to indicate the *extreme* situation. And when he feels dizzy just before fainting, he uses anomalous Italian expressions comparing this sensation to an electric *shock*: “mi parve che qualche d’uno mi avesse dato un colpo di elettricità.”¹⁶ Describing the moment when they seem to have found a way to safety he says “noi tutti gioiosi” – apparently transposing *all glad*; another expression intended to transmit similar emotions was “si [ci] venne un raggio di contentezza,”¹⁷ which apparently expresses the concept of *beaming* in Italian. He describes how they gather together to work out a strategy to save themselves, using the words “ammucchiati tutti in un cerchio”¹⁸ from *to crowd around*.

When referring to the *foreman* or *ganger* in charge of the team, he uses the expression “caporale,” which was a military term used in the peonage system or in factories. Elsewhere there are echoes of the disciplined hierarchical linguistic register occasionally used in the American workplace, where a person does not simply reply no, but “rispondeva negativamente”, from *answer in the negative* or *reply in the negative*; when informing someone he writes “lo notificai di questo” from *to notify*.¹⁹ When he finally returns to the light of day, he is helped by numerous people who are careful not to give him nutritious foods after his 8-day fast. Adopting an almost joking tone with regard to American customs, he describes how someone brings him a *coffeepot* of unsweetened coffee, which he refers to as “un secchio di caffè.”²⁰

When reflecting on the tragedy, he merely refers to his fears that he will never see his wife and son again. He expresses no nostalgia for Boretto, maybe because such sentiments are not pertinent to the civic aims of his booklet, nor does he mention any memories of his past in Italy or as a worker

¹⁴ *Grande Disastro*, 5.

¹⁵ *Grande Disastro*, 16, 6.

¹⁶ *Grande Disastro*, 6.

¹⁷ *Grande Disastro*, 3, 5.

¹⁸ *Grande Disastro*, 5, 11.

¹⁹ *Grande Disastro*, 17.

²⁰ *Grande Disastro*, 31.

elsewhere in America or in some *Little Italy*. Reading between the lines, we get a picture of the growth of a great industrial nation yet there is no reference to competitiveness between workers from the European continent seeking to assert their national cultures. He does not emphasize or even touch upon expressions of patriotism by Italian workers or even by workers of other nationalities, because this is not relevant to his text. Religious language and human compassion for people who are suffering seem to be the only exceptions to his strictly professional register. Quartaroli takes pride in appearing as a well-integrated Italo-American worker, a new citizen of this country; a failure to do so might make his writing seem less convincing to the American public that he is addressing. His account leaves no room for imprecations or criticisms of American society. Quartaroli provides the spatial and temporal references concerning the mine according to the precise approach of the Anglo-Saxon system. He generally measures distances in meters but then pities his group trapped “nel profondo degli abissi a 315 piedi sotto terra.”²¹ He quantifies the little kerosene remaining for their lamps as just one gallon.²² He always mentions whether the hour of the day is antemeridian or postmeridian, according to the Anglo-Saxon custom. And when they need to know the time they ask the only man with an “orologio che camminava,”²³ which he translates as *watch to run*. Describing how the trapped men desperately wandered around in circles, he often mentions the depth levels and the numerical coordinates linked to the points of the compass serving as references in the labyrinth of mine shafts and galleries that were of vital importance to the miners underground and that would have been indicated on signs marking each intersection or turn in the galleries. Yet he misspells some of the cardinal directions, writing “*suot*” or “*sut*” or even “*sout*” instead of south and “*vest*” for west. Moreover, Quartaroli never uses the letter *w*, showing that he was entirely schooled in Italy and not in the United States. He misspells the names of a Scottish and an English workmate, writing *Valter* and *Villiam*, according to a consolidated practice in Emilia (still in use today) where newborns were increasingly christened with foreign names from the late 19th century onwards.²⁴ On a couple of occasions he refers to his friend Francesco Zanarini as *Franck*; it is unclear whether this “k” was already present in the manuscript or only in the printed version instead of the more common Italian spelling *Franco* that may have been misinterpreted by the American printer. He also refers to an English workmate as *Frenck*. He calls some workmates by Italian names, referring to a Scot as *Giorgio* and to a Frenchman as *Paolo*, while referring to two other Frenchmen by the surname “Howard”, probably derived from Huard and which they themselves may have adapted in order to get American citizenship or which may have been

²¹ *Grande Disastro*, 8.

²² *Grande Disastro*, 4.

²³ *Grande Disastro*, 14, 17.

²⁴ See Stefano Pivato, *Il nome e la storia. Onomastica e religioni politiche nell'Italia contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999).

anglicized by Quartaroli himself. Quartaroli does, however, reveal some basic knowledge of French: sometimes he uses “sortire” instead of the appropriate Italian verb “uscire”, a Frenchism that does not exist in his dialect or in English. It seems likely that he – or even his father – had previously emigrated to francophone areas such as Switzerland, France, Belgium or Quebec.

