

## **An Italian (American) among the cyborgs**

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I've been thinking about Uncle Tony lately. I last saw him sitting in front of a sickly green TV screen—he wouldn't get it fixed—watching the home-shopping channel. The eighth of nine children of Italian immigrants, he was my mother's older brother. Uncle Tony was a strange man, dark, reclusive, agoraphobic, I suppose. He boxed as a kid, was a tough guy into middle age. He fought in bars, lost a few teeth, butted heads with bosses. He installed neon signs for a living, the big ones, the ones you used to see sixty feet above factory roofs in towns across the Midwest, places where the Ford plant, the refinery, the steel mill were as important in the life of a town as the mall is today. He was proud that he didn't fear heights, my Uncle Tony, and moonlighted installing TV antennas. The broadcast media was truly broadcast in those benighted years, the fifties and sixties. With the help of a seventy-foot tower, erected at the side of every house by fearless and foolish men like my Uncle Tony, we could pull in three faint stations, depending on the weather. One day, just after his forty-fifth birthday, he walked off a job and never worked again. I'll tell you more about Uncle Tony later. How I came to be thinking about him and the power he continues to hold over me, though he's been gone ten years, is the real subject of this essay.

A short while ago I wrote an article arguing that the emperor of computing is not so resplendently clothed as is usually imagined. My little article began life in protest to a course that I, as a new professor of computer science, had been forced to teach. This course was driver's education for prospective owners of microcomputers. I am sorry to

report that the problem of offering college credit to master a consumer product is not confined to my university. You'll find courses like the one I taught in universities everywhere. All of us press-ganged to teach such courses follow the same script. We do a quick run-through of hardware components and then proceed to initiate students into the mysteries of Microsoft products. After teaching this course for two years, because I was the low guy in my department and so unable to push it off onto a more junior someone else, I did what all academics do. I wrote a conference paper. I argued that computer literacy courses are a direct subsidy to the computer industry. What is more, they neither require professors with advanced degrees to teach them, nor do they belong in university course catalogs. I knew I wasn't exactly pushing the frontiers of knowledge forward. Still, I thought I had made a good argument. The stupidity of offering college credit to students who master the material in what amounts to an expensive infomercial seemed self-evident to me. I had labored in graduate school for six years and was rewarded by being cast as an appliance salesman to a roomful of bored twenty-year olds. My colleagues in computer science did not see it that way. The paper was rejected—somewhat nastily, I might add. I responded to the criticisms and resubmitted the paper to the same conference the following year. It was rejected again.

Though by nature a cheerful sort and as confident as the next guy, two consecutive rejections had begun to chip away at my self-esteem. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe offering students three credit hours to master Microsoft Office was not the crime against nature that I had imagined. In the great cafeteria of university offerings, who is to say that the study of astronomy, or linear algebra, or the historical novel, or French is any more worthy of student attention than mastery of Windows? This is how matters stood

when a former student, now editor of the campus journal of fiction and critical writing, asked me if I might like to submit an article. Wanting to be a good academic citizen—an unsung task of the professoriate—and having my spurned paper lying about unused, I agreed. Changing course a bit, I removed the academic dressing--the citations, the hedging, the passive voice. Next I inserted myself into the article and widened the condemnation from courses like the one under whose weight I had been groaning, to microcomputers in general. I was astonished at the response. A day after the journal appeared, professors and students from across the grassy quadrangle that separates the sciences from the humanities shook my hand, left messages on my voice mail, greeted me as a friend. At first I thought they were simply surprised that a computer scientist could write a coherent essay. But no, it was that I had dismissed the so-called information revolution as so much corporate welfare.

