

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 Diomedea 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(al) 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