



## *IN MEMORIAM*

Nicolas J. Perella  
Professor Emeritus of Italian Studies  
UC Berkeley  
1927 – 2015

Nicolas J. Perella, for almost 60 years a teacher and scholar of Italian literature at the University of California, Berkeley, died on September 26, 2015, at the age of 88. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, on September 7, 1927 (one of eight children of parents who had immigrated from Italy), he attended the English High School in his native city (while frequenting the Boston Public Library, as he liked to say, "evenings and weekends"), and graduated from Suffolk University in 1952 with a B.A. in Romance languages. He spent the academic year 1952-53 at the Université d'Aix-Marseille in France, as a special student with an award from the Fulbright Program, and in the fall of 1953 entered the graduate program in Romance languages at Harvard University, where he studied with Charles S. Singleton (Ph.D., UC Berkeley, 1936), then just approaching the peak of his fame as this country's leading scholar of Dante. He earned his master's (1954) and Ph.D. from Harvard (early 1957), and was appointed instructor in Italian there for the following fall, but over the summer he resigned in order to accept an offer from Berkeley. His departure, which followed close upon the contentious resignation of Singleton himself and took place at around the same time as two other junior Italianist faculty failed to have their appointments renewed, provoked an anguished article in the *Harvard Crimson* lamenting the "weakening of the Italian department." But Harvard's loss was Berkeley's gain: he settled happily into his new university and his new home in Kensington, and remained profoundly attached to both until he and his wife Vivian, who survives him, returned to Massachusetts to be closer to family, shortly before his death.

Over three decades at Berkeley, beginning with his appointment as instructor in Italian in 1957, he rose swiftly through the ranks: he became assistant professor in 1959, associate professor in 1963, and professor in 1968, and served as chair of the then-Department of Italian between 1968 and 1973, and again between 1980 and 1984. He

was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1966. During this period he taught and published mainly in the areas that were always closest to his heart: the Italian literature (especially poetry) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, in particular, the major authors of Italian Romanticism: Ugo Foscolo, Alessandro Manzoni, and above all Giacomo Leopardi. But he had begun, under Singleton's influence at Harvard, as an accomplished philological and comparatist scholar of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, and this interest inspired, in the 1960s, several contributions to Boccaccio scholarship and a series of major articles on Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* that culminated in his definitive book, *The Critical Fortune of Battista Guarini's "Pastor Fido"* (1973). Meanwhile, a series of major books published at either end of the 1970s — *The Kiss Sacred and Profane: An Interpretative History of Kiss Symbolism and Related Religio-Erotic Themes* (1969); *Night and the Sublime in Giacomo Leopardi* (1970); and *"Midday" in Italian Literature* (1979), winner in 1980 of the Modern Language Association's Howard R. Marraro Prize for best book in Italian studies — established his international reputation, not only as the acknowledged dean of Leopardi studies in the United States but as an original and insightful thematic critic and a close reader of rare acuity.

Nick Perella's scholarship, as he himself would always emphasize, was constantly inspired and nurtured by his experience of teaching. His late-Friday-afternoon graduate seminars on Leopardi became legendary for the intensity of his own involvement with the texts under discussion and for the analytical and interpretative demands he made of his students (it was said at the time, perhaps rightly, that he insisted on scheduling them at an unpopular hour in order to insure that only those who truly wanted to learn from him would attend), and he brought the same unflinching personal commitment and unyielding insistence on the highest of standards to his undergraduate courses. His reward was the devotion of his graduate students and the admiration of undergraduates, few of whom, across the years, can have failed to notice and be impressed by the depth of his love for his subject, the immense extent of his knowledge, his unique capacity to evoke and communicate emotional response in the reading of poetry, and his unselfish readiness to share with others the seemingly infinite riches of what he knew, and felt, about Italian literature.