I began to think that I had hit upon something. It was as if I had touched a pressure point, some nerve in your average history professor that recoils at the prospect of sending more treasure off to Microsoft. Everyone, it seems, whose livelihood does not rest on the health of the computer industry resents it but is afraid to say so. God knows, the industry has given us reason enough. Billed as Lone Rangers in silicon, saviors of our precious time, bountiful fountains of information for knowledge-hungry children, our computers stare blankly from their corners in basements and dens. We each carry another two thousand dollars or so in credit card debt, and we're still pressed for time. Our adolescents continue to be as stridently anti-intellectual as Visigoths at the Roman gates, and the future looks no closer to a future than any reasonable person would want than it did before Bill Gates hauled in our part of the American dream.

I was pleased by the response, especially after two years of exile at the hands of my colleagues in computer science. Emboldened, I expanded the article and submitted it to a quarterly known for its elegant essays. Microsoft Office, I am sorry to say, is not the stuff of great, or even minor, literature (though the novel of software development—the money, the greed, the pathos, the disappointment, the heroic hours, the broken marriages, the stuff of life—has yet to be written). Still, the article was accepted, and I was a surprised and happy man.

Accustomed to sending my writing to the great black hole of academic journals, I was astonished when, shortly after the article appeared, I began to hear from readers. How I came to criticize the computer industry seemed to arouse some curiosity. I am, after all, a professor of computer science. I prosper with the industry. That I was, in essence, biting the hand that feeds, clothes, and houses my family, seemed to lend a touch of the heroic to my case. I began to wonder too. What reasonable person, whose fortunes in this life have risen with every upward tick in computer industry profits, would complain about the very source of his wellbeing?

This is where the spirit of Uncle Tony reenters the story. I can still remember the night, now more than three decades ago, when I told my father that I had decided to become a professor of English. He had sent me off to college the year before, slide rule in hand, to study engineering. Italian-Americans value many things deeply, passionately, with their hearts and souls. Study for its own sake is not one of them. To paraphrase an historian of Italian immigration, my grandparents soon learned that the streets of New York were not paved with gold. In fact, they weren't paved at all, and the newly arrived

*contadini* were expected to pave them. The obvious corollary is that their grandchildren were not expected to make a career of reading Henry James either.

As it happens, my life as a literary scholar was not to be. Shortly after I entered graduate school, the academic job market dried up. Though this was wrenching for me at the time, my extended family saw it as a chance to reel in my free-floating career aspirations, borne, in their view, of some odd confusion between myself and the ungrateful suburban kids who were making headlines for my university, Berkeley, in the sixties and seventies. Lucky for me, the computer industry was about to blast off to stratospheric heights through the development of the microprocessor. I learned, to my father's delight, that it would pay good money to people with an aptitude for mathematics—and would be willing to overlook the years I spent pretending that my family had not arrived on these golden shores in steerage.

Now, twenty years later, the computer industry has continued to prosper, the current glitch notwithstanding, and a few golden crumbs have even found their way to my little university in the interior Northwest. A short while ago I was tenured and promoted. My wife and I promptly did what all Americans do when their incomes rise: we bid on a larger house with yet more bathrooms. Then something quite un-American happened. As soon as our offer on the new house had been accepted and the For Sale sign placed in our front yard, I was visited by a case of screaming 4 A.M. anxieties. This was not buyer's remorse, worry about a roof leak, the neighborhood school, the size of the mortgage. I knew what that felt like. This was madness incarnate. Day after day I was plagued with anxiety, fear, guilt, remorse. Demons whispered in my ear by night. I did my own whispering by day. The university could fail. I could be afflicted with an

incurable illness. I was abandoning our neighbors. I had reached above my station. Day after tortured day I ruminated, until, one afternoon, working at home in our house that had, curiously, come to seem extraordinarily beautiful to me, I received a letter from my mother. In the envelope was a small green sheet of paper with these words:

*“Chi sta bene non si muova.”*

And the translation:

“If you are well where you are, don’t move.”

