

**Sacco and Vanzetti: The Literary and Cultural Effects of the Controversy  
for Their Lives**

**By  
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## I.

### Introduction

On the last day of the lives of Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco, American's most noted poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, published "Justice Denied in Massachusetts." Its theme was the blight which had fallen upon life; the earth was now sour. "Evil," she wrote, "does overwhelm the larkspur and the corn. We have seen them go under."

The poet's words rippled throughout the world, in cities in Europe, Asia, South America and Africa, as thousands lined streets and filled meeting halls, with eyes teared and souls torn by anger, and waited for the fateful moment of the execution.



Alfred Dreyfus

Men and women of literature, science and philosophy, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, John Dos Passos, Bertram Russell, Upton Sinclair, Madam Curie, Albert Einstein, Alfred Dreyfus and Anatole France, pleaded publicly for America not to do this; not to execute these two men for being Italian, for being immigrants, for holding strong views about justice and human decency.

There is in the writing and recorded words of these men and women a powerful story of inspiration and commitment to principle that emanated from the brief lives and exemplary character of these two Italians. They all echoed, in their own way, the saddened words and lost hope of Edna St. Vincent Millay.



Luigia Vanzetti and  
Rosina Sacco (1927)

The harshest effects, however, were felt here, in Boston and the towns that surround it. Aldino Felicani, the founder and treasurer of the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee, understood it. "Justice Denied" and "Justice Crucified" were printed on the black arm bands that many mourners wore a few days later, in the North End. Amid the stunned, saddened crowd, many Italian- Americans marched with dignity and defiance along side the hearses that carried the caskets of both men, and the black limousines – moving down Hanover Street – that contained Rosina Sacco and Luigia Vanzetti.

Although I will address the literary and cultural effects that continue to this day, including a powerful and moving new musical drama from Belgium, it is here, in Boston and the towns that surround it, that individual lives and families were affected so directly and with such enduring consequence. It is here that the story must be repeated, in all its dimension, and understood by subsequent generations. It is here that words must be put to explain the disappointment in law and those that administered it, and the unease about the future, on the faces of those Italian-Americans, hard working, caring men and women, who gave precious dollars and time to the Defense Committee, who were subjected to surveillance and, at times, to outright deceit, by Department of Justice agents and who

lined the streets of Boston, under the glaring and hostile watch of a policeman's baton, during the long funeral procession.

Their unease was shared by Italian-Americans throughout the nation, many newly arrived, in New York, Chicago and San Francisco, watching, mourning quietly, including within my own place of birth and rearing, New Haven, Connecticut.



Aldino  
Felciani

The decision of this Society to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of the execution is important. For many years, Aldino Felciani joined with others, until, as many died and moved on, he continued almost alone, unyielding, committed to the integrity and innocence of his two friends. I commend the Society and its Board Chairman, Judge Peter Agnes, for giving life to these two men; for ensuring the flame remains lit and the prospect for literary and cultural inspiration endures. This is the place for it to be done. I am gratified to be here.

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## II.

### The Two Italians: Poetry, Plays, Movies



Sacco and Vanzetti

Who were these two Italian immigrants to America, who touched people's hearts and souls and evoked such passion and anger and despair? What was it, in them, about them, in the way the controversy evolved, that moved men and women to risk their well being, to take sides, to write and speak against the power and abuse of government, to demonstrate, repeatedly, in Buenos Aires, New Delhi, Capetown, Berlin, Toronto, Brussels, Paris, London? In Chicago, an 18 year old school girl, Aurora D'Angelo, led a massive demonstration following the decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Court denying a request for a new trial. She was arrested. Within days, she demonstrated again. She, too, took sides in support of two men she could hardly know.

**The Poetry.** Sacco and Vanzetti and the controversy that led to their execution inspired more than 140 poems. The themes were largely personal and social; many are about the loss to society; about intolerance towards Italians; about perverting justice in order to preserve dominance; about the terrible injustice inflicted on human values and these two men by Massachusetts officials, its Governor, its judiciary, and the President of Harvard, A. Lawrence Lowell.

Many of the poems are tempered by anger, bitterness and a certainty that, ultimately, Sacco and Vanzetti would be vindicated and that all those who acted against them would be judged as lesser men.

Three poems were written by Edna St. Vincent Millay. One of her sonnets, "Where Can The Heart Be Hidden", published in August 1930, is available on RCA Victor Records. You can hear her words. Her voice resonates with sternness and with disappointment that men have acted with such coldness and a disregard for truth.

In a 1948 survey of the literature, Harvard law professor Edmond Morgan and G. Louis Joughin of the New School of Social Research, reported that not one of the 140 poems supported the authorities.



They also recognized an underlying spiritual theme in the poetry. They identified Malcolm Crowley's poem, "For St. Bartholomew's Day" written for the first anniversary of the execution in August 1928, and Arthur Davison Ficke's "Prayer In Massachusetts," written in 1929. Listen to Ficke's deep condemnation of what occurred here:

Arthur Davidson Ficke

Upon this soil may no tree ever grow.  
 In this land may no lips ever again  
 Speak the word justice, now that all men know  
 Those lips have long boasted and in vain,  
 May never young men hither come to learn  
 What cruel elders have no power to teach.  
 May no lights burn here save witch fires that  
 burn  
 Along some desolate and abandoned beach,  
 May this dour land go back now whence it  
 came—  
 To early granite, to implacable sea.  
 May there descend on it the cleansing flame  
 Of some remote, supreme catastrophe  
 Divorcing it forever with its shame  
 From men who would be generous, wise and free.



