Forum

The Emerging Canon of Italian-American Literature

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Introduction

This forum sets forth diverse approaches to the formation of an Italian-American canon, without reaching any definitive conclusions. A few caveats: at present it might be more accurate to speak of a collection of writings rather than a canon, hence the qualifier "emerging." Samuel Johnson once proposed a test for determining a canonical author: "length of duration and continuance of esteem" (190). It takes generations to form a literary canon. A productive debate on the formation of the Italian-American canon traces only to 1993 when Italian-American writers and critics reacted to Gay Talese's explosive, front-page article "Where Are the Italian-American Novelists?" in the *New York Times Book Review*. Another caveat: since writers cannot be categorized solely by ethnicity, an Italian-American focus should be taken as one among many foci, more productive with some texts than others, more appropriate in examining DeLillo's *Underworld* than his *Point Omega*. Moreover, any discussion of a canon of Italian-American literature proceeds without the benefit of a sufficiently large body of criticism adequate to the effort. Though Rose Basile Green's pioneering *Italian-American Novel* came out in 1974, Italian-American poetry has not yet received a single comprehensive study (some individual poets have received biographical and monographic attention, e.g. Ciardi, Gioia). The major literary institutions are relatively recent, the American Italian Historical Association was founded only in 1966; the John D. Calandra Italian-American Institute, 1990; the Italian-American Writers Association, 1991. *Italian Americana* first appeared in 1974; the *Italian Journal*, 1987; *VIA* (*Voices in Italian Americana*), 1990; *Italian-American Review*, 1992. While important critical studies had appeared from time to time, it was only in the 1980s, with that decade's conferences and publications, that the large and ongoing conversation began in earnest. It is therefore premature to speak of a full-fledged Italian-American literary canon.

In our view the main purpose of the canon is to serve as a guide to readers who want insight into the range and complexity of the Italian-American experience, both in itself and in its relations to the hyphenated and canonical literatures in America, Canada, and other countries. If the same books keep

asserting themselves as being broadly representative and aesthetically effective, the canon that results will speak for itself (cf. Durante 1: 3-8). There is already a substantial body of work, from Philip Mazzei's letters, Lorenzo Da Ponte's memoirs, and Joseph Rocchietti's *Lorenzo and Oonalaska* (1835), the "first Italian-American novel" (Albright 129), down to the plays and screenplays of Albert Innaurato and Evan Hunter (Salvatore Albert Lombino), the fiction of Joseph Papaleo, Helen Barolini, Tina DeRosa, Anthony Giardina, Don DeLillo, and Gilbert Sorrentino, and the poetry of Emanuel Carnevali,[1] John Ciardi, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Dana Gioia, and Lucia Perillo.

To illustrate the complexity of canon formation, let us attempt to assemble a working canon of fiction for the period 1925-1950, when the offspring of the Great Migration (1884-1914) came of age. It is known collectively as the "second generation," and sociologists such as Leonard Covello, Herbert Gans, Joseph Lopreato, John W. Briggs, and James A. Crispino, among others, have classified its salient issues and problems: conflict with the parent or "first generation," personal freedom, religious observance, schooling, language, marriage inside or outside the group, cuisine, and other aspects of assimilation. Irvin Long Child, whose *Italian or American?* (1943) is a milestone in Italian-American ethnic studies, groups the second-generation Italian Americans with regard to their orientation towards or reaction to "nationality problems" (72): the traditionalists or "in-group" whose reaction is "to accept and to pursue energetically the goal of affiliation with the Italian group in the community" (71); "rebels" who stand apart from the Italian community and seek self-expressiveness, career orientation, solitude, and "complete acceptance by the American group" (76); and the "apathetic" individual who desires "compromise," seeks "to avoid the unpleasant consequences" of deciding between the traditionalists or the

[1] Poets such as Emanuel Carnevali and John Ciardi could contribute significantly to the picture of the Italian American between 1925-1950. Seriously ill from the effects of encephalitis, Carnevali describes "This shipwreck – my sick body" in "The Return," which contains the famous lines that Mark Cirino calls "the most desperate lines in immigrant poetry":
I have come back with a great burden,
With the experience of America in my head –
My head which now no longer beats the stars.
O Italy, O great shoe, do not
Kick me away again!

rebels (72), and who "does not achieve the satisfactions of full participation in either the American or the Italian group" (182).

Using Child's theory as a lens, one may organize an extraordinary range of materials. In Louis Forgione's *The River Between* (1928), the autocratic Demetrio had been a smuggler from "Vulcan" (13) (Vulcano, one of the Eolian Islands), who escaped to America and made a fortune in the construction business. Aging and half-blind, "grimly Cyclopean," he lives a solitary life in a fortress-like home on the East River. Like him in size and strength but with "superb, smooth Grecian features" (6), his son Oreste engages him in a battle of wills; the name Oreste suggests none too subtly a Greek agon, and also the sensitivity of Aeschylean Orestes. Though born in Italy, Oreste exhibits second-generational problems, the solitariness, the inability to resolve conflict, and the search for compromise, which is ultimately unsatisfying. He is "apathetic" in Child's terms, with regard to "striving for status within his immediate group" (71). Relations between Oreste and his wife Rosa have broken down because she, one of Child's "rebels," prefers the social life "across the river" in Manhattan. There, unable to adapt to her life as the mistress of a jazz composer, she ends in prostitution, by which she is punished for her rebellion.

Garibaldi Marto Lapolla's panoramic *The Grand Gennaro* (1935), a "rich literary and historical document of immigrant experience (Meckel 128), is similarly about crime, a dysfunctional family, and material power. One of the most imposing characters in Italian-American literature, the Calabrese Gennaro Accuci (possibly from Lat. *accudere*, to beat out) wants to "make America" and succeeds by deceiving his friend and employer and building a rag and metal scrap business in Italian Harlem. His affair with his married landlady is the reason he leaves his wife Rosaria and young children waiting seven years in Italy before bringing them to America; she finds her husband a changed man with whom she will never be reconciled. As for the second generation, Domenico, the elder son, is a dandified wastrel and womanizer; he is forced to marry one of his victims, Carmela, to preserve the family reputation, but he wanders afar and dies in the Spanish-American war. Gennaro's younger son, Emilio, flirts for a time with Protestantism, attends Columbia University (as did Lapolla), but wants to drop out, and becomes temporarily estranged from the family and his background (Emilio and his neighbor Roberto's walk to Columbia "at the other end of town" [319] is almost certainly Lapolla's

own reminiscence of walking from Italian Harlem to Columbia with fellow undergraduate Leonard Covello. Perhaps Emilio's dissatisfaction with his education reflects Covello's [325]). The industrious Carmela makes a great success of her milliner's business, not only locally but in the city at large. Gennaro assists her financially; they eventually marry. Later Gennaro, who is paying for the construction of a church in Italian Harlem out of his ill-gotten funds, is murdered by the man whom he had cheated years earlier.

The vagrant Marco, the central moral figure in Guido D'Agostino's *Olives on the Apple Tree* (1940), has taken odd jobs for six or seven years; he diagnoses the peculiar "American sickness" (28) as unsatisfied desire for material gain; Green calls him the "isolated reject of an interactive culture" (129). The Gardella family has extracted itself from the ghetto known vulgarly as "Wop Roost"; their son Emilio has become a doctor, calls himself Emile, and aims to enter the establishment and join the local country club, spurning the clan; another of Child's "rebels," he is thwarted in the end by misreading the signals of the WASP medical establishment (symbolized by "Dr. Stone") and, banished for his malpractice, returns to the Italian fold. D'Agostino, through his mouthpiece Marco, counsels an organic integration into a new culture: "If the minute you land here you want to rush to become American, then little by little you kill yourself – and you cheat the land that gives you a home because what you brought with you from your own country to make it richer and better, you have thrown away and forgotten" (295). In Mari Tomasi's *Like Lesser Gods* (1949) Michele Pio Tiffone or "Mister Tiff," the rheumatic aging bachelor, defies his sister to visit America and discovers that his one contact, a nephew, has died and that he must make his own way. He latches on to his former student's family in Granite Town (Barre, Vermont) and, with his Old World wisdom, counsels the daughter to marry her "American" boyfriend, Danny Douglas.

John Fante's loosely autobiographical Bandini quartet opens in Colorado in the1920s with *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938). This coming-of-age tale set in 1920s Colorado prepares for the more ambitious *Ask the Dust* (1939), a modernist novel of urban alienation generally regarded as Fante's masterpiece. An impoverished, twenty-year-old writer, Arturo Bandini has left Colorado to try his luck in Los Angeles. Most characters in the novel, even the general atmosphere and objects themselves, are described as "lonely" – Bandini most of all. (The words "lonely" or "loneliness" occur eleven times in a novel of

165 pages.) Yet his ethnicity does not merely add to his loneliness like one container filling another; it permeates or penetrates the core of his loneliness. As George Guida notes, Bandini is a soul divided between the desire for assimilation and an Italian background that marks him as a “cultural other” (137). On the one hand, Bandini can say he is “an American, and goddamn proud of it” (44); on the other, he longs for his family and his mother’s Italian cooking; his reference points are DiMaggio, Cellini, Casanova, and the Madonna. When he makes love, he says “I’m a conqueror ... I’m like Cortez, only I’m Italian” (94). He laments the prejudice that he suffers in Anglo America: “It was Smith and Parker and Jones who hurt me with their hideous names, called me Wop and Dago and Greaser” (46). His desire for the Mexican-American waitress Camilla is compromised from both his American and his Italian sides: as an “American,” he at times behaves no differently from her Anglo boyfriend Sammy Wiggins, a bartender and would-be writer, who merely wants to possess Camilla “to live out his fantasy of union, both sexual and social, over the foreign, dark-skinned, female other” (Guida 141). As an “Italian,” however, Bandini embraces her from a shared “sense of ethnic (and class) alienation” (Cooper, “John Fante’s Eternal City” 91).[2] Like the other texts, Fante’s complex analysis sheds much understanding on the second-generation Italian American, but he tests the terms of tradition, rebel, and apathy, thereby becoming a trailblazer of the third generation.