Like St. Paul on his horse, Newton under his tree, Archimedes in his tub, I understood. I was well into middle age. I had a preteen daughter, a mortgage, two dogs and as many cars. I was old enough to have passed into and out of two careers, and I had not understood something fundamental to my character until this moment. My anguish, my guilt, my garden variety buyer’s remorse cranked up about ten notches was due to the *mal occhio*, the evil eye, the presence that had haunted every change I had made since youth. My ostentation, my grasping after things better left to my social superiors had aroused the envy of my friends and colleagues. Though I might move, I would live in terror.

The evil eye is found in agrarian societies throughout the world. Its job is to ensure social stability. If a peasant begins to acquire more--more land, more animals, more stuff--through ability, hard work, good luck, his rise threatens the equilibrium of the village. His neighbors eye him enviously and, so it is said, the suffering of Job will be his own. His crops wither, his animals sicken, his children conspire against him. Impotence disrupts his marriage, which is just as well since boils cover his body.

I now remembered why my parents never left the parish they were born into, even after my father's business prospered. I remembered, then, my Uncle Tony. By comparison my father, who continued to fear the *mal occhio* sixty years after his father had arrived in New York, was the very emblem of assimilation. He owned not one but two cars, built a good business, owned an automobile racing team, yet was nearly seventy before he left the neighborhood where he was born.

Uncle Tony was another species altogether. He and some of my older aunts and uncles belong to what urban planners sometimes refer to as remnant populations. The clock stopped for them in the thirties, a time when men wore hats and work meant the steel mill or locomotive works, a time when America was a poorer but more certain place. With a sense of relief that only those who have known the profound anxiety that accompanies change can understand, I backed out of the sales agreement. As I began to see my old house in a new way, the golden morning light, the wainscoted parlor, the perennial garden that graces my summer evenings, I found Uncle Tony in my thoughts more and more frequently.

I once spent an afternoon trying to convince him to let me mount a light over the kitchen stove so that my aunt could actually see what she was cooking. "Pop didn't need it," he told me, a mantra he often invoked to hold back change and, I now understood, ward off the *mal occhio*. Tony, though only two years older than my father, never learned to drive a car. Pop—my grandfather—couldn't drive one either. As neighbor after neighbor died or moved in with their suburban children, Uncle Tony and his older sister, Aunt Levia, remained in the house where they were born, and where I lived as a boy with my sister and parents and grandfather. The locomotive works up the street shut

down with the death of the steam engine. The cigar stores, combination card rooms and pool halls, serving a clientele of railroaders and factory workers, and owned by the Gallos, the Ciminillos, the De Palmas, went with it. A Good Will store went up not six inches from the south side of our wraparound porch, a result of poor planning on my grandfather's part who apparently believed that because nothing ever changed in Fossalto, his village in Molise, the lot next door would be forever vacant. The several lots to the north became commercial scrap yards. At the time of Uncle Tony's death ten years ago, not a single house was occupied in the once-thriving commercial block, except, of course, the meticulously kept frame house that he and Aunt Levia inherited from their father.

This is a profound conservatism, this refusal to adapt to the creative destruction of American capitalism. Southern Italians of my parents' and grandparents' generation had been recruited to work in the steel mills, the locomotive works, the automobile plants of northern Ohio and western Pennsylvania. Ironically, maybe even tragically, they brought with them enough peasant fatalism to last into my generation. Here, I finally realized, was the locus of my antipathy toward microcomputers. I was drawn to the computer industry for the same kind of no-nonsense reasons that led my father to spurn the GI Bill and build a commercial electronics business a generation earlier. It was a growing industry, there was money to be made, I had a family to support, and the professional study of literature seemed deeply ridiculous for a man whose family was brought to America to pave her streets and fabricate her steel. What I had not realized when I began taking courses in computer science twenty years ago was that what made the computer industry attractive to me—its growth, its opportunity for steady employment—implies

change. The steel and the roads that the *contadini* had built became the infrastructure for a capitalism that undermined the stability of European ethnic neighborhoods in the older American cities. In exactly the same way, the computer systems that I had built for a decade, and that I was now training students to build, were contributing to the centrifugal destruction of American cities, possibly the only agglomerations of people anywhere in the world without centers. When you can bank by phone, order your winter coat from L.L. Bean, use a credit card issued by a bank in Delaware, who needs to live near anything? Cities can spin off hollow versions of themselves and the result, after three decades of nearly unplanned development, is the facelessness of Southern California imprinted on every population center—you can hardly call them cities—in the country. Like my father and grandfather before me, I had helped create the conditions of a life that I feared most, a life where the future is not like the past.