In 1935, a New England poet, Lola Ridge – who demonstrated at the State House and was arrested in 1927 – wrote a lengthy poem about Sacco and Vanzetti, 384 lines, entitled "Three Men Die". The spiritual nature of her words are first worth a moment of reflection about Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

Lola Ridge

Vanzetti, it must be recalled, was very familiar with the life of Jesus Christ, especially that characteristic which defied the authorities of his time, and protected and administered to the poor and those who were undefended. A few days before his execution, Vanzetti specially requested a visit from his counsel and friend, William Thompson. Thompson transcribed the words and feelings they exchanged with each other:



Arrived for plotting: John St. Vincent Millay (left),  
 Lola Ridge (right).

Edna St. Vincent Millay (left)

**I then told Vanzetti that I hoped he would issue a public statement advising his friends against retaliating by violence and reprisal ....Vanzetti replied that, as I must know, he desired no personal revenge for the cruelties inflicted upon him; but he said that, as he read history, every great cause for the benefit of humanity had had to fight for its existence.... He asked me to remember the cruelty of seven years of imprisonment, with alternating hopes and fears. He reminded me of the remarks attributed to Judge Thayer ... and whether I thought that such refinement of cruelty as had been practiced upon him and upon Sacco ought to go unpunished.**

**The two talked further about the origins and struggles of great movements for human betterment, about the experiences of Socrates and Galileo, and about Christianity. Thompson then writes:**

**[Vanzetti] spoke with eloquence of his sufferings, and asked me whether I thought it possible that he could forgive those who had persecuted and tortured him through seven years of inexpressible misery. I told him he knew how deeply I sympathized with him, and that I had asked him to reflect upon the career of One infinitely superior to myself and to him ... that the essence of the appeal [of Christianity] was the supreme confidence shown by Jesus in the truth of His own views by forgiving, even when on the cross, His enemies, persecutors and slanderers. There was another pause in the conversation. I arose and we stood gazing at each other for a minute or two in silence. Vanzetti said he would think of what I had said.**



William Thompson  
and  
Herbert Ehrmann

**At the moment before Vanzetti stepped into the electric chair, he "paused, shook hands with the Warden and Deputy Warden and the guards, thanked them for their kindness to him and, turning to the spectators, asked them to remember that he forgave some of his enemies."**

**In Lola Ridge's poem, "Three Men Die", she closes with this scene, at the execution. Ridge describes Vanzetti's action:**

He reached and touched them where they stood;  
then cut into the core of him and plucked  
from out its deepest part the love that  
quivered at his heart[,] and held it on his  
palm to them.

She captured the moment of Vanzetti's singular triumph.

**The Plays and Movies.** Seven plays have been written that were inspired by Sacco and Vanzetti, the moral themes of the case, the personalities and the legal issues. Two plays were made into movies.



Maxwell Anderson

In 1928, Maxwell Anderson, a noted but still young playwright, in collaboration with Harold Hickerson, wrote *Gods of the Lightning*. The story depicts two men, labor organizers and radicals, one Italian-American – Capraro – and his friend, Macready, unjustly accused and tried for killing a paymaster during a recent hold up. The real murderer, Suvorin, owns the restaurant both men frequent and within which they are arrested, after a struggle.

The District Attorney, Slater, recognizes he has no real testimony against the two men. He intimidates the witnesses and provides words for them to memorize and repeat at trial. All of this rings true. So, too, does the dynamic courtroom scene and the prejudice of the jury foreman.

Finally, Suvorin, accused of committing another murder, steps forward at the trial and admits under oath to having killed the paymaster. The District Attorney, Slater, attacks Suvorin's testimony as self-serving, and Capraro and Macready are convicted. The judge acknowledges, however, that their guilt was based on their political beliefs and on their "consciousness of guilt", not on the evidence. Both are executed. Suvorin escapes from jail.

Although it opened in New York to positive reviews, and later was shown in Berlin and Madrid, *Gods of the Lightning* did not succeed commercially. One critic believed it was "too close to the event"; "written in the flush of anger"; too direct and harsh in its portrayal.

An effort was made to show it in Boston. The City's Corporation Counsel would not allow it: "The whole play", he wrote, "is an attempt, while depicting the recent trial of Sacco and Vanzetti in Massachusetts to bring into disrepute our judicial officers, especially those officers who participated in the Sacco-Vanzetti trial." This community was not allowed to see that play.

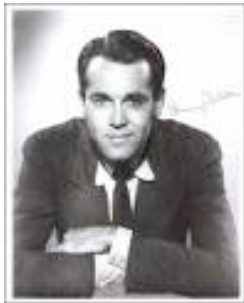
In 1935, Maxwell Anderson wrote a second, very successful play, *Winterset*, that also was inspired by the controversy. It takes place 12 years after the execution. The main character, "Bartolomeo Romagna" (played by Burgess Meredith), was haunted by

government officials to leave his quiet home town, following his father's execution for committing a robbery and murder and the loss of his mother to heartache and poverty.

Bartolomeo later returns, now as a young man, to the slums of New York to seek the person who committed the murder for which his father was convicted unfairly. A law school professor had uncovered new evidence. An elderly, neatly dressed derelict learns of the same evidence and seeks the same person. The derelict is the trial judge who condemned Bartolomeo's father to death. He, too, has been haunted. He wants to be vindicated; to assure himself he was correct.

Bartolomeo unwittingly falls in love with the sister of an accomplice to the murder. Both are killed in the play's closing scene, shot by the real murderer. But not before Bartolomeo learns, finally, that his father was innocent.

The play opened on September 25, 1935 at the Martin Beck Theatre in New York. It ran for 195 performances and won the first New York Drama Critics Circle Award.