Simone Cinotto’s essay on the origins and development of Italian-American historiography provides a useful framework for the other contributions to this forum – contributions which, from a variety of perspectives, both offer definitions and investigate the current state of the Italian-American literary canon. Given the broad definition of literature that characterizes the following pieces, covering texts ranging from first-generation immigrant memoirs to postmodern fiction, Cinotto’s survey of the ways in which Italian immigration

[2] “In trying to connect with a Mayan princess,” comments Guida, “Arturo strives for unity with a land before it became the America that makes him feel his Italian difference. At the same time, he looks to absolute racial otherness in an Anglo world, to Indianness, as an alternative to assimilation. He seeks, in short, to alleviate his feelings of alienation from his society, to reconcile the Italian and American halves of his identity, through Camilla” (137). This presents a further problem: Camilla, too, has an ethnically divided nature: “I’m not a Mexican ... I’m an American” (61); and she wants through Sammy to possess “Americanness personified” (Guida 141).

into the United States has been studied and understood over the years affords a fitting and illuminating introduction. So is the homage he pays in his essay to two historians whose work has left an indelible mark on Italian-American studies: Rudolph J. Vecoli and Donna R. Gabaccia.

After examining the reasons for the late arrival of Italian-American studies on the academic scene both in the United States and in Italy, Marina Cacioppo notes that a great deal of work still needs to be done, especially as regards some of the earliest examples of Italian-American writing. The vast literary production that emerged in the years of massive Italian immigration into the United States (1880-1914) has not yet been properly recognized as an essential field of study for scholars attempting to trace the formation of a distinctive Italian-American identity. As Cacioppo argues, this is due not simply to the fact that most of these texts, long out of print, are not easily retrievable, but also to the distrust with which they were long regarded by critics upholding traditional aesthetic standards. A case in point, Cacioppo believes, is that of the writings of Bernardino Ciambelli who used the formulas and conventions of sensational urban-mystery fiction to explore the Italian-American experience and combat the stereotypes circulated by the advocates of laws aimed at restricting immigration.

Martino Marazzi's contribution suggests an interesting analogy between the debate over the recognition and definition of an Italian-American literary canon and the Italian-American community's struggle for acceptance into American society, with American literary history functioning as the nation writ small. It is essential for the critic or student of Italian-American literature, Marazzi argues, to acknowledge, and pay homage to, the historical, cultural, and aesthetic value of the writing of first-generation Italian immigrants such as Bernardino Ciambelli and Arturo Giovannitti; just as it has been important, and continues to be so, for Italy and the United States to re-examine the role that Italian immigrants have played (albeit in different ways) in the history of both countries, and give it its proper due.

While acknowledging that the very existence of an Italian-American literary canon is still to some extent a notion that experts in this field feel the need to defend, and even vindicate, against academic skepticism, Edvige Giunta chooses to focus her attention upon a specific genre, the memoir, and its unique contribution to the Italian-American literary experience. Giunta makes an intriguing case for the memoir as a powerful means of expression,

which, unlike the autobiography, draws attention not so much to individual experience as to the relationship between the self and the community. For this very reason the reading and studying of memoirs (a genre in which, as Giunta justly reminds us, Italian-American women have been particularly prominent) can give us a better understanding of both the Italian-American milieu and the role of the artist within it.

Leonardo Buonomo contributes to the discussion about the emerging canon of Italian-American literature with an appreciation of John Fante, an author whose work, after years of neglect, has experienced a remarkable revival of interest that shows no signs of abatement. Delving into family relationships in novels and short stories and exploring the conflicting loyalties and complicated identity issues of second-generation Italian Americans such as himself, Fante produced a body of writing that, Buonomo believes, must necessarily occupy center stage in any configuration of the Italian-American literary canon.

In his piece Giuseppe Lombardo charts the critical fortunes of Pietro di Donato. He focuses, as one might expect, on the response to the Italian-American writer's startling debut novel, *Christ in Concrete*, but also takes into account other, long-neglected works of his. In a welcome departure from sociologically-oriented readings of *Christ in Concrete*, Lombardo draws attention to di Donato's stylistic achievement, in particular his innovative rendering of register and tone and the extent to which dialogue delineates character and setting. The sophisticated quality of di Donato's writing, Lombardo believes, is also on display – albeit less prominently – in *This Woman*, the follow-up to *Christ in Concrete*. Deserving of more consideration than it has so far received, this novel, in Lombardo's opinion, confirms the centrality of di Donato to the Italian-American literary canon.

Arguably the greatest living American writer of Italian descent and, undoubtedly, one of the most prominent figures in contemporary American literature, Don DeLillo is the subject of Daniela Daniele's essay. Weighing DeLillo's often proclaimed desire to distance himself from the limiting category of "American ethnic writer" against his vivid portrayal of Italian-American life in some of his early stories, as well as the sporadic, but evocative, appearance of Italian-American signs in his novels, Daniele offers us precious insights into DeLillo's complex and ambivalent relationship with his cultural heritage.

SIMONE CINOTTO

Is There a Canon in Italian-American Historiography? Historians, Places, and Languages

Almost half a century has passed since Italian-American history has established itself as a legitimate scholarly field of inquiry with the American Italian Historical Association (now renamed Italian American Studies Association) in 1968. Since then, a good number of scholarly books on the Italian experience in the United States have been published, and, in retrospect, Italian-American history appears to have achieved at least one crucial goal: no longer a mere celebration of an ethnic heritage, it has produced a collection of works whose methodological and theoretical relevance has successfully transcended the boundaries of the field. The continuing vitality of Italian-American historical studies in the face of the epistemological change that since the 1960s has revolutionized the social sciences in general and U.S. immigration history in particular may in fact be a consequence of the paradigmatic nature of the Italian-American saga for the overall cultural experience of modernity. At the turn of the twentieth century, more than three million immigrants from Italy provided the unprecedented expansion of the U.S. economy with an inexpensive labor force, in the context of a massive global human movement out of the recently unified nation-state (29 million people between 1876 and 1976). In the U.S., turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrants, their descendants, and further new arrivals from Italy became members of a culturally diverse society, developing complex ethnic and racial identities, while maintaining a sense of affiliation – and often actual transnational relationships – with the diasporic "home" across the Atlantic.

My students (Italian and non-Italian) are generally fascinated by this story. I am sure this is due in part to the extraordinary visibility Italian-American characters achieved as icons of American popular culture, which made representations of Italian-American life an enthralling archetype of *Italianità* for global audiences; but more importantly because of the immediate

perceptibility of the heuristic value of Italian-American history for the comprehension of the contemporary human condition.

But if Italian-American history is such an exciting tale to be listened to, doesn't this also depend on how it has to be narrated? Is there a canon in Italian-American historiography? I argue that there is, and it resides in the spatial imagination of Italian-American historians who have been able to craft most convincing geo-historical entities (the *paese*, the region, the nation, the diaspora, the Atlantic, Ellis Island, Little Italy, the suburbs; in turn connected by roads, bridges, canals, trains, ships, subways, mailing systems, and electronic images and information), and it exists because of those articulate, illuminating historical narratives of mobility and identity. Since the 1960s, Italian-American history has developed different languages and narrative styles, reflecting not only the different interpretative purposes, tastes, and talents of its interpreters – the historians – but also the different geographic scales they have been concerned about. The two landmark Italian-American historians I will briefly discuss, Rudolph J. Vecoli and Donna R. Gabaccia, are themselves linked by place, having been born in the East (Connecticut and Massachusetts respectively) but spending a significant part of their professional lives as Directors of the Immigration History Research Center in Minneapolis (IHRC), a peripheral location in the geography of Italian America with its center in New York/New Jersey (along with Rhode Island, these are states with the highest percentage of population with Italian ancestry). With their seminal works, Vecoli and Gabaccia have marked two consequential periods of Italian-American studies, and, what is more important, made this relatively small subfield provide new, leading perspectives to Migration and American History. They did so by focusing on, and in the process shaping, two different historical places – Little Italy and the Italian Diaspora.

Rudolph Vecoli: Little Italies and Ethnic History

The birth of AIHA in 1968 had a vital antecedent in *The Journal of American History* in an article titled "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*," by Rudolph Vecoli (1964). Born in Wallingford, Conn., to Tuscan immigrant parents and growing up in an Italian-speaking home, Vecoli received his Ph.D.

from the University of Wisconsin in 1963. With his doctoral dissertation, which described the social and economic life of the Italians in Chicago before World War I, and in condensed form in the fourteen-page essay for *JAH*, Vecoli took issue at nothing less than the foundational text of U.S. Immigration History – Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* (1951). From his Cold-War, liberal perspective, Handlin had proposed a view of the experience of European immigrants to the U.S. at once compassionate and optimistic. Their cultural values useless for American life, immigrants had to suffer alienation, social disorganization, and displacement until they assimilated into the mainstream of American democracy. Armed with the example of Italian communities in Chicago, Vecoli argued for the persistence of ethnic cultures in the face of assimilation (a process to which he clearly attributed a cultural-pluralist negative significance). Against Handlin's notion of "uprootedness," Vecoli underscored the *agency* of immigrants as they built their urban enclaves and organized everyday life in the host country around selected elements of their original culture: "The *contadini* of the Mezzogiorno came to terms with life in Chicago within the framework of their traditional pattern of thought and behavior," he stated ("Contadini in Chicago" 417).

The entire next generation of immigration historians moved from Vecoli's succinct but effective theorization. For the most part themselves the children of Eastern and Southern European immigrants and educated in the mass universities of the late 1960s and 1970s (but heavily critical of the homogenizing effects of late-capitalist bureaucratized society), these young historians opposed the concept of the "melting pot" as part of American exceptionalism propaganda, emphasizing the uniqueness of each group's experience and strategies of survival. The ethnic history paradigm, which found its summa in John Bodnar's *The Transplanted* (1985), even challenged the assumption that turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrants actually *wanted* to become Americans, deconstructing it by pointing at the high number of returns and low percentage of naturalizations (in which Italians championed). Ethnic historians drew also methodologically from Vecoli: for the historians of the Italian-American experience the favorite scale of analysis was definitely the urban community (their favorite time-frame was the peak years of immigration through the Immigration Act of 1924); a productive choice because of the high degree of residential concentration of first- and second-generation Italian immigrants.