I began to think about the peasants whose conservatism I had inherited just as surely as I had inherited black hair and brown eyes. I like to think of myself as a modern man, a cultural materialist. It seems reasonable to suppose that cultural practices are useful in the context where they develop. The anthropologist, Marvin Harris, argues that the kosher injunction against pork has its origin in the environmental circumstances of Biblical nomads. Pigs are creatures of the forest and require water and shade, items rare in the Middle East. A swine-keeper in the desert diverts precious resources from community use. A reasonable social policy would discourage swine-keepers. Now, what about those who keep kosher in the United States, a place of abundant water (even, in the Nevada desert where, I'm told, the poor dammed Colorado River permits farmers to build cranberry bogs)? Is kosher maladaptive? From a narrow perspective, it is. Religious

Jews across the country are deprived of the pleasure of ham for reasons that no longer hold. On the other hand, keeping kosher continues to promote group solidarity, which, judging from the tenacity with which ethnic minorities cling to their customs, must be a good thing.

We Americans have been living with the most vigorous capitalism on the planet for a long time now. It's hard for us to imagine that what we value so highly--individual accumulation of wealth, permeable class barriers, enshrined self-expression--are muted in other capitalist societies and non-existent elsewhere. Suppose, instead, that social arrangements are as they have been for generations, that God is in his heaven, the Duke is on the hill (something that one of my other uncles, Uncle Nick, actually recalls), and I farm my plot just as my father and grandfather did. It should not be surprising to find cultural practices, the *mal occhio*, for example, that reward conservative behavior and punish self-aggrandizement.

We could use a strong dose of that kind of conservatism here. We would have a richer community life in this country if more people erred in Uncle Tony's direction instead of, to paraphrase Huck Finn, lighting out for the territories whenever things get tough here or seem more desirable there. Unfortunately for Uncle Tony, his way is not the way things are done in the land of the free. The "early bird gets the worm," we learn from birth, along with "he who hesitates is lost." These are the proverbs of a nation of salesmen. Uncle Tony is an extreme case, but should I be surprised that he dropped out of the labor force at forty-five and, except for a monthly haircut and regular trips to Sullivan's bar, never left his house again?

I am in the curious position of being the most American of Americans with the cultural baggage of the *mezzogiorno*. I am a post-war baby. I was an anti-war activist in college. I was a student at Berkeley, lived in San Francisco among bohemians and leftists. In 1980, as if responding to the imperatives of a biological and cultural clock, I threw off the things of a child, went to work for an East Coast consulting firm and became an urban pioneer in an gentrifying Philadelphia neighborhood. Later, as the Reagan years wound down, I moved to the Northwest when Seattle was the hottest city in the U.S. and much of my generation was puzzling over the drippy eeriness of *Twin Peaks*. Meanwhile, Uncle Tony remained in the neighborhood of my birth, within walking distance of the now vacant locomotive works, of the abandoned steel mill, of the grammar school we all attended, now closed, of the grand Romanesque church, St. John the Evangelist, built by immigrant labor, not yet down, but on wobbly legs. It is testimony to the generosity of my Uncle Tony that he did not regard me as a creature from another planet. As I was crisscrossing the country, studying utterly foreign and utterly ridiculous things, my Uncle Tony and Aunt Levia, my Uncle Nick and Aunt Julie never drove a car, regarded a trip to the shopping mall, which had replaced downtown, as a visit to a foreign land, continued to attend mass at St. John's.