Henry Fonda

In 1937 *Winterset* was made into a movie, also with Burgess Meredith. Although it is engaging and poignantly acted – and Burgess Meredith's screen debut – the movie (RKO, Radio Pictures), like the play, only marginally captures the power of the actual story and makes no pretense of reflecting the reality of what had occurred in Massachusetts, in America, and to these two men. *Winterset* is available on VHS.

*The Male Animal* is a play by James Thurber and Elliott Nugent. It was written in 1939. It was reworked into a 1942 movie with Henry Fonda and Olivia de Havilland.

An Associate Professor of English, Tommy Turner, at "Midwestern University," proposes to read to his class comments by Bartolomeo Vanzetti along with those of Abraham Lincoln. He is seeking to demonstrate how eloquently words can be used by those who are not professional writers.

Professor Turner is threatened with expulsion if he does so by the Board of Trustees. They believe Vanzetti's words do not reflect "Americanism." Although the movie is largely a satire, with some irony (i. e., the football team reflects virtually every southern and eastern European ethnic group), an underlying controversy erupts about academic freedom and the suppression of ideas. Will this mild mannered Professor adhere to his principles?

The movie ends with Tommy Turner (Fonda, in the movie), walking into a packed school auditorium and reading Vanzetti's statement, the one that begins "If it had not been for these thing, I might have live out my life, talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have died, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure...."



Professor Turner believes Vanzetti's words will "endure in the language." The intellectual force of those words are related to those of Lincoln. Members of the Board of Trustees are in the audience. They are taken by the unobjectionable nature of Vanzetti's words. The young professor is not fired. *The Male Animal* also is available on VHS.



Martin Balsam

In 1960, a television movie about Sacco and Vanzetti, with some live acting, was presented on NBC. It was motivated by the hearings and controversy generated by State Representative Alexander Cella's valiant and persistent effort to get a formal pardon from the Massachusetts legislature in 1959. One of the actors was Steven Hill, who played Vanzetti. Mr. Hill currently stars in the television drama, *Law and Order*, as the Chief District Attorney, Adam Schiff. Martin Balsam played Sacco. The raw film of the documentary is in the National Archives, donated by NBC. The movie also can be seen at the William Paley library in New York.



It was not until 1970 that a full-length movie was made, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, that the story was told directly. It is the movie many of us have seen or are familiar with. Riccardo Cucciolla, who played Sacco, won the Cannes Film Award for Best Actor. The movie – a passionate, accurate portrayal, with stunning courtroom drama – was accompanied by a stirring ballad sung by Joan Baez and fine performances by American actors, Milo O'Shea and Geoffrey Keen. It was made in Italy. It, too, is available on VHS.

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### III.

#### The History and Novels

Literary figures of special renown in America, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Katherine Anne Porter, Dorothy Parker, Lola Ridge, and John Dos Passos all were arrested for picketing on the State House Grounds or the Boston Commons. Edna St. Vincent Millay also was arrested for occupying the Governor's office.

Katherine Anne Porter wrote pleas for money and updates on the case for *The Bulletin*, the Defense Committee's official publication. She was there the night of the execution, outside the Charlestown State prison, amid the armed camp of police and soldiers. Porter later won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *Ship of Fools*.

In 1977, in her last work before her death, Porter wrote *The Never Ending Wrong*. It was her memory of the days leading up to the execution. It is a brief book, 63 papers in length; written, she explained, because she did not want the events forgotten.

At last, a huge rally took place the night before the execution, with Rosa Sacco and Luigia Vanzetti, Vanzetti's sister, on the platform. Luigia had been brought from Italy.... Now they brought her forward with Mrs. Sacco and the two timid women faced the raging crowd, mostly Italians, who rose at them in savage sympathy, shouting, tears pouring down their faces ....Rosa Sacco spread her hands over her face. The crowd roared and cursed and wept. It was the most awesome, the most bitter scene I had ever witnessed.

We walked on toward the prison, coming as near as we could, for the crowd was enormous and in the dim light silent, almost motionless, like crowds seen in a dream.... [T]he crowd massed back from a center the police worked constantly to keep clear. They were all mounted on fine horses and loaded with pistols and hand grenades and tear gas bombs ....

This was not a mob, however. It was a silent, intent assembly of citizens – of anxious people come to bear witness and to protect against the terrible wrong about to be committed, not only against the two men about to die, but against all of us, against our common humanity and our shared will to avert what we believed to be not merely a failure in the use of the instrument of the law ... but a blindly arrogant, self-righteous determination not to be moved by any arguments, the obstinate assumption of the infallibility of a handful of men intoxicated with the vanity of power and gone mad with wounded self-importance.

For an endless dreary time we had stood there, massed in a measureless darkness, waiting, watching the light in the tower of the prison. At midnight, this light winked off, winked on and off again,

and my blood chills remembering it even now – I do not remember how often but we were told that the extinction of this light corresponded to the number of charges of electricity sent through the bodies of Sacco and Vanzetti.... It was only one of many senseless rumors and inventions added to the smothering air. It was reported later that Sacco was harder to kill than Vanzetti - two or three shocks for that tough body.

\* \* \* \*

Almost at once, in small groups, the orderly, subdued people began to scatter, in a sound of voices that was deep, mournful, vast, and wavering. They walked slowly toward the center of Boston.

\* \* \* \*

Life felt very grubby and mean, as if we were all of us soiled and disgraced and would never in this world live it down. I said something like this to the man walking near me, whose name or face I never knew, but I remember his words – "What are you talking about?" he asked bitterly, and answered himself: "there's no such thing as disgrace anymore."

John Dos Passos entered the controversy in 1926. He was 31. He interviewed Sacco and Vanzetti and wrote an article entitled "Two Interviews," published in *The Bulletin* in 1926.

