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The Conflicts of Ethnicity: The (Un)Making of Americans in Italian American Narrative

by

GEORGE GUIDA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

The Conflicts of Ethnicity: The (Un)Making of Americans in Italian American Narrative

by

George Guida

Adviser: Professor Morris Dickstein

Two narrative enterprises, *ripresa* and *impresa*, dominate Italian American narrative, particularly the body of narrative written by Italian American men about their experience of being Italian American. *Impresa* is the struggle to achieve individual success in America. Ripresa is the reaching back to Italian culture of the late nineteenth-century Mezzogiorno for social and spiritual fulfillment.

We can better understand the power and limitation of nineteenth-century Mezzogiorno culture by examining the social practice, myth, superstition, and history brought to life in the short stories of Giovanni Verga. We can better understand the Italian American understanding of nineteenth-century Mezzogiorno culture--"Italian" culture to many Italian Americans--by studying the conflict of *impresa* and *ripresa* in Italian immigrant autobiographies. The autobiographies of Rocco Corresca and Francesco Ventresca tell us a great deal of Italian American male attitudes toward the Italy they left and about American attitudes toward Italian American males during before World War II.

The fiction of John Fante carries on the *impresa/ripresa*

conflict and presents its effect on Italian American/ethnic male identity, vis-a-vis American and ethnic women--all in context of Depression Era America, particularly Hollywood. The fiction of Anthony Valerio portrays the same narrative conflict, as it makes and unmakes stereotypes of Italian American men. *Ripresa* and *Impresa* continue today to dominate the (re)construction and literary discussion of Italian American identity.

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An Introduction: *Tutt'a Posto?*: Italian American Narrative and Its Critics

"Another result of the predominance of inauthentic myths is to force Italian Americans into a preoccupation with setting the Italian American record straight."

–from "The Crisis of Italian American Identity," by Rudolph J. Vecoli

"*Tutt'a posto,*" my great-grandfather would say, his Italian as close to textbook Tuscan as it would ever come. "*Tutt'a posto,*" to him meant, and means, everything in place. For my great-grandfather, "*tutt'a posto*" meant more specifically that the daily affairs of his American construction company were settled. Having made sure, for example, that his men had closed up the site of their work on the Lower East Side subway, he could settle into the pine and lacquer throne of his backyard grape arbor and puff his pipe through the early Brooklyn evening until supper.

When, several years ago, I went to live and study Italian culture at a Tuscan university hundreds of miles and a hundred years removed from my great-grandfather's hometown in Campania, I discovered that for most Italians it remains important to have *tutt'a posto*.

"*Tutt'a posto?*", questioned Signor Pinciani, the university's *Direttore* of Student Housing, pointing to my room.

"*Tutt'a posto?*", Fabio, a law student from Calabria, inquired, pointing to me.

"*Sì*," I answered them both, believing that since I had finally managed to find the dormitory, after wandering through two medieval cities, toting five leaden bags, enough of my American life to sustain me for the year abroad; and I had scared up enough Italian to request a room key; and I had dumped my bags on the room's cold tile floor just in time to collapse on my cot for a three-hour nap, that *tutto* was now indeed *a posto*.

But I learned quickly that tutto was not even close to what most Italians I know are comfortable calling *a posto*. To achieve this shibboleth, I had first to find a proper *way* for everything I did as well as a proper place for everything I owned: clothes *neatly* folded and stowed, bedsheets tucked *tightly*, classes *carefully* scheduled, language mastered, diet controlled, courtesies politely dispensed, mind, body, and spirit contented.

I have since discovered that, contrary to two possible and frequent stereotypes of Italians as louts or libertines, the desire for order remains among Italians an obsession. An understandable one--given that for centuries the Italian people, especially Southerners, have needed to preserve property, dignity, and often their lives from a ceaseless procession of occupying forces and exploitative governments--but an obsession nonetheless. In Italy, it was Signor Pinciani's insistence on "*la pulizia della camera*," the cleanliness and order of each and every dorm room; or it was

a twenty year-old (male) university student's mopping his floor twice a week; or it was another student's determination at the dining hall to have me eat the *primo piatto primo* and the *secondo secondo*. In America, it is my mother's careful arrangement of Capodimonte in the china cabinet, her plans for my sisters' catering hall weddings and future residence not too many blocks away from home; or it is the carefully-placed stone lions and donkeys of Bensonhurst's front yards; or, important here, it is the need for scholars of Italian American writing to find for disparate Italian American texts neat categories based on formulae, to put Italian American writing *tutt'a posto*, all of it in its "correct" place.

My great-grandfather read the Italian American newspaper *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* every day, but he never, to my knowledge, read an Italian American book--a book by an Italian American about Italian American experience--but my great-grandfather's spirit, his zeal for having *tutt'a posto*, lives on in the bodies of contemporary critics of Italian American writing.

Most of these are, not coincidentally, *d'origine italiano*. I met them all, in text and in the flesh, during my first couple of years in the field. My first conscious encounter came with a multi-genre collection entitled *From the Margin*. This landmark anthology was an attempt to map

what had been to the critical establishment virgin territory: an assortment of neglected elements called lately "Italian American Writing." I discovered there the work of critics I would come to know well: Robert Viscusi, Fred Gardaphé, Peter Carravetta, Helen Barolini, Anthony Tamburri, Ben Lawton, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, Jerre Mangione, Paolo Giordano, Samuel Patti. They write on a variety of subjects, but like my grandfather, like my great-aunts and great-uncles with their baffling accents, they seem compelled to be heard, compelled by one guiding desire: to place, all of the literature Italian Americans have produced over the last hundred years *a posto*.

Rose Basile Green's pioneering 1974 study, *The Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures,* began the contemporary movement toward order. Green's book, like several that have followed, divides Italian American writers and their texts into three or more generations or "stages."[1] Green identifies these stages as stages of reaction to the dominant Anglo American culture. Moving chronologically through nearly the entire Italian American literary tradition (to 1974), Green groups texts by the generational psycho-social desires they project: "The Need for Assimilation"; "Revulsion"; "Counterrevulsion"; "Rooting"; and so on. These rubrics are as useful as any others that claim to place all Italian American literature *a posto*. The trouble is that no two critics agree on which

writers or texts belong under which rubric, fit into which generation, which stage, and why. Their discussion of generations and stages, while it may reflect Italian American social history, remains inadequate to account for the common and uncommon characteristics of various Italian American narratives. More adequate, more useful, or at least complementary, will be a discussion of Italian American narrative that considers the hybrid structure and language of each narrative; a discussion that places each narrative within its author's biographical, historical and literary context; a discussion of authors and texts as nodes of circumstance and choice along a continuum of Italian American narrative. Generational niches, it turns out, are insufficient *posti* and ways of seeing.

Aside from Green, several other critics of Italian American narrative also practice generation-based criticism. In the course of several different essays, one such critic, Anthony Tamburri, expounds the tri-generational progression of Italian American writing. In his most recent essay, "In (Re)cognition of the Italian/American Writer: Definitions and Categories" (Caravetta 9-32), Tamburri not only presents his own generation-based interpretation, but also summarizes and compares the similar work of other critics, notably Daniel Aaron and Fred Gardaphé. Tamburri classifies Italian American writers according to their generation's collective use of cultural heritage (20).[2] My study also

will rely on the cultural content of texts to evaluate those texts, but it will not impose artificial uniformity on variegated groups of works. To his credit, Tamburri concedes that "ethnicity--and more specifically in this case, *italianità*--is redefined and reinterpreted on the basis of each individual," is "always new and different with respect to his/her own historical specificities vis-à-vis the dominant culture" (21), a view my own study supports.

A less absolute practitioner of generation-based criticism is Gardaphé, whose book-length study of Italian American narrative, *Italian Signs, American Streets,* appeared in 1996. Gardaphé classifies Italian American narratives according to their various "modes." He derives these modes from the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher and historian Giambattista Vico's "notions of a culture's three ages--the Age of Gods, the poetic stage; the Age of Heroes, the mythic stage; and the Age of Man, the philosophic stage" (15), which together imply the inevitable disintegration of a culture, stanched only, and only temporarily, by attempts to preserve it in writing. By Gardaphé's accounting, Italian American narrative proceeds, more or less chronologically, across the twentieth century, from one mode to the next: "poetic" to "early mythic" to "later mythic" to "philosophic."

It makes perfect sense to discuss the texts of any literary tradition in chronological order, since texts may

and often do respond to earlier texts--as contemporary African American narratives often respond to nineteenth-century slave narratives;[3] however, it makes less sense to insist on the chronological *progression*, be it toward glory or extinction, of a literary tradition. Literature is not science. Literary traditions, I would argue, just *are or can be*: a position not completely lost on Gardaphé, who is careful to qualify Vico's model with the (post)structuralist notion that all, or at least most, Italian American narratives participate in a play of Italian and Italian American signs, which jumps back and forth across time. Those signs are part of "a prehistory" common to any "minority culture" "that can and must be reconstructed. For Italian Americans, this is a history largely found in the immigrants' words and figures, or tropes, discovered in both the early writing...and the oral traditions that inform this early literature" (20). Here Gardaphé makes his most consequential point of all: that Italian American texts may be characterized by their deployment of these signs. I would add that these signs may be further understood in Italian American texts by studying their earlier deployment in nineteenth-century Italian texts, such as the short stories of Giovanni Verga (discussed at length in Chapter I). I agree with Gardaphè that the formal and thematic elements, the conflicts of Italian American narrative, appear in many of the earliest Italian American narratives, particularly

the immigrant autobiographies.

Gardaphé has also done fine work on the Italian roots of Italian American narrative. His 1991 essay "From Oral Tradition to Written Word: Toward an Ethnographically Based Literary Criticism" (Gardaphé, et. al. 294-306) posits oral tradition, Italian folklore, as a primary source of the Italian American literary tradition. I will deal with Italian folklore and folk culture as a narrative source, in my discussion of Giovanni Verga's stories. I will also explore, to a lesser extent, the connection between Italian pastoral (often dialect) poetry, and Italian American narrative.

Both the form and language of a number of Italian American narratives, says Gardaphé, reflect the Italian tradition of *cantestorie,* history singers, and the Italian American tradition of storytelling within the family. Gardaphé takes a cue here from Robert Viscusi, whose groundbreaking 1981 article, "*De Vulgari Eloquentia*: An Approach to the Language of Italian American Fiction," remains the most insightful account of Italian American narrative style to date. Viscusi recognizes four distinct registers of Italian American narrative language:

> liturgical, to call up the power of lost Italy...patriarchal, to emphasize a continuity that often seems to have been broken...heroic, to reflect the nature of the immigrant

> enterprise...[and], finally...diplomatic, to negotiate the terms on which Italian America can exist...as a culture, a state of mind, and a system of referents rich enough to generate works of art in a tongue that, howsoever American or Italian any of its parts may be, remains irreducibly Italian American. (24)

Viscusi's categorization speaks directly to my consideration of the form and themes of Italian American narrative. As I will discuss them in the foregoing chapters, the "liturgical" elements of these narratives are their *ripresa*, their pastoral attempt to recover and recreate an idealized, timeless Italy. The "patriarchal" elements of these narratives are its Italian American signs and themes, inclusive of both the Italian and Anglo American (literary) traditions. The "heroic" elements are those that reflect on the immigrant *impresa*, the enterprise, of creating a fulfilling Italian American life and identity in America. Finally, and most significantly, the "diplomatic" elements are the texts' attempts to mediate between Italian American narrators and Italian American protagonists, between both of them and their immigrant, Italian American, Anglo American, and other audiences. I see no use in forcing the constraint of rubrics on the following chapters, so I will not borrow Viscusi's terms; still, the prescience of his conception and its applicability and influence on my work and the work of

other scholars in the field deserve careful summary, acknowledgement, and continual reconsideration.

Suffice it to say that I see the development of Italian American narrative in non-Vichian, non-Hegelian terms, not as a progression, but a continuum. Italian American writing, like all ethnic writing, changes from time to time and text to text, but, generally speaking, draws from a great store of cultural stuffs, which, while it grows in volume, elaborates the culture of ethnic origin at the point of emigration/immigration. Italian American narrative is not descending or declining, as the Vichian model implies, but rather carrying on and expanding upon traditional material. This is why Italian intellectuals have begun to take an interest in Italian American literature. We Italian Americans define Italians and Italy as well, as much, as they define us. Thus, Italian American literature is a means of Gambino's "'creative ethnicity,'" "'the revitalization of Italian-American traditions and the contribution [of them] in a new form to an enriched American culture'" (qtd. in Gardaphé, *Italian* 198). But that is not all it is.

I contend that works of Italian American texts--texts written by Italian Americans, about Italian American experience--can only be put *a posto* in reference to themselves; to their own figurings of formal and cultural characteristics of the continuum of Italian American writing.

A number of other texts to which I owe a debt have attempted to examine that continuum and the cultural current that bears Italian American writing along. Jerre Mangione's and Ben Morreale's *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* covers more Italian American ground than any single previous work. Although *La Storia* focuses on social and political history, two of its final three chapters are devoted to an examination of Italian American writing. In a less than scholarly manner, it presents the body of Italian American writing as the culmination of all Italian American experience. My study will likewise demonstrate that understanding an Italian American author's work depends more on understanding his or her relation to English and Italian, American culture and Italian culture, than on placing him or her in a generation or particular era. I agree with Gardaphé especially on this point: "By constructing a dialogical scene between what is Italian and what is American, we can begin to read the consequential sign production and thus understand that there is an Italian American perspective" (Gardaphé, *Italian* 18).

Throughout this study, I will attempt to identify and describe a characteristic relationship between Italian American authors' work, between Italian American narrative, and, simultaneously, American culture and Italian culture. I call this characteristic relationship *impresa/ripresa*. While *impresa/ripresa* does not consist of a single narrative

pattern or model that may be drawn from or made to fit *all* Italian American narrative texts, it does identify a pair of recurring tendencies in many of these texts: *impresa* and *ripresa*, which I discuss at length in Chapter II, but will briefly define here.

Impresa and *ripresa* function to develop what all serious literary narrative seeks to develop: a narrator's or character's identity, his or her self. In narrative, even in autobiography, as Philippe Lejeune points out, the "self and life story" (the former of which we may call narrator/protagonist, the latter of which we may call plot) "are culturally determined constructs" (qtd. in Eakin xxi). Lejeune claims that the "concept of person" in narrative is a "linguistic structure" (x).

In Italian American narratives authors manipulate narrative language and form, the elements of narrative, to create selves identifying at once with both Anglo American culture and (a regional) Italian culture. Boelhower calls this peculiar self a "double self" ("Brave" 11). *Impresa/ripresa* is simply the sum of linguistic, formal and thematic ways that Italian American authors construct their double selves.

Impresa is the process by which Italian American authors tell stories that reinforce the lessons of the American myth of the self-made man as manifest in Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Horatio Alger's "luck and

pluck" boy books.

Ripresa, by contrast, is the process by which these same authors criticize American life (and the individual's pursuit of its material rewards), by comparing it to an idealized version of life in Mezzogiorno communities like those Verga portrays, whose values (family, honor and respect) are clearly less individualistic. *Ripresa* is thus a version of pastoral in which Italian American authors reconstitute life in Italy as a spiritual and sentimental idyll ballasting the ship of self they construct to negotiate their worldly enterprise of individual success in America.

Robert Orsi and Ron Scapp examine Italian American cultural signs and conflicts on a sociological level, by discussing the racial and ethnic discrimination against and by Italian Americans, forms of discrimination which frequently define Italian American writers' relation to American society, culture, and language. Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street* considers the perception and self-perception of Italians as racial Others in American society. Scapp's essay "Watermelons, Tee Shirts and Giorgio Armani: Eight-and-a-Half Epigrams on Italian-American Culture" (33-44) focuses on less obvious prejudices, namely mistaken generalizations about Italian American behavior. I will show that Italian American narratives, both their *ripresa* and *impresa* tendencies, often take the shape of an individual

author's reaction to those prejudices and generalizations in life and literature.

