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