In the best examples, the use of quantitative and qualitative sources and a multidisciplinary approach allowed historians to locate the processes of socialization and identification in an actual context, as well as thoroughly penetrate "Little Italies" as regards labor, housing, family structures, gender, associational life, and political and religious participation. That is why a few works of the late 1970s and 1980s transcended the boundaries of Italian-American studies. Eric Foner's edited volume *The New American History* (1997) placed three books of Italian-American history in an essential bibliography of Immigration History, and all of them were community histories: Virginia Yans-McLaughlin's *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (1977), Donna Gabaccia's *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (1984), and Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (1985). A volume edited by Robert Harney and Vincenza Scarpaci, *Little Italies in North America* (1981), suggested that an actual research and narrative universe had formed around the study of Italian-American urban communities, while Gary R. Mormino's and George E. Pozzetta's *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (1987) demonstrated that the same formula could also address interracial and comparative questions (the book won the Immigration and Ethnic History Society's Theodore Saloutos Memorial Award).

Even though Vecoli remained over the years the intellectual founding father rather than an active participant in "Little Italy Studies," dedicating most of his energies to cultural organization and the construction of yet another place – the archive (he was a frantic collector of primary sources for the collections of the IHRC) – he contributed significant writings on the basic three "R"s of Italian America – Religion, Radicalism, and Race (to these, Donna Gabaccia would add some of the most notable ones on the two "F"s of Family and Food) (Vecoli 1969; 1983; 1995). When Vecoli passed away in 2008 he was widely recognized as a crucial figure in both Italian-American and U.S. immigration history; a status that his lucid, essential, and jargon-free writing style, reflecting his wariness for broad generalizations and categorizations, had helped him to achieve ("Forum on *Sempre, Rudi*").

DONNA GABACCIA: TRANSATLANTIC CROSSINGS AND ITALIAN DIASPORAS

By the early 1990s, though, this classic model of study of Italian-American communities had exhausted its momentum. The effects of the post-1965 immigration, overwhelmingly originating in Central and Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific, had redesigned the Departments of Ethnic and American Studies nationwide and U.S. Immigration as a discipline. Italian-American history became a fragment of the history of European immigration, whose principal value for historical theory and methodology now lay in the discussion of the centrality of race in shaping the experience of immigrant Americans. Globalization and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, in turn, deeply transformed U.S. history in a post-national or transnational direction. In this context, migrations to North America became interesting when studied with a multipolar approach and in their circulatory movements, rather than as two-way processes. Almost single-handedly, historian Donna Gabaccia was able to inflect all these new perspectives into the case of the Italian diaspora, making it extremely relevant for scholarly historical debate, and in the process revitalizing Italian-American history as a useful sub-discipline for twenty-first-century historiography.

Gabaccia was born in Great Barrington, Mass., and grew up in rural Columbia County, New York. A "daughter of the Sixties" developing her progressive views as the first child in her working-class immigrant family to attend college, at the beginning of her career Gabaccia was herself very mobile as an academic migrant: she studied in Germany and did research in Italy for the above mentioned Ph.D. dissertation, and later book, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street* – a microhistorical analysis of the Sicilian community of Milocca and its translocal twin reconstituted on a few blocks of New York's Little Italy and an analysis that originally merges women, family, housing, and migration history ("Student Exercise"). In the mid-1980s the book was ahead of its time, though. Gabaccia was to discover that her inventiveness and transdisciplinarity actually isolated her, as national histories and area studies still reigned over History departments: there was not an academic placement, a market, and an audience for transnational and global migration studies. Apparently, Gabaccia would have just given up and chosen another profession if it weren't for the 1990 annual AIHA Conference in New Orleans. Attending the conference to deliver what she supposed to be her "'swan song' paper," Gabaccia,

> met new colleagues (Fraser Ottanelli, Joseph Barton, Sam Baily, Carol Bonomo Albright, and Fernando DeVoto) who praised the global and comparative approach I attempted in it. Collectively, their enthusiasm worked its influence on me. Rather than write another book about immigrants for American historians, I began to fantasize of writing a book about Italian migration for scholars interested in class and ethnicity in many lands. I also quickly met an interdisciplinary group of Americanists searching for global and comparative ways to interpret modern history and life in the U.S. Here was the audience I wanted to address. (*Italy's Many Diasporas*, xii)

In the next two decades, Gabaccia lived up to the promise both of transforming Italian global migration in a paradigm for diaspora studies and of performing a painstaking work of cultural organization, mobilizing international scholars around symposium and editorial projects about "Italians Everywhere." This network logic, which allowed individual experiences of research to overcome national and disciplinary boundaries, developed into the publication of two collections, *Italian Workers of the World: Labor Migration and the Formation of Multiethnic States* (edited with Fraser Ottanelli, 2001), focalizing the intersection of labor migration, workers' internationalism, and nation-building, and *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (edited with Franca Iacovetta, 2002), on the comparative experience of migrant Italian women workers, militants, and mothers to different countries. A more recent collection has explored the world of nationalism, intimacy, and emotions Italian migrants have created in the diaspora (*Intimacy and Italian Migration: Gender and Domestic Lives in a Mobile World*, edited with Loretta Baldassar, 2011).

A formidably prolific writer, Gabaccia has authored two monographs that have established themselves as new classics. *Italy's Many Diasporas* (2000) is the definitive history of Italian migrations, in a *long-duree* that spans from the Middle Ages to the turn of the twenty-first century. It addresses proletarian, trade, and political migration and covers the five continents as places of destination. *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Foods and the Making of Americans* (1998) is a history of immigrant and ethnic eating in the U.S., which insists on the long-term proclivity of Americans to cross the boundaries of taste and identity on the food terrain. In all these works, the Italian-American case has special prominence, as a particularly significant experience for the

illumination of the questions of class, labor, nation, race, gender, and sexuality that Italian migrants have elaborated in response to the specific conditions they have encountered in the world; among them as participants in a global diaspora; and in the relationships with their original "home."

With Gabaccia's work, Italian-American history has also entered a new era from a narrative point of view. Gabaccia's prose reproduces in form – with her very imaginative writing style – the dense, highly theoretically informed, contents of her essays. Perhaps less obsessed with the "objectivity" of sources than Vecoli, Gabaccia is more versed on broad theorizations and interpretations. She has consistently used the Italian and Italian-American case to deconstruct existing, and create new, interpretative postulates. Her works are *tour de forces* that are always rewarding for the scholar of Italian-American history who appreciates the tremendous heuristic values of the field.

MARINA CACIOPPO

The Role of Early Serialized Fiction in the Development of a Canon of Italian-American Literature

For a long time, "few in academia regarded Italian-American literature as a category in itself" (Bona, "Introduction" 3). The idea of an Italian-American literature seemed far-fetched to both Italian and American academics. On the European side of the Atlantic, the closedness of the bureaucratically defined disciplines and a certain snobbery toward the perceived lack of aesthetic quality of Italian-American writings and of the high cultural status of their writers has hindered its development and institutionalization as a field; on the other side of the Atlantic, the dominance of the glamorous gangster stereotype as a pole around which representations of Italian Americans gravitate has set the agenda for many scholars and has obscured the rich and varied cultural production of the group since its beginnings over a century ago.

The fact that we are only asking this question now is itself a sign of the late recognition of the existence of this field but also, at the same time, of the revived interest in exploring it. Having missed out on many of the developments spurred by the ethnic revival of the 1960s, Italian-American literary studies only began in the late 1980s and did not take off as a movement until the late 1990s. However, the predominant focus of this work has been on authors of the 1930s and 1940s such as John Fante, Pietro di Donato, Jerre Mangione, and those who came after, almost completely ignoring the vast literary output in Italian from the 1880s to the 1920s. Especially important, in my view, is the fiction serialized in newspapers and other periodicals of the day, which not only illuminates the early experiences of immigrants in America and the specific dynamics at work within these early Italian-American communities, but also sheds light on the process of forming an Italian-American ethnic identity – its mechanisms and dynamics, the external forces impinging upon it, and the group's own concerns with self-representation, both individually and collectively.

These texts have only begun to be recovered in the last ten years or so, their oblivion due to both practical and political reasons. Firstly, they are dispersed in the hundreds of Italian-American periodicals held in archives both in Italy and in the United States, making access difficult. Written in Italian and/or dialects, they are difficult for many non-Italian scholars to read and hard to inscribe within disciplinary boundaries as they are fundamentally transatlantic products, neither Italian nor American, but both. Secondly, for a long time scholarly attitudes have been influenced by the negative aesthetic judgments expressed by prominent critics, such as Giuseppe Prezzolini and Emilio Cecchi in the 1940s and 1950s (Durante 2: 4; Pietralunga 71; Viscusi, "The History" 46), who were looking for "the great, true book ... of the Italian in America" (qtd. in Marazzi 22) and viewed the textual production of the "*colonia*" as derivative and provincial, relegating it to a marginal position.

As Francesco Durante has noted, Italy's recent transformation from a country of emigration to a country of immigration has spurred a renewed interest in immigration studies; as scholars are starting to consider ethnic literature produced in Italy, a recovery of our own emigrants' literary production now appears long overdue. In the U.S., the multilingual turn in American literature, advocating the inclusion of texts in languages other than English in the canon

of American literature (see Shell and Sollors; Sollors), has opened the way to a re-discovery of what Robert Viscusi has called the "colonial period" in Italian-American literature ("The History" 45). The archival work done by Martino Marazzi and myself, and especially the enormous contribution of Durante, who has produced a comprehensive, two-volume anthology of early texts in Italian, have opened a whole new chapter in Italian-American literary studies (see also Buonomo's work on early Italian-American texts written in English).

As these early texts have become more well-known and accessible to scholars, some of them have begun to be included in survey articles on Italian-American literature. Some names have begun to emerge as common points of reference for this period, such as Luigi Donato Ventura, Bernardino Ciambelli, and Camillo Cianfarra. For example, recent articles by Viscusi, Mary Jo Bona, and Peter Kvidera in a collection of essays published by the MLA include these authors in their discussions of the history, canon, and pedagogy of Italian-American literary studies, showing that they are perhaps beginning to enter into the canon. The recovery of these texts should not only be motivated by the urge to fill a time gap in the history of Italian-American literature, or by the value that these texts have as an anticipation of themes and genres of future, more important works; instead, they should be appreciated for and studied in terms of the real cultural work that they perform and the dynamics that we can see at work in them. Ciambelli is an example that we can use to illustrate some of the interesting issues that can be found in these texts and which make them worthy of serious consideration in discussions of an Italian-American canon.

