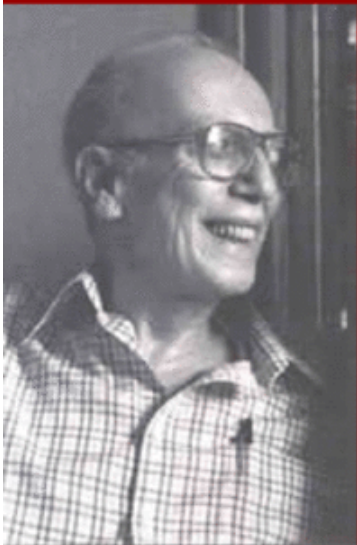




Felix Stefanile, the "Everyman" Poet

Anthony Julian Tamburri (January 29, 2009)



Felix Stefanile

"The Americanization of The Immigrant"

**Your words, Genoveffa,
through the open window,
telling me once again what to buy at the store—
don't forget, don't forget—
aroma of fresh bread almost a halo.
That was a long time ago.
I never forgot.
Like Dante
I have pondered and pondered
the speech I was born to,
lost now, mother gone,
the whole neighborhood bull-dozed,
and no one to say it on the TV,
that words are dreams.**

Italian America has lost one of its greatest poets and thinkers. In exhorting his Italian/American sisters and brothers to learn of their history, he once stated, "There is no ontology without archaeology!" Felix always knew how to say what had to be said.

It is with great sadness that I write this blog about a dear friend, Felix N. Stefanile, who, at the age of 88, died at 5:21 AM Tuesday, January 27, 2009, at St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Lafayette, Indiana, where he spent twenty-six years as a member of the professoriate at Purdue University.

Felix was born April 13, 1920, in Long Island, NY, to the late Frank Stefanile and Genevieve Lauri Giannicchi. Educated in the New York school system in the 1920s and 1930s, he received his bachelor's degree from the College of the City of New York, CUNY in 1944.



A veteran of World War II, Felix served as an interpreter for the U.S. Army and went on to co-author a manual on how to fight malaria in Southern Italy. After the war, he worked at various jobs until 1950, when he took a position with the New York State Department of Labor until 1961. During that time, he and his wife Selma (nee Epstein, whom he married in 1953, and who now survives him), a poet in her own right, started Sparrow (1954), which remained one of the oldest poetry journals in the United States, until they stopped publication in 2000. They founded the journal "to lead the life of poetry"; it was their "idiosyncratic odyssey." Over the years, Sparrow steered itself toward form, specifically the sonnet. In explaining such a move, Felix responded as follows to Gloria G. Brame in a 1994 interview: "I love the sonnet; I'm devoted to it.... It's also an air-tight editorial alibi.... Furthermore, it's a form that is a paradigm of the genuine writing experience: closure, constraint, contrast, accuracy of expression, focus, architectonics of syntax."

Felix won numerous awards for his poetry, essays, and teaching. In 1966 he penned an essay entitled "The Imagination of the Amateur"; it earned him a National Endowment for the Arts prize in 1967. In 1973, he was awarded the prestigious Standard Oil of Indiana Prize for best teacher; and in 1997 he was the first recipient of the John Ciardi Award for lifetime achievement in poetry, presented by the journal *Italian Americana*. Author of a plethora of essays and reviews in the best of journals in the United States and abroad, he authored numerous books of poetry and translated some of Italy's finest poets, from the middle ages to the twentieth century. His books of poetry and translations include: *A Fig Tree in America* (New Rochelle, NY: Elizabeth Press, 1970); *East River Nocturne* (New Rochelle, NY: Elizabeth Press, 1976); *Indiana, Indiana: A Local Reader*. Edited by Felix and Selma Stefanile (West Lafayette, Ind.: Sparrow Press, 1976); *Umberto Saba, Thirty-one Poems*. Translations by Felix Stefanile (New Rochelle, NY: Elizabeth Press, 1978); *In That Far Country* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Sparrow Press, 1982); *The Blue Moustache: Some Futurist Poets*. Translations by Felix Stefanile (New Rochelle, NY: Elizabeth Press 1980); *If I Were Fire: Thirty-Four Sonnets by Cecco Angiolieri*. Translated by Felix Stefanile (Iowa City: Windhover Press at the University of Iowa, 1987); *The Dance at St. Gabriel's: Poems* (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1995); *The Country of Absence: Poems and an Essay* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Bordighera, 2000).

Felix moved to Purdue University in 1961 as a visiting poet and lecturer. After that initial year, he was asked to stay on as a member of the English Department, and in 1969, he was appointed full professor. He retired from Purdue in 1987, the year in which I first met him. In the subsequent thirteen years Felix and Selma became dear friends in one sense, mentors in another, and, to some degree, my initial guides on how, as a North Easterner, I might successfully negotiate this new landscape; in effect, family. Possessive of profound intelligence, affable wit, and a wonderful gift of language, Felix proved ever generous in spirit and counsel. His wisdom was infinite, and he dispensed it charitably; his erudition was extensive, and he shared it willingly. One could not expect any more from such a bountiful and integral human being. For those of us who came to know him well, we are forever the beneficiaries of his munificence and magnanimity.

An American of Italian origins, Felix was equally and fiercely proud of his Italian heritage and his American being. He negotiated the US literary scene like very few before him. In like fashion, he distinctly negotiated the US ethnic landscape. Two poems that might best exemplify such sentiments of his are "Hubie" (a poem that sings the necessity of racial integration) and "The Americanization of The Immigrant," both of which appeared in his last collection *The Country of Absence*. I leave you with one of these two seminal poems.

"The Americanization of The Immigrant"

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through the open window,



telling me once again what to buy at the store-

don't forget, don't forget-

aroma of fresh bread almost a halo.

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