I started this essay with Uncle Tony, and it is with him that I end. Uncle Tony, when he climbed down from his last big neon sign, when he walked into the back door of my grandfather's house at forty-five, never to leave the neighborhood again, was expressing in his own way—mad, to be sure—a profound unease with a world where all that is familiar dissolves into air. Nearly four decades later, my thoughts on the computer industry, spring from the same source—the peasantry of southern Italy. And, for the first

time, I find a silver lining in this maladaptive cloud. I am told that there are farms within sight of central Dusseldorf, one of the world's richest cities. In Siena, cars have been banned since the sixties. The result is that the Sieneese of all ages stroll their stone streets each evening, gelato in hand, chatting, gossiping, laughing, doing those things that urban dwellers have done since humans first gathered in cities three thousand years ago. Italians even have name for this evening walk, *La Passegiata*. In my own hometown, by contrast, the downtown is vacant, the streets empty day and night, except for the ceaseless drone of traffic.

My parents finally overcame the inertial tug of the *mal occhio* and left the parish of St. John about ten years ago. They now live in a suburb where not only are there no front porches, there are no sidewalks either. Life turns its back on public places in America. As well it should, since they have been given over to cars. And, because there is nowhere to walk to, no one walks anywhere. My parents don't even walk to Church, not two hundred yards from their back door. Doing so would require that they maneuver a busy thoroughfare, built without provision for pedestrians. The garages in my parents' neighborhood front on the street, each with an adjacent small door, giving the impression that the two cars who live there keep domestics.

I have a colleague, an Italian, who teaches modern languages at my university. She says that she often thinks, as she gardens on sunny May afternoons, that no one lives in America, that our grand houses, our exquisite plumbing were put in place by a race of aliens, now long gone. The neighborhoods would be as mysterious to an outsider as Copan or Palenque had the aliens not provided for their lawns with such care. One of the truly weird sights these days is the arrival, in suburban neighborhoods across the land, of

the lawn service workers. They jump from their truck, armed with weed whackers and bug sprayers, like a SWAT team, rescuing hostages. For fifteen crazed minutes, the sound of their battle against insects and all vegetation not purchased at a garden supply rings through the streets. Then they depart--as quickly as they arrived. The otherworldly green of the grass, now dotted with little flags to warn away children, is the only evidence of their battle.

Think again of Siena, of the strolling grandmothers, of the espresso bars and gelato stands. It is asking too much, I hear you say, for the suburbs of a played-out industrial town to have the conviviality of a city that has had eight hundred years to polish its edges. But that is exactly my point. It is as hard to imagine an America eight hundred years from now as it is to imagine an America in eighty years. Siena is what it is because there, and in most of Europe, every fast talker with a pocket full of cash and access to a bulldozer is not permitted to throw up a strip mall and a subdivision wherever he pleases. Nor is he permitted to shout down all objections with the sacred cry of property rights. If Siena is too far away, imagine my town--or yours--before the freeways, the strip malls, the convenience stores. Life in my neighborhood two generations ago, life in the shadow of steel mills and oil refineries, more closely resembled Siena than it does my parents' suburb. Neighbors visited on summer evenings. Women shopped at neighborhood stores and made an occasional streetcar excursion downtown. Men walked to work, children to school. Everyone walked to St. John the Evangelist on Sunday mornings. This is the neighborhood that Uncle Tony never left, though, sadly, it left him.

Uncle Tony, in front of his green TV, the worst kind of urban chaos just outside his front door, has become for me a standard bearer from another time. Here was a man who never used a cell phone, flew in a plane, checked out a Web site. Here was a man who died in the same room where he was born. Here was a man who suffered a deep, a profound cultural dislocation, though wrapped in his unhappiness was a pearl. It applies equally to neighborhoods *and* computers:

*Chi sta bene non si muova*

If you are well where you are do not move.