Ciambelli, like most writers of this period, was a journalist whose fictional writing has a close relationship to his journalism. His "sprawling" mysteries of the city novels (aside from their typical romance elements, *à la* Eugene Sue – tortuous and multiple plot-lines, prurient and sensational details, seedy and dangerous slums inhabited by swarthy, ruthless criminals, the vices of the upper class) contain original, more realistic elements tightly related to life in the *colonia*: a realistic representation of Italian communities, topographical references to the actual places in which they lived, references to real crimes and detective figures taken from reality, notably Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino and the Italian Squad (a unit of the NYPD formed in 1905 specifically to fight Italian crime). If one considers the attention to real social issues and the close relation to the local and crime news that filled the pages of the press of the

colonia, seeing this fiction as simply a derivative version of the Italian tradition of *feuilleton* (though correct to a certain extent) does not exhaust the analysis of these works, which also need to be put in relation to their social context and circumstances of production and consumption.

The interest of these texts lies more in analyzing how the conventions of the genre are bent to meet the needs of self-representation and self-definition of an Italian-American community that was struggling against prevailing stereotypes in the process of negotiating its ethnic identity. Progressively introducing the theme of the "recurring conflict with institutional authorities, in particular the police and judicial system," which Bona ("Rich Harvest" 87) has defined as an archetype of Italian-American fiction, Ciambelli's romances carry out a systematic attack on, and wholesale reversal of, anti-Italian stereotypes centered around the issue of Italians' supposedly innate criminal bent. Providing alternative representations of the Italian community as honest, hard-working people and addressing the topic of criminality in the Italian enclaves by creating a police detective character from a widely recognized American hero were effective means to counter stereotypes about Italian Americans that were becoming popular in the mainstream press, popular magazines, and even the Congressional Record and which represented them as an ethnic group which, by nature, race, and culture was unfit to adapt to American law and democratic institutions, or worse, ready to conspire against them.

For example, Ciambelli, interrupting the narrative – and echoing the words of the real Petrosino in a newspaper interview (Smith 49) – defends the community against accusations of complicity in criminality, arguing that they themselves are victims not only of crime but also of a system that left them unprotected in their under-policed neighborhoods: "every time a mystery was too entangled to be solved, they'd say: the Black Hand did it. An easy excuse that often covered the ineptitude of the police" (*I misteri* ch. 9, my translation). In another text, when a number of workers are killed in an explosion during the construction of Penn Station, the fictional Petrosino rails against the invisibility of the hard-working, law-abiding majority of the enclave to mainstream society as well as the exploitative capitalist system that sees workers as disposable. He laments that these men "did not belong to the Black Hand, but to the legion of men with calluses on their hands, to the squad of the martyrs of work," knowing full well that "his cry would not be

heard, as a clamor was only made every time an Italian committed a crime, while there was silence when hundreds fell victim in the line of duty" (*Il delitto* ch. 48, my translation).[1]

By engaging in these counter-representations, Ciambelli may have been gratifying his colonial audience to some extent, but to see it as merely a misguided defense of criminality means overlooking the broader discursive context in which he was operating. Ciambelli's fictional strategies, for example, can be usefully linked to the political stance of *La Follia di New York*, in which much of his work was published. Its editor, in fact, was a delegate of the National Liberal Immigration League whose main purpose was to counter the racial arguments of the nativists in the public debate over immigration restriction policies. The alignment of Ciambelli's representational strategies with his editors places this literary production firmly within the context of the contemporary debate over immigration restriction, which was very much on the mind of his colonial readership, as well as the general public. It also points toward a reading that can shed light on the massive popularity of this kind of fiction in terms of the community's need to contest the mainstream, racialized regime of representation, heavily influenced by nativist ideology, and to have alternative models with which to identify.

Thus contextualized and set against external, mainstream representations, the serial fiction of the colonial period can be seen to be participating directly in the processes of constructing ethnic identity and developing strategies for its representation. And as these issues are certainly among the primary foci of the broader project of Italian-American literary studies, these early texts need to be understood as fitting squarely within its scope rather than relegated to the status of a historical footnote presaging more interesting developments to come. These developments were already happening in these early texts, and these formulations need to be put in relation to later re-workings of the same issues in order to have a deeper and fuller under-

[1] Ciambelli's originals for the two preceding translations read as follows: "Tutte le volte che non si giungeva a trovare il bandolo di una matassa molto intrigata si diceva: è la Mano Nera. Comoda scusa questa che copriva spesso l'inettitudine della polizia" (*I misteri* ch. 9); "non appartengono alla Mano Nera, ma alla legione degli uomini dalle mani callose, alla squadra dei martiri del lavoro. Il suo grido non sarebbe stato udito, perché si usa far clamore tutte le volte che un italiano commette un delitto, ma si tace quando centinaia e centinaia cadono vittime del dovere" (*Il delitto* ch. 48).

standing of the range and diversity of Italian-American literary production; thus, in the process of constructing a canon in this field, it is important to consider these kinds of texts and not only those which have received the most scholarly attention and analysis.

Martino Marazzi

What Fodder for the Canon?

A poet, an artist, doesn't ask for permission to his or her public. He needs, first of all, to be true to himself: not to the reader, not to the critic; not to the existing, but invisible, structures of society. His life and his urge to fulfill it by recreating it come first. The more I make room, in my own research for the creative words of immigrants (Italians to the U.S., but more and more, Italians everywhere, and all men to Italy and to the Western world: see, for instance, the overwhelming and disrupting force of Nuruddin Farah's *Yesterday, Tomorrow*), the more I try to learn the difficult art of listening with respect to the unique and individual intelligence deposited at the core of one's wounded personality. Those wounds and that perceptiveness, however expressed, are not matters of historiography, nor can they be comfortably tailored into a predetermined pensum. I have always found it sad to reduce works of art into the patterns of a genre: it's a good way to abuse the enthusiasm of our students and to stifle their genuine interest. Of course, there are several bona fide narrative and poetical genres, patterns, and structures. They've always been around, and there's nothing wrong in detecting them or in pondering over their strategic relevance in a writer's expressive style. But there comes a point when we as scholars should also try to be true to ourselves and consider the heart of the matter.

The decisiveness behind the ultimate journey that is emigration shows there's no time to fiddle around and demands that we get to the point. It would be relatively easy to linger around the surface of our theme. The fact that a number of scholars are asked to test the emergence of a canon is by itself

a sign, if not proof, of its likelihood. The questions, then, more or less become: "Why is there a canon?"; "Why have we come to think in those terms?"; and "What is its existence telling us about our position?"

It is rather obvious, in my view, that a discourse on the canon (whatever its content) camouflages a desire to be accepted by the received wisdom of a majority. That has its perks. If you act accordingly, you're recognized, you're ushered in and given a candy. You're being a good boy, all the more because you've looked up to something or someone. A canon – or rather, a canonical way of thinking – is the sweet harmony oozing out of the blissful spheres of *Order*. As any good altar boy knows, you sing in tune with someone else and acquiesce in the soothing sound of the organ. Call it the neo-Tomism of literary studies.

Take the mechanism a little further. Convince yourself. Not only that, but convince yourself of being able to see a canon, teach it, and pass it on. Now you're on the way to turning into the chrysalis of an obedient scholar. You've learned to read the *Books* in their correct order. You'll also be able to type in the correct order of your credit card numbers and book a flight and a room to the next conference where a job is being searched. The parthenogenesis of higher learning requires an accurate tuning of your intellectual disposition.

The canonical discourse, then, which is inescapable and by now shared among colleagues of Italian Americana, is also, more or less, an act of self-defense: be it Catholic, Machiavellian, or democratic in the American way. Inventing a tradition, a sign of distinction. Chanting the mantra in class, a proof of your reliability.

There's nothing wrong in an unquenchable thirst for acceptance. In a way, it reduplicates the assimilating rituals of the defamed melting pot. And one should point out, to its credit, that the canonical discourse requires a fair share of abstraction, of inventiveness, as I just suggested. It's binding in many ways, but it also has the thin elegance of an airy formation, mesmerizing only if you keep staring at it.

Let's go back to earth. I feel I've done my share of historical research. Fashioning a philology of immigrant writing has meant, for me, trying to ground the analysis of an epical, gigantic, historical phenomenon on the only extant traces of which I am confident enough given my training: written words, *litterae*, or, the staple of littera-ture. One should here open a huge preamble

on the relationship, in many immigrant cultures, between written and oral. Orality always played an immense role, but an analysis of its interplay with the written dimension is forcibly problematic, since its literary products are documented – precisely – in written forms, which in turn allow us to infer, rather than observe, the actual weight of the oral dimension. If and when we read about orality, its improvisational dynamism is by then long gone already. I find the whole theme inescapable and fascinating, but at the same time methodologically frustrating.

Which brings me back to my usual heroes, the "unsung" heroes – as Rudy Vecoli taught us to call them – of the largely Italian- and dialect-speaking first generation. It's hard for me to imagine if and how contemporary writers working in one or more of the new global "destination countries" (not only the Old New World of the U.S., but the New Old World of the peninsula, of the European Union, and the numerous other points of arrival and departure in Argentina, Brazil, Australia, etc.) can connect to the distinctly situated inspiration of the early demiurges, whose careers I cherished over the last two decades. I'm too biased in their favor. Their histories showed me a much larger picture of the birth of a nation, Italy; the more I learned from and through them, the more I learned about the suppressed and all-too-human aspects of the Italian recent past – a past that in so many ways is now unleashing a metaphorical nemesis with the force of a tsunami. Being better acquainted with the past doesn't help us in figuring out the present, let alone the future, but it can at least disabuse us and warn us against ossifying categories. It can help us to be more open to possibilities.