After 30 years of active service Nick was ready by 1988 to enter what the university administration of the day called "phased retirement"; but this gradual withdrawal over the following several years from teaching and administrative responsibilities in no way detached him from the life of his department. Well into the twenty-first century he continued to work at his impossibly untidy desk in the department's emeriti office — piled high with the correspondence of decades, with stacks of manuscript in his spidery hand (he never learned to type, and computers and he just didn't get along), and with library books that he regularly renewed rather than returning them (because, he swore, they were safer by far in his keeping than in the library's) — a desk from which his proud and often demonstrated boast was that he could retrieve any needed document at a moment's notice. From this Troy-like accumulation of layered paper he would tear himself away most days at around lunchtime to lead as many of us as he could find off to the only café in Berkeley that, in his expert and eloquently-argued opinion, made real Italian espresso (alas, it no longer exists, and he was never impressed by any of the many more recent arrivals on the Berkeley scene). Retirement also saw him embark on a

new and productive phase of his publishing career. He had already produced, in 1986, a widely-acclaimed annotated translation of Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio: Story of a Puppet*, accompanied by a prize-winning article on the text, that between them did much to spark the still lively interest in Collodi's work and its afterlife among English-speaking practitioners of Italian cultural studies. During the 20 years that followed he became notably active — often in collaboration with his close friend and departmental colleague the late Ruggero Stefanini — as a translator of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Italian prose fiction, especially the work of Aldo Palazzeschi (*Man of Smoke* [*Il codice di Perelà*], 1992; *A Tournament of Misfits: Tall Tales and Short*, 2005). (It might be added, at this point, that the memoir of Stefanini that he wrote for these *In Memoriam* pages, after the latter's sadly premature death in 2005, is not only a fine and fitting tribute in itself but is also, in its every word and phrase, down to the very punctuation, wholly and beautifully characteristic of Nick's mind and personality.)

He was, in the best and deepest sense, a man of feeling. His sharply questing critical intelligence coexisted at every turn — as it does in the authors, especially Leopardi, to whom he was most instinctively drawn — with a rich and powerful emotional engagement with life and the people with whom it brought him into contact. In relations with colleagues, staff and students alike he was always generous and patient, staunchly loyal, invariably willing to listen, and simply, genuinely, unfailingly, *kind*: as likely to remember to bring in a small token of appreciation on a staff member's birthday as he was to invite a newly hired and still somewhat disoriented junior faculty member (myself) to be his guest at the opera — not just once, but for every single production in the 1986 fall season. He was fiercely proud both of being Italian-American and of being a Bostonian. The splendours and miseries of his ancestral homeland's operatic tradition offered him, through his *two* annual subscriptions to San Francisco Opera and his vast collection of recordings dating back to the 1940s, one way of uniting intellect, emotion, and the senses in a colorful, perhaps occasionally excessive, but always gloriously passionate celebration of human existence and all its foibles. His lifelong dedication to the Red Sox did likewise. To be with him, as I was, on the night of Game 6 of the 1986 World Series was to witness despair on a level that even the gloomiest nihilistic effusions of his beloved Leopardi only seldom, thank goodness, attain; to share in his boundless delight when the Curse of the Bambino was finally lifted in 2004 was to be convinced that, after all, Leopardi was wrong, and that happiness pure and unalloyed really is available to human beings. Nick Perella, of course, found that happiness did not consist only in savoring his hometown team's sporting triumphs or all those memorable nights at the opera. He found it still more deeply in his decades-long inseparable companionship with Vivian; in the company over many years of his family, friends, and colleagues; in the literature that was a lifelong source of private joy as well as the focus of an exemplary professional career; in his tireless work with and on behalf of his students; in the enjoyment of a choice Barolo, a perfect cup of coffee, or the wild mushrooms for which he went hunting on weekends in the fall; and, above all, in sharing his enjoyment and understanding of the world and our life in it with those of us who were lucky enough to have the privilege of knowing and loving him.

Steven Botterill  
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