In early 1927, he wrote "Facing the Chair," a 126-page analysis published by the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee. Dos Passos was angered by the clandestine activity of the U.S. Department of Justice, its infiltration into the Defense Committee, and its refusal to disclose its files. Dos Passos said this, in "Facing The Chair":

It was a frame up ... that does not necessarily mean that any set of government and employing class detectives deliberately planned to fasten the crime of murder on Sacco and Vanzetti. Though in this case it is almost certain they did.

Dos Passos' anger was well founded.



John Dos Passos

It should be recalled that, by this time, two affidavits had been submitted by two former Justice Department agents to Judge Thayer as part of the Defense's request for a new trial. Both affidavits stated that agents in Boston that "had any knowledge on the subject, [believed] that these men had nothing whatever to do with the South Braintree murders and that their conviction was the result of cooperation between Boston agents of the Department of Justice and the District Attorney."

It also had now been revealed for the first time — in 1927 — that Justice Department agents had long infiltrated the Defense Committee, solicited money on its behalf and, with dishonesty, kept it; and that a Justice Department agent had been placed in jail next to Sacco — in 1921 — and had reported to his supervisors that no admission of wrongdoing was made. Consideration also was given to placing a federal agent, acting as a border, in the home of Rosina Sacco.

In light of the two Affidavits, both William Thompson and Michael Angelo Musmanno also had sought to get the Justice Department files that might shed light on the innocence of Sacco and Vanzetti. The Attorney General would not make them available.

Dos Passos' anger, and his words, "It was a frame up," were not only well-founded but were prescient as well. They paralleled the remarkable, documented analysis of Dr. David Kaiser in *Postmortem, New Evidence in the Case of Sacco and Vanzetti*, written 60 years later, in 1985: "Sacco and Vanzetti, two innocent men, most probably were framed for a murder they did not commit."



As Kaiser documented and substantiated, the so-called "bullet III" — from the gun Sacco had when he was arrested weeks after the crime — "were not genuine exhibits but were substituted by the prosecution" after Sacco's gun had been test fired. Dos Passos -- and many others -- were right.

Professor David Kaiser

Dos Passos' most famous literary work, *U.S.A.*, is a trilogy of novels about the distinctions and conflict between those with power and privilege and those without. It was written in 1937. To one critic, "The Sacco-Vanzetti case gave [Dos Passos], in a word, the beginning of a formal conception of society ... of two nations, the two Americas, that is the scaffolding of U.S.A." It is not until the third volume that specific references are made to the case. I am going to describe only one of those.

Dos Passos' character is walking the Plymouth shoreline and his thoughts move backward to the first immigrants to America. "The King Killers, the haters of oppression", he calls them, referring, of course, to the political and religious persecution that drove the early colonists to America.

The speaker then sees the massive buildings of the Plymouth Cordage Plant and thinks to himself: "This is where another immigrant worked [,] hater of oppression [,] who wanted a world unfenced ... when they fired him from the Cordage he peddled fish. the immigrants in the dark frame houses knew him [,] bought his fish [,] listened to his talk [,] following his cart around from door to door ... you ask them what was he like? .... We knew him [.] We see him every day [.] Why won't they believe [,] that day we buy the eels?"

This is an important reference. In Vanzetti's first trial in Plymouth, for an attempted robbery and murder in Bridgewater on December 24, 1919, 14 Italian-Americans testified to buying fresh fish – particularly eels – from Vanzetti's cart throughout the day of the crime, to be cooked that evening, for Christmas Eve dinner.

All testified in Italian. Their testimony was ridiculed by the prosecutors, misinterpreted by the official translator – who later named his son after Judge Thayer, and completely rejected by the jury, which included a foreman at the Plymouth Cordage Plant where Vanzetti had been fired.

Seven other novels were written between 1927 and 1946 that relied upon the case to establish settings, characters and moral choices. Each are highly interpretive of the events and the moral and ethical forces that tempered them.

Bernard DeVoto's novel, *We Accept With Pleasure* (1934), is centered in Boston in the closing days of the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Five men, all interrelated by friendship, blood or as comrades in the First World War, are affected in various ways by the case. Each struggles differently with the case's meaning. DeVoto's purpose is not to analyze Sacco and Vanzetti or the legal issues, at least not directly. He dwells instead, through these five characters, on the impact of the controversy on their lives.



Upton Sinclair

The most widely read and influential novel, in literary circles and on the public perception, was Upton Sinclair's *Boston*, published in 1928. He already was a Pulitzer Prize winner; a renowned writer, social critic and activist.

Sinclair uses a fictional character – Cornelia Thornwell modeled, in many obvious respects on Elizabeth Glendower Evans (who I will talk about later) – to move the reader through the real story. Cornelia, the 60 year old wife of a former Governor of Massachusetts, has long been discomforted by her family's patrician values. With her husband's death she departs Boston and, without informing her family and with few possessions, moves to North Plymouth. She takes a room, as a border, on Suosso's Lane, in the home of the Brini family. Another border is Bartolomeo Vanzetti, then 26. She also begins working in the Plymouth Cordage Factory. It is here the story begins. Sinclair's novel is two volumes, 755 pages.

When I read this book, early in my own research, I read it first and foremost as an Italian-American. I was struck by one passage, which I read over and over again. Its implications continue to be profound today.