Richard Gambino's 1974 *Blood of My Blood,* dated and unscientific as it is, helps to debunk many of the prejudices and myths of Italian American life by divulging what Gambino questionably claims to be generic Italian American family secrets. In tracing family structure and function to its Italian roots, Gambino explodes sexual, religious, intellectual, criminal, political and social stereotypes. Also of some use in explaining Italian and Italian American behavior is Luigi Barzini's *The Italians.* Published over thirty years ago, it remains a valuable study of Italian "manners and morals." Both these sociological studies provide information about Italian and Italian American culture crucial to understanding versions of their literary recovery, the *ripresa* aspect of Italian American narrative that my study examines.

All of these works together have inspired me to wreck any sense of encyclopedic order that may have already been imposed on the diversity of Italian American writing. This *tutto* we call Italian American writing can doubtless be better *compreso,* understood, but never, if we critics know what we're about, placed *a posto.*

Why These Writers?

This study is exclusive. It will place *non tutta, ma poca letteratura a posto.* In it, I will discuss only work by male writers. I do this for two reasons: first and foremost, because Italian American male identity deserves further study. To date, few scholars have written on the subject.[4] As a result, we have been left with reductive literary and cinematic images of Italian American men as criminals, brutes, hotheads, gigolos, and buffoons; second, because I find it impossible to discuss the making and unmaking of Italian American male *and* female identity in a single volume. Italian American men and women have not encountered the same species of stereotyping, discrimination, and fulfillment in America, and neither do the narrators and protagonists who represent them. In writing of Barolini's *Umbertina*, the reigning epic of Italian American womanhood, Anthony Tamburri rightly notes that the novel "introduces the theme of gender identity" in addition to the theme of ethnic identity (362). I would add that women protagonists often work through this double dilemma by resisting both ethnic stereotypes from without and gender biases, male models of identity, from within Italian American culture. Carmolina, the protagonist of Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish* (which Gardaphè examines in *Italian Signs, American Streets*) is an outstanding example of such resistance.

Of course, Italian American men, and male protagonists, have struggled with the same dilemma of dual identity in a society that has historically treated the Mediterranean or other non-Nordic male with suspicion. Italian American male authors have written, not surprisingly, accounts of Italian American male identity that incorporate problems and triumphs peculiar to the Italian American male psyche.

In "The Biography of a Bootblack" and *Personal Reminiscences of a Naturalized American* (discussed in Chapter II), Rocco Corresca and Francesco Ventresca, both Italian immigrants, tell tales of an American *impresa* inflected by the *ripresa* of Italian life and honor. Corresca's is a story of thrift, industry, and good fortune worthy of Franklin and Alger, but written in the voice of a man mediating between an American audience eager to have their belief in the possibility of rising reinforced and an Italian audience ignorant and perhaps suspicious of American society. Ventresca's story recounts the enterprise of establishing himself as a successful and influential (in his opinion) *American* educator, while it expresses his enduring feeling of connection to his native Italy, to its social and political interests. In his Arturo Bandini tetralogy (discussed in Chapter III), John Fante, an Italian American author writing of life in Depression-era California, records the *impresa*, the upward literary and romantic struggles, of his protagonist, while demonstrating his sense of Italian

ethnic identity, his desire to recapture a pre-Anglo America and a explore a pan-ethnic sense of difference from the Anglo American mainstream. And in *Valentino and the Great Italians*, and *Conversation with Johnny* (discussed in Chapter IV), Anthony Valerio, a native of Bensonhurst, America's largest Little Italy, and a pioneer post-modern Italian American writer, redefines his male characters' sense of masculinity and of Americanness by linking their ambitions and experiences in contemporary American society with those of illustrious Italians and Italian Americans of the past.

If this study is exclusive by gender, it is also exclusive by perceived quality of work. In it, I will discuss narratives which effectively create complex and interesting Italian American male selves, texts that exemplify the (un)making of Italian American male identities. I will show how these texts create such identities through conflicts of ethnicity presented as conflicts of image, sign, theme, and form.

Critical work on the texts I have chosen remains scant. I have yet to find a single published full-length critical essay on either the work of the autobiographers Corresca and Ventresca or the work of the contemporary fiction writer Valerio. On the other hand, Fante has drawn plenty of attention from critics of Italian American writing and American writing in general, finding, gradually, *un posto*

among Depression-Era writers like Raymond Chandler and Nathanael West, with whom he deserves comparison. His books enjoy nationwide distribution, the admiration and investment of filmmakers, and, most importantly, a loyal following here and abroad; still, only one collection of essays on Fante's work will, should the winds of publishing prove favorable, have seen print by the end of 1998.

I will also deal with the work of more renowned authors, such as Giovanni Verga, O. Henry, and Horatio Alger, though mainly in order to shed light on the work of Corresca, Ventresca and other autobiographers, as well as the work of Fante, and Valerio.

Critical attention to Anthony Valerio's work consists of several book reviews, including a recent review of the 1986 novel *Valentino and the Great Italians* by Peter Caravetta for *Differentia;* a brief mention in a 1997 survey of Italian American writing, by Fred Gardaphé, written for the Sons of Italy general interest organ *Italian America;* and a recent joint interview, with Maria Mazziotti Gillan, on National Public Radio's *New York and Company,* focusing on the state of Italian American literature.

Fante enjoys much greater critical prestige. While no full-length study of his work has yet been published, many articles have, and Fante's high critical stock and currency in Hollywood promise to win him much more attention in the near future. Frank Spotnitz's 1989 article, "Hottest Dead

Man in Hollywood" details the film interest in a number of Fante's novels, including *Ask the Dust*, his most salient work. The best critical work on Fante has come from a few established scholars. Two, David Fine and Stephen Cooper, place Fante in context of other California writers of the 1930s. Another, Richard Collins, examines Fante's relationship to the immigrant experience. And Jay Martin, in a forthcoming article, "John Fante: The Burden of Modernism," examines Fante's interaction with modernism. I will join the discussion of Fante's relation to these phenomena, especially as they manifest themselves in his masterpiece, *Ask the Dust*: this in an attempt to assess Fante particularly as a writer of Italian American narrative.

The immigrant autobiographers, like Fante, have received some notice. Samuel Patti recognizes the seminal nature of the autobiographies in his essay "Autobiography: The Root of Italian American Narrative." I will examine the manifold influence of immigrant autobiographies on Fante and Valerio. James Craig Holte recognizes in Italian immigrant autobiographies the simulataneous expression of dissatisfaction and glorification of American society, the dichotomy of Italian American (and of most ethnic American) literature. His recognition of this dichotomy provides a foundation for my own reading of these texts. A important critical figure in both Italian American studies and

literary criticism is William Boelhower. Boelhower's *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States*, though it uses Italian American autobiographies exclusively as specimens, offers insights crucial to the understanding of all immigrant autobiography. From his reading of many separate texts Boelhower creates a macrotextual model of immigrant autobiography. Where Boelhower concentrates most on the significance of the New World as idealized place, I will give attention to both the New World as place of possibility and the Old World as place of comfort (a dichotomy explored also by Orsi in his 1990 article "The Fault of Memory: 'Southern Italy' in the Imagination of Immigrants and the Lives of Their Children in Italian Harlem, 1920-1945"). Boelhower's greatest influence on my work is, however, his discussion of past and present in the narratives, the narratives' treatment of which figures prominently into my own analysis.

Finally, it bears mention here that for the writers I am discussing, writing often from the margin--real or perceived--of society, presumed audience played an important role in composition. They had to mediate between Southern Italian peasant mentality, a largely Anglo American audience, some immigrant and ethnic readers, America's various approaches to ethnic integration, and their own conflicted feelings about the position and portrayal of Italian Americans; so I will spend some time discussing the

Italian pre-history of Italian American culture and its portrayal in the fiction of Verga, some time discussing the early twentieth-century American society and its popular and literary imagination of Italian Americans, and some time discussing the context of Fante's and Valerio's indispensable narratives.

My aim here, again, is not to place the writers I've chosen *tutti a posto;* rather, it is to discuss their work, what I believe to be essential work of the male tradition, as part of a literary legacy that continues into the present, its various artists spinning fugal variations on ongoing Italian American conflicts of ethnicity and identity played out in form and theme alike. Some of Valerio's themes and techniques closely resemble the work of Verga, the immigrant autobiographers, and Fante; some bear no resemblance to them at all; but all these texts present various manifestations of *impresa/ripresa,* each of which is a unique contribution to the the literary (un)making of the reductive images and complex selves of Italian American men.

Importa, above all, that this study allow critics and other readers to better understand these texts in specific, and Italian American narrative in general, without the stricture of a paradigm. Italian American writing calls, not always but often, for a critical approach that negotiates between my great-grandfather's critical progeny, and present-day American readers who encounter authors and texts

one at a time; between Italian *sistemazione* and American individualism, the analytical path between having *tutt'a posto* and, more importantly, *una cosa ben capita*, something, as much and as well as possible, understood for its unique self.

Notes

1. Daniel Aaron's term, cited in Tamburri, "In (Re)cognition of the Italian/American Writer: Definitions and Categories."

2. Tamburri, like most critics of Italian American literature, divides Italian American writers, narrative, into the categories "expressive" (first generation), "comparative" (second generation), and "synthetic" (third generation); he claims, typically, that "ethnicity is not a fixed essense passed down from one generation to the next. Rather, "ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual" (21).

3. I am thinking specifically here of the relation between Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and between Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*.

4. Scapp's "Watermelons, Tee-Shirts, and Giorgio Armani..." and Pasquale Verdicchio's "Spike Lee's Guineas," both published in the Spring, 1994 number of the journal *Differentia*, are among the precious few considerations of the reality as opposed to the prevailing stereotypes of Italian American manhood.

Chapter 1: The Culture That Time Forgot: Nineteenth-Century Mezzogiorno Society and the Stories of Giovanni Verga

"Ji' me ne parte sopr' a nu pède de fiore:
Mille bbon zere te lasse chi cand' e ssone."

"Addij' addij', e 'n'aldra vold' addije;
La lundananza tue, la pena mije."

["On feet of flowers I take my leave:
To you who play and sing I leave a thousand pleasant eves."

Farewell, farewell, farewell again;
Your distance always shall be my pain."]

—Abruzzese dialect poem (anonymous)

A medieval via, narrow, dark, runs through the heart of Prata del Principato Ultra,[1] the hill town from which my great-grandfather emigrated around the turn of the century. The via begins in the town's lone piazza, where, under the midday sun of the Mezzogiorno--the land named for the midday sun--men lounged on benches, played briscola, sipped espressi, eyeballed me, as I walked past from the bus stop to the flower shop called "Preziosi," a family name. Down the via barely wide enough to accomodate a subcompact car I walked past one-story stone hovels and vistas of backyard gardens and vaguely green hills beyond them; past women in windows, in black, and blind alleys leading to dead public courtyards. All of this the source.

The Mezzogiorno of Italy, "the land that time forgot" (Gambino 230): now, for me, a graduate fellow on spring

break from a Northern Italian university; and a century ago, for my great-grandfather, an apprentice with no prospect of becoming *maestro* in his own *paese*. The Mezzogiorno: comprised of eight Southern regions--The Abruzzi, Campania, Molise, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia--then, as now, the most underdeveloped and archaic area of Italy. Even after 1861, the year when most of Italy was unified and became, nominally, a liberal nation-state[2] peasants of the Mezzogiorno continued to live according to centuries-old economic and social customs.

From time immemorial Southern peasants lived under the yoke of foreign domination--Greek, Roman, Saracen, Norman, German, Spanish, French. They lived under one feudal regime or another well into the nineteenth century (Nelli 20), and until 1861 were forbidden to leave the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies--the Neapolitan branch of the Bourbon monarchy (first established in 1734), which encompassed the majority of the Mezzogiorno. The Risorgimento, the unification of Italy, brought economic and social changes in name, but not in fact, as the peasants of a unified Italy lived under "a new and different feudalism: instead of *corvées* and *banalités* there were the communal taxes which could be suitably rigged, and though the peasants were not tied to the soil in law, they were still so in fact" (Mack Smith 237). In fact, "a rigid caste system existed which made upward socio-economic mobility extremely difficult for the

vast majority of the people to achieve" (Nelli 25)--a significant factor in the great peasant emigration.

Following unification, the Italian government, seated first in Turin, then Florence, and later in Rome, opted to gain the political support of "a professional and mercantile element, allied to a new middle class of landed gentry," as well as the old landowning aristocracy" (36) of the Mezzogiorno; instead of trying to ameliorate the misery of the peasants. The government accomplished this goal by selling the confiscated domains of the Catholic Church as large parcels affordable only to the former wealthy classes (36-40; Gambino 230). The Northerners increasingly regarded Southerners as backward, lazy, and intractable, and thus justified neglecting the interests of the majority of the Southern population[3] (Gambino 52-55; Gramsci 91; Mack Smith 230). Most of the wealthy Southern landowners were residing in cities such as Naples, distant from their estates, whose management they entrusted to overseers and whose protection they left to various criminal groups (Nelli 27). And then came the peasants, the majority of whom worked the land for their absentee landlords. The "typical peasant was landless and received a bare minimum for his labors. In most sharecropping arrangements, half or more of the grain harvest went to the landowner as well as the major portion of the grape crop" (Franchetti, qtd. in Douglass 86).

After laboring as serfs under the yoke of overseers,

the peasants daily returned to "one story, one-room stone buildings, which often preserved all the elements of ancient Hellenic or Arabic dwellings" (Covello 72) in towns "set on hills to escape the malarial conditions that existed in the valleys below and also to provide defense against bandits and the invaders who came throughout southern Italian history" (Alba 23). Each morning, the peasant men walked long miles to work in the often malarial lowland fields, following the same ancient vias home again in the evening.

> [E]ven the small land owner (proprietor) was seldom sure of his ability to continue keeping the land, because of either legalistic or purely economic pressures. He was constantly conscious of the probability that his status might be changed, sooner or later, from that of land-owner to land-lessee, or even to farm laborer....This element of uncertainty...brought about also a change in the emotional association of the peasant with the soil. The new system under which he tilled his land interfered with his traditional reverence for the soil. (Covello 70-71)

The uncertainty of Risorgimento partitioning of land--aggravated by overpopulation, natural disasters, and economically disastrous government policies of the 1870s and 1880s--and the precariousness of peasant life under the new system which bore a striking resemblance to the old feudal

system, fostered a pastoral longing for an idyllic peasant society that never existed in fact, but came, more importantly for the purposes of this study, to exist in the minds of those peasants who would later emigrate to America.

Living under the oppressive conditions of late nineteenth-century Mezzogiorno society, often referred to collectively as "La Miseria" (Nelli 19; Mangione and Morreale 45), peasants remained insular, largely illiterate, suspcious of formal education, and resistant to the new authority of the Italian government, as well as to the old authority of the landlords and the Catholic Church establishment.[4] "As far as the Southerner was concerned the foreign domination continued, now in the form of a more efficient, oppressive, and ruthless government in Rome" (Nelli 22-23). Further, "between the Church and the people of the Mezzogiorno," especially the peasants, there existed an "historic and bitter animosity," as "the Church was for centuries allied with the exploitive landowning class" (Gambino 229). Even after the Church was stripped of some of its lands, peasants did not loath its authority less (230).

Finally, laws requiring some institutional education of children, the first imposed by the government in 1877, posed a threat to the traditional way of life, and were thus rarely observed by peasant families (247; Manoukian 22).

In the southern Italian *contadino* [peasant] life,

> the transmittance of all social, cultural, and moral values occurred within the confines of a narrow community life, or, more precisely, within the family life....to the Italian parent, the idea of education, of his concept of a person *buon educato**[5] was remote from the concepts which served as a basis of school education. Formal education did not enter the sphere of his interest. The wisdom of the group--the experience of generations and a projection of knowledge beyond that which is known--was transmitted through channels that were distinctly different from those of the school. (Covello 254)

Peasant life, then, revolved around the preservation of the family and its members, the preservation of their well-being and honor (247; Manoukian 20).

The "notion of honor was the very antithesis of noblesse oblige. Onore meant protecting one's blood and advancing family security and power. One did this not by being noble, but by being clever, foxy, shrewd" (Gambino 134). And though with the passage of time the Progressivist policies of the Italian government and the forces of modernization changed the way the peasants thought and lived, they retained, well into the twentieth century, their traditional values, along with a sense of life's immutability. "This was a different sense of time. Americans

think of time in a progressive way; each year is different than the last, and there appears to us to be a line of development or progress in the sequence of the years...but southern Italian peasants were more concerned with the past and present. Their view of time was in terms of cycles, synchronized with the rhythm of the agricultural seasons but having little sense of cumulative development" (Alba 29). This world-view forms the basis of the pastoral aspect of Italian American narrative, an aspect I will explore in chapters to follow.

