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**Building the West
Literary agents as Italian and American Cold War players**

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Literary Agents as relevant Cold War Players

In the second half of the 20th century the United States of America influenced European societies through the peaceful and seductive weapon of mass consumption: through books, films, cartoons and music, and via new marketing techniques, new lifestyles and new desires were fostered (De Grazia 2005; Banti 2017).

In creating those desires and those lifestyles, much as an imaginary and a perception of common realities between Europe and USA, literary agencies – I argue – had its part.

During the period following World War II, the United States focused on fostering a precise cultural framework to contain Soviet expansion in Western European countries. Promoting American views in those countries through books was a strategic choice aimed at the dissemination of democratic principles and, surreptitiously, at the adherence to the American system of values and power. The intention was to reach intellectuals through translated literature so they would become mouthpieces for democratic principles and market economy (Meyer 2001).

The task here, to uncover the relationship between US literary agencies and, eventually, US government agencies within European translation and publishing practice during the Cold War,

extends a research project I published in 2019 under the title: *Cacciatori di libri. Gli agenti letterari durante il fascismo (Book Hunters. Literary Agents under Fascism)*. In the past two years, whilst working on the history of the highbrow Italian publishing house Adelphi, I have explored the archival post-World War II correspondence of Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale (ALI), stored at the Mondadori Foundation in Milan, which illustrates his extensive relationship with US publishing. In New York I have been able to consult US literary agents' archives to begin to sift the evidence of their role in transatlantic dissemination.

My main research objective is the qualitative analysis of available data and documents in order to establish how some of the most prominent American and Italian literary agencies developed editorial and trade strategies. I evaluate the impact of these practices on the Italian cultural context and explore the extent to which this contributed to a political and ideological construction of a shared ideology and cultural practice of the "West". I also consider the reverse impact to account for the influence that working relationships between US and Italian publishing had on the US context. European societies, although prostrated by the dramatic consequences of World War II, were certainly not empty and passive vessels: on the contrary, as recent studies have shown, European and, more specifically, Italian literary and artistic networks have been more influential on American culture than has hitherto been recognized (Iuli, Morello 2024).

This is a work in progress, and some of the terms and ideas may shift. The concept of "the West", for instance, is contentious. As our fellow Jeremy Brotton put it: «there is no continuous geographical place called 'the West'. Like all the other cardinal directions, it simply does not exist as a universally accepted location. So how has the West taken on such a defining political identity, and has it triumphed? [...] the notion of the 'West' as a concrete reality has become firmly fixed in the global imagination, whether as a 'westerner' you live within and endorse it or you live outside and criticize it» (Brotton 2024).

Italy occupied a strategic place in the Cold War political context: the so-called iron curtain passed through Trieste, whilst the significance of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) demonstrates

Italy's ideological as well as geographical proximity to the USSR. The Italian Communists were the main Communist party in the West (Pons 2021). At the same time, Italy played a significant role in the dissemination of literary ideas as the seat of one of the most prominent literary agencies in Europe – the Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale. The ALI had strong ties with literary agents and publishers in the United States of America, especially in New York, and was responsible for significant US translation and publishing projects in Italy. Moreover, the market of Italian and European literary agencies also expanded from the 1950s onwards. As an indication of the scale of the material disseminated in this way, in the 1970s, about eight out of every ten titles negotiated via ALI were imported, and a significant part of them came from the United States. Between 1951-1983, ALI was led by Erich Linder, regarded as *the dominus*, or monopolist of the Italian publishing field. He had been a communist in his youth, but after WWII grew closer to the Republican Party, which had an openly pro-Atlantist stand in international politics (Biagi 2007).

There are some questions to address here in order to better understand the role of the ALI and the US literary agencies in disseminating soft power influence in the West through publishing: which major US literary agents did Erich Linder work with? What type of editorial mediation did American agents and ALI carry on over time? Did the mediation draw exclusively on mainstream culture, or was it also attentive to the emerging counterculture that greatly influenced Italian publishers and readers in the season of the long 1968?

It was the Eisenhower administration that precipitated the involvement of the US government in the publishing field as soft power diplomacy. In 1953 the United States Information Agency (USIA) was established. USIA was a United States government agency dedicated to the practice of public diplomacy, which operated from 1953 to 1999. It explained and supported American foreign policy and promoted US national interests through a wide range of overseas information, cultural and educational programs, with oversight of national libraries and publishing abroad (Spence Richards 2001). All the more reason, therefore, to understand and assess how closely these government bodies worked with private US literary agencies or how direct the state influence on them was.