There were, indeed, some great beams of light. As always, the "fathers" – however wild and irreproducible – did leave their imprints. Italian-American literature was born with a Tuscan storyteller, a dime-novelist, the pulp-fiction writer Bernardino Ciambelli: his stories are crazy, but the thrust of his prose is contagious, and the maps of his dramas, far from naive, are socially and ideologically revealing. Arturo Giovannitti was a giant soul, a poet divided, a cleft-poet of the proletariat; but when years ago we read aloud his *Samnite Cradle Song*, in its Italian version, in the icy hall of his abandoned hill-town in Molise, ravaged by another earthquake, both curse and blessing sent waves of recognition, and we knew that such a poet could not be denied. Add Farfariello and his skits; in his marvelous study, Bertellini has shown the semiotical and

cultural depth that permeates this mask's diabolical comic art. Migliaccio's scathing self-irony remains unsurpassed, linguistically and conceptually. And there were other, more occasional, instances: the rough-and-tumble fight of cop Fiaschetti against the *goodfellas*, fought with the weapons of irony. He defused and ridiculed Sopranos and sopranology before the fact – enough for a seat at the Pantheon; and there was Carlo Tresca spitting against capitalism and military intervention, a radical enemy of prevailing, eternal sanctimony.

No gods and no masters. And yet, in some unacknowledged, tense way, around those and other voices the first communities of immigrants from Italy managed to express their divisions, contradictions, and their unremitting vitality. That literature, and its exponents, functioned as a public forum. They were the mouthpiece of a people. I have the impression that we've lost this collective, almost physical dimension.

I can't see all this as a lesson or as anything "empowering," but those writers used their language to the brim, they filled their time and helped their contemporaries experience a respite – which, I think, was the most harmony anyone could wrest under the circumstances. Unwitting canon-makers for their cushioned great-grandchildren, if you wish, delivering messages difficult to fully grasp, written as they were in another language. And here's an obvious but necessary rediscovery: the roots of the canon grow obliquely and point toward the stratified and complex Italian tradition. The canon works canonically, and its origins are also in some way self-reflective. So much for the illiteracy of the first generation. No people is ever without a culture.

EDVIGE GIUNTA

Memoir and the Italian-American Canon

The politics of recognition and the related discussion regarding the marginality of the field still permeate much of Italian-American scholarship. The ongoing concern to overcome the position of "emerging" literature makes the question of an emerging Italian-American canon fraught with complexity. We cannot

ignore the resistance in academia, often coming from writers and scholars of Italian descent, to recognize anything of lasting or "universal" value in Italian-American literature. Thus the anti-intellectual stigma against Italian Americans remains pervasive. The reasons for such resistance continue to constrain the scope of scholarly discussions in the field.

The memoir has most directly and powerfully addressed this resistance to the notion of the Italian-American literary figure. Memoir, unlike autobiography, is not about individual emergence, about the self retracing the steps that led to its present socially and culturally recognized success; it's not a narrative that outlines the journey of the self-in-the-making, a self invested in its separateness and individuation from the community of its origins. Memoir seeks to understand the ties between the self and its community. The contemporary memoir, in its most original and characteristic manifestation, theorizes a notion of the self less individualistic than the self of autobiography, a self more critically and ambivalently rooted in the lives of the community the writer inhabits or has left behind. Janet Zandy describes the breaking from working class origins as a form of self-denial and self-destruction: the move into the middle class can provoke a devastating cultural and social amnesia. Indeed, when writers from working-class and immigrant backgrounds embark on a journey in which the making of the self is equated with emancipation from and even renunciation of origins and community, they risk artistic suicide.

A number of contemporary Italian-American writers have turned to the memoir, a genre with its own problematic canonical status, to explore the relationship between the self and the community. The publication of Louise DeSalvo's groundbreaking memoir *Vertigo* in 1996 (almost ten years after the publication of Helen Barolini's *The Dream Book*) has been followed by a wealth of memoirs, especially by women writers, which collectively constitute a coherent body of work. This body of work speaks to the experience of being Italian American *and* fashioning oneself as a literary persona in a culture that continues to be partial to the trope of Italian Americans as anti-intellectual. A number of writers have written memoirs that should be regarded as constituting an emerging Italian-American canon. They include, among others, Mary Cappello, Maria Laurino, Kym Ragusa, Carole Maso, Diane di Prima, Susanne Antonetta, Danielle Trussoni, Carl Capotorto, and Joanna Herman. These writers have incorporated into their narratives – of family, sexuality, illness,

war, politics, literary movements, transforming neighborhoods, environmental violence – a sense of themselves as both the subjects of their narratives and the Italian-American artists shaping those narratives.

We can benefit from teaching memoir – the practice and craft of memoir – in our classrooms, where the next generation of Italian-American writers is emerging. As a pedagogical genre, the memoir involves learning and teaching to read the scattered traces of memory and to craft them into narratives. These narratives do not erase borders and separations; they are not preoccupied with filling or concealing the gaps between jagged pieces; they flaunt what Mary Cappello calls the "awkward." The process underscoring the development of these narratives is integrated into the narrative of memoir itself and can lead to radical political awareness and literary inventiveness.

The realization of the constructedness of memory work represents a key moment in the encounter between subjectivity and collectivity. Such a realization proves especially useful when teaching immigrant and working-class students (including many Italian-American students, whose life narratives defy the myth of a seamless Italian-American cultural integration and success). These young writers come to understand – through writing – the rigid social narratives that impede the complex revelations to which memory work can lead. For my Italian-American student writers, to move outside stale narratives of family, immigration, work, education, power, success, Italy and America, can prove a challenge, one that most of them welcome once they learn, through memoir writing, to disengage from the story they thought they wanted to write. Once they let go of the learned impulse to think of their story as being *about* a well-understood event waiting to be told and contained in a pre-determined form, they begin to write stories that explore in a nuanced and authentic manner the relationship with their communities: this relationship, while full of conflicts and contradictions, is vital to the survival and the making of a self that has political, ethical, and literary coherence.

Leonardo Buonomo

The Legacy of John Fante

At his best, John Fante both illuminates and transcends the canon of Italian-American literature. In a deceptively simple, wonderfully fluid prose style that resonates with the quality of the speaking voice, his novels and short stories dramatize the themes at the heart of all ethnic writings in the United States (Anglo-American included) and, indeed, of the American experience as a whole, namely: identity, allegiance, family, independence, and self-expression. A second-generation Italian American, Fante put into words his condition, at once maddening and stimulating, of being culturally in-between, of simultaneously acknowledging and rejecting his Italian heritage, of needing to both identify with the American mainstream and keep at bay a nagging suspicion he could never entirely belong to it. In the course of a career that began in the 1930s with the appearance of his first stories in H.L. Mencken's influential *American Mercury* and ended in the 1980s when, rendered blind by diabetes, he dictated his last novel, *Dreams from Bunker Hill* (1982), to his wife Joyce, Fante produced works which in my opinion not only place him firmly in the history of American literary modernism, and which in some respects look forward to postmodernism, but also make him a prominent figure in the tradition of the American urban novel of the twentieth century.

Having read story after story in which the young Fante, through his fictional alter egos, probes into his complicated, troubled feelings toward his parents and upbringing and depicts his home as both a refuge and a prison, H.L. Mencken wrote to his gifted protégé that the subject of his family seemed "to obsess" him (*John Fante & H. L. Mencken* 37) and encouraged him to explore other areas of experience. In spite of an admiration that at times came close to worship, Fante, as we know, did not heed his mentor's advice, something for which, I believe, we can only be thankful. Family life was an extraordinarily rich lore for Fante. As Fred Gardaphé has pointed out, Fante repeatedly drew from his own life to portray "the relationship between the individual and his family and community and the subsequent development of ... [his] ... American identity that requires both an understanding and a rejection of the immigrant past represented by the parent" ("John Fante's American *Fantasia*"

44). This ambivalence is rendered beautifully and painfully in Fante's fiction, particularly so in his deeply felt story "The Odyssey of a Wop" (a key text in the Italian-American canon), and in his poignant first novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938). In "Odyssey" (included in Fante's 1940 short story collection *Dago Red*) the young protagonist, torn by shame and self-hatred, strives to deny his family and ethnic background (indeed, his very name) in order to fashion a separate, independent identity and thereby ensure his admission into the dominant culture, namely the group that has the power to define everyone else as "Other." And yet, moments after mentally inveighing against his father who, in his eyes, is a living embodiment of Italian immigrant stereotypes, the protagonist acknowledges the unconquerable force of a shared heritage when confronted with his Italian-American schoolmates: "I am away from home, and I sense the Italians. We look at one another and our eyes meet in an irresistible amalgamation, a suffusive consanguinity" ("Odyssey" 140). No amount of willpower, no desire – however ardent – to efface one's ethnic and cultural traits, can finally suppress what Fante clearly felt to be an essential part of his and his characters' make-up, something that, in his view, quite literally ran in the blood. The Italianness that Fante's young protagonists desperately try to leave behind them, with its associations of poverty, backwardness, and marginality, is incarnated in their parents. Mentally and emotionally the parents are still, to some extent, in the old place, or one might say that the old place is still in them. And it is almost as if, in their desire to differentiate themselves or even break free from their parents, Fante's young heroes were trying to bring to completion that process of removal from the old country which did indeed take place for the older generation, but only in a geographic sense. As portrayed by Fante, the children of those emigrants are themselves, metaphorically speaking, emigrants, or rather would-be emigrants from their families; but, as they invariably discover, the family is a country they can never entirely either escape or abandon. Thus it comes as no surprise that their frustration, resentment, and sense of entrapment should frequently develop into aggressiveness and even hate.

And yet at the same time the household and, by extension, the larger circle of the Italian-American community provide a comforting haven from the prejudice with which the dominant culture views all minorities. Significantly, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, Svevo (the father) and Arturo (the son)

are finally reunited when the widow Effie Hildegarde, with whom Svevo had been conducting an affair, makes them the joint target of her xenophobic insults: "'You peasants!' the Widow said. 'You foreigners!'" (*Wait* 265). Her words are a brutal reminder that, outside their own house and community, the Bandinis tread on hostile ground. The different status that Svevo claims for his American-born son – as he indignantly retorts: "You can't talk to him like that. That boy's an American. He is no foreigner" (*Wait* 265) – is not recognized by the widow. In her eyes father and son are indistinguishable in their shared alienness. They are foreigners who are trespassing on her property and, by implication, on American soil. As he departs with his son, Svevo resorts to his native Italian to respond to the widow's indiscriminate contempt, thus verbally anticipating the return to his home ground and family that we witness in the final pages of the novel.