As it pertains to the present discussion, such a world-view reflects both fear, a desire for security, and pride. The pride finds expression in Tomasi di Lampedusa's epic novel of Risorgimento-era Sicily, *Il Gattopardo*, in Chevalley's response to Giuseppe Garibaldi's men, who, having arrived in Sicily in the name of national unification, to liberate Sicilians from Bourbon rule, claim that they will educate the Sicilian peasants (who are, I suggest, by synecdoche, all peasants of the Mezzogiorno). Chevalley: "the Sicilians never want to improve for the simple reason that they think themselves perfect; their vanity is stronger than their misery; every invasion by outsiders, whether so by origin or, if Sicilian, by independence of spirit, upsets their illusion of achieved perfection, risks disturbing their satisfied waiting for nothing; having been trampled on by a dozen different

peoples, they consider they have an imperial past which gives them a right to a grand funeral" (188-89). Of course, the aristocratic point of view here denies the desire for improvement that later drove so many peasants abroad and allowed them ultimately to write about, through, and beyond the nothing for which they supposedly had been waiting (Viscusi, "Narrative" 77-97); as it exaggerates the degree to which pride is responsible for peasant adherence to custom. On the other hand, the speaker does not exaggerate the quality of pride that was a component in peasant resistance to economic and social change.

The fear of change and desire for security find expression in the *modo di dire*, the Southern Italian saying, "*Chi lascia la via vecchia e piglia la via nuova sa quello che lascia ma non sa quello che trova* (He who leaves the old way for the new, knows what he leaves but knows not what he will find)" (qtd. in Covello 257). A number of the scholars whose work I have examined for this study, quote this saying. Only now, however, do I understand the extent to which the "*via vecchia*," like Prata's via along which my great-grandfather walked to reach his *maestro*'s workshop, was more important to the peasant than anything else in his world.

This world of my great-grandfather reveals itself in the work of the Sicilian Giovanni Verga. Verga sought to

interpret the world of the peasants in the their own terms (Cecchetti, "Introduction" xv), although he was not himself a peasant. He was, however, a southerner. Born in 1840 in Catania to an aristocratic Sicilian family, Verga at age twenty-five published his first novel and moved to Florence, and then, eight years later, to Milan. During the 1870s, Verga published autobiographical novels of upper-class romantic intrique, all of which reflect the influence of French realism, but none of which stands as a literary achievement of any great merit.

It was in the mid 1870s that Verga turned his attention to the subject of his later masterpieces--the way of life of southern Italian, particularly Sicilian, peasants. That way of life inspired two great novels--*I Malavoglia* (1881) and *Maestro Don Gesualdo* (1889)--and the two great collections of short stories which I will examine in this chapter--*Vita dei Campi* (1880) and *Novelle Rusticane* (1883).[6]

Verga Sicilians live the lives of most late nineteenth century *contadini*[7] of the Mezzogiorno: lives which "'depend for their existence on the whim of the weather....If the *annata* is good, all is well; if not, then those on the margin of society pay the price'" (Bergin qtd. in Pacifici 10-11); lives in which poverty and passion fuel unexpected violence that disrupts seemingly peaceful peasant life (Cecchetti, "Introduction" xii); lives governed by a rigid moral code (xiii); lives lived by characters whose

psychology is a folkloric psychology of peasant insecurity (xi).

Verga's stories, nonpareils of "cultural verisimilitude" (Lucente 108), "revolve around the hardships or passions endured or experienced by...laborers, farmhands, shepherds" (Pacifici 10), who accounted for up to two-thirds of the population of many Sicilian towns (Gabaccia 6) "--all equally proud yet resigned to a wretched existence, wishing merely to live simply and quietly, enjoying whatever little satisfaction life can offer them" (Pacifici 10). Verga captures their world, "ranging from the details of traditional dress to religious observances and codes of honor" (O'Grady 207), in a reconstruction of the language in which peasants spoke and thought (Cecchetti, "Introduction" xv). Verga's themes and techniques, a literary application of the philosophy that "the true ideal lies in reality itself, as it happens and as it changes" (Cecchetti, *Giovanni Verga* 48), came to be known as *Verismo*,[8] a species of psychological realism which conveys the psychology of the entire peasant community; which "aims to tell the sort of story that might well have happened (or did actually happen) at a certain period and to do so in a way that illustrates the period" (Woolf 104). In his portrayals of peasant life, Verga portrays both the economic predicament of southern peasants and their resulting sense of impotence to change their lives (104); a view which reflects what Paolo Toschi

sees as "one of the more profound characteristics of the Sicilian [peasant] soul: a love for dark hues, which responds to a dark but powerful tragic sense of life" (translation mine) (14). Since the peasant life that Verga depicts has largely vanished in the Mezzogiorno, his literary recreation is as near an experience of actual peasant existence of the era, and of the peasant consciousness, as we can have--the 1990s midday men of Prata's piazza notwithstanding.

In general, Verga's stories convey a strong sense of *campanilismo*,[9] the peasants' limitation and attachment to their town and its environs, and their suspicion of outsiders; as they convey also, at every turn, the effects of poverty. Verga's third-person narrators often speak as though they themselves are villagers, as if they are reminding readers, not necessarily informing them, of the village personae and local places they describe. Typically, the "narrator of the story establishes positions both inside and outside the parameters of village knowledge, shaping localized perception of characters and events while not appearing to evaluate or judge those perceptions except through the selection and organization of his own discourse" (Lucente 109). The opening lines of "Cavalleria Rusticana" (1880): "When Turiddu Macca, Nunzia's son, came back from the service, he used to strut in the square on Sundays in his *bersagliere* uniform with the red cap that looked like

the one worn by the fortuneteller who sets up a bench with a cage of canaries" (10). For the townspeople, Turiddu, an impoverished former soldier, is both an object of admiration and resentment; the dual status ascribed to him seals his fate, as we will later see.

Like Turiddu, the protagonists of Verga's tales typically contend with economic and social privation and its ramifications. The following passage from "Black Bread" (1882) describes a peasant family and its misfortunes:

> Now, in fact, she had to bake the bread and sweep the rooms for her sister-in-law, who went to the fields with her husband as soon as God brought daylight, even though she was pregnant again, since for filling the house with little ones she was worse than a cat. Altogether different things were now needed than the little presents at Easter and Saint Agrippina's Day, and the nice words they exchanged when they saw each other at Castelluccio. That crook of a field watchman had done himself a favor by marrying off his daughter without a dowry, and now it was up to Santo to support her. Since Nena had been with him, Santo saw that he didn't have enough bread for both of them and they would have to snatch it by the sweat of their brow from the land at Licciardo. (172)

All three characters, Lucia (Santo's sister), Santo, and his

wife Nena, work desperately to eat. Lucia resents their lot, even as she accepts it; she also expresses a concomitant (and ubiquitous in peasant society) class resentment (Mangione and Morreale 48-53). In the end, Lucia realizes too late that the only way to have saved her dying mother would have been to accede to the unwanted romantic advances and dowry of an older *galantuomo* (or gentleman), a member of the landowning upper class.

Illness is another of Verga's central themes: illness arising from the peasants' very livelihood, the land. Following the Risorgimento, "the new owners exploited the land and turned heavily forested areas in the South to agricultural use. This in turn resulted in soil erosion and the creation of marshes in the valleys of the South. The marshes, in turn, became breeding places for malaria-carrying mosquitoes, which infected at least two million people each year" (Nelli 20). So the peasants walked miles each day from their hill towns to the fields often rife with malaria-carrying insects, in sickness as well as health.

Verga allows us to feel the ravages of the disease as the peasants felt it, in "Malaria" (1881).

> Malaria gets into your bones with the bread you eat, and when you open your mouth to speak, as you walk on the roads that suffocate you with dust and sun, and you feel your knees give way, or you sink down on the saddle as your mule ambles along with

> its head low....malaria snatches up the villagers in the deserted streets and nails them in front of the door of their houses plasterless from the sun, and they shake with fever under their overcoats and under all the bed blankets piled upon their shoulders. (Verga 118)

Verga changes the tone of his narrative voice here from folkloric to documentary. We feel the physical suffering, even as we witness its social consequences.

"In the evening, as soon as the sun goes down, sun-burned men with shabby straw hats and wide canvas pants appear in the doorways, yawning and stretching their arms; and half-naked women with blackened shoulders, nursing babies that are already so pale and wasted that one can't understand how they will get big and dark and how they will romp on the grass when winter is back and the yard becomes green once again..." (119). Here, Malaria literally ruins peasant life, robbing the peasants of pastoral pleasures they might enjoy, pleasures for which immigrant narrators later long. "...and the sky blue, and all around, the countryside laughs in the sun. And one can't understand either where they live, or why they live there, all those people who hurry off to Mass on Sundays, to the lonely little churches hemmed in by cactus hedges, from ten miles around, as far as you can hear the ringing of the little shrill bells over the plain that never ends." (119-120) Day

in and day out, the peasants endure Malaria in work and play, escaping it only when they leave, because as "Wife-killer" (a character whose several wives all die of the disease) reasons, "for those people there just isn't malaria!" Verga's characters, like the actual peasants of the Mezzogiorno, simply assumed the risks and accepted the often fatal consequences as a fact of life (Mack Smith 150).

"Freedom" (1882), prefiguring *Il Gattopardo*, recounts yet another peasant hardship, disappointment with the Risorgimento. The story begins, "They hung the tricolor kerchief [the flag of united Italy] from the campanile, sounded the alarm with the bells, and began to shout in the square: 'Hail to freedom!'" (206). It ends, "The charcoal man, while they were handcuffing him again, stammered: 'Where are you taking me? To jail? Why? I didn't even get a foot of land. And they had said there was freedom!...'" (216). The freedom Garibaldi's liberators promise evolves into a new form of imprisonment of the peasants, at the hands of the civil authorities the Garibaldini helped to establish. "In the decades following unification, Southern-Italian peasants fell deeper into *la miseria*. A repressive system of taxation and usurous interest rates further undermined whatever initiative remained and discouraged efforts at self-improvement. By the end of the nineteenth century, taxes in Italy were the highest in Europe and weighed especially heavily on those least able to pay, that

is, on the *contadini* (peasants) and the *giornalieri* (or day laborers) of the South" (Nelli 23). The peasants, no longer serfs, were now slaves to capital.

We see survival in the face of both adverse conditions and hostile authority in "Property" (1882); survival through ceaseless work and *furberia* "(cleverness, cunning)" (Gambino 134). The protagonist of "Property," Mazzarò--whose name echoes both the Sicilian "massaro," one given to "diligent application" of himself (Gabaccia 6), and the Italian "amazzare," "to kill," suggesting all at once Mazzarò's all-consuming diligence, his social and spiritual suicide, and his symbolic killing off of masters--embodies *furberia* in his dealings with landowners and peasants alike.

> He had gotten together all that property himself, with his hands and with his mind, by not sleeping at night, by catching fever from anxiety or from malaria, by toiling from morning till night, and going around in the sun and in the rain, by wearing out his boots and his mules--he alone never wore out, thinking of his property, which was all that he had in the world, for he had no children, nor grandchildren, nor other relatives; he didn't have anything but his property. When a man is made this way, it means that he is made just for property. (143-44)

Although Mazzarò has not achieved the ends of property

according to peasant values--the preservation of family and folkways--he has mastered the means.

> And property, too, was made for him, who seemed to have a magnet for it, because property wants to stay with those who know how to hang on to it, and who don't waste it like that baron who had once been Mazzarò's master, and who had taken him, poor and in rags, out of charity into the fields...and when he came on horseback to his lands, with his watchmen behind him, one would have thought he was the King, and they got his lodging and his dinner ready--the fool--so that everybody knew the hour and the minute when he was supposed to come and no one would let himself be caught red-handed. "He's simply asking to be robbed!" said Mazzarò, and when the baron kicked him in the pants, he burst with laughter and rubbed his back with his hands, muttering: "Fools should stay home"; "Property doesn't belong to those who have it, but to those who know how to get it." He, instead, after he had gotten his property, certainly didn't send word to say he was coming to supervise the harvest or the vintage, and when and how, but turned up unexpectedly, on foot or on a mule, without watchmen, with a piece of bread in his pocket; and he slept near his sheaves, his eyes open, and his

shotgun between his legs. (144-45)

The final image of Mazzarò in this passage crystallizes Verga's depiction of his *furberia*, and his accumulation of property. Mazzarò overcomes economic oppression, but at the cost of familial and spiritual deprivation. "So, when they told him that the time had come to leave his property and think of his soul, he staggered out into the courtyard like a madman" (147). Verga implies that the peasant need to earn a living often conflicts with the desire to preserve family and folkways. This conflict, as this study will show, prevails in Italian American narrative.

In other tales, Verga portrays, with both sympathy and scorn, the values and folkways that peasants and immigrants from the Mezzogiorno sought to maintain. In "Cavalleria Rusticana," a young man, Turiddu, dies in the name of honor, at the hands of his true love's husband, Alfio. Forbidden to marry the beautiful Santa for lack of money, Turiddu becomes her lover. Alfio finds out and must defend his honor. "Honor refers to the moral worth of an individual or family as evaluated by others and implies 'a quick response to offense, intolerance of any encroachment upon one's person or patrimony [property] or the person and patrimony of others to whom one is loyal'....The code of honor intertwined with sexuality in a way that bore directly on marriage as the ultimate expression of the supremacy of the family" (Alba 33). Further, an "extensive literature attests

to the fact that throughout the Mediterranean...social structure is predicated on a 'sex/gender system' (Rubin 157 passim) articulated through an ideology of honor and shame thought of as emanating from 'natural' male and female sexuality. Honor and shame constitute an assymetrical gender system in which women naturally *feel* shame while men *seek* honor" (Rando 24).

Alfio must seek his family's honor. Anything less would endanger his own economic and social status and that of his family, as family honor formed the basis of useful social ties (Gabaccia 9). "In a very real sense respect became a resource, not terribly different from property. That, in fact, was how proverbs described it: 'A man with credit, also has honor' (IV, 220). 'Honor is worth more than money' (I, 207). And, like other possession, honor could also be lost (IV, 151)" (9). Turiddu recognizes Alfio's masculine obligation to defend his family's honor and accedes to a dual in which Alfio kills him. Alfio is triumphant in his victory. "'That's for making a cuckold of me in my own house'" (18), he declares. Turiddu is, on the other hand, tragic, his death grotesque. "For a while Turiddu staggered here and there among the cactuses and then fell like a log. Blood gurgled up and foamed in his throat, and he couldn't even gasp: *Ah, mamma mia!" (18)*. He begins the tale as a popinjay marching in uniform through the town square, an object of admiration as well as resentment; and ends up like

dog in the dust, an object of scorn, dead young, in service of the Mezzogiorno code of honor.

In "Rosso Malpelo" and "War Between Saints" (1880) Verga renders important aspects of the peasant belief system: superstition and saint-worship. In a note on "Rosso Malpelo," Cecchetti explains, "Sicilians believed that red-haired people had a malicious and evil disposition" (65), a belief which determines the fate of the story's protagonist, Malpelo (literally, "evil hair"). Superstitions like this one were common among the peasants, products of age-old uncertainty and vulnerability. "In the Mezzogiorno, evils abounded. What is more, disasters struck without warning, felling the young and the old, the innocent and the corrupt. The dynamics of natural troubles like diseases, droughts, and earthquakes were not understood. More significantly the religious or philosophical question of why they and worse man-made evils happened, why evil and undeserved suffering afflict people, is a dilemma as old as humanity....The workings of nature and the benefits and calamities caused by them were attributed variously to saints who resembled pagan gods, to witches, ghosts,and demons, to the Christian God, to Satan, and to any and all possible combinations, alliances, oppositions and juntas of these." (Gambino 213-14). Superstitions were part and parcel of a belief system designed to explain away ceaseless hardship.