Historiography and Sources

My approach is grounded in contemporary history and publishing history, combining elements from cultural history and translation studies. In research on translation and *transfer* — which represent a growing interest in the study of transnational literature since the 1990s (Lefevere 1992; Venuti 1998; Espagne 1999) — the role of the translations and literary agents as cultural mediators has been overlooked, as Pascale Casanova (2002) and Robert Darnton (2007) pointed out.

James Hepburn's incisive 1968 essay, *The Author's Empty Purse and the Rise of the Literary Agent*, directed the attention of the academic community towards literary agents for the first time, tracing guidelines for research on the subject, but failing to include any detailed analysis. It was 40 years later that Mary Ann Gillies picked up where the discourse left off, when her archival research methodically examined how the two British pioneers of the profession, Watt and Pinker, worked, demonstrating how they influenced both the careers of their clients and literary culture as a whole. More recently, Cécile Cottenet's 2017 book *Literary Agents in the Transatlantic Book Trade* focused on Paris Agence Hoffman's buying and selling of French translation rights to American novels between 1944 and 1955. Laurence Cossu-Beaumont's study published in 2023 on *William et Jenny Bradley passeurs culturels transatlantiques* also falls along the same lines, suggesting that research into literary agents has become of crucial interest, in the evaluation of a broader context of an interconnected history of culture.

The Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library stores rich archival materials of publishers and literary agents who were somehow in touch with Linder and the Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale during the 1950s and 1970s: Curtis Brown Ltd. records, 1914-2018; Georges Borchardt Inc. records, 1951-2019; Ronald Hobbs Literary Agency records, 1964- 1992; Paul Reynold papers, 1899-1980; Society of Authors' Representatives records, 1939-1991. Other valuable archives include the records of the United States Information Agency at the National Archives,

College Park (Archives II). These will be consulted to assess potential connections between private literary agencies and American political and diplomatic institutions.

Such rich archives, mostly untouched by scholars, provides the starting point to assess the role of literary agents in the second half of the 20th century. The massive amount of documentary sources that these subjects have produced which are particularly rich for the 1960s and 1970s , would be a useful work basis for investigating the networks of knowledge production and the cultural circuits during the Cold War and the construction of a so-called Western imaginary, which also in Italy was strongly linked to the United States and to the transatlantic routes of cultural agents.

The Age of the Middlemen. The birth of the Literary Agent in 19th century Europe

Erich Linder, a polyglot Jewish immigrant born in Lviv in 1924, shaped the role of literary agents as professionals in Italy after the Second World War, «modelling [them] on foreign agents» ¹. In Linder's model, literary agents became both representatives of Italian writers abroad as well as overseeing Italian access to foreign ones. The origins of the profession, however, date back to late 19th-century Europe and Italy. Augusto Foà 'imported' the profession of literary agent from England founding ALI in 1898, just as industrialization had begun to revolutionize the way in which Italian publishing houses operated (Forgacs 1990). Erich Linder was the Foà heir and he officially joined ALI in 1946.

The model of the professional literary agent was shaped in Great Britain. The forerunners of modern-day literary agencies, known as “syndicates”, had their roots in the county of Lancashire, north-west England, whose coal-rich lands supplied the world's largest cotton industry, making England the most powerful global economy, at least until the Great War. The Tillotson's Newspaper Bureau (TNB), one of the busiest syndicates, was founded in 1871 in Bolton, just north-west of

¹ Arnoldo and Alberto Mondadori Foundation [Faam], Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale – Erich Linder Records [ALI], typed letter from E. Linder to A. Moravia, undated, series 1946, b. 3, f. 57 (Alberto Moravia).

Manchester. Its purpose was to collect newspaper articles, serialized fiction and other printed material and distribute them to its syndicate-member newspapers and magazines. This practice ensured that authors would see their work printed in a number of publications simultaneously, even offering the chance to be read in the United States, where the TNB had opened its own branch. The Bolton syndicate was one of the first to supply ALI, where Augusto Foà had begun to buy the translation rights to its works; he would then translate and edit the Italian versions for local newspapers. TNB's international connections went some way towards pioneering the globalization of the book market. The establishment of *syndicates*, and later agents and agencies, was predicated on the emergence of new copyright laws. The Berne Convention in 1886 was the first agreement establishing that copyright was to be mutually recognized by party countries. The copyright protection of translation initiated a new phase of internationalization of authorship prompting publishers to seek and pay for copyright to publish translated foreign novels/essays, thus encouraging the translation business and giving the agent a new power (Lanfranchi 2024).