In *Ask the Dust* (1939), Fante places Arturo Bandini (now a struggling twenty-year-old writer) in a Los Angeles setting he portrays as alternatively moribund and alluring, where outsiders – immigrants from the Midwest and ethnic minorities – pathetically pursue the elusive *California dream* of prosperity and success. Had Fante written nothing else, with *Ask the Dust* he would still have earned a place in the history of American literature for creating one of the fundamental Los Angeles novels, to be ranked alongside Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* and Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (both of which, as it happens, were published in the same year as *Ask the Dust*). Moreover, for its depiction of cheated, devitalized Midwestern immigrants (whom Fante's hero both despises and pities), stranded in heartless, unwelcoming California, *Ask the Dust* may call to mind another coeval novel, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Culturally and morally barren, sickly and seedy, the Los Angeles of *Ask the Dust* is also Fante's own wasteland, or a Southern Californian version of the valley of ashes. However, what makes Fante's recreation of the city unique is the way in which, through the eyes of his Italian-American hero, he shows us an ethnically diverse milieu where relationships are inescapably conditioned by cultural, social, and (in the pseudo-scientific language of the time) "racial hierarchies." As Katherine Kordich has noted, upon "moving to Los Angeles, Arturo discovers that the social perception of his ethnicity has shifted" (78). If in his native Colorado his Italian name and appearance had made him a member of a despised ethnic minority, the more diverse ethnic

composition of Los Angeles grants him at least a position of relative superiority over communities (such as the Mexicans, the Filipinos, and the Jews) that the Anglo majority regards as even more undesirable than his. It is this newly acquired rank, combined with the painful memory of the hateful ethnic insults that "Smith and Parker and Jones" (*Ask* 46) had hurled at him back home, that poisons his relationship with the woman he loves, the Mexican-American waitress Camilla Lopez. Since she mirrors his own ineradicable difference (as does, to some extent, Vera Rivken, the mature Jewish woman with whom Arturo has a brief affair), Camilla simultaneously attracts and repels Arturo. Nowhere is this oscillating attitude more evident than in the words he addresses to her, expressing as they do, alternately, the pleasure of affinity, condescension, hyperbolic infatuation, and outright racism. Unsure of his own ethnic status, Arturo cannot resolve his feelings for Camilla, just as he cannot resolve his feelings for Los Angeles. That Fante intended to suggest a link between the beautiful young woman and the city (whose very name reminds us of the Mexican past of Southern California) is strongly suggested by the novel's ending. In a dope-induced stupor, Camilla disappears into the Mojave Desert whose dust, as Fante repeatedly reminds us in the novel, is carried by the wind and deposited over the city and its population, thus foreshadowing their ultimate, inevitable fate.

With its treatment of the volatile relationship between Arturo and Camilla and, indeed, of Arturo's contradictory attitudes toward women in general, *Ask the Dust* also reveals the relevance of gender issues in Fante's fiction. If Arturo's uneasy mix of fear of, and longing for, sexual experience derives in large part from his Catholic upbringing (most patently obvious when he interprets the Long Beach earthquake as divine retribution for sleeping with Vera Rivken), it is also true that Fante here and elsewhere in his work intriguingly associates masculine insecurity with a literary profession. In *Ask the Dust*, Camilla tellingly calls into question Arturo's virility and sexual orientation when his verbally ornate professions of love for her fail to translate into actual love-making. By contrast she becomes obsessed with her fellow employee, the Anglo Sammy, a "man of action" who regards writing (he dreams of penning lucrative pulp westerns) as merely a means of making money. The impression is that by devoting themselves to the art of storytelling, Fante's characters inevitably come into contact with their feminine side, thus renouncing traditional

Italian-American models of masculinity. This is another factor that feeds the generational conflict Fante repeatedly explores and finds its most memorable expression in the father-son relationship at the center of his penultimate novel *The Brotherhood of the Grape* (1977).

Although suffering the devastating effects of diabetes in the last years of his life, Fante nevertheless found cause for joy in the reappearance in print, after a long absence, of *Ask the Dust* and in the consequent renewal of interest in his work. Since then it may be said to have achieved cult status, particularly in France, Germany, and Italy. In addition to winning a large and devoted readership, as well as being recognized as a "classic" (as evidenced, for example, by the 2003 publication of his collected works, edited by Francesco Durante), Fante struck a chord with a new generation of Italian writers, notably Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Sandro Veronesi, and Alessandro Baricco. In the United States, critical and scholarly appreciation of Fante's work has grown slowly but steadily over the years, from Rose Basile Green's early tribute in her study *The Italian-American Novel* (1974) to the publication of Jay Martin's seminal essay "John Fante: The Burden of Modernism and the Life of His Mind" (1999) and Stephen Cooper's excellent biography *Full of Life* (2000). Official recognition of Fante's standing in American literary history is still slow in coming, although his inclusion in such publications as *The Literature of California* (2000) and *The Columbia Companion to the American Twentieth-Century Short Story* (2000) is undoubtedly an encouraging sign.

Giuseppe Lombardo

Italian Americans: The Example of Pietro di Donato

In August 1967 the *New York Times* published "The Italians, American Style," Mario Puzo's passionate and intense claim of the innovative contribution of Italian Americans to the society and culture of their chosen country. The article voiced the writer's restrained but frank protest against the *clichés* of Mafia and

Cosa Nostra obsessively played on Americans of Italian descent. "The story of the Italian migration," Puzo says, "is a great epic ... a story that perhaps has not been quite properly told ... in some ways, a bitterly sad story." Far from the expected traits of the *mafioso* type, "the poorest Italian is the proudest of persons. He never complains about being barred from an exclusive country club; when he achieves economic success he never tries to crash an élite social group. He has always known where he was not wanted, and one of the first places where he knew he was not wanted was Italy." In literature, poets and novelists "have made hardly any impact at all on the American public," with the possible exception of "Pietro Di Donato's primitive novel," his masterpiece *Christ in Concrete*. The caustic but piquant label comes with a tone of implied rebuke to the artist who, in subsequent years, "has not written anything comparable since that first novel was published in 1939" ("The Italians" 7). In the context of cultural history, Puzo's choice of words cannot be considered a random one; on the contrary, it is proof of his sincere admiration for a genuine novel, the true outcome of a generous creative effort not governed by sophisticated techniques, a book unable to fuse the contrasting elements making up the harsh picture of immigrant life built by di Donato. Puzo sincerely admires the author. He is the authentic type of the millions of immigrants who bent their spine without hesitation under the weight of exploitation, relying on physical strength and the "shovel" in order to push on the dream of redemption from a life of hardships and violence; men who exuded a *terragna* vitality outweighing tragedies and passing joys in a unique boost toward survival.

"Primitive" conveys all these aspects both of rawness and authenticity, while linking them to the resounding success of the novel at the time of its publication, the very end of the post-Great Depression dramatic decade. Unfortunately, the word categorizes di Donato's novel as boggy ground, a tricky text if you try to bridle it within the framework of Italian/American culture (on hyphenation: Tamburri, *To Hyphenate or Not To Hyphenate?* and his "Preface" to *A Semiotic* viii-ix), suggesting indirectly a supposed equivalence between its peculiar qualities and the salient features of the ethnic affiliation of its author. In other words, the ethnic standpoint prevents di Donato from reaching levels of universality that would justify his *example* in the course of mainstream literature. He therefore is condemned to a narrower perspective on rules and values organic to a reality lost by now, artificially recreated by

immigrants in the many Little Italies dotting America, the great mother ready to welcome all the dispossessed of the world. The ethnic heritage inevitably traps their existential prospect, neither completely resolved in the melting pot nor identifiable in full with pre-immigration life.

Starting from this split condition in the cultural identity of Italian/American artists, scholars have explored new roads, supplementing the traditional paraphernalia of textual analysis with the resources of sociology, anthropology, the study of cultures and conditions and instruments of communication, the approach of gender, and comparative studies. The result was a total reversal of Puzo's somewhat defeatist position, partially tempered, it is true, by his exaltation of the Italian age-long contribution to culture. Indeed, in the case of di Donato, the 1993 reprint of *Christ in Concrete* for the Signet Classics, with an introduction by Fred Gardaphé, marked the full recovery of the value of the novel as a work of art and of di Donato's stature as an Italian/American intellectual and a writer who sails the national mainstream dialogue, exploiting the central themes of economic freedom and liberation from social alienation, the dreams of immigrants, and their sometimes tragic involvement in ideological class dynamics. The very primitiveness, which troubled Puzo, has become proof of the linguistic experimentalism the artist consciously performs, marking inter-ethnic language not as an instrument of exclusion but as a means to assert identity, to live it with pride and without restrictions.

Starting with the tentative essays by Mariolina Salvatori (on the female figures in *Christ in Concrete*), Michael Esposito, and Flaminio Di Biagi, then going through the increasingly refined attempts at categorization by Fred Gardaphé, Mary Jo Bona, Anthony Julian Tamburri, and others, and the perceptive explorations by Sarah Benelli, Josephine Gattuso Hendin, Maria Paola Malva, Nicholas Coles, Fred Gardaphé, Anthony Julian Tamburri, Michael Fazio, Peter Kvidera, and myself, a substantial and varied critical corpus has accumulated, focusing on the narrative dynamics of the novel, as well as on social aspects and ideological-political relevant issues. The introduction by Fred Gardaphé to the Signet reprint of *Christ in Concrete* acknowledged that scholars now consider the first novel by di Donato to be the prototypical *ethnic* American novel, singling out the use of a peculiar linguistic *pastiche* of English and Italian as its distinctive feature, the privileged instrument through which the *italianità* of the novel emerges and articulates. Gardaphé

develops a complex key to interpretation, involving the deconstruction and rewriting of "the Christian myth." The young Paul and Annunziata, the mother, function as a veritable inversion of the figureheads of the Catholic faith, formally acting as conservative forces that induce the immigrants to a passive acceptance of their condition of exclusion and exploitation. In the final rebellion of Paul (intensely symbolized through the smashing of the Crucifix), the icon of the Mater Dolorosa (symbolically incarnated by the dying Annunziata) replaces that of Christ (Geremio), leaving a legacy as to the awareness of the impossibility of "redemption through the father," i.e. the fact that to be in the system, to interact with it, does not open to the immigrant the doors of the American Dream, but rather envisions for him the same tragic fate of Geremio. So, Paul's individual quest finally moves toward the conquest of a renewed spiritual truth that grows into a revolutionary "socialistic vision of the world" ("Introduction" ix-xviii).