And from the outset, superstition binds Malpelo. "He

was called Malpelo because he had red hair; and he had red hair because he was a mean and bad boy, who promised to turn into a first-rate scoundrel. So everybody at the red-sand quarry called him Malpelo, and even his mother, having always heard that name, had almost forgotten his real one" (Verga 65). According to Karl-Ludwig Selig, for the village peasants, "Malpelo was his name and with his red hair he is immediately associated with the thought, attitude and notions of folklore, or folk tradition, supersition and folk-belief" (35). These "notions of folkore" are important to understanding peasant consciousness and action in "Rosso Malpelo" (and in other of Verga's stories discussed later, as well as in Italian American narrative).

Verga's narrator speaks with the voice of superstitious peasants in his condemnation of Malpelo: "he would go and huddle in a corner, his basket between his legs, to nibble his piece of dark bread, as *animals like him do*" (emphasis added) (Verga 66). Here, Verga compares Malpelo to a beast, valued for what he can do and not for who he is (Selig 35). (As we will see, Verga also makes the animal human, as in the important "Story of The Saint Joseph Donkey.") No one cares for Malpelo, because of his red hair, a trait which "pushed him into the realm of another world, of outsiderliness, of specialness" (35); and because no one cares for him, he is sent to work on a dangerous project in the same quarry that killed his father. No "man with a

family wanted to take a chance, nor would he let his own flesh and blood run such a risk for all the gold in the world. But as for Malpelo, he didn't even have anyone who would want to take all the gold in the world for his hide, if it was really worth that much: so they thought of him" (85). Malpelo does not protest this or any other mistreatment. "'What for?,'" he exclaims. "I'm Malpelo'" (73). In the article-less manner of the Italian language, Malpelo assumes an adjective, a label, a physical characteristic to be his identity. (In Italian, to indicate profession, one says, for example, *"sono dottore"* ("I am a doctor"), not *"sono un dottore,"* so that a noun or adjective can each with equal weight be ascribed to an individual as his or her defining quality.)

The peasants, for their part, certainly believed in their patron saints: a phenomenon Verga depicts in "War Between Saints." The narrator of the story recounts the battle for processional rights through a small town between the devotees of Saint Rocco and those of Saint Paschal. In the Mezzogiorno, then as today, "The peasant, calls upon his patron saint to bless the land, attributes a function to the saint's benediction, which is to say, a productive and liberatory function. That is, the peasant attributes to the saint a real function, and not just a ritual one" (translation mine) (De Rosa 5). "To the pragmatic contadini, God, the Holy Family, and the saints were personal, worldly

powers in direct everyday intercourse with them" (Gambino 221). The peasants of "War Between Saints" supplicate their respective patrons for rain and for clemency from the onset and effects of cholera. To supplicate according to custom, they march icons of their saints through town in ritual procession.[10]

> Not a drop of rain had fallen since March, and the yellowish wheat fields, that crackled like tinder, were dying of thirst. Instead Bruno, the cartwright, said that as soon as Saint Paschal should come out in procession, it would rain for sure....In fact, they did carry Saint Paschal in procession, to the east and to the west, and they held him high on the hill to bless the fields, one sultry, cloudy day in May--one of those days when the farmers tear their hair in front of their burnt fields, and the wheatears bend down just as if they were dying.
>
> "Damned Saint Paschal!" shouted Nino, spitting in the air running through the wheat field like a madman. "You've ruined me, Saint Paschal, you thief! All you've left me is a sickle to cut my throat with!" (Verga 103)

It is the patron saint of a district rival to Nino's. Later, though, Nino goes so far as to heap abuse on his own patron. "'Ah, Saint Rocco, you thief!' Nino began to lament. 'I

didn't expect this from you!...'Ah, Saint Rocco!' said he. "This is a dirtier trick than Saint Paschal played on us!'" (106).

Nino's words accurately reflect the peasant treatment of saints as worldly beings. Witness this passage from Salomone-Marino's 1897 ethnography of Sicilian peasants.

> People, in Sicily as everywhere, now as of old, have fashioned God and His Saints in their own image and likeness, with their own instincts and passions, but with superhuman powers....When their Patron Saint proved to be unsatisfactory, or if he ws too mild, sulky at performing miracles, or did not want to protect them, the people went to battle....every peasant then has his own personal Patrons....For the defense of one's Patron Saint there have been and still are today quarrels and the liveliest altercations...Naturally, a Saint who has such tenaciously ardent devotees is obliged to listen to their prayers and satisfy their requests: he can do anything. Unless, as often happens, he turns a deaf ear, is unmoved. Well then, do you believe that the peasant will take it tranquilly? Come now!...The peasant...turns against his Saint, threatens him, insults him, beats him, inflicts upon him the severest punishments--until his prayer is granted

> and his boon given. If however, the Saint is truly and repeatedly obstinate, the final resort is prompt: deposition. (172-74)

Verga presents peasant supplication and attribution of earthly power to saints, as well as rebellion against them, as both charming and senseless. Saints mean much to Verga's peasants, but do not materially change their lives.

At the close of "War Between Saints," the two main characters, Nino and Saridda--one a proponent of Rocco, the other of Paschal--recovering together from cholera, continue to argue the relative power of saints who have apparently done little to alleviate either drought or illness.

> "And you? Do you think it was Saint Rocco who kept you alive?"
>
> "Why don't you stop it!" broke in Saridda. "Or we'll need another cholera to make peace!" (Verga 107)

In Saridda's irony we hear Verga's. It is irony, however, which, while it satirizes the peasants' reliance on saints to deliver them, stops short of discounting saint worship entirely.

Verga's "Ieli" (1880) illustrates the power of another peasant sentiment, as strong as the attachment to saints: the feeling for the land--not only as soil, but as landscape, idealized site of innocence and simplicity. Ieli, a poor shepherd boy, and Don Alfonso, the young son of a

wealthy landowner, share days together in the pastures.

> Ah, the wonderful chases over the mown fields, manes in the wind! the beautiful days of April, when the wind piled up the green grass into waves and the mares neighed in the pastures! the beautiful summer afternoons, when the whitish countryside lay silent under the hazy sky, and the grasshoppers crackled among the clods, as if the stubble were catching fire! the beautiful winter sky through the naked branches of the almond tree that shivered in the north wind, and the path that sounded frozen under the horses' hoofs, and the skylarks that sang high up in the warmth, in the blue! the beautiful summer evenings that came up very slowly, like fog, the good smell of the hay in which you sank your elbows, and the melancholy humming of the evening insects, and those two notes of Ieli's pipe, always the same--ee-oo! ee-oo! ee-oo! (20)

This passage comes early in the story, when Ieli and Don Alfonso are still boys and relatively innocent. As the description of pastoral days draws to a close, however, the narrator sounds a note of persistent longing for them, seemingly from the point of view of Don Alfonso (who will later grow away from the pastures, the age-old existence, corrupted by formal education and the attractions of his

power).

The days in the pastures "made you think of far-way things: of the fiesta of Saint John, of Christmas Eve, of the dawn of a picnic day, of all those big events gone by, which seemed sad so far away, making you look up, your eyes wet, as if all the stars that were lighting themselves in the sky rained into your heart and flooded it!" (20) This narrative reminiscence foreshadows the loss of innocence and simplicity of which Ieli's life itself becomes a symbol; an innocence and simplicity that Don Alfonso and, later, immigrants from Italy, convinced themselves they had had and lost; an idealized timeless way of life (Boelhower, *Immigrant* 103-08) that was in reality, under the feudal conditions of the Mezzogiorno, a land where "the spirit and nature of feudal times lingered in the hollows and valleys of the countryside and in the minds of men and women" (Mangione and Morreale 51), a life as miserable as it was innocent and simple.

Portions of "Ieli," then, like portions of so many Italian American narratives, are pastoral reconstructions of Mezzogiorno life. (The Italian title of the story translates literally as "Ieli the Shepherd.") Of course, the subject matter of the story suits this purpose particular well, as,

> In general, classical pastoral begins with a conception of man and of human nature and it locates it in a specific type, the shepherd, the

> simplicity of whose life is the goal towards which all existence strives; of that life, the individual details, the labours and vicissitudes, are neither insisted upon nor ignored...the shepherd remains, first and foremost, an emblem of humanity, a general rather than a specific type, and his afflictions and joys are universal. (Marinelli 6)

Verga's pastoral, like those of Theocritus and the Italian American immigrant autobiographers, begins with the remembrance of a "boyhood from the perspective of an overripe" adulthood (10). As he grows older, Don Alfonso learns to read--which causes Ieli to look "at the book and at him suspiciously" (Verga 26)--and eventually assumes his position in the "strictly enforced caste system" (Covello 75) of the Mezzogiorno, the position of *galantuomo*. "The *galantuomo* class (gentleman class) consisted of all land owners--the wealthy and the moderately wealthy--who had once been identified with the baronial castle....Though the *galantuomo* class had not been developed on any 'blue blood' basis, there was considerable solidarity among its constituents. The unifying factor, first of all, was the recognition of the cultural cleavage between them and the other classes" (97), the peasant classes. Don Alfonso leaves the simple Ieli behind in the fields, and ultimately carries on an affair with Mara, the woman who, in part because Don

Alfonso ruins her reputation, agrees to marry Ieli.

Class distinction and Mara's attraction to Alfonso, a *galantuomo,* ultimately corrupt and destroy the paragon of peasant simplicity and innocence, Ieli. Though slow, Ieli slowly comes to recognize his wife's adultery with Alfonso and to feel a shame and anger about it that he can not fully comprehend. During an argument, a shepherd boy tells Ieli what everyone else in the town already knows, that Don Alfonso "has taken your wife" (Verga 60). Since to "be labeled a 'cuckold' was one of the stongest insults in the southern Italian vocabulary" (Alba 34), even the naive Ieli reacts. "Even when he thought of Don Alfonso, he couldn't believe that such a dirty trick was possible; he still could see him at Tebedi [the pasture lands], with his kind eyes and his smiling little mouth coming to bring sweets and white bread, so long ago--such a dirty trick! And since he hadn't seen him any more, for he was a poor shepherd who stayed in the country the whole year round, he always remembered him that way" (Verga 62). His wife's and Alfonso's corruption raise Ieli's consciousness of his economic position as peasant and social position as cuckold, poisoning his contentment.

At a "picnic in the country at shearing time" (63), in the company of both Mara and Don Alfonso, Ieli is at first able to overcome incipient feelings of shame and anger, and enjoy the pastoral scene. From his point of view, so close

to the natural world, we hear, "It was a beautiful, warm day in the golden fields with the flowering hedges and the long green rows of vines. The sheep were gamboling and bleating with pleasure at feeling themselves freed from all that wool, and in the kitchen the women were making a big fire to cook all the things that the owner had brought for dinner" (63). Still, amid the simple gaiety of the country outing--a traditional peasant custom, necessary for the "'refreshment of body and soul'" (qtd. in Salamone-Marino 123)--arises a hint of class distinction and a reminder to Ieli of his disgrace. "Meanwhile, the rich men who were waiting had gone into the shade under the carob trees, and were having someone play the tambourines and bagpipes, and those who wanted to, danced with the women of the farm" (Verga 63).

In this pastoral setting, Don Alfonso's and Mara's corruption infects Ieli, and he finally succumbs. "Ieli, while he was shearing the sheep, felt something gnaw inside him, without knowing why, like a thorn, a driven nail, a pair of fine shears that worked aroung inside him bit by bit, worse than poison" (63). When, over Ieli's objections, Mara goes off to dance with Alfonso, Ieli slits Alfonso's throat with his shears, transforming from innocent to murderer.

Many of Verga's tales employ strategies of myth and folktale, the timeless peasant narrative form and means of

transmitting cultural and moral customs and lessons (Covello 266-68).[11] In the manner of the folktale, "Verga's novella [short story] utilizes mythic structures to organize the seemingly contingent aspects of the narrative. The coherence of naming, the simple syntactic organization which lends the text the appearance of adopting the logic of its characters while depicting their world from their own perspective, and the air of primordial superstition hanging over the entire text all contribute to the realistic portrayal of life in nineteenth-century rural Sicily" (Lucente 118). Verga's utilization of folktale resonates on both a literary and a social level.

Writing in 1960, Mario Pei recognized that "Even today, in parts of Italy and Sicily, the miraculous exploits of mythological and legendary heroes continue to be recounted by *cantastorie*, those often illiterate bards who wander from village to village" (Preface ix). Recognizing the prevalence of the folktale in Italy into the twentieth century is crucial to understanding the Southern Italian peasant sense of timelessness and attachment to elemental, pre-industrial life; which is, as Gardaphè points out, itself an important element in the literary consciousness of Italian American narrators. "The folktale reflects prehistoric reality, medieval customs and morals, and the social relations of feudalism and capitalism" (Propp 17).

Verga employs strategies of folktale most strikingly in

"Story of The Saint Joseph Donkey" (1881). The story is an elaboration of a traditional Italian folktale form, the animal fable (Calvino xx) or animal tale. "The animal tale is, as a rule, a short narrative that contains the adventures of the animal that is its principal character" (Dégh 68). Verga's story is then an animal tale; the Saint Joseph Donkey of the title, its principal character. Significant is the way Verga exploits a particular characteristic of the traditional animal tale: its analogy to the human condition. Degh notes, "Animal tales may share identical plots with etiological legends or with anecdotes about human actors" (68). And, in fact, "the role played by the animals" of Verga's stories "becomes more important--the animals that are valuable assets, to be sure, but that also poignantly and silently reenact the unbelievably hopeless activity of Verga's peasants" (Pacifici 11).

Verga's choice of a donkey as protagonist suits the story's theme of peasant hardship especially well, since the peasants he depicts typically, as Pacifici claims, "work like donkeys (which, in Italy, occupy the last place in the animal hierarchy; like horses, they exist purely to work the land, and like the sheep they take to pasture, day in and day out they must exhibit meekness of spirit and restrained behavior" (11). The donkey, a creature common in Italian folklore from the time and influence of storytellers like Aesop (Aesop 20-21, 40, 85-86, 107-08, 217), symbolizes a

number of proverbial, and in many cases real, Southern peasant values and traits: humility, obstinacy, patience, stupidity (Cooper 16). In fact, the "donkey is present in all the stories told in towns throughout the South....For "the Southern peasant, the donkey became the image of suffering and poverty--a poverty so dire it could not be faced directly and could be described only obliquely through animals" (Mangione and Morreale 35). By understanding this context, we can understand why "Story of the Saint Joseph Donkey" is a salient expression of peasant consciousness.

As Cecchetti explains, "Saint Joseph donkeys are a type of donkey considered the cheapest and least useful. Their coat is black and white and their name probably derives, by popular association, from rustic paintings of the donkey which appear in scenes representing [the Holy Family's] flight to Egypt" (Verga 148). Like the Saint Joseph Donkey, peasants, regardless of their labors, were little valued, treated as "nothing" by the upper classes and government of their society (Covello 79, 96), mute in their resistance to authority by dialect, custom, force, (Viscusi, "Narrative" 80-82).[12] Interestingly, in "some parts of the South...the title of *Santu* (Saint) was added to [the peasant's] first name in sarcastic reference to the giornaliero's [day laborer's] absence of worldly riches" (Covello 79). What Verga gives us, then, is a triple analogy--symbolic, serious, sarcastic--of donkey, peasant, saint.

In its folkloric setting reflecting "the social relations of feudalism and capitalism" (Propp 17), a faithful rendition of the late nineteenth-century Mezzogiorno, the story recounts the life and death of one particular Saint Joseph Donkey. The Donkey, like the peasants, is treated throughout the story as a commodity: an object valued for the work he can perform, and devalued to nothingness as he is able to perform less and less work. The Donkey's breeder spends an entire day haggling his price with the Donkey's first owner, Neli.