In Quartaroli’s writing we can also find traces of dialects of the Po Valley. In both the Emilian dialect and regional Italian, the sounds “s” and “sc” are pronounced in the same way and Quartaroli repeatedly writes “usita” instead of *uscita* (exit), “fasiare” instead of *fasciare* (to wrap), “sintille” instead of *scintille* (sparks). Other dialectal influences emerge when he writes, “la lampa sempre accesa l’aveva messa attacco a un timbro,”²⁵ instead of *attaccata a* (attached to) or “Infreschiamo”²⁶ instead of *rinfreschiamo* (we cool down). He repeatedly writes “l’aria era così pesa” instead of *pesante* (heavy) or “l’aria era più forte del solito” or even “l’aria era un po’ meglio.”²⁷ Describing the fainting spell of a companion from Modena, he transposes the dialect expression “gli era venuto male.”²⁸ When describing his own recovery from poisonous gas, he writes “rammucchiai tutte le mie forze,”²⁹ italianizing the dialect word “mucier” to express the Italian *raccogliere* (to gather [my strength]); however, later, when describing a similar situation he writes “ramacchiai [*sic!*] tutte le mie forze,”³⁰ a clear Frenchism from *ramasser*. He also writes “ora di desinare,”³¹ which is the dialect expression for lunchtime; however, in English the expression is *dinner* and in French the expression is also similar. Quartaroli occasionally uses expressions that may seem rather formal or even obsolete in 1910, given that popular semi-dialect writings may contain expressions of literary origins,³² deriving from songs or theatre in particular. However, most of his expressions are directly transposed from contemporary dialect when they are not anglicisms or frenchisms. He compensated for his inadequate Italian language skills by integrating and mixing his Italian with the languages acquired during repeated migrations.

When he puts speeches in the mouths of workers with the aim of stimulating a unified reaction in their multiethnic group, words like *fratelli* (brothers) or *compagni* (companions) are emphasized so as to underline their shared fate. In that piece of America trapped in a mine, the speeches written by Quartaroli or attributed to one of his companions seem to assume tones of religious rituality. If he were in a village in Emilia this type of emphasis would not have been necessary to arouse a shared emotion in a team of day laborers: at most they would have referred to the others as “ragazzi” in

²⁵ *Grande Disastro*, 2.

²⁶ *Grande Disastro*, 31-32.

²⁷ *Grande Disastro*, 3.

²⁸ *Grande Disastro*, 28.

²⁹ *Grande Disastro*, 6.

³⁰ *Grande Disastro*, 19.

³¹ *Grande Disastro*, 1,7.

³² E. Franzina, *Merica! Merica! Emigrazione e colonizzazione nelle lettere dei contadini veneti e friulani in America latina (1876-1902)*, (Milano : Feltrinelli, 1979), 38.

order to build a team spirit. The group leader, an English Presbyterian, sometimes addressed the others using religious incitements, calling them *compagni* or occasionally *fratelli* and receiving very respectful responses from them, as on the Sunday when “incomincio [incominciò] una preghiera in Americano che tutti noi l’accompagnammo.”³³ The author attaches great importance to describing the existence of a kind of evangelical brotherhood with his companions. In fact, he deliberately evokes this evangelical work ethic in order to show that he is entirely in agreement with the American culture, demanding equal compensation for the families of the victims and safety for all miners. The Protestant revivalism running through popular cultures in North America³⁴ were not that distant from the tendencies and sensibilities present in the Po Valley day-labourers' and farmworkers' movements.³⁵

What emerges strongly from Quartaroli’s account of the desperate situation of the miners who survived the disaster is the strong sense of solidarity that existed in a group of men where only one or two were born in the United States and all the rest were foreign – Italian, French, English, Slavs, Germans (referred to as “germani” by the author who again transposes the English) as well as a Scot and an Austrian. His compassionate account of an elderly asthmatic miner describes him as *slavis*,³⁶ an ambiguous deformation of the English *slavic* while *slavish* is the negative American expression attributing a servile character to those populations according to the common European use. However, no ethnic prejudices emerge from Quartaroli’s account. He numbers some of the Modenese mountain folk among his close friends but is also proud to consider the Scotsman as “un mio amico”; he has marked feelings of empathy towards the companions struggling the most: he helps the French and the Slavs while the Anglo-Saxons come to his help on a couple of occasions when he is about to collapse from gas intoxication. The improvised collective that comes together as a closely-knit team in adversity exemplifies the image of melting pot, which always ends up by revealing a typically working-class community spirit. No contrasting groups emerge in the mine. The mixture of established or recent immigrants who all come from different countries but are joined by shared interests reduces ethnic competition to a minimum. The only person who seems out of place among these Europeans who have come to Pennsylvania in search of their fortune is George Eddy, the American “caporale di notte” (night pit boss). Quartaroli’s booklet leaves no room for nationalist claims that would divide the group: these miners of various nationalities are presented like a choir that is tragic yet supportive, a quality that will ensure their survival.

³³ *Grande Disastro*, 12.

³⁴ See. Herbert G. Gutman, *Lavoro, cultura e società in America* (Bari, De Donato, 1979), 89-120.

³⁵ See. Marco Fincardi, “De la crise du conformisme religieux au XIX^e siècle. Les conversions au protestantisme dans une zone de la plaine du Pô”, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 102 (1998): 5-27.

³⁶ *Grande Disastro*, 15.