

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(aldo) 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 disenchanting 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 financier 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 Squarcone, 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 pantehnicon" (*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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