> "It's a beautiful colt," said the owner, "and he's worth more than thirty-five *lire*. Don't pay attention to that black and white coat like a magpie's....In all honesty, I don't know where the colt got that magpie coat. But his build's good, believe me! You don't judge men by their faces. Look what a chest he's got! And those legs like pillars! Look how he holds his ears! When you have a donkey who keeps his ears that straight, you can put him to a cart or to a plow, just as you like, and make him carry four *tumoli* of buckwheat better than a mule, I swear by the holy day that's today! Feel this tail; you and your whole family could hang on it!" (Verga 149)

The breeder denies the Donkey's individuality, his "magpie coat" and its association with saintliness, to take full

economic advantage of him, to have his whole family, in an economic sense, hang on the donkey's tail. In Verga's Mezzogiorno, you don't judge donkeys by their coats or "men by their faces." The analogy is present already: the breeder in his prevarication--the landowners, their control; the Donkey in his sturdiness and compliance--the peasants, their nothingness.

The analogy gains in clarity and force as the plot progresses. With each episode the Donkey becomes more of an individual, more human. As events unfold, we frequently see, hear, and feel them from the Donkey's perspective. "Meanwhile, [the Donkey] kept tripping along behind Neli, trying to bite his jacket for fun, as if he knew it was the jacket of his new owner, and as if he didn't care that he was forever leaving the stable where he had been warm beside his mother, where he had rubbed his muzzle on the edge of the manger, or had butted and capered with the ram, and had teased the pig in its little corner" (155). Verga gives the Donkey's thoughts and feelings, like those of the peasants, expression, even as Italian society of the time ignored them. "The only one who remembered the colt was his mother, who stretched out her neck braying toward the door of the stable" (155).

As he and his labor change hands, the "colt" (156) is gradually broken in both body and spirit.

At the threshing, the colt, tied by the neck in a

> row with the other animals...became so tired that he didn't even feel like biting into the pile of straw....Then he let his muzzle and his ears droop, like a full-grown donkey, his eyes lifeless, as if he were tired of looking at that vast white countryside which...seemed made only to let you die of thirst and to make you trot around on the sheaves. In the evening, he went back to the village with his saddlebags full, and the owner's boy kept pricking him in the withers, as they went along the path's hedges which seemed alive with the chirping of the titmice and the fragrance of catmint and rosemary, and the donkey would have liked to take a bite, if they hadn't made him trot all the time so that the blood went down to his legs and they had to take him to the farrier; but his owner didn't care at all, because the harvest had been good, and the colt had made his thirty-two and a half *lire*. (156)

As "the labor of children in the fields was needed," (Marraro qtd in Covello 251), so is the labor of the immature Donkey, already exploited and downtrodden.

Verga compares the Donkey explicitly to a human being in the episode at the farrier's, in which the Donkey "tried to break loose from the twisted rope which squeezed his lip, his eyes wild from the pain as if he were human" (Verga

157). And like the peasants, the Donkey falls further and further into misery. The narrator remarks, "And yet there are so many Christians who are no better off" than animals, the Donkey and other beasts who "shielded themselves by huddling close together" under "stars that were shining like swords," beasts whose "harness sores shuddered and quivered in the cold as if they could speak" (162). The explicit analogy makes perfect sense, when, in Mezzogiorno society of the era, "the connection and contact between family life and animal life has a very concrete substratum linked to an extreme closeness in work...and which often continues during the time of rest, celebration, and relaxation" (Manoukian 17). The same animals that plowed the land alongside the peasants often slept alongside them as well, sharing most of their lives (Franchetti qtd. in Manoukian 17).

At story's end, the personified Donkey has suffered nearly to death. It is only then that he is given some comfort by "a poor widow, in a hut more broken down than the lime kiln itself, where the stars went through the roof like swords" (Verga 162). This old peasant woman lives under the same conditions as the Donkey, "as if she were in the open" (162); and she sees fit, despite her poverty, to care for him. The "poor Saint Joseph donkey was better off during his last days, since the widow kept him like a treasure, thanks to the money he had cost her, and at night she went to find straw and hay for him, and kept him in the hut beside her

bed, whre he gave off heat like a little fire; and in this world one hand washes the other" (163). Here, the widow gives care based on affection, but at least as much on economic interdependence: the dual motivation of relations among members of the peasant family. Although, for example, children were naturally loved by their parents and siblings, they also "generally were expected to make an economic contribution to family as soon as they were able to work" (Alba 32). Fathers, in return were expected to earn the lion's share of family bread; and mothers, if and when they were not working in the fields, kept household order (Gambino 128-182). In a similar way, the widow relies upon the Donkey. "One hand washes the other."

When the Donkey "knelt down just like the real Saint Joseph donkey in front of the Christ Child, and he didn't want to get up any more" (Verga 164), the widow and her own fever-stricken son are left without their only means of earning bread, the donkey, the one-time conveyance of the Christian world's savior. By this point in the narrative, the Donkey's treatment in death seems no worse than his treatment in life. A passerby tells the widow, "'I'm buying only the wood, because here's all the donkey's worth....' And he kicked the carcass, which sounded like a broken drum" (164). The folkloric Donkey suffers and dies, the way centuries of Southern folk did, most often bound in thankless, hopeless, and endless servitude to their

landowning masters, or at best, to their own tiny pieces of land.

Yet, to this land peasants remained true, maintaining their "intimate embrace of the land that had sustained them for generations, in spite of the apparent harshness of life there" (Alba 38). Life there, like the familiar folktale, was the only story they knew: not necessarily a happy one, but one from which they could draw discernable themes, in which they could learn practical lessons. True, many ultimately left, driven by economic crisis--"destitution, lack of work, and a natural desire to improve their condition" (Nelli 31)--but they "were reluctant to leave their villages" (31). "With reverence, they could recount how the histories of their families entwined with that of the village. The village and its surroundings were something intimate, familiar, where every stone, tree, and field was connected to this personal sense of history and place" (Alba 28). They felt an attachment to the land and way of life, and at a distance conceived a pastoral of their *paese*, as they came to idealize an ultimate return there.

To escape their miserable lot peasants had to leave their land, since "emigration held at least the prospect of escape from misery" (Douglass 92). Prior to the 1880s, migration meant, in most cases, movement within the Italian Peninsula. And most of those landless laborers who migrated, as was later the case with emigrants to America, were men.

These men were typically *giornalieri*, day laborers. "The bulk of the town's peasant group consisted of such *giornalieri*.[13] He [the *giornaliero*] had no share in the local affairs of the town. He often lived the life of a nomad, moving from one place of work to another. Long distances between home and work place permitted him to visit the family only occasionally" (79).

Such movement for economic survival finds expression in the Sicilian version of the classic folktale, "Out in the World." It begins, "There was a widow with two daughters and a son named Peppi, who was at a loss to earn his bread. While mother and daughters were spinning one day, Peppi said, "Listen, Mother; with your leave, I am going out into the world" (Calvino 616). Peppi represents the "young, unmarried males" who formed "the majority" of emigration (which was overall seventy-five percent male (Archdeacon 139)) from Mezzogiorno towns (Douglass 101). He leaves for economic reasons, as most emigrants ultimately did (Nelli 30-31).

Once out, he works at first for room and board, and seeks money only in order to return to his family. He pleads with the landowner for whom he labors, "Carnival is coming, and you couldn't give me a little money just this one time so I could go and celebrate with my mother and sisters?" (Calvino 617). The landowner refuses to remunerate labor, a problem for Peppi, but an absolute barrier to upward

mobility for late nineteenth-century peasants caught between feudalism and capitalism (Douglass 35-36; Mack Smith 148-57; Nelli 22-23), victims of "the Mezzogiorno's disadvantaged position in the emerging international capitalist economy" (Alba 38). While the Southern landowners themselves could not compete for "capital which was needed for effecting the switch from subsistence farming to production for an international market" (Mack Smith 151), the landless Southern peasant could not even enter the competition by accumulating capital to buy land.

The solution for Peppi is a sly, "tough" (Calvino 618), personified ox, a symbol of both peasant *furberia* and peasant perseverence. The ox instructs Peppi to ask the master, who hates the ox, to give him to Peppi in place of money, which the master does. One day, Peppi hears a proclamation: "WHOEVER FEELS UP TO PLOWING FIFTY ACRES OF LAND IN ONE DAY'S TIME WILL RECEIVE THE KING'S DAUGHTER IN MARRIAGE; OR, IN THE EVENT HE'S ALREADY MARRIED, TWO PILES OF GOLD. BUT WHOEVER TRIES AND FAILS, DIES" (618). Peppi and the ox succeed in plowing fifty acres of land in a single day. The king is reluctant to marry his noble daughter to "that ugly peasant" (619), so he asks Peppi, "'What do you want, two piles of gold coins?'" To which Peppi replies, "'I'm a bachelor, Majesty. What would I do with gold pieces? I've come for my wife'" (619). Once the king agrees, Peppi endears himself by slaughtering the ox, as the ox instructs

him to, for the wedding feast. Peppi kills off the symbol of his servitude, whose magical hoof causes his matrimonial bedchamber to grow "full of flowers and fruit out of season" (620). Peppi himself, a peasant at heart, is himself out of season as a noble living in a castle.

His solution to poverty is characteristic of the folktale, which "reflects prehistoric reality, medieval customs and morals, and the social relations of feudalism..." (Propp 17). It is a solution that relies still on the graces of the *galantuomini*, the nobility. Such a solution was not possible for the real peasants of the Mezzogiorno; and even for the hero Peppi it is only temporary. After his wedding his sisters and brothers-in-law conspire to rob him of his money, by exploiting his trust. They learn the secret of his fertility from his wife, wager him that they know it, and when they win the wager, literally send him packing, "set out dressed as a peasant and carrying his knapsack" (Calvino 621).

Only Peppi's initiative and his curiosity restore him to his fortune and wife. He goes off in quest of the Sun, through a series of fantastic feats comes to speak with it, and bargains with it to set at an unusual hour, so that he can win back his possessions from his in-laws, as they had done from him. Upon winning this second wager, Peppi initially refuses his reward, announcing to the court, "'I intend to show you the heart of a peasant'--as they still

called him....'I have no desire for the property of others, but only for my own'" (622). When the king hears this, he "insisted on embracing [Peppi] and, removing his crown, placed it on Peppi's head....So goes the story of Peppi, who started out as a starving cowherd and ended up the wealthiest and happiest of kings" (622). Peppi renounces property gained through trickery and ultimately gains it through humility and abstention, enacting values and virtues practical in the world of a folktale. A more realistic portrayal of practical values, but still not representative of reality, is Mazzarò's obsessive acquisition of property in Verga's "Property." Of course, Mazzarò's degree of success would have been nearly as rare for a peasant as Peppi's crown.

"Out in the World," then, teaches the practical peasant virtues of hard work, humility, initiative, perseverence; it tells the tale of a hero meeting "life situations in terms of accepted and immutable behavior" (Covello 266), and seeks the "inculcation and transmission of culture traits" to children, as well as the edification of these traits "not...for any particular age level" (Calvino xxx); however, it does not offer a realistic solution to peasant problems. That solution would be left to the peasants who became the great emigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; who, although they did not share Peppi's means, shared his values and virtues.

The peasants who became the great emigration "were not the dregs, those at the bottom of the economic ladder, but sturdy and hardy peasants who were a step or two up and who feared impoverishment" (Nelli 32), "'the more frugal, thrifty and energetic' members of Southern society" (Carroll qtd. in Nelli 32). As one American official of the era stated, "One of the complaints of the present day of the Italian officials is that the very best young blood of the Italian plebes is going out of the country. They recognize that fact. It is the man with the initiative who leaves" (McLaughlin qtd in Nelli 33). In danger of being driven over the brink of poverty by a rash of economic disasters--the unfair redistribution of lands and the dissolution of feudal ties, combined with the effects of extended drought, pervasive phylloxera, overproduction of agricultural products (especially wine and wheat), burdensome taxes, and the restrictionist agricultural trade policies of the Italian government (Alba 39; Mack Smtih 150-54; Sori 11-17)--nearly twenty million Italians, full of hope for a brigher economic future, emigrated (from 1861 to 1940) from an Italy that in 1901 contained a population of only thirty-three million (Sori 19). "Many appear to have left with the intention to work abroad and earn enough money to purchase land when they returned. One indication that this is true is the large number of young men unaccompanied by their families who were counted as part of the immigration to the

United States" (Alba 40). Most of the immigrants to the United States, ninety percent of whom came from the Mezzogiorno (Nelli 32), were men who, having "never strayed far from their home village much less been on an ocean voyage" (34), left their families and homes for America, alone and frequently illiterate (Archdeacon 135-140; Covello 246).

The illiteracy of the immigrants is significant, since, as we will see, the trope of literacy, specifically literacy in English, is central to Italian American immigrant autobiography; for the immigrant autobiographers, literacy signifies accomplishment, a key to success in the United States. To understand why in part the autobiographers held literacy out as a symbol of success in late Gilded Age America, one need only to understand that in the United States, then as now, "Lost earnings from an inability to communicate in English are potentially quite substantial" (McManus 84); and to examine the state of illiteracy in late-nineteenth century Mezzogiorno society.

> On the whole, the South [of Italy] was decidedly illiterate in comparison with the North. And this condition continued long after various policies were inaugurated which were directed specifically toward the enlightment [sic] of the South. For instance in 1901...the situation there did not even approximate the conditions as they existed in

> northern Italy in 1867. Thus in 1901, the illiteracy rate was still 70 per cent in Campania, 69.5 per cent in Apulia, 75.4 per cent in Basilicata, 78.7 per cent in Calabria, and 70.9 per cent in Sicily. (Covello 246)

Several men of this largely illiterate population would author the autobiographies upon which the following chapter will focus.

A problem for the Italian immigrants, the "birds of passage"--so-called by Americans who viewed them as "a rootless population that would not be able to assimilate successfully" (Alba 40), half of whom, in fact, returned to Italy (Archdeacon 137-140)--were the vast and many differences between the two societies of which they would take part: Post-Risorgimento Italy and Progressive Era America. Thomas Archdeacon neatly summarizes their dilemma

> Sociologists and others tend to interpret the success or failure of a group in industrial society in terms of its own traits, the cultural 'input' that it brings to the machinery of mobility...By this kind of cultural scorecard, Italians rank near the bottom, epitomizing a 'traditional' outlook that is presumed to mesh poorly with a dynamic, urban society. Their traditionalism is indicated by their personalistic ethos and, above all, by the solidarity of their

> family bonds, which brings about a closure to new experience and an adherence to the ways of ancestors...Whether this is true and whether culture deserves the primacy it is often accorded are questions that are tested by the Italian-American experience. (41)

Italian American immigrant autobiographies and other Italian American narratives document the results of this test.

The following passage from Viscusi's *Astoria* crystallizes the dilemma of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian immigrants to the United States: "A whole nation walked out of the middle ages, slept in the ocean, and awakened in New York in the twentieth century" (22); so I will end this chapter with an account of these emigrants/immigrants from an Italian point of view (translated, however, into English)--that of Emilio Salgari (1863-1911) in "Gli emigranti."

> Many times you have heard talk of those poor peasants who, without means of earning their bread in their own little *paesi*, go to seek their fortune in distant America, and perhaps you have seen many of them depart, crowding onto train cars, carrying their few rags, their last bit of wealth.
>
> Those wretches, before reaching America, must cross an immense ocean, the Atlantic, and travel

twenty-five days, sometimes thirty, aboardship.

We present to you now a scene of emigration. Look at all those peasants, who have abandoned our beautiful Italy, gathered together in the hold of a ship. With them are their women and children.

It's dinnertime. All crowd around the cooks and the sailors to receive their bowls of soup. But the ocean is not calm, and the ship, tossed by the waves, bounces around wildly, jostling everyone.

The bowls overturn, children fall to the floor, losing their soup, others cling to their mommies' skirts and howl with fright, or they are helped by their older brothers and sisters, while the parents run back and forth, everywhere, for fear of going without dinner.

At sea, these are everyday occurences, scenes played out over and over again, which try the patience and the hunger of those poor peasants.

But finally, the ocean crossed, the coastline of America is in sight, they debark onto those distant shores. But how many disillusionments often await them there, and how many return to their fatherland poorer than they left! (translation mine) (Savana and Straniero 341)

Just as significant as how many immigrants returned to Italy

is how many ways Italy returned to those who remained in America, a phenomenon the succeeding chapters of this book will examine in detail.