An adverse, and somehow inevitable, outcome of this growing interest in *Christ in Concrete* was a correlative process of devaluation of di Donato's remaining production. Apart from an essay dedicated to *This Woman* (1959), and occasional, sporadic pages on *The Immigrant Saint: The Life of Mother Cabrini* (1960), *Three Circles of Light* (1960), or *The Penitent* (1962) (Lombardo, "Building a New Self"; Deasy; Burnham; McDonnell; Cerasulo), the predominant critical perspective seems to be that of a sudden collapse of creative tension after the success of the history of Geremio and his family, as if the author had mysteriously lost his ability to capture the themes and situations constituting that *italianità* so effectively focused in the debut novel. The imagery vibrant with "earthy sensuality," which Gardaphé indicates as the distinguishing quality of the community of Italian immigrants ("Introduction" xi), the connective tissue making up the structure of the linguistic *pastiche* of *Christ* and giving rise to the effects of estrangement of the builders involved in a titanic effort on the gigantic structure of Job, seems to be suddenly out of di Donato's reach. It is true that *This Woman* is still largely an effort in the use of rhythmic patterns, mainly based on the iteration process of specific lexical items and their resulting cumulative force; but the weaknesses of the plot and excessive insistence on an exasperated sexual desire undermine the compactness of the whole, sometimes frustrating the writer's effort to maintain a balanced mixture of narrative and symbolic elements. The key to the deconstruction of

the "Christian myth" (see above) does not seem to be useful in the case of the biography of Mother Cabrini or in the reconstruction of the life of Alessandro Serenelli, the murderer of Saint Maria Goretti. Privileging *Christ in Concrete* as the object of critical inquiry, scholars have indirectly acknowledged the correctness of the perspective designed by Mario Puzo. Di Donato's literary career seems to be seriously flawed by the writer's inability to build upon the unique combination of faith in the message of redemption and strength of social denunciation, which are the powerful narrative poles in the story of Geremio and Paul. Maybe, Puzo was in some way too passionate in labeling *Christ in Concrete* as a "primitive novel," though from his point of view there was solid ground for his inability to abide with what he considered as the unresolved crudity of di Donato's style.

As a matter of fact, the widespread consensus on the peculiar outline of di Donato's career gives us precious hints as for the future critical ventures that are likely to pursue new and stimulating targets. Most probably, scholarly interest will concentrate on the polysemous nature of narrative language in *Christ in Concrete* and *This Woman* and the way in which the artist manipulates different linguistic codes (English and Italian) in view of the ideological function of both themes and characters. In the novels, in fact, two registers coexist: a neutral one, unmistakably referential, highly stylized, typical of the omniscient narrator who dominates the spatial/temporal frame in which the characters act in social and ethnic terms and the plot unfolds; and a colloquial one, typical of the individual protagonists, which the writer di Donato articulates in the form of a calque in English of the structure and rhetorical clauses of the dialectal varieties of central and southern Italy (Tamburri, "Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*" 4; "Bricklayer" 75, 77; Viscusi, "'De Vulgari Eloquentia'" 37; see also Sinicropi; Orsini; Mulas).

The linguistic code reifies the barrier of ethnic separation, establishes distances and roles, and conveys an ideological domain, almost a law, which the immigrants cannot escape. It is the focal point of the axiology of the artist. Di Donato claims it as a cultural and social heritage (in his narrative texts the authorial point of view is regularly superimposed on the narrator's perspective), and as the main focus of a politically conscious analysis of the ostensibly democratic but essentially oppressive structure of American society. Language and its possession become power in the full sense of the term,

and the author/narrator, with a strong grip on storytelling, identifies all his protagonists through the use of a specific linguistic register (the language of bureaucracy, that of the Church, of policemen, shopkeepers, other outcasts, of men, women, etc.), which is governed by relations of dominance/exclusion. Di Donato creates a multilingual discourse that marks the changing borders of the real community of immigrants in its different dislocations of class and gender.

Aiming at steering clear of any form of ethnic reductionism, then, it is possible to implement, as Anthony Julian Tamburri has authoritatively suggested, a dynamic concept of ethnicity and magnify the interpretive potential of true artists, namely their ability to give voice to an original synthesis of the Italian/American identity through the creative manipulation of the languages available in their socio-cultural milieu. In this context, Tamburri notes, Italian/American culture may be taken as "a series of on-going written enterprises which establish a repertoire of signs, at times *sui generis*, and therefore create visual verbal variations (in the case of film, painting, sculpture, drama, etc.) that represent different versions – dependent of course on one's generation, gender, socio-economic condition – of what can be perceived as the Italian/American interpretant" (*A Semiotic* 8; for what may be called the founding guidelines of the new model of ethnicity see, again, *A Semiotic* 14; Fischer 195).

Within the perspective of this Italian/American interpretant, the ideological choices made by di Donato have a paradigmatic value. They may not translate into overt militant activism, but clearly imply a conscious adherence to the cause of the poor and oppressed, and therefore provide materials for the ideological dynamics of *Christ in Concrete* and *This Woman*. The ensuing structure is already fully operational in the first novel, whose syntax is organized around the repeated confrontations between Annunziata and Paul (the eldest son) on the one side, with economic and State powers on the opposite side. The resulting deconstruction of the American Dream replaces it with the version of an American nightmare (Job, to use the evocative word of the writer), a vortex that literally devours the immigrant workers, the enslaved labor force reduced to mere food supplying Job's hellish mechanisms (on di Donato's acute awareness of the enslaving mechanisms that bind the labor force to capitalistic exploitation see Diomede 110). In *This Woman*, the same structure is the ideological background on which the dualism

between the protagonists, Paul and Isa, takes place; or, to say it in narrative terms, it is the dramatic paradigm of the son of immigrants who has attained economic well-being (Paul is no longer a skilled mason but a contractor) and yet is continuously wavering between the seductions of full integration into American society and the impassioned defense of his ethnic heritage.

Language as an instrument of the ideological patterns of inclusion/exclusion strikes here its elective soil, loosening novels from the function of passive testimony of a reality, in view of their becoming the original terrain of experimentation toward a new and original synthesis of shapes, languages, and identities.

Daniela Daniele

The Missing Father, and Other Unhyphenated Stories of Waste and Beauty in Don(ald) DeLillo

Don DeLillo has always addressed a wider American audience than his originary Italian community, as he experiments with a style able to confront the American mainstream on national themes that have little to do with the romanticization of his ethnic roots. Most of his protagonists significantly carry Anglo-Saxon names like David Bell, Klara Sax, or Nick Shay, though surrounded by minor Italian characters who also experience a symbolic break from their cultural roots and take English nicknames such as "Nicky Black" for Scalzo in *Libra*.

The author himself has never been tempted to anglicize his name, as other writers of immigrant descent have done in the attempt to secure recognition and facilitate their access to the most exclusive intellectual circles. His first novel, *Americana*, shows how the disguise of the residual marks of ethnicity by means of onomastic travesty perpetuates, in Gatsby's fashion, the "universal third person, the man we all want to be" (170), that is, the mass-produced, "noncarnal" abstraction of the hegemonic Anglo-Saxon identity, which domesticates

diversity in America and eventually turns, in *Underworld*, every Branca into a Branker, every Sachs into a Sax. In the pseudonymous novel, *Amazons*, the author responded to this assimilation technique by maintaining an unequivocal Italian name, conscious that "First names give you a little freedom to let loose, to chant and embrace. Last names pin you to the earth" (117). And, to make the point clearer, in scorn of the criminal stereotypes that invest the Italian Americans, after his early "Italian" tales signed with his full name Donald DeLillo, the author ironically adopted the abbreviation "Don," fatally playing with the grim authority of the Mafia bosses that Italians are insultingly associated with. This obstinate loyalty is certainly a sign of the writer's awareness of his Italian cultural legacy but also proves, in his parents' belief in the American dream, that the son of modest immigrants from an out-of-the-way village in Molise could become one of the major contemporary novelists in America. Far from the vulnerable immigrant type who "must cast off the European skin, never to resume it" and prove ready, whatever their feelings, to "cling to the prejudices of this country" (Sollors 4), DeLillo looks quite at ease with the dimension of an author who rejects the hyphenated definition of "Italian-American writer," maintaining the critical stance of other Bronx native writers of his generation, namely, E.L. Doctorow and Grace Paley, who assumed the imperfect status of a partial integration to delve deeper into the mysteries of America.

It goes without saying that DeLillo's intention to confront a broader American field does not prevent him from offering vivid representations of the Italian neighborhood of Arthur Avenue where he grew up. His early stories are mostly set in the Bronx, although, apart from Gardaphé's reading, they have neither been given much critical attention nor been republished, being dismissed as little representative of this complex literary personality who would probably respond to the unconditioned pride of the typical Italian-American expression "Who's better than me?" with the more disenchanted and democratic "I'm better, I'm worse, what's the difference" (*Underworld* 685). Early Italian tales like "Take the 'A' Train" appear to him too "Hemingwayan" and "embarrassing" in their stark representation of the inherited models of male power, featuring domineering paternal figures whose "Proud Sicilian voice" subjects their sons to a series of brutal, patriarchal initiations, according to the agonistic conception of life as survival typical of first-generation immigrants struggling for integration ("Take the 'A' Train" 17).