Sinclair describes Vanzetti's often quoted statement given, in prison, in August 1927, to the reporter Philip Strong. They are the same words quoted in the movie, *The Male Animal*. Sinclair, already familiar with Vanzetti's letters and writing and his recorded, oral statements, makes this observation:

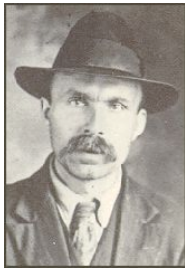
**History records that those who heard the Gettysburg address of Abraham Lincoln were ill pleased by it[.] But the future seldom chooses words which are flowery; it chooses those which have been wrung from the human heart in moments of great suffering, and which convey a gleam of spiritual illumination. When such words have been spoken, we discover what Paul meant when he wrote, 'this mortal shall put on immortality.' School children learn them by heart, ... civilizations are built in their image.**



Abraham Lincoln

**Pass on, Bartolomeo Vanzetti, your work is done!.... Fear not the executioner, not yet the raging slanderer – they are powerless to harm you[.] You have spoken the noblest words heard in America in two generations since Abraham Lincoln died!**

**I cannot speak for the Italian-Americans who are here this afternoon. But I can say that in my education and experience, in my readings in literature and history, and in my discussions with family and Italian-Americans active in local and national organizations, I had never read Sinclair's judgment repeated by Italian-Americans or others. I was saddened and angered. I had not known that the words of an Italian-American had been compared to those of Abraham Lincoln.**



Bartolomeo Vanzetti

**It raised hard questions for me about how we pass on our own heritage, especially our experience in America, and who does it.**

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#### IV.

#### Vanzetti

Vanzetti's writing and recorded words also have a special place in the literature that emerged from this controversy. He wrote letters and articles in Italian. In English, he wrote a novella "Events and Victims", and an autobiography "A Proletarian Life"; and, of course, the letters and numerous recorded and reprinted statements, a few of which were referenced earlier.

I quoted Upton Sinclair's evaluation. In their 1948 book, *The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti*, Joughin and Morgan devoted an entire chapter to "The Mind and Thought of Vanzetti." They found he had a "profound complex courage [and] gave proof of a truly philosophic spirit." "Vanzetti's mastery of the English sentence," they concluded, "unquestionably establishes his right to a place among creators of our literature."

These are Vanzetti's words to Governor Fuller, in his Petition for Clemency, which he wrote:

Our sense and ideal of justice is based on the principle of man's self-respect and dignity; of the equality of men in their fundamental nature and in their rights and duties.

We call ourselves Libertarians, which means briefly that we believe that human perfectibility is to be obtained by the largest amount of freedom, and not by coercion, and that the bad in human nature and conduct can only be eliminated by the elimination of its causes, and not by coercion or imposition, which cause greater evil by adding bad to bad.

Katherine Anne Porter said of Vanzetti: "He knew English very well not so much in grammar and syntax but for the music, the true meaning of the words."

Listen to these words, spoken by Vanzetti, without notes, just before being sentenced to death by Judge Webster Thayer:

This is what I say: I would not wish to a dog or to a snake, to the most low or misfortunate creature of the earth – I would not wish to any of them what I have had to suffer for things that I am not guilty of. But my conviction is that I have suffered for things that I am guilty of. I am suffering because I am a radical and indeed I am a radical; I have suffered because I was an Italian, and indeed I am an Italian; I have suffered more for my family and for my beloved than for myself; but I am so convinced to be right that if you could execute me two times, and if I could be reborn two other times, I would live again to do what I have done already.

**His lawyer, William Thompson, wrote this about Vanzetti's writing and grasp of the English language: "If Vanzetti had an education he would have been a professor in Harvard College. He is one of the most gifted men I knew of." And, in recording Vanzetti's last statement a few hours before the execution, Thompson said:**

**In this closing scene the impression of him which had been gaining ground in my mind for three years was deepened and affirmed – that he was a man of powerful mind, and unselfish disposition, of seasoned character, and of devotion to high ideals.**

**Vanzetti's writings in Italian and English, and these and other observations of his skill and character have never been compiled, analyzed and made available for all to read, especially Italian-Americans.**

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## V.

### The Law As Literature

There also was a special eloquence in the words of the law, not only from the words spoken or written but from the courage of those who spoke to the truth, who challenged forcefully the assumption that government, including the judiciary is always right and impartial and who recognized that the fundamental values of justice and fairness and due process of law that underlie this nation's legal principles were not applied to these two Italians.



Professor Felix Frankfurter

The 1927 article written by Professor Felix Frankfurter of Harvard, in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "The Case of Sacco and Vanzetti", falls squarely in this category. Frankfurter had once worked in the Office of the United States Attorney. He understood the duty of government, federal and state, to be above reproach.

The case against Sacco and Vanzetti, he wrote, "was part of a collusive effort between the District Attorney and the Department of Justice.... [By] the systematic exploitation of the defendants' alien blood, their imperfect knowledge of English, their unpopular social views ... the District Attorney had invoked against them a riot of political passion and patriotic sentiment; and the trial judge connived – one had almost written, cooperated – in the process."

The same courage is reflected in the enduring, thoughtful persistence of Herbert B. Erhmann, who served as Assistant Counsel to William Thompson; in his belief in both men; and in the exhaustive thoroughness of his own writings, *The Untried Case* (1933) and *The Case That Will Not Die* (1969).



Michael Angelo Musmanno  
(third from left)

It also is found in the effort of Michael Angelo Musmanno, a young Italian-American lawyer from Pittsburgh, who aided in the defense during the closing months, spoke the language of both men, later became Chief Justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court and served as a trial judge at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal.

Musmanno's own writings, including *After Twelve Years* (1939), recognized that in a nation that depends so powerfully on judicial review to define and to defend individual rights, no abuse is greater than the failure of a judge to fulfill his or her duty.