In this chapter I have sought to illuminate the Italian peasant side of the conflicts played out in the autobiographies; the peasant sense of tradition and timelessness, the pastoral values that would accompany latter-day peasant hero-adventurers in their journey from Italian serfdom to American subjectivity. Having done so, I imagine again my great-grandfather, older, hollow-cheeked, having built a successful business and life in America, resting at his Brooklyn home, in the shade of his grape arbor, shielded from the bustle of his neighborhood, reading *Il Progresso*,[14] dreaming of Prata del Principato Ultra and its medieval via.

Notes

1. A town in Campania, about thirty miles inland from Naples. Both my paternal great-grandfather and maternal grandfather emigrated from there to New York.

2. A full generation after the Risorgimento, less than ten percent of the total population of Italy was eligible to vote. The "administrative franchise," barring entry into government to all but wealthy landlords, demonstrates even more clearly the limits of Italian democracy during this period (Mack Smith 236).

3. To say that the Northern government neglected the South is not to say they ignored the South. From 1880 to 1910, the

government commissioned two massive studies of conditions in the Mezzogiorno: The Jacini Investigation (1878-1885) and the Faini Investigation (1907-1910). Both were essentially fact-finding missions whose purposes were to determine the causes and nature of *La Miseria*--an complex of extreme economic and social conditions--and to suggest remedies. Unfortunately, these missions did little to alleviate the Southerners' economic and social woes, which persist to a lesser degree even today (Manoukian 13-34).

4. Richard Gambino's *Blood of My Blood* evokes the "pragmatic," hybrid nature of peasant religion and "historic bitter animosity between the Church and the people of the Mezzogiorno" (212-44), as does, in finer detail and with greater erudition, Robert Orsi's *Madonna of 115th Street*.

5. Covello's note: "*The words *educato* and *istruito* today, still retain their special meaning. *Una persona educata* is a respectful, well-mannered person. *Una persona istruita* is a learned person; one who has been instructed in the schools--has school learning. A person may be *ben istruito* (well-instructed) but *mal educato* (badly mannered). The southern Italian attaches the greatest importance to a person being *buon educato* rather than *istruito*. *Buon educato* is the southern Italian expression. The literary Italian is *ben educato*" (254).

6. The two collections of short stories are best known in English in D. H. Lawrence's unremarkable translation of the 1920s.

7. The Italian word for peasants.

8. *Verismo,* which means literally "realism," does not correspond to the nineteenth-century literary "realism" of English and American authors. "*Verismo* (being 'true to life') was the name given to revitalized realism during the second half of the nineteenth century by a group of Italian writers in opposition to the fantasies of late Romanticism...Verga is generally considered the main representative of that school" (Cecchetti, *Giovanni Verga* 44-45)....Italian *veristi* believed in some of the principles of naturalism, but...they did not make any special attempt to apply them....They did not even call themselves naturalists, but simply 'neo-realists'....They looked for the reality of human passions in the simple, and eternal, interplay between man's actions and man's aspirations" (47).

9. William A. Douglass, in *Emigration in a South Italian Town,* defines this term as "a sense in which community boundaries set off a distinctive moral and social universe" (1). Richard Alba, in *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity,* elaborates: "One manifestation of the tension between trust and distrust was the parochialism known as *campanilismo.* The southern Italian perceived a strong social boundary between the world of his town or village (including its fields, of course) and those of other towns or villages. The name *campanilismo* refers to the town bell, *il campanile,* implying that the margin of this world was where the bell ceased to be heard. Except for the military service of the men, which gave them a taste of the wider world, it was not

unusual for a peasant to spend his or her entire life within the boundary, with infrequent visits to neighboring towns and villages and few or none at all to larger urban places" (28). I accept these explanations, although I would qualify them with reference to Humbert Nelli's comment, in *From Immigrants to Ethnics,* that "Residents [of the Mezzogiorno town] simply did not recognize 'the community,' as the term is understood in the United States and elsewhere in Western Europe" (29), for although "in Southern-Italian and Sicilian villages most residents were related, little closeness, cohesiveness, or feeling of unity existed among the villagers" (28).

10. A practice that survives in both Italy and America. The procession of the Madonna during the annual Our Lady of Mount Carmel *festa* in East Harlem is an example (Orsi, "The Religious" 330).

11. Italian American authors continually employ these strategies in the twentieth-century. Fante and Valerio are two fine examples.

12. Robert Viscusi, in "Narrative and Nothing," illuminates the peasants' experience of nothingness, its role in understanding the society Verga portrays, and its impact on immigrant and later Italian American authors.

> The *cafoni* [peasants], unlike the authorities, do not need to be divided among themselves in order to be rendered harmless. Their separation is of a different kind. They are removed from the drama of power by three layers of Nothing.

And even these are precise. At the top, under the guards and dogs, there is that Nothing closest to the rich and powerful. Let us call this **The Nothing of the Deaf**: in *Fontamara* [Ignazio Silone's twentieth-century novel of peasant life], the rich systematically misinterpret what the *cafoni* say, insisting that every request for help is an act of transgression, and the treating a desperate plea for water as if it were an act of revolutionary terrorism. At the bottom, just above the *cafoni*, there is the Nothing of those who cannot represent themselves. Let us call the **The Nothing of the Mute**: the *cafoni* do not know what to say even when they say it. They arrive at the festival carrying the wrong flag, their clothes are laughable, their accent is sidesplittingly awkward. After all, they *cannot*, actually cannot, speak the language of the nation, but only the local tongue belonging to their narrow little crevasse in the primeval hills--what is called a dialect but has in practice the effect of a visible stigma. They speak with a wordlist and a *cantilena* that mark them out as simply not worth listening to, mark them out no less vividly than a bright red tattoo across the mouth.

Then there is the middle Nothing. It stands for that which cannot even attempt to speak or to hear. This is **The Nothing of the Dead**: it represents that which ought to be there but is not. It represents those who have so totally failed to claim a right to existence that they have either

died or emigrated, or both..." (81).

13. In 1881, "out of every thousand" peasants in the Mezzogiorno, "there were only forty-six *mezzadri* [sharecroppers] and fifty-nine peasant proprietors. The majority were simple laborers, with luck employed for half the year, whose standard of living was minimal, and who gained nothing when higher prices later brought prosperity to those who owned land" (Mack Smith 149).

14. *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, since renamed *America Oggi*, was "the most important" periodical, the largest circulation newspaper in the Italian American community and "the most long-lived among those in a foreign language" in the United States (Russo 249). For an account of the prolific and influential Italian American periodical press, see Russo [entire].

Chapter II: Americans in the (Un)Making: American Images of Italian American Men and Italian Immigrant Autobiography Before World War II

"The South Italian is volatile, unstable, soon hot, soon cool....It is not surprising that such people are unreliable. Credit men pronounce them 'very slippery'...It is generally agreed that the South Italians lie more easily than North Europeans, and utter untruth without that self-consciousness which makes us awkward liars....It would be safe to say that half, perhaps two-thirds, of our Italian immigrants are *under* America, not *of* it. Far from being borne along with our onward life, they drift round and round in a "Little Italy" eddy, or lie motionless in some industrial pocket or crevice at the bottom of the national current."

--from *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People*, by Edward Alsworth Ross

I come from America where everything
Is bigger but less majestic;
Where thre is no wine.
I arrived in the land of wine--
Wine for the soul.
Italy is a little family;
America is an orphan,
Independent and arrogant,
Crazy and sublime,
Without tradition to guide her,
Rushing headlong in a mad run which she calls progress.
Tremendously laborious America,
Builder of the mechanical cities.
But in the hurry people forget to love;
But in the hurry one drops and loses kindness.

--from "The Return," in *The Autobiography of Emanuel Carnevali*, by Emanuel Carnevali

"...I have made no account of a factor which is at the bottom of half our troubles with our immigrant population, so far as they are not of our own making; the loss of reckoning that follows uprooting..."

--from *The Making of an American*, by Jacob Riis

The trouble with my great-grandfather was he had a name the immigration agents at Ellis Island couldn't mangle: PA-

TELL-I. They could, I suppose, have changed the "i" to an "e" or the "p" to a "b," but the latter mistake would have been difficult even for the most careless agent to make, and the former wouldn't have made a phonetic difference in America. On the other hand, the change in my own surname, Guida (GWEE-DA to GUY-DA), has made a great difference. In Italian, "guida" means "guide or leader"; in English, it means nothing, or worse--if pronounced as it should be in Italian--it sounds perilously similar to a common derogatory term for Italian American men.

So great-grandpa Peter (Pietro) Patelli--counterstereotypically tall, thin, blue-eyed--was able to keep the most obvious sign of his Italian identity intact. This may be the reason he remained so attached to Prata del Principato Ultra, even as he immersed himself in the building of America and the American pursuit of more material wealth than he ever could have known in his little *paese*.

Back in the old country, Peter Patelli may or may not have dreamt of leaving his medieval hill town, but he did ultimately follow its narrow *via* beyond its limits and limitations, beyond those even of his native Italy. Like more than two million other Italian immigrants, he arrived in the United States during the first decade of the twentieth century with little money, little English, no wife, and no children.[1]

At first, he lived very much apart from American society. With his artisan training, he found work at a Manhattan construction site, but returned every evening to his predominantly Italian Brooklyn neighborhood where he could speak his dialect as well as standard Italian and eat an American version of familiar food. He lived alone in this small community and rarely interacted with English speakers.

Peter arrived in America before 1917 and the literacy test for immigrants. Even if he had come earlier, his illiteracy in English likely would not have barred his entry,[2] although it did keep him from moving up to a supervisory position in a construction company, frustrating him and compelling him to learn English, which he did in a short time. Shortly thereafter, a construction site superintendant, noticing that Peter could speak both English and Italian, and, on top of that, could read and write well, promoted him to foreman of a crew. Peter was on his way.

Soon, he left the company to start one of his own, with the help of Mr. Wilson (our family still knows him only as "Mister"), an American friend and backer. Soon after that, he met and married an Italian American woman whose grandmother had been a sharpshooter in Wild West shows travelling America in the 1880s. Peter had completely arrived in America.

By the time he had become successful enough to fulfill

his dream of returning to Italy, however, he had made too many commitments to America--to an American-born wife and to the several employees who relied on his business--to return to the medieval vias of his youth, which his mind, through years of American toil, had transformed into a site of pastoral beauty, timeless contentment.[3]

Early twentieth-century Italian immigrants to the United States came primarily to make money. In 1920, Stefano Miele, an immigrant man, admitted as much in a autobiographical sketch published in *World's Work*.

> If I am to be frank, then I shall say that I left Italy and came to America for the sole purpose of making money....If I could have worked my way up in my chosen profession in Italy, I would have stayed in Italy. But repeated efforts showed me that I could not. America was the land of opportunity, and so I came, intending to make money and then return to Italy. This is true of most Italian emigrants to America. (Miele 150)

Miele and others made their American money, however, at great cost. Later in the same sketch, Miele considers that "America wants the immigrant as a worker" and asks, "but does it make any effort to direct him...?" (150); he also complains that "the American newspaper magnified crime in Italian districts...made sensational stories out of what

were really little happenings" (151), and otherwise misrepresented Italian immigrants. Further along, Miele reveals the greatest price of all paid by Italian immigrant men, one revealed again and again in more substantial immigrant autobiographies: the price of memory. "For me, America has proved itself and promises to continue to prove itself the land of opportunity, but I have not forgotten Italy--it is foolish to tell any Italian to forget Italy. I say Italy; but for me, as for the others, Italy is the little village where I was raised--the little hills, the little church, the little garden, the little celebrations" (152). Here, Miele, like other immigrant autobiographers, waxes pastoral about his Italy. It becomes, with the passage of time, the site of blissful simplicity, its hardships erased by the act of literary remembrance.

Like the other autobiographers also in this strategy, Miele claims to speak "for the others." Whether or not he can does not particularly matter. What does matter is that Miele and other immigrant autobiographers set themselves up as "synechdochic" selves--selves, that, as Arnold Krupat claims of Native American narrative selves, express an "'I am we'...sense of self, where such a phrase indicates that I understand myself as a self only in relation to the coherent and bounded whole of which I am a part" (209-10): that "bounded whole," in this case, the "little village" in Italy.[4] Through the act of autobiography, Italian immigrant

autobiographers have left us the precious few extant impressions of complex Italian American immigrant male selves during the last great wave of immigration from Europe to the United States.

Some seventy percent of the Italian component of that wave were *contadini* from the Mezzogiorno (Vecoli 259).[5] In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Risorgimento, the unification and attempt to modernize Italy, came and passed the *contadini* by. In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci describes the effects of unification and industrialization on Italian society and the southern Italian *contadino* mentality. Following unification, the urban forces of the North and South, displaying a "hatred and scorn for the peasant" (Gramsci 91), worked in tandem to establish a protectionist economic regime under which "the Mezzogiorno was reduced to the status of a semi-colonial market, a source of savings and taxes," and was kept 'disciplined' by force and political chicanery (94).

This chicanery continued from the time of the Risorgimento through the reign of Mussolini (and, some would say, continues today), and fostered an attitude of suspicion and aloofness of authority and outsiders that immigrants took with them to the new world. It is portrayed with perfect simplicity in Ignazio Silone's 1934 novel *Fontamara*, the story of a small Southern village and its ruin at the hands of fascist government forces. The village's troubles

begin when Cavaliere Pelino, a government agent, arrives in Fontamara, and demands that the villagers sign a petition, without explaining its portent. The petition is written in Italian, while most of the villagers are illiterate and understand only dialect. Suspicious of anyone beyond the village, they refuse to sign. "Why should I sign?", the narrator asks in retrospect. "I hadn't caught ten words of what [Pelino] said. But why should I sign even if I had understood it? (29)...He was definitely a stranger....He was altogether incomprehensible....It was obvious that this bird had come to tell us about some new tax. There was no doubt of that....There was just one thing to clear up: what could they possibly put a new tax on?" (27). When the villagers refuse, Pelino barks at them, "Sign! It's for your own good" (29). In the end, the government, acting without town approval, diverts the village's sole source of water, destroying its timeless way of life. The villagers' suspicion is justified. It was this sort of suspicion that kept Italian immigrants to America living in "tight little islands" called Little Italies (Mangione and Morreale 130), apart and alienated from American society, imagining life in a fantasy Italy free of both American urban strife and the destructive influence of Italian *forestieri* (people from outside the village) like Caveliere Pelino.

In the face of such destructive government policy, ongoing absentee landlordism, and the immemorial

difficulties of sharecropping or squeezing a living out of inadequate land holdings,[6] over four million Italians left for the United States between 1880 and 1920 (Nelli 41). But emigration to America had to be especially difficult for men who had relied on their village communities and members of their families to survive "regimes that were as destructive natural disasters" (Glazer and Moynihan 184) and natural disasters themselves. Add to that the need to leave behind their betrothed or wives, children, families, and the "fields of Italy" for the squalor and loneliness of Italian American ghettos and industrial labor,[7] and it is easy to understand the tendency of Italian immigrant men either to return to Italy during times of low demand for immigrant labor--the great numbers of these men became known as "birds of passage" (Nelli 43)--or, if they remained in America, to develop a nostalgia for Italian life. For these latter, long-suffering men, "Retreat into the past, except by memory, was impossible" (Rolle 106). As this study will later show, this memorial retreat finds expression in the pastoral aspects of immigrant autobiographies.[8]

In America, Italian immigrant men began to feel a sense of dislocation that speaks to the comments of one American observer who claimed in 1881 that "The idyllic life of an Italian hillside or of a dreaming medieval town is but poor preparation for the hand-to-hand struggle for bread of an overcrowded city" (qtd. in Iorizzo and Mondello 78).

Although their lives in Italy had usually been far from "idyllic," those lives became so in the immigrant men's memories; memories set to pastoralizing Italy[9] not only by the squalor of their lives in urban America, but also by the symbiotic forces of nativism and misrepresentation of Italians and Italian Americans in American popular literature and culture. Together, these forces made life for Italian immigrants more difficult than it had to be.