At this point the flow of printed material and copyright was predominantly from Europe into the States. The first official literary agency, in fact, was founded in 1875 in London by Alexander Pollock Watt; then came the James Brand Pinker Agency in 1896 and finally Curtis Brown. Albert Curtis Brown moved from New York to England in 1888 to head the International Publishing Bureau and started his own literary agency in London in 1905 (Gillies 2007). One year after the outbreak of the First World War, Brown escorted two members of the London staff to New York City and established the USA branch of Curtis Brown Ltd, creating one of the first and longer-lasting transatlantic connections. It was in this context that in 1898 Turin-born Augusto Foà founded Italy's first literary agency, one of Europe's oldest, which he would rename *Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale* in 1914.

But what was a "literary agent"? He aspired to present himself as a defender of authors' rights, a type of legal representative who oversaw and protected their contracts in exchange for a commission on sales. Literary agents took advantage of the increasing size of many publishing houses and the

internal division of tasks that industrialization brought about in order to manoeuvre into the space between authors and publishers where they could act as a mediator between the two parties.

Middlemen had always existed, but theirs was a more informal role. It was often a friend of the writer, or early professional publishing-house readers, who performed typical literary-agent tasks, such as choosing texts, negotiating contracts, revising manuscripts for printing, supervising contractual deadlines and renewing them under the best conditions (Gillies 2007). In 1935, US publisher George H. Doran said that he preferred to do business with a good agent rather than with the author directly because “an agent, through his knowledge of general publishing conditions and practice, is often able to explain satisfactorily some point in question”, such as “what books and authors are open for negotiation”, adding “On the whole, I feel that the literary agent has been a constructive force in modern publishing” (Doran, in Gross 1962) .

Literary agents were not intermediaries but gatekeepers and mediators, responsible for guiding and delimiting the cultural transfer process. These middlemen have operated behind the scenes of national and international literary distribution, influencing tastes, outlooks, and individual and collective imaginaries for over a century.

From 1898 to 1983, ALI played a significant role in selecting European and North American literature and essays. Even in the darkest years of Fascist Italy’s ‘cultural autarchy’ (1936-1945), when nationalist ideas reached their peak, ALI oversaw the purchase and the translation of European and American authors. ALI was in contact with authors, publishing houses and the most renowned foreign agents, selling translation rights to Italian publishers who were interested in what was being printed further afield. Among the first agents the Foàs came into contact with were the two British pioneers, Watt and Pinker, each with his own way of interpreting the role of a literary agent. Watt was the inventor of this role and a continuous innovator, being the first to establish a film division in his agency. Pinker, unlike Watt who dealt only with established authors, staked his reputation on his capacity to identify new literary talent, succeeding in having young unknown British and Commonwealth writers – Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West, Joseph Conrad, D.H. Lawrence,

James Joyce, to name only a few – published by prestigious houses. ALI's situation, however, was different because it had started out as a representative of foreign books and authors (e.g. ALI was the «Exclusive authorized representative of Mr. Georges Simenon for Italy») and as an Italian branch of foreign agencies (e.g. all the British authors represented by James B. Pinker & Son literary agency were sold in Italy through ALI). It was only later, mainly after 1938, when Fascist censorship on translated books and Jewish authors became progressively more incisive, that ALI started to represent Italian authors directly in Italy and abroad (by nationalising its list of authors), acting as their agent in the modern sense.

The rise of the Literary Agent during Fascism: Cosmopolitanism *versus* Autarchy

As David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle pointed out, the media should not only be seen as instruments of political control, but also as channels for the circulation of words, sounds, and images that can fuel and change individual and collective aspirations and behaviors, thus challenging the effectiveness of the consensus machine (Forgacs, Gundle, 2007). The reconstruction of the history of ALI and of the biographies that revolved around it – agents, translators, publishers – in my previous research permits the restoration of a more nuanced and sufficient understanding of cultural international relations and nation building during Fascism. It demonstrates that Italian culture was much less autarchic than the regime would have liked. Cultural cosmopolitanism was the cornerstone upon which ALI's rich and varied catalogue was built. Augusto Foà had included the word 'international' in the title of his agency because he aimed to open up the Italian book market to foreign cultures, an objective that would inevitably clash with the autarchic plans of Fascism. In this context, literary translations ended up representing, on the editorial level, the litmus test of the "autarchic effectiveness" - its capacity to defend its borders from "pernicious contaminations", to use the language of Fascist press. This was the historiographical and interpretative point that intrigued me: it was precisely Italy in black shirts that became, according to data from the League of Nations, the most important consumer of foreign books in the world (Rundle 2011) and in this opening - negotiated

and contested - the ALI network played its part. Nazi Germany also translated a lot, but unlike Italy, it exported many titles abroad, thus being able to maintain its image as an imperialist country.