One searches in vain for serious, compelling words and thought, or demonstrations of courage, from the prosecutors, the judges or those, like lawyer and Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell, who, confronted with an opportunity for dispassionate fact finding and analysis, succumbed fully to the nicely expressed but rough mentality of prejudice.

**Oliver Wendell Holmes fares no better. Three times he was asked to stay the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. Three times he denied it. Any serious student of this case, who analyzes with detachment the record compiled between the arrest of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1920, through the appeals, the record disclosed before the Lowell Committee and the execution in 1927, stands stunned at Holmes' opinion that the enormity of the prejudice of the trial judge and the prosecution did not warrant his intercession.**

**What remains unmatched in its precise, moving and legally solid exposition of the principles of law, are the words, character and courage of William Thompson, Sacco and Vanzetti's lawyer from 1924 through early 1927.**

**In 1926, when confronted with the unwillingness of Attorney General Sargent to reveal Department of Justice files on Sacco and Vanzetti, Thompson said this, in his oral argument to Judge Thayer requesting a new trial:**

**Is there anything so exalted in the office of the Attorney General of the United States that the inference that you draw against any other men who hold back documentary evidence should not be drawn in this case? I am not talking about him personally, of course; I am talking about him in his official capacity.... But is there some reason of strong policy why those papers are not produced here. What can that reason be?**

**What can it be? Are you going to say because Sacco and Vanzetti are Italians, because these are poor folks, because they are aliens, ... we will let [the Attorney General] hold back what might set them free?**

**This, too, is literature.**

## **VI.**

### **Creative Arts: Sculpture and Art**

**Throughout the controversy, drawings and sketches appeared frequently in Italian and American newspaper dailies, in magazines and on their covers. During and after the appeals, Ben Shahn painted 23 gouaches. In 1931, Shahn prepared, with glass and marble, a massive mural, in three panels, entitled "The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti." It was done in Chartres, France. In 1967, it was donated to Syracuse University, where it stands today on a wall outside its Graduate School.**

**A photographic history exists in abundance; some poignant, striking and sad. Film also exists of aspects of the trial and funeral at Brandeis University and the Boston Public Library. Tragically but characteristically the FBI confiscated and destroyed the more complete film history of the controversy.**

**The most controversial work of art, however, is the bronze relief plaque of Sacco and Vanzetti, sculpted by Gutzon Borglum, who sculpted Mount Rushmore.**



Gutzon Borglum

In August 1927, a ceremony was held at Mount Rushmore in South Dakota marking the initial "ground breaking" for what was to become the sculpted replica of four Presidents by Gutzon Borglum. President Coolidge was in attendance. During the ceremony, Coolidge was interrupted by messenger with a request to stay the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. The request was made by Musmanno. Coolidge refused. Borglum, once discovering the President's action, was angered and dismayed. The execution occurred, as scheduled, on August 23, 1927.

Borglum was approached by Gardner Jackson on behalf of the Sacco and Vanzetti Memorial Committee and especially Vanzetti's dear friend, Aldino Felicani. Borglum was asked to prepare a suitable plaque commemorating the execution of both men as part of a "memorial". In 1930, a bronze base-relief plaque, approximately 3 1/2 feet by 7 feet was prepared by Borglum, who did the work without fee.

The Committee sought a public place for the plaque. Offers were made in 1937, 1947 and 1957 to the Mayors of Boston and the Governors of Massachusetts. The 1947 presentation was made by Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Einstein and Herbert Lehman. On all three occasions, the plaque was symbolically or actually refused. It was returned to Borglum's warehouse in Connecticut, where it languished, unseen and without anyone seeking to display it publicly.

Three forms of the plaque apparently exist; the original bronze, a second (apparently a mold) made of plaster and a third made of aluminum. Following the refusal of any government officials to formally accept the plaque, one form (the plaster) was saved and was given to Aldino Felicani. He preserved it and, as I understand it, gave it to the Boston Public Library in 1979, as part of his collection of the Sacco and Vanzetti papers.

Also in 1979, a third form of the plaque (aluminum) apparently was located in the Borglum warehouse or made from the plaster mold. At the request of Gardner Jackson, Jr., the aluminum plaque was placed in the Community Church of Boston (565 Boylston Street). Many of the Church's members, and the Church itself, were active in the Sacco and Vanzetti Defense Committee. Governor Dukakis attended the unveiling. The plaque is still there.

No Massachusetts's government official has recognized and "accepted" this plaque for a truly public display. Not until now. Through the fate of history and the virtue of democratic change, the Mayor of Boston, Thomas Menino, and the Governor of Massachusetts, Paul Celluci, will accept the plaque publicly on Saturday, August 23, 1997.

Most Italian-Americans, especially those of a younger generation and particularly those outside (and many inside) Boston, do not know the plaque even exists.

## VII.

### Music

We come now to the music; to the effort to capture in song and instruments, the pathos, sadness, anger and bitter irony, and the enduring human themes that characterized this controversy.

In 1927, at a rally in Toronto, Canada, it was reported that a lone violinist had composed and played a work devoted to Sacco and Vanzetti. My Aunt, Ms. Rose Proto Sansone, recalls listening with her father to piano music with words referring to both men, played on the radio during the period just prior and after the execution. She was 11 years old. There also may have been original, musical accompaniment to one or all of the seven plays. The origin and nature of these works remains, to my knowledge, unexplored.

In 1946, famed American folk singers Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie collaborated to produce "The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti." It was released in 1960. Drawing heavily on the letters both men wrote from prison, and on their own sense of moral outrage and hypocrisy, Woody Guthrie performs 12 ballads, taking the listener to Suosso's Lane in North Plymouth, to Boston and the trial, and into the lives and families and views of both men. The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti is available, on tape and CD, through the Smithsonian Institution.



Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie

Charlie King, a folk singer with the elegance and insight of Seeger and Guthrie, wrote and performed his own ballad "These Two Arms." It is based on Vanzetti's words and Vanzetti's empathy for the lives of workers and the exploited. King's recording is available on record and tape.



Marc Blitzstein

In 1959 and 1960, Marc Blitzstein conceived and began work on an opera – as he understood that form – on Sacco and Vanzetti. His research was extensive. He hoped to perform it at the Metropolitan Opera. The project – like the controversy – was tempered by severe public criticism. Based on Blitzstein's notes, related correspondence and the music and libretto he was able to complete, the opera sought to follow the story closely. Blitzstein died before it was completed.

There also is the music, stirring, compelling music that accompanied the 1970 movie, *Sacco and Vanzetti*. The music and words, drawn in part from Vanzetti's letters to his father, were written by Ennio Morricone. One of the songs, "The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti," by Joan Baez is available in a 1976 collection of her recordings.

Continue on next page

## VIII.

### The Two Italians

We come back, then, to the same question.

Who were these two Italians, Vanzetti, 39 when he was executed, Sacco, only 36, who evoked such literary and theatrical imagination and who provided, for an entire generation, the standard by which commitment to principle was judged?

**Literate and Knowledgeable.** Both Sacco and Vanzetti were literate in Italian. Sacco and his wife Rosina also were active in organizing, producing and participating in community theatre, plays involving tributes to those who fought and died for working people and the poor. Vanzetti was extraordinarily well-read in his youth. He wanted to study law. Sacco was a skilled worker, praised by his employer at the trial.

Both men, long before their arrest, read numerous Italian newspapers, corresponded with friends and relatives in Italy, and were engaged in understanding the ideas and values of capitalism, anarchism, socialism, and the history of democracy in Italy. Both understood and disdained the Fascism that had begun to embrace their native country.

Both were men touched by sadness. Vanzetti's mother had died in his arms at 19. Sacco's older brother, Nicola, also had died. Sacco later adopted his name.

These two men are often referred to as the "good shoemaker and the poor fisherman." It is an accurate but insufficient description. Confronted by a hostile judicial system, conducted in a language they did not speak, and compelled to rely upon an official court interpreter who repeatedly and suspiciously translated incorrectly the Italian spoken by witnesses for the defense and by Sacco and Vanzetti, both men learned English while in jail.

Vanzetti was clearly the more insightful and articulate of the two. But listen to the depth and warmth of a portion of Nicola Sacco's last letter to his son, Dante, written in English, on August 18, 1927, from the Charlestown State Prison:

[M]y dear boy, after your mother had talked to me so much and I had dreamed of you day and night, how joyful it was to see you at last.... I saw that you will remain the same affectionate boy, faithful to your mother who loves you so much ....I knew that and what here I am going to tell you will touch your sensibilities, but don't cry Dante, because many tears have been wasted, as your mother's have been wasted for seven years, and never did any good.

So, Son, instead of crying, be strong, so as to be able to comfort your mother, and when you want to distract your mother from the discouraging soulness, I will tell you what I used to do. To take wild flowers here and there, resting under the shade of trees, between the

harmony of the vivid stream and the gentle tranquility of the mother nature, and I am sure that she will enjoy this very much, as you surely would be happy for it.

\* \* \* \*

Much I thought of you when I was lying in the deathhouse - the singing, the kind tender voices of the children from the playground, where there was all the life and the joy of liberty just one step [outside] the wall.... It would remind me so often of you and your sister Ines, and I wish I could see you every moment. But I feel better that you did not come to the death-house so that you could not see the horrible picture of [us] in agony waiting to be electrocuted, because I did not know what effect it would have on your young age.

\* \* \* \*

Dante, I say once more to love and be nearest to your mother and the beloved ones in these sad days, and I am sure that with your brave heart and kind goodness they will feel less discomfort. And you will also not forget to love me a little for I do – 0, Sonny! thinking so much and so often of you.

The letters of Sacco and Vanzetti, written in English from jail, were compiled and edited in 1928 and published by Viking Press. They will be reissued this year. These letters are part of the literature of the controversy.

The point is plain and worthy of reiteration: Sacco and Vanzetti were not ordinary men. Their own passion for life, and knowledge of human values and experience, was built on their Italian heritage and its values, and the grasp of their own language.

The Circumstances and the Ideas that Tempered the Times and the Controversy. More must be understood, however. The United States, in the years leading to the arrest and trial, teemed with anger. Anti-immigrant violence was commonplace, acquiesced in and sometimes sanctioned by the government.

The lynching of nine Italians in New Orleans in 1891, lynchings later in Florida and elsewhere in Louisiana, and the invasion and destruction of an Italian-American neighborhood in Illinois in 1920, are only examples.

Italians also brought from Europe their own vision of ideas already the source of tension here; ideas about individual freedom, justice, dignity and fair treatment for workers, especially women. The right to speak, write and demonstrate in support of those ideas, the right to strike, were suppressed, brutally, including by Department of Justice agents acting under the direct orders of the Attorney General.

Those ideas were feared. But those ideas were emerging in the world. Sacco and Vanzetti understood this. They wrote and thought about it. This was the stuff of culture, of literary works.

The trial and the prosecution of both men embodied the same conflict of ideas, as well as the bigotry.

Here, an additional point must be emphasized. From the moment of their arrest and questioning, the fact they were Italian was an overt, explicit part of the case against them. It is evident in the jury selection, in the Court's constant reference to the distinctiveness of being Italian, in the denigration of witnesses who could only speak Italian, and in the deep, often articulated concern of the defense, in and out of the courtroom, that prejudice against them because they are Italian had clouded the fairness of their treatment.