Nativism helped shape the literature of Gilded Age and Progressive Era America, and was in turn shaped by it. In literature of the period, images of Italian males as libertines, criminal brutes, buffoons, or musical waifs (but not complex human beings) prevail. Alexander DeConde makes clear that although writers like Fennimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne expressed admiration for Italy and Italians (albeit mingled with moral condescension and exoticism), later writers like Mark Twain ("saying among other things that [Italians] were strangers to cleanliness" (137)) and Henry James (especially in his account in *The American Scene*) of mute Italian immigrant ditch-diggers "of the superlatively southern [read "inferior"] type" (qtd. in Boelhower, *Through* 21) fueled American popular contempt for Italians. Their "negative impressions" of Italians "are the ones that Americans" of the Gilded Age "usually read and most readily recalled" (DeConde 137).

But Twain and James did not misrepresent alone.

According to John Paul Russo, William Dean Howells, who often included "courteous, sincere, individualistic, quick-witted, and artistic" Italian characters in his fiction, nonetheless also included Italian characters who "resemble the stereotype of the Italian as noble savage in northern European and American Romantic literature" (59). The work of later, lesser literary lights such as the dialect poet Thomas A. Daley and novelist Samuel Ornitz[10] further contributed to the negative stereotyping of Italians during and after the Gilded Age.

Daley published several volumes of Italian immigrant dialect poems in his lifetime, the most popular of which was 1919's *McAroni Ballads*. Gaetano Cipolla claims that Daley's work is important because "it offers a view of Italian Americans as a humane and interesting people, a view...which ran counter to that generally held by American society and even by pseudoscientists who dealt with Italian Americans" (46); be that as it may, his poems' laughable typography, diction, and rhyme contradict its sympathetic sentiments.[11] This passage from the 1906 poem "Handicapped" proves the point.

> Eef I could talka 'Merican
> Like w'at I can Italian,
> So stronga langwadge eet would be
> You would be scare' to joke weeth me.
> Een Italy I am so queeck

For theenk of sassy theengs to speak,
W'en som' wan makin' fun weeth me,
Dat nexta time dey let me be.
Da professori from da school
Som'time was try for mak' me fool;
Ah! wal, they find, you bat my life,
My tongue ees sharpa like da knife.
(qtd. in Cipolla 47)

Clearly, Daley engages in what John Paul Russo calls "romantic primitivism" (52) in his depiction of an Italian immigrant man with a noble soul but a savage tongue--which, in Italian, by the way, is "sharpa like da knife." Is the vaguely criminal metaphor an accident? On the whole, Daley's Italian immigrants are nothing more than musical cartoon buffoons.

Two of the most telling (and widely-read during the period) literary manifestations of the forces then distorting Italian American male selfhood are Horatio Alger's *Phil, the Fiddler* (1872) and an O. Henry short story from the writer's second collection, *The Four Million,* entitled "The Coming Out of Maggie". *The Four Million,* published in 1906, was O. Henry's most popular collection, featuring stories, such as "The Gift of the Magi," earlier published in large-circulation magazines and newspapers of the time, like *The New York World, The Smart Set,* and *McClure's*. The stories thus reached millions of Americans in

periodical *and* book form, catching "the attention of readers everywhere" (Litz 394).

"The Coming Out of Maggie" treats, as many of O. Henry's New York stories do, the working class, particularly the Irish and Italian working class. Its plot proves Carl Van Doren's assessment of O. Henry as "the artful manipulator of already popular material," ideas and sentiments already in the cultural air of this century's first decade (qtd. in Litz 395). The story reinforces the idea of Italian man as seductive, dangerous criminal by nature. Its focus is Maggie Toole, a young Irish girl of "dull eyes, broad mouth and left-handed style of footwork in the two-step" (O. Henry 69). To the surprise of everyone at the Lower East Side Irish Clover Leaf Social Club, Maggie arrives at the Club dance escorted by a handsome young man who calls himself "Terry O'Sullivan." The Irish lads at the dance note that "Terry" puts on "Beau Brummel airs" (72). The narrator tells us--alluding to Donatello in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*--that "Terry" "danced like a faun; he introduced manner and style and atmosphere; his words came trippingly upon his tongue" (74).

In the end, "Terry" is revealed to be no Irishman at all. "You ain't no O'Sullivan," exclaims Dempsey Donovan, who will eventually rescue Maggie and recognize her charms, "You are a ring-tailed monkey" (77). The "monkey," we discover, is really Tony Spinelli, a local Italian youth,

who, upon being discovered and challenged to a fistfight by Dempsey, with "a murderous look in his dark eyes" pulls "a long, bright stiletto" "from his bosom" (79), which Maggie manages to knock away. Foiled, Tony leaves the dance, but not before he "hissed" (like a serpent) "something unintelligible" (Italian?) "between his teeth" (79). Dempsey calls Tony a "cheese slicer" and a "Guinea"; Maggie admits, "I knew there'd be nothin' doin' for him if he came as a Dago"; and Dempsey explains, summarily, that "Them Guineas always carries knives," before the two members of the older immigrant group go off happily together.

O. Henry's story reflects the early twentieth-century escalation of nativist prejudice against Italians, whc were coming to America in rapidly increasing numbers. More importantly, it and other literature that reduced Italian men to cartoons helped perpetuate into the 1920s and later decades one of many prejudices which Italian immigrant men of the period had (and Italian American men have since had) to overcome. In a 1909 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, Frank Marshall White wrote, "Though we do not know even approximately the number of Italian criminals in the United States, what we do know, nevertheless, [is] that they have piled up a record of crime here during the last ten years that is unparalleled in the history of a civilized country in time of peace" (qtd. in LaGumina 93). White goes on to lament that "During the entire period in which exotic

malefactors have been swarming into the country, nothing of any value has been done to stem the tide" (93). White's alarmist comments found support in the pseudo-scientific racialism of the period.

As Thomas Curran explains, during the early part of the century, "Working class Americans...came to accept the racial inferiority of the Italians and the other Southern and Eastern Europeans. However, the racial argument was not proposed by working-class Americans. It was a product of the upper-class intellectuals, the press, and the business elites" (116). In his 1914 treatise, *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People*, one of those upper-class intellectuals, then renowned professor of sociology, and nativist, Edward Alsworth Ross, distinguishes by differences in the size and shape of their heads the "North Italian" race from the "South Italian" who accounted for the great majority of Italian immigrants to America (97). Ross states further that "In nothing are the two peoples so unlike as in their crimes. While northern Italy leads in fraud and chicane, southern Italy reveals a rank growth of the ferocious crime that goes with a primitive stage of civilization. The contrast is between force and fraud, violence and cunning" (100-101). "In homicide, rape, blackmail, and kidnapping [Italian immigrants] lead the foreign born" (106).

At the height of their popularity during the same

period of nativist pseudo-science, reportage, and short fiction were the "luck and pluck" novels of Horatio Alger. "More copies sold each year between [Alger's] death in 1899 until 1920 than they did in his lifetime" (Decker 1). Although Jeffrey Decker finds nativist attitudes "embedded" in novels such as *Ragged Dick*, it is unlikely that Alger published his only story of Italian immigrant life, *Phil, the Fiddler* (1872), in order to reinforce nativist stereotypes of Italians[12]--an effect it likely had thirty years after its original publication. Whatever Alger's intent, *Phil, the Fiddler* is a story which left a negative impression of Italian men on at least two generations of American minds.

The story follows the trials and triumphs of Phil, a twelve year-old Italian boy fiddler, who is sold by his father (the first unscrupulous Italian man of the story) into "a form of chattel slavery" (Fink). Phil is then sent to live and work in New York for an Italian agent, a *padrone*--one of the men who, working on behalf of European shipping lines and American businesses, sponsored Italian immigrants in America, often housing them and directing them to labor sites around the country, in exchange for a commission or percentage of their wages (Iorizzo and Mondello 164-183). While it is true that many *padroni* exploited and abused the immigrants who relied on them for direction (Phipard 470), most, as Iorizzo and Mondello

claim, "wielded a beneficial influence in a number of ways" (166).

> They played a vital role in stimulating and directing Italians to America. Among the first to stir the masses and open their eyes to the tremendous opportunities awaiting them in the United States, these middlemen insured that once the Italians got here, though impoverished, they would not be immobile. *Padroni* directed the distribution of Italians, taking their work forces wherever there was need for them....
>
> Paradoxically, these Italian go-betweens, labeled among the fiercest promoters of misery and squalor in overcrowded metropolitan areas, often presented the ghetto residents with a way out. (166)

A way out is just what Alger's *padrone* does not offer. Instead, he holds Phil and the other Italian boys in servitude.

Of course, Alger's experience of the *padrone* system was limited, since he saw only its effect on child laborers in one extremely crowded and squalid quarter of New York. In this regard (and others), the narrator of *Phil* reflects Alger's limitations.

> What wonder that the boys sold into such cruel slavery should be estranged from the fathers who for a few paltry ducats sell the liberty and

> happiness of their children! Even where the contract is for a limited term of years, the boys in five cases out of ten are not returned at the appointed time. A part, unable to bear the hardships and privations of the life upon which they enter, are swept off by death, while of those that survive, a part are weaned from their homes, or are not permitted to go back. (45)

Phil and the other Italian boys in the novel suffer at the hands of the evil *padrone*, an "oppressive task master" (Alger 17), "a short man, very dark, with fierce black eyes, and a sinister countenance" (31), a "tyrant" (109) whose "dark face was marked by an expression of greed" (66): in short, a swarthy brute bent on making his charges' lives miserable for his own profit and pleasure.

The *padrone* beats Phil and the other boys if they do not bring home what he considers a sufficient day's earnings--which he keeps for himself, to indulge his taste for alcohol (33) and other vices. That the *padrone* has such vices would only serve to reinforce in the minds of Progressive Era readers even relatively novel stereotypes of Italian men created by twentieth-century nativists like Ross who noted (in a passage on Italians subtitled "CHARACTERISTIC VICES") that "in the Italian home the bottle of 'rock and rye' is seen with increasing frequency" and that "Italians...are addicted to gambling. Games of chance

flourish in their saloons, and many a knife-thrust" (suggestive of a less novel stereotype) "has come out of a game of cards" (105).

Unfortunately, the *padrone* is the story's only adult Italian male character (other than Phil's unseen, callous father). As Phil flees Manhattan, in an attempt to escape this cruel stepfather figure, the *padrone*'s "sharp eyes" (68) and presence loom, and his reach in the form of spies and lieutenants constantly threatens the fugitive Phil with falling "into the power of that old brute again" (178). Readers, especially young readers, of Alger's novel would have taken from it frightening images and perhaps dread of Italian American adult males.

The other prominent Italian American male in the book is a child, Phil himself, the exotic musical waif, the "dark-eyed Italian boy" of "brilliant brown complexion" (50). He is "twelve years old, but small of his age" and "In spite of the dirt, his face was strikingly handsome, especially when lighted up by a smile" (9). "His voice was clear and melodious, and, in spite of the poor quality of his instrument, he sang with so much feeling that the effect was agreeable" (13). Phil is another Italian faun, another Pan of American literature, this one available to as wide and impressionable a readership as any before or since.

To Alger's audience, Phil was an exotic jewel and a fatherless child, a protagonist extremely appealing to

paternalistic Progressive sensibilities; of these sensibilities John Higham tells us that "Most native-born progressives in the early years of the century viewed the immigrant as a passive entity, malleable and still to be molded under the influences of American society" (119). Even Jane Addams, champion of immigrant customs, occasionally expresses this view. In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, while Addams preaches respect for immigrant customs, her tone betrays a degree of paternalism. Of Italians, she writes, "They come to us with their petty lawsuits, sad relics of the *vendetta*, with their incorrigible boys, with their hospital cases, with their aspirations for American clothes, and with their needs for an interpreter" (170). Like Jane Addams' charges, Phil has something to contribute--his music--to American life, and is ripe for American shepherding.

The shepherd appears in the person of Doctor Drayton, a well-heeled American who, at story's end, discovers Phil half-frozen in a snow storm and adopts him. Plucky and lucky, having displayed the gumption to strike out on his own, having learned English well, having "been fortunate in securing a good home," Phil is assured success and satisfaction. "Some years hence the doctor promises to give himself a vacation, and take Phil with him to Europe, where he will seek out his Italian home, and his mother with whom he has already opened communication by letter. So we leave

Phil in good hands, and with the prospect of a prosperous career" (264). Through his strength of character and dilligence, Phil succeeds in his striving to become a successful American; and it is that very success that will enable Phil to revisit his pastoralized life in Italy which he believes to be "much nicer" than America...There are olive-trees and orange-trees and grapes" (45).

Throughout the narrative, in the narrator's words, "[Phil] had been dreaming of his mother and his far-off Italian home" while living "the harsh realities of life" (100) in America. American readers might have tolerated (or missed) this subtle and other less subtle critiques of American life in the novel, because Phil's story unfolds in a setting--an immigrant slum in New York-- foreign (in all senses) to many of them. Also, Phil's story is still, at bottom, a rags-to-riches tale, in which Alger does his due dilligence to capture, in exotic hues, the American myth of the self-made man. Finally, readers could rest assured that Phil would return to Italy "in good hands," as an American on "vacation," understandably wanting to visit his mother--the Doctor makes clear that Phil "has found" an American "father" (263)--and, in James's words, "to gaze upon certain of the highest achievements of human power" (qtd. in DeConde 132) as well as the beautiful fields of the *Bel Paese*.

Rocco Corresca, the first Italian American immigrant

autobiographer to write his autobiography in English,[13] takes cues from Horatio Alger in developing perhaps the first complex, fully human Italian American male self in literature. His "The Biography of a Bootblack" appeared in the December 4th, 1902 issue of *The Independent*. Corresca's title obviously alludes to Alger's *Ragged Dick; or Street Life with the Bootblacks*. Not surprisingly, "The Biography" tells a rags-to-riches story.

It begins with a description of Corresca's life in an Italian orphanage, the protagonist again a parentless child ripe for American influence but attached to his native Italy. He remembers the Italian orphanage as "a good place, situated on the side of the mountain, where grapes were growing and melons and oranges and plums" (2863). A pastoral setting, like the Italy Alger's Phil recalls. From this bucolic setting, Corresca is taken to Naples by an old man claiming to be his grandfather. This "grandfather," Corresca tells us, turns out to be a *padrone*, the first of two for whom he is forced to work.

Corresca flees the *padrone*, and passes another idyllic period in the company of a kindly fisherman and his beautiful daughter, until the fisherman can no longer afford to pay him. Although Corresca's *padrone* is nearly as callous as Phil's, he does not hunt the fugitive Corresca down. Not quite so relentless or brutal as his American predecessor, Corresca's *padrone* is a turn-of-the-century improvement on

the Alger's image of the Italian American man.

Impoverished, Corresca leaves for America, "a far off country where everybody was rich," where "Italians went...and made plenty of money, so that they could return to Italy and live in pleasure ever after" (2864). This double desire, to succeed in America (to become and rich and literate enough to tell about it) and to return to Italy "and live in pleasure ever after," shapes the male selves of Italian American autobiographies throughout the early twentieth century.

Corresca reaches America by contracting with a second *padrone,* Bartolo. In America, Corresca's experiences with Bartolo echo Phil's experience with his *padrone,* but differ in several important ways. Corresca's *padrone* keeps him with him by contract, not by brute force. He feeds Corresca and the other boys well, telling them, "I am too kind a man, that is why I am poor"; even though, as Corresca tells us, he "is now a very rich man," the *padrone* does not squander money on his vices in the manner of Phil's *padrone.* Like Phil, Corresca one day travels to Newark, not in flight but in quest of money which he would not have to share with Bartolo. Bartolo pursues him, but is easily deterred--like the first *padrone,* he is hardly a menacing presence. In fact, in the character of this second *padrone* Corresca presented readers of the day with an image of *padrone,* Italian man, as complex human being, who grows rich from

child labor, but at the same time acts kindly toward the immigrant boys he sponsors; instead of responding with the threat of violence to their breaking the *padrone*/immigrant contract, Bartolo simply goes away complaining to police that "there was no justice in this country" (2866). A good number of American readers of the time might actually have identified with him.[14]

The most human, complex self emerging from "The Biography" is Corresca himself. Unlike Phil, whose story is told by a narrator close to Alger's point-of-view, Corresca, from his own point-of-view, organizes his own experiences to create a narrative self. Corresca's act of creating his own metaphor of an Italian American male self[15]--the first such act by an Italian American writer--in context of Gilded Age and Progressive Era misrepresentations of Italian Americans, amounts to nothing less than declaration of Italian American literary independence.

