



Camille Paglia: A Crown Jewel of Italian Americana Languishes in the Shadow of the Sopranos

Tom Verso (May 17, 2009)



An Italian American tragedy - a 'low-brow' culture that can't read Paglia because of low education levels. She doesn't write books for the beach.

Camille Paglia first penetrated my consciousness through a televised panel discussion about various women's social, work and political issues. I soon became bored with the din of politically correct clichés. I began puttering around barely conscious of the television background noise.

Suddenly, I became aware of a hyper energetic voice speaking with such rapidity, for a second, I



thought of my Army automatic weapons training. I stopped what I was doing and turned to the television: “who is that lady?” It wasn’t simply her fast-talking that interested me. Rather, the ideas were coming to her with such rapidity it seemed that her mouth couldn’t keep up with her mind. She was ranging over a 4,000 year history of Western art and culture pulling up anecdotes and analogies to illustrate her points, with a few dollops from Asia.

Her recursive parenthetical phasing was incredible. She would start with a subject, then a parenthetical phase to the subject, then a second parenthetical phase to the first, and so on. I swear she had sentences four or five parentheticals deep and then she would work herself back to the subject. What an incredibly spontaneous mind!

Then they flashed her name on the screen “Paglia”; and I started to laugh. An Italian - wouldn’t you know? Passion and art are as much apart of Italian culture as salt and pepper are to food...” Later that day I was in the library looking for her books.

Camille Paglia is 100% Italian by nature and nurture. Her mother was from Ceccanon, Italy and her father of Italian descent. She dedicated her first book (“Sexual Personae”) to her grandmothers and



aunt: Vincenz Colapietro, Alfonsina Paglia and Lenora Antonelli. Unlike John Ciardi who took great offense when called an Italian American poet, Paglia is very conscious and proud of her Italian heritage. She often refers to her Italianess. For example, in her 1991 M.I.T. lecture she referred to her Italianess four times. In a 1995 Charlie Rose interview, her explanation of why she was fired from Bennington College: "I'm Italian and don't do well in institutions

Although Paglia's mother was an immigrant, Camille was born in 1947, which places her solidly in the demographic cohort "baby boomers" and, the subset of that cohort, 3rd generation Italian Americans, i.e. the grandchildren of the pre-WW I immigrants. The 2nd generation did not pass on the Italian language, history and little of the culture (save nuances such as family dinners) to their children, with one very significant exception - the concept of womanhood. The girls of the 3rd generation were raised with the ancient Catholic values of their southern Italian ancestors. Specifically, no sex before marriage, no artificial birth control after marriage, and homosexuality? - Oh my god! Don't even think about it!

Virtually all of Paglia's life and professional writing stand against these ancient feminine sexual mores. For example, the lesbian component of her bisexuality manifested itself early in life. During the summers, she went to a Catholic camp that she c

haracterized as " a prelesbian heaven. It was just so romantic. I had mad crushes on all the counselors." While in high school, she began in depth research on Amelia Earhart and read Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex". Thus, by the time she entered college in 1964 she was well disposed to deal with sexuality. She had the will and extraordinary intellect to channel that disposition into tour de force scholarship.

She entered college at a time when Italian/Catholic sexual values were to become severely challenged by society. The 1960s saw the onset of major movements for social change: civil rights for Black Folks, women's liberation, sexual freedom, academic freedom, etc. Many of those issues have been largely resolved or are in their denouement. African Americans have attained de jure all the rights they were denied in the Jim Crow era through the 1950s; similarly women. Although, for both groups there is de facto still significant "miles to go before we sleep". Nevertheless, the trajectory of change is in a positive direction and the mass protests and great polarizing debates have largely passed.



However, there is one factor of social change that began in the sixties that is still the basis of significant conflict – sexuality. Issues having to do with abortion, various gay related issues (marriage, military), contraception, etc. are still heatedly debated and cause of public protestations. For example, recent articles here in i-Italy.org have been very critical of Catholic theological principles and teachings having to do with sex related issues (e.g. the celebration of the virulent anti-Catholic Sabina Guzzanti).

Paglia has made major contribution to these discussions and debates. However, she is

differentiated from the protesting masses by her scholarship. She's not "just another pretty face" walking a picket line. An "ubermensch" (a la Nietzsche: one who overcomes the herd perspective and creates a new world view), she is a giant intellectual with an unbounded passion for philosophy, art and history. The combination of these passions (rights of women, philosophy, art and history) makes for prodigious intellectual output.

Most amazing to me, is the unique combination of 'breadth' and 'depth' of her scholarship. She covers the history of Western Art from ancient Egypt down to Madonna. However, she doesn't simply write in sweeping generalizations about this or that period such as one reads in many art histories. Paglia is more than an art historian. She is a philosopher. She writes: "Sexual Personae seeks to demonstrate the unity and continuity of western culture..." In an effort to find that philosophic unity, she delves into the minutia of individual works. For example in her discussion of Renaissance art she draws the reader's attention to a 'feather' on the boot of Donatello's David: "The feathery wing of Goliath's helmet...like an escaping thought, climbs ticklishly up the inside of David's thigh."



Sadly, all the philosophical and aesthetic works of Camille Paglia, a very proud to be of Italian descent American, are of little value to the vast majority of the Italian Americans. All her genius and energy can make no contribution to the development of Italian American culture because, frankly, she is too intellectual for our people. Intellectual! Not intelligent! She is not too intelligent for our people. We have the intelligence, but we chose not to apply it to higher education – especially in the humanities. That, to my mind, is our tragedy. Italian culture is in essence humanistic and we essentially reject our culture – indeed, our Being.

All cultures are a mix of 'high and low brow'. "Highbrow" understood as being intellectual, "Lowbrow" as un- or even anti-intellectual. Robust cultures, are a healthy mixture of high and lowbrow. Early 20th century Jews manifested genius in the sciences and in Vaudeville 'shtick'. However, the low levels of Italian Americans going to college are reducing our culture to a disproportionate lowbrow. We don't, indeed can't, read intellectually challenging Italian American writers like Camille Paglia (or Fante or Ciardi or DeLillo, etc). Instead we anxiously await the next Scorsese movie or Sopranos season. Ideally, we would do both: read Paglia, and enjoy the Italian Vaudeville of Scorsese and the Sopranos.

Paglia eloquently expressed this ideal on a Charlie Rose show. She said, "I'm Italian, I'm a working class intellectual." Similarly, she tells her students: "I'm a product of the Italian culture and in the Italian cultural tradition...there are great artist. If you are a product of Italian culture you respect that artistic tradition...Art is not elitist in Italian culture; a peasant in the field of Italy knows the great artist, operas, tenors, etc. in Italian history."

Tragically, Camille Paglia a teacher, philosopher, social reformer is an Italian American Hecuba who languishes alone in Italian America - unknown and unknowable to her people.



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