Nevertheless, I always found these early stories a lively premonition of the Italian portraits to come, proving that the same author who declared in an interview that a writer with his background should leave his neighborhood for a larger context, keeps getting back to the genius loci, like financer Eric in *Cosmopolis*, who gets his ritual haircut in Hell's Kitchen, the block in mid-Manhattan where both Mario Puzo's and DeLillo's fathers grew up. This cultural ambivalence reflects the attitude of other innovative American writers of Italian origin, like Gilbert Sorrentino and Mary Caponegro, who claim a critical distance from their background without denying how much it nourished their imagination.

The author's affectionate view of Italian culture is proved by his detection of distinctive ethnic features like the expressiveness of brown eyes (*Underworld* 712), not to mention the reassuring mantra of Italian food, which goes from the Campobasso bread Dantesquely praised as the best in the world to the "Spaghetti and Meatballs" that provide the title for another early story; from the ugly deliciousness of eels to the tangerines peeled by Bronzini in his *flânerie* in the Bronx, whose very name reconnects the narrator to Morocco and to the carnal verb "tangere" which, in another prolonged ode to the Mediterranean (*The Names*), evokes a list of gestures and postures engraved in the complicated palimpsest of ancient cultures that persists across the Aegean Sea and the Middle East. From these mysterious regions in permanent conflict, the author draws a familiar alphabet of body signs, cleverly captured in the Southern habit of eating with hands, of wrapping soles in a newspaper, of rolling up sleeves, of keeping the cigarette between the thumb and the forefinger, of tapping hands on the inside of thighs, and smashing octopus tentacles against the rocks: all these being proletarian gestures inscribed in a material Italian culture that DeLillo resuscitates as an unsurpassed master of non-verbal language. These Mediterranean epiphanies, savored with Proustian, guilty pleasure, do not need Aegean resorts dazzled with light to come to surface, as the author sees the "permanent and soul-struck" Middle Eastern lament naturally re-enacted in the cry of modern American children (*White Noise* 77) or unexpectedly pop up in an elegant Milan street from a passer-by's peculiar way of adjusting hair with his hands. To these distinctively Southern features the author adds the stoical temper of Italian characters athletically resistant to adversities and led by a sense of self-respect and disciplined alertness that

makes them instinctively cautious and wary of the ancestral "power of secrets" that underlies the jazz and push of urban America (*Underworld* 296).

These traits are not to be wrongly mistaken with the stereotypical Italian virility or the vicarious pride for power figures such as Enrico Fermi, whom, in *Underworld*, the author actually locates at the origin of a nuclear era that destroyed all certainties. To the blind celebration of the Fascistic clichés that fascinated his community during the wars, DeLillo opposes a convinced deconstruction of conventional Italian gender models, showing, in *Amazons*, the hidden powers of gentle males in fruitful dialogue with bold women physically equipped to confront them.

No wonder that "Take the 'A' Train," a tale presented in the rebellious 1960s in the same *Epoch* issue recording the beginning of Thomas Pynchon's literary career, points to the disintegration of a family that the Italian tradition wants united at all costs. The story, whose title is borrowed from a famous 1941 hit by Duke Ellington, accounts for stormy Sunday reunions inaugurated with the complimentary pastry wrapped in white boxes, and quickly degenerating in the gruesome spectacle of the Italian patriarch scooping spoons of lamb's brain in front of a disheartened daughter-in-law (16). Like many an Italian alter ego, DeLillo objects to the mute obedience to the tribal laws that Mario Puzo defines "the religion of the people" (*The Godfather* 424), as well as to a distorted sense of honor, which, by extension, risks perpetuating the Mafia control over immigrants. To these obscure codes of authority, he opposes the democratic independence of the American self in his right to break unhealthy relations, in praise of Puzo and Pietro di Donato who first fictionalized the drama of broken families stigmatized by the Italian community. Angelo's father in "Take the 'A' Train," who fiercely opposes his wife until conjugal separation, finally leaves his son alone in the world, anticipating the traumatic disappearance of Nick's paternal figure in *Underworld*, and the marriage failure of the other Nick who, in the movie-script *Game 6*, endures, on the very same day, the end of his marriage and the defeat of his favorite baseball team.

The trauma of separation that invests both (beat?) Nicks exacerbates, in terms of personal failures, the social drama of betrayal enacted by the immigrants' initial breaking from the homeland, which gets perpetuated by the sad evictions portrayed by the author as further signs of family alienation and dispersal in the American hyphenated universe. In *Underworld*, DeLillo

appropriately reads his Italian characters as Oedipal heroes in a larger, modern epic, being equally estranged, never at home with themselves and quite uncomfortable with ethnic categories.

The conversations with an accent recorded in the Bronx by Santullo and D'Annunzio in "Spaghetti and Meatballs," or by Bronzini and his old friends who "sat on the stoop with paper fans and orangeades" (*Underworld* 207) or engaged in ingenuous manual activities, often divert their attention from the joyous noise of Catholic weddings ("a merry-go-round of shouts and music and laughter") ("Take the 'A' Train" 12) and from the "patronizing humor" of Italian folklore (*Underworld* 109) to the desolation of freshly evicted tenants, staring at their personal belongings scattered on the city sidewalks. Hence, DeLillo's second-generation Italians appear critically torn between their Italian roots and their broken homes in modern America, between Bronzini's loyalty to his inherited values and Nick Shay's urban shrewdness, in a parallel representation of opposite figures who respectively incarnate an Italian version of Pynchon's dichotomy of the introvert type vs. the drifter, of the family hothouse vs. the street, leaving room for more of a speculation on the possibility that the two writers (who published their first stories in the same issue of the same literary journal) actually represent two sides of one and the same (Italian and) American identity. What is certain is that Bronzini, as the quintessential conservative Oedipus, holds to an obsolescent patriarchal system, and to a cult of marginality that makes him grimly cling to the "unlaureled" destiny of his parents, limited by their broken English and the cramped circumstances of their faulty integration (*Underworld* 472-73). In his eyes, the family remains an immutable institution stifled by sexual repression, which Nick Shay challenges by seducing his neighbor's wife Klara, in their parallel access to a larger, American network of careers and secret correspondences. Instead, after his separation, Bronzini retreats to the ritual games of his old neighborhood (from bocce to card games) and, in his unquestioned devotion to his old mother, appears basically unable to entertain healthy relations with other women. Although well-read and fully aware of the laws of sciences, he is inexplicably determined not to own a car, adding his name, in his Jesuitical indecision, to a long list of Italian-American single parents, who represent, from Nick's and Matt's mother to Lucia in Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, the only support to their sons, who grow hard and apart, in the lonely shade of their Catholic community.

The counter-pointed, jazzy structure of *Underworld*, quite attuned to Frank Zappa's extravaganzas mimicked by Thomas Pynchon in his narrative psychedelia, balances the silent integration of the fatherless Shay brothers with the obstinate traditionalism of Bronzini's daughter, determined to compensate her father's broken marriage by marrying an Italian from the neighborhood, "to be a family again, even if fleeting and incomplete," and by wearing, to her mother's dismay, a brocade wedding vest once belonged to a great-aunt (497, 494).

In his oscillation between modernity and tradition, despite his nostalgia for the Italian streets of his Catholic boyhood, Bronzini cannot ignore the arrival of new multitudes, including the Indian girl who plays the same game he used to enjoy as a boy. This episode opens a retrospective meditation on the anthropic mobility in America, ever enriching the hidden layers of linguistic and cultural legacies in America, which make of this character, as we read in a segment of *Underworld* initially entitled "The Play Street," "a Greek and Roman sage resurrected in the Bronx." DeLillo's awareness of the complex history of immigration in America leads him to disclose the lost signs of the Italian alphabet engraved in the stuccoes of the New York buildings, as the visible tribute of beauty and dissent left by anonymous Italian carpenters (*Underworld* 373). The indelible marks on the wall of these humble workers, respectful of "things done the old slow faithful way" and feeling at home only with their talent, is debated in the correspondence between the author and Frank Lentricchia: a long exchange that started after the publication of *Libra* and contributed to the shaping of the Italian voices first presented in his neglected early tales and later powerfully resurrected by DeLillo only in *Underworld*. These letters, which at moments echo the written dialogue between Eliot and Pound, rescue gems of Italian language and culture from the wasteland of the New World. Among the writers of the postmodern generation, Pynchon was the first one who resurrected, in "Low Lands," the "dumping-ground" of immigrants through an Italian character, Rocco Squarcione, whose dialect represents the chaos of diversities simmering under the glittering surface of mainstream America. Later on, the illegal waste business denounced in *Underworld* in terms of an eco-criminal, corporate enterprise finds his counterpoint in the ghettos where social rejects ferment like discarded waste left in the largely unexplored American "ethnic pantechnicon" (*Players* 143). The DeLillo-Lentricchia correspondence,

which constitutes a precious document on the radical implications of being Italians in America, provides precious items of Italian Americana, inclusive of a lexicon in itself worthy of a longer study than this brief article allows. In the same frame, the author pays homage to other wasted lives and talents, which, in the acclaimed *Underworld*, take the violated forms of little Esmeralda, brutally raped and killed but fatally preserving the innocent aura of dissent also surrounding Jimmy Costanza, the missing father of the Shay brothers, very probably kidnapped by the mob, and somewhat heroic in resisting the coercive values of his community. By providing a specific Italian background to Pynchon's subversive notion of "waste," DeLillo bets on the unique, undisciplined ability of immigrants to produce a new aesthetics out of the "garbage guerrillas," that is, a "noise art" (*Underworld* 569) springing from the neglected genius of "irregulars" like the graffiti-artist Moonman, and, above all, Simon/Sabato Rodia, whose "jazz cathedral" in Los Angeles represents the architectural equivalent of DeLillo's narrative construction. This "piece of art that has no category" is the work of a "runaway eccentric" (276), of a Neapolitan vagrant who became a champion of aesthetic individualism by building a street monument out of city garbage. The towering arabesque of his "Watts Towers" erected in 1954 stands as a "place riddled with epiphanies" and a tribute to the "splendid independence this man was gifted with" (492). First celebrated by Pynchon in an essay on the Watts race riots appeared in *The New York Times* in 1966, this "intuitively engineered" artwork is the ingenious, transient creation of a self-taught master builder with which DeLillo can easily identify, in his subterranean voyage into the heart of America.

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