I reconstructed the list of works represented by ALI from 1930 to 1945, through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of primary sources - for those years very cumbersome ones - analyzing translation contracts and the business correspondence stored in ALI historical archives in Milan.

The Foàs boasted an extensive catalogue that grew more than sixfold from the early 1930s to the early 1940s: by this time, ALI's portfolio numbered 435 works, 373 of which in foreign languages and 62 in Italian. However, the number of works blocked by censorship also increased. Until 1939, the number of books published was still higher than those rejected, but that ratio gradually reversed during the Second World War, reaching its peak between 1940 and 1945, when 289 out of 373 works were rejected. Clearly, the full force of book censorship began to take its toll during WWII, although the way had been paved by the Italo-Ethiopian War, the ensuing creation of the MinCulPop (Ministry of Popular Culture) in May 1937, and the Bonifica Libraria Committee in 1938, which was closely tied to the introduction of Italy's racial laws. Before then, Fascist book censorship was a field of compromise, negotiation and ambiguity. Even after autarchic policies were put in place in 1936 the impression was of imperfect censorship with some bargaining room. The novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) offers an interesting case in point. It was written by the African American feminist author Zora Neale Hurston and was critical of a hierarchical and a racist society, however, it was released in translation the very year anti-Semitic legislation was passed (1938).

I have identified two periods of 1930-1933 and 1934-1936 during which the presence of French and English literature in ALI's catalogue, in particular, was dominant. After 1936 proposals diversified to include the publishing markets of central and northern Europe and countries that were either neutral or close to the Axis forces. For example, at the beginning of the 1930s, English-language books accounted for 39% of ALI's catalogue, falling to 15% during the Second World War. In contrast, German-language works constituted 4% between 1930-1933, but soared to 27% in the early 1940s. Another major trend saw books by North American writers almost double from 7% to

12% between 1934-1936, then soar to 33% in 1937-1939, only to plummet abruptly to 8% in 1941 when the United States entered the war alongside France and Great Britain.

ALI's contribution to the internationalization of Italian culture should also be judged in quality terms. It was not just ALI's selection of North American writers, British and German modernists – Richard Aldington, Aldous Huxley, James Cain, Erskine Caldwell, Louis Brimfield, William Faulkner, Ernst Erich Noth, Jakob Wassermann, Walter Benjamin – that was revolutionary, as its catalogue of French authors, which included Martin du Gard, Colette, Guy Mazeline and Claudel, was equally so when we look at the predominant 19th-century writers in contemporary Italian literary culture and the complete unawareness of what was being written in contemporary France. Modern works were the hallmark of the Foà's mediation from the outset of their publishing career.

New figures for French, British and American authors contrast sharply with studies on foreign literature in interwar magazines where French authors were the most reviewed, translated and commented. On the contrary, ALI's catalogue was mostly made up of English and American authors. ALI ushered in, and somehow promoted, a trend that would become dominant after World War II, i.e. Anglo-American translated literature becoming more popular than French. I guess that the international network of literary agencies, which began in London and New York, where major ALI agents, including Watt, Pinker and Curtis Brown, were based, was a factor that paved the way for US cultural hegemony in Western Europe at the dawn of the Cold War.

The Critical Starting Point of the Seminar

To conclude, I briefly return to the second paragraph of this pre-paper and the heart of my Wednesday seminar to emphasize the connections between the historical and historiographical context I underlined above and the issues I will raise during the seminar. In establishing these connections and placing more emphasis on continuities rather than discontinuities between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, I am already advancing a hypothesis, namely an interpretation.

- The emergence of the literary agent as a profession in late 19th century Britain and its slow formalization in the early decades of the 20th century which was both cause and consequence of the industrialization process of the publishing world;
- The importation of the English and American model of the literary agent into Italy during 1930s by the Foà;
- A literary translation industry which emerged in Europe during the inter-war period as a result of the Berne Convention on the European booktrade and the 1892 reciprocal copyright arrangement between Italy and the United States that granted protection to authors in the respective countries (Lanfranchi p.12);
- The diplomatic channels put in place by Great Britain and the USA during WWII and soon after the war that supported European publishing houses (Cottenet 2017);
- An emergent interest in American culture and translated literature which flourished during the two decades of Fascism.

These mid/long-term factors underpinned the expertise, the working and intellectual networks, the legal and even political basis that helped strengthen transatlantic publishing ties after World War II and into the Cold War, when literary agencies increased in number and influence in Western Europe and in the United States.

Starting from the archival sources collected so far and focusing on three case studies (Georges Borchardt, Curtis Brown, Ronald Hobbs), in the seminar I will try to outline some possible research paths to answer the questions raised in the second paragraph.

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