The Men and the Ideas: Bringing the Controversy to the World. All of this was understood. Immediately after both men were arrested, Aldino Felicani – then 29 years old – formed the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee. He was a journalist; a newspaper printer and writer. He was born in Italy, and a good friend of Vanzetti's. Felicani understood ideas and how to effect them. The Committee began to publish *Agitazione* almost immediately. Italian-Americans would be informed.



Gardner Jackson (right)

Gardner Jackson, another Committee member, took responsibility for *The Bulletin*, also published by the Committee. It was a quarterly, written in English and distributed widely. Jackson also was a journalist.

Elizabeth Glendower Evans, a friend of Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, from an old, wealthy Bostonian family, was powerfully committed to the cause of labor, of education, of fairness and to the lives of Sacco and Vanzetti.

In June 1921, Ms. Evans published an article entitled “Foreigners” in the *New Republic*, a journal of wide circulation among intellectuals and social activists. This is part of what she wrote about Vanzetti, and how she framed the controversy, in 1921, when it was just beginning:

Vanzetti is a determined-looking man, big and powerful, and somewhat stern of expression. His features are shapely, and he has a very winning smile. His command of English is limited, but he is making use of his time in prison to study English and spelling ....When I asked him about his home in Italy, if he thought of it often, his face lighted.

'Oh, I think of it all the time. I can see my father's house and the pear tree near the door. I can see it all as if it were here.'



**I had heard that he was esteemed by his fellows as a thinker, and as one who has his ideals much at heart. And of this, his conversation gave abundant proof.**

**Since I saw him in prison, I have read a little article of his which had been published in an Italian newspaper, to which he has been a frequent contributor. In this article, ... he tells how in his youth he read St. Augustine and the Divine Comedy.**

**Ms. Evans then ridicules the witnesses for the prosecution, describing how frequently an eyewitness, unable to describe Vanzetti with any precision, was allowed to identify him because the person they saw was "some kind of foreigner" or "dark-complexioned" or by "the way he ran." She concluded her article with an appeal for help, in this way:**

**Meanwhile working class Italians, in these days of bitter unemployment, are taxing themselves for the defense fund with a generosity beyond the understanding of those who belong to the more protected class. One man quit a job at which he earned forty-three dollars a week, and puts in his whole time helping on the case. Another mortgaged his little home for \$1,500 and gave the money to the defense fund without a hope of ever getting back one cent. Others drew out every dollar from the savings bank. Shall such as these carry the whole burden?**

**These three people, Felicani, Gardner and Evans knew and believed unreservedly in these two men. They also understood the ideas and moral and social forces intertwined in the trial and being debated passionately throughout America and the world.**

**Most importantly, they knew how to project the truth about these men, and their ideas, into a broader society.**

**They did that. And, as you can see, the finest literary and cultural figures of this century here and throughout the world embraced and were inspired by the character and commitment to principle of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.**

**That inspiration continues.**

## **IX.**

### **Sacco And Vanzetti: The Musical Drama**

**In the winter of 1996, only a few months ago, the Royal Ballet of Flanders staged, in Antwerp, Belgium, the musical drama "Sacco and Vanzetti." This warrants special attention.**

**Belgium was the site of 12 demonstrations on the day of the execution alone. Its press covered the controversy closely. Flanders also has a long, customary commitment to**

**individual integrity and to respect for individual rights. The Sacco and Vanzetti controversy is part of Belgium's history.**



Frank Von Leack

**The Royal Ballet has a unique position in Belgium's cultural life. In 1986, it created a Musical Division. In anticipation of its 10th Anniversary, the Royal Ballet turned to Frank Von Leack, a well-known author, playwright and director. He was 29 years old. The Royal Ballet wanted an idea; a special performance to commemorate the Anniversary.**

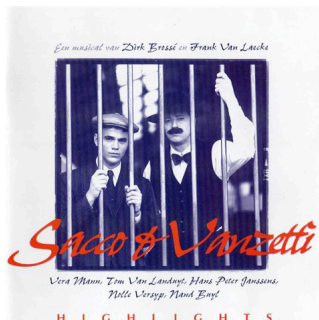


**Von Leack had seen a play about Sacco and Vanzetti as a young boy. He also had seen the Italian-made movie and knew about the Proclamation issued by Governor Dukakis in 1977 and by the courage and grace that motivated it. The whole story had touched his imagination and his literary genius.**



Dirk Brosse

**There are 13 original songs, the words written by Von Leack, and 3 new, purely instrumental pieces. The music is by Dirk Brosse. The story and the love between Rosina and Nicola, of the harsh ethnic prejudice that greeted the Italian immigrants, the drama of the trial, the prosecutor frame up, the sentencing, the execution and the global reach of the moral sadness, are all told through music. One is the "Overture to Sacco and Vanzetti". Through its musical themes you can hear the entire breadth of the story. We will listen to it in a moment.**



**The entire production played with success throughout Belgium.**

**The story begins through the words and memory of Rosina Sacco. Twenty years after the execution, she visits Judge Webster Thayer, now elderly and frail. She is 51. She forces him to examine his conscience; to think about the cruelty he visited upon the hopes and lives of both men and their families.**

**The second song, performed by Vera Mann, is Rosina's first words to Thayer. It is told through her memory as it unfolds. You hear her hopes and expectations about America, the false lure of its promises and its law, and the arrival into this country of Sacco, then 16, and Vanzetti, then 19.**

**This song that we will hear is less than 2 minutes in duration. The words are in Dutch. Listen, too, to the way that pain is captured in the simple beauty of the music.**

**Thank you.**