For the first time, American readers could gain a sense of Italian American male consciousness as constructed and presented by an Italian American male writer. Corresca's "Biography" constructs an Italian American literary self conscious both of economic success and, naturally for an immigrant, of his ethnic heritage, in a way that the work of Alger and other American writers of the era does not. Corresca makes clear that his success is more pluck than luck, a matter of dilligence and design in the manner of

Franklin who, "by the time large numbers of Italians began arriving in the United States...had already been enshrined as a model for emulation" (Holte, "Benjamin Franklin" 101). Corresca writes,

> When the Newark boss told us that there was no more work Francisco and I talked about what we would do and we went back to Brooklyn to a saloon near Hamilton Ferry, where we got a job cleaning it out and slept in a little room upstairs. There was a bootblack named Michael on the corner and when I had time I helped him and learned the business. Francisco cooked the lunch in the saloon and he, too, worked for the bootblack and we were soon able to make the best polish.
>
> Then we thought we would go into business and we got a basement on Hamilton avenue [sic] near the Ferry, and put four chairs in it. We paid $75 for the chairs and all the other things....Outside we had a big sign that said:
>
> THE BEST SHINE FOR TEN CENTS
>
> Men that did not want to pay ten cents could get a good shine for five cents, but it was not an oil shine.
>
> We had two boys helping us and paid each of them fifty cents a day. The rent of the place was $20 a month, so the expenses were very great, but

> we made money from the beginning. We slept in the basement, but got our meals in the saloon till we could put a stove in our place, and then Francisco cooked for us all. That would not do, tho [sic], because some of our customers said that they did not like to smell garlic and onions and red herrings. I thought that was strange, but we had to do what the customers said. So we got the woman who lived upstairs to give us our meals and paid her $1.50 a week each. She gave the boys soup in the middle of the day--five cents for two plates...We had said that when we saved $1,000 each we would go back to Italy and buy a farm, but now that the time is coming we are so busy and making so much money that we think we will stay. We have opened another parlor near South Ferry, in New York. We have to pay $30 a month rent, but the business is very good. The boys in the place charge sixty cents a day because there is so much work. (2866-67)

The narrative here not only demonstrates the nineteen year-old Corresca's ability to define his life, but also at times reveals his feelings on small matters such as the American negative reaction to "garlic and onions and red herrings," which he thinks "strange."

The passage also reveals Corresca's sense of

Italianità, his sense of difference from Anglo and other non-Italian Americans. At one point, he comments on a American ethnic group then antagonistic to Italian Americans. "There are some good Irishmen, but many of them insult Italians. They call us Dagoes" (2867). At another point, Corresca notes that "There are here plenty of Protestants who are heretics, but they have a religion, too. Many of the finest churches are Protestant, but they have no saints and no altars, which seems strange....These people are without a king such as ours in Italy. It is what they call a Republic, as Garibaldi wanted" (2867). This passage is notable for two reasons: first, because it appears to be written for an Italian or Italian immigrant audience unfamiliar with American politics and American religion; such an address is surprising, because, first, it is written in English; second, to this point in the narrative--a narrative full of information about Italy and constructed on the design of the American rags-to-riches tales of Franklin and Alger--Corresca has been addressing "the model reader" of immigrant autobiography, the "Anglo-American" (Gardaphè, *Italian* 48); and third, because, like many of the immigrant autobiographies that follow it--as William Boelhower claims of Pascal D'Angelo's *Son of Italy* (*Immigrant* 134-35) and Fred Gardaphè claims of Constantine Panunzio's *The Soul of an Immigrant*--it offers, in Gardaphè's words, "criticism (both explicit and implicit)" (*Italian* 48) of American

society.

The Italian American immigrant autobiographers who follow Corresca, notably D'Angelo and Panunzio, also employ this strategy of addressing both "the model reader" and the Italian (American) reader who might follow the autobiographer's example. This double address allows the narrators to identify with sympathetic Americans like Corresca's first boss in Newark, while expressing their sense of ethnic difference. Their dual identification represents the starting point of Italian American selfhood in literature, the central conflict of Italian American ethnic consciousness as Corresca and other, later Italian American narrators express it. I will call this conflicted narrative relationship to Italian and American audiences, to Italian and American culture, to Italian and American models, *impresa/ripresa*.

Zingarelli's *Nuovo Vocabolario* defines *"impresa"* and *"rirpesa"* as follows:

> Impresa: s. f. 1. *Opera, azione che si comincia o si ha in animo di fare.* 2. *Azione, attività di una certa difficoltà e importanza, ma spesso di esito dubbio.* 3. *Organismo che coordina prestazioni di lavoro e strumenti adeguati per il conseguimento di finalità economiche.* [n. f. 1. Work or action that is undertaken for the purpose of accomplishing some task. 2. Action, activity of a

> certain difficulty and importance, but often of dubious result. 3. System that coordinates labor and adequate instruments for the attainment of economic ends.]
>
> Ripresa: s. f. 1. Nuovo inizio, continuazione dopo una pausa o un'interruzione. 2. Ricupero di vitalità, energia, intensità e simile.[n. f. 1. New beginning, continuation after a pause or interruption. 2. Recovery of vitality, energy, intensity and the like.]

These definitions, with a similar degree of accuracy in each case, describe the Italian American struggle, my great-grandfather's in life, the immigrant autoiographers' in literature, to succeed while reconstituting Italian culture in America. *Impresa, ripresa* suggest these concurrent enterprises.

What is the nature of these enterprises, *impresa* and *ripresa*, and how do they function in Italian American narrative? To begin with the second question, *Impresa* and *ripresa* function to develop what all serious literary narrative seeks to develop: a narrator's or character's identity, his or her self. In narrative, even in autobiography, as Philippe Lejeune points out, the "self and life story" (the former of which we may call narrator/protagonist, the latter of which we may call plot) "are culturally determined constructs" (ctd. in Eakin xxi).

Lejeune claims that the "concept of person" in narrative is a "linguistic structure" (x).

In Italian American narratives authors manipulate narrative language and form, the elements of narrative, to create selves identifying at once with both Anglo American culture and (a regional) Italian culture. Boelhower calls this peculiar self a "double self" ("Brave" 11). *Impresa/ripresa* is simply the sum of linguistic, formal and thematic ways that Italian American authors construct their double selves.

Impresa is the process by which Italian American authors tell stories that reinforce the lessons of Franklin's *Autobiography,* the myth of "the making of Americans,"[16] the myth of the "self-made man" (Cawelti) as portrayed in the "'luck and pluck'" fiction of Horatio Alger and others "up through the Progressive Era" (Decker xx). Although the myth of American success has often been seen as "a pilgrimage from imperfection to perfection" in some moral sense (Spengemann and Lundquist 503), during the early twentieth century, it had everything to do, as Abraham Cahan illustrates in *The Rise of David Levinsky,*[17] with the attainment of wealth. But apart from its moral and monetary dimensions, the American success myth is a myth of individual success, the creed of a society obsessed with individualism and adherent to the "cult of the self-made man" (Wyllie 13). It is, finally, a myth which naturally

plays a large role in the narratives of individual men cut off from an Italian society concerned more with the success of the family than that of the individual (Orsi, "The Fault" 138). Small wonder then that Italian American male autobiographers seek American models for their narrative experience; that, like Rocco Corresca in his "Biography," they consciously echo the language and plots of Franklin and Alger (Holte, "Private").

Ripresa, by contrast, is the process by which these same autobiographers criticize American life (and their literary selves' individualistic pursuit of its material rewards), by subtly comparing it to an idealized version of life in Italian villages like those Verga portrays (and to the lives of individuals like Ieli the Shepherd in his innocence), whose values (family, honor and respect above all), ring more communitarian than American values.

Ripresa is, at least superficially, the opposite of *impresa:* a version of pastoral by which Italian American authors reconstitute life in Italy as an idyll. That Italy is not now and has never been simply a blissful garden of communitarianism (Nelli 135) does not matter. Pastoral, as Raymond Williams reminds us, is "myth functioning as memory" (43). Because it is, the pastoral interludes in Italian American narratives serve, as does much pastoral literature, to criticize by comparison the society in which narrators and characters find themselves--in this case, American

society.

As often as they provide contrast, however, pastoral interludes in the immigrant autobiographies also allow narrators and characters to reach back to the Old World for keys to viable selfhood in the New World. In this way, Italian American narrators and characters develop identities, through the enterprises of *impresa* and *ripresa*, both in harmony and in contrast with American values. They become hybrids, truly Italian American.[16]

From the celebration of economic success in America; from longing for an "idyllic" Italian life lived only in their memories; against Progressive Era nativism; and against the popular images of Italian men in America, the immigrant autobiographers who followed Corresca wrote accounts of their lives that present Italian American men as complex selves, and express the *impresa/ripresa* conflict inherent in the literary representation of Italian American male selves throughout the twentieth century. In *Immmigrant Autobiography in America* and *Italian Signs, American Streets,* Boelhower and Gardaphè offer rich analyses of two of the most important immigrant autobiographies: again, *Son of Italy* (1924) and *The Soul of an Immigrant* (1921). I will not repeat or attempt to elaborate on their trenchant work here, but instead will examine an autobiography which I believe sums up Italian immigrant autobiography of the early

twentieth century: Francesco Ventresca's *Personal Reminiscences of a Naturalized American*. Published in 1937, on the eve of World War II, at a time when the virulent nativism of the Progressive Era, having wrought permanent changes in American immigration policy, was clearly waning (Higham 324-30), Ventresca's *Personal Reminiscences* represents the last of the Italian immigrant autobiographies concerned with proving the humanitiy of an Italian American self to the model Anglo American reader; and the last autobiography concerned with offering its narrator's story as an example for other immigrants.

Ventresca's *Personal Reminiscences* is an essential *impresa/ripresa* narrative, even though James Craig Holte claims that it is "self-propagandistic" ("Newcomer" 44), presents no real "sense of struggle or suffering" (44), portrays the narrator as "a figure straight out of a Horatio Alger novel" (73), reveals "very little about the author's inner life" (74), and is "essentially a personal album" (74). I could say, facetiously, that if I can make a case for the importance of this flawed a work, I can make one for any Italian American narrative. The truth is that, to some degree, Holte is right, but that I disagree with a number of his assessments, and that I believe Ventresca's autobiography, written in the wake of the Progressive Era and the Immigration Act of 1924, to be, in fact, a classic of the genre.

Most Italian immigrants who wrote autobiographies, especially those who wrote them during the great wave of immigration from 1880-1920, wrote success stories. In a culture shaped by the works of Franklin, Alger, and the autobiographies of nearly every great industrialist of the era (Wyllie 116-121), the impulse to write and publish success stories and not to write and publish failure stories, makes perfect sense. In fact, no Italian American autobiography published before 1967, none of which I am aware, tells a tale of unmitigated failure. In 1967 Kay Boyle compiled, edited, and published the miscellaneous autobiographical writings of her deceased friend, the Italian immigrant (though he did not remain in America long) poet Emanuel Carnevali, as his *Autobiography*. Carnevali's story, written in the 1920's, 1930's and 1940's, is unquestionably a story of failure. Still, it was never published during Carnevali's lifetime, and its peculiar history of composition and publication hardly qualifies it as a coherent *auto*biographical act "by which the lonely subjective consciousness gives order not only to itself but to as much of objective reality as it is capable of formalizing and of controlling" (Olney 30).

Ventresca's story begins in Introdacqua, a small town in the Abruzzi region of Italy--and coincidentally the hometown of Pascal D'Angelo, who calls it "a beautiful town" which "nature appears to have squandered beauty on....When

good seasons are with us the valley is happy and the sturdy peasants walk jovially to work in the early morning, and sing in harmony with the heaven-soaring larks" (17), a pastoral setting except in times of the drought and "hunger" which drive its *contadini* abroad (17).

Ventresca's family, unlike D'Angelo's and unlike most families of the era's Italian emigrants, enjoys a middle class existence. Ventresca hints, however, that were he to remain in Introdacqua, his own fortunes would surely decline. At seventeen he leaves home "for Rome and vicinity to earn some money for myself" (15). It is important to note that Ventresca never states plainly that money, a new economic life, provides the sole motivation for his journey to America; he does strongly imply, though, that while money is not the only object of his *impresa*, it is awfully important just the same.

In 1891 Ventresca follows the course of millions of other Italian emigrants and sails for New York by way of Naples, the word "*bracciante*" ("laborer") stamped on his passport (20). In Chapter II, aptly titled "America: The Land of Promise," Ventresca lands in New York where he eats a "*hot doggie*" and drinks his first beer. He takes care to tell readers, however, that, unlike Alger's *padrone*, "in subsequent years I never took a beer. I thought more of the nickel than the glass of beer I could get for it. And, mind you, I had not read Benjamin Franklin's autobiography yet"

(24). Perhaps during his first years in America Ventresca did not read Franklin, but he did apparently learn the lessons Franklin's narrative teaches. From this point in the narrative on, the youthful Ventresca keeps close account of his finances.

This accounting reflects values different from those expressed in Chapter I, "Abruzzi: Beauty Spot of Italy," wherein the narrative rarely touches on money (or at least rarely does so before Ventresca's departure for Rome). The first chapter, typical of Italian American immigrant autobiography in this respect, as well as in its portrayal of Introdacqua, recalls D'Angelo's "Happy Valley,"[17] where "there is a vast tract of land covered, in summer, with luxuriant green grass, thanks to several perennial springs of pure crystalline water"; where "during the summer shepherds and herdsmen feed their flocks"; where "these people give us today a touch of the pastoral life of old as they play their bagpipes and other pastoral instruments, adding rhythm to the beauty of nature" (1-2). Naturally, like Corresca and D'Angelo, Ventresca, faces at least some hardship in his homeland, but he reprises that homeland as a pastoral scene of timeless beauty, "the beauty spot" of *Bell'Italia*.

The rest of the story is Ventresca's seemingly endless *impresa*, his strivings to succeed in America, wherein Ventresca the narrator concludes of Ventresca the

protagonist's experience, that "there never was a time when a man could not use an [American] education to advantage" (50). He comes to this understanding after telling the story of his life as a laborer of one sort or another in towns from New York to Indiana. In Chapter III, "Incipit Vita Nova," Ventresca's experiences awaken in him a desire for formal education, for literacy, a key to American success here as it is in *Son of Italy, The Soul of an Immmigrant,* and *Phil, the Fiddler.* As Gardaphè points out, "Essentially, in the writing of Pascal D'Angelo and Constantine Panunzio, control of the American language--"something that immigrants...who were more rooted in the oral tradition did not have--means greater control of the self as American" (*Italian* 36). The same holds true for Ventresca's writing.

"One beautiful sunny morning" in Indiana, he reports,

> I was going to the post office to get the mail. It was recess time at the school. The children were playing marbles on the sidewalk. They looked as happy as children could be. It occured to me that it must be a great thing to go to school here, compared to Italy, where we went to school shivering out of fear lest we would not be able to recite faultlessly the memorized lesson, and would have to kneel down till school was out. (39)

America becomes, necessarily, the site of Ventresca's *impresa* (of literacy and education), while Americans

themselves, a number of his benefactors, become agents of his development. In a matter of three years, from the age of twenty-one to the age of twenty-four, Ventresca completes his education from first grade through high school. At this point Ventresca is given a letter of introduction to an prominent local priest, Father Dempsey, who "expressed admiration for an Italian boy of twenty-four who would resign doing chores and gardening in order to go to school in Indiana" (54). "These words of admiration," Ventresca tells us, "pleased me, and I made up my mind that I would strive to the utmost to make good and prove myself worthy of his comments" (54). The rest of the narrative reads like Ventresca's attempt to do so.

After college, Ventresca returns to Italy and other parts of Europe to pursue the study of languages, after which he receives innumerable written recommendations from people whom he has served as an interpreter. Recalling the letters of recommendation which "regularly preface the texts of slave narratives...Native American autobiographies" (Gardaphè, *Italian* 37) and other immigrant autobiographies such as Jacob Riis's *The Making of an American* (preface by Theodore Roosevelt), Ventresca's letters appear at various points in the text of *Personal Reminiscences*. Note this excerpt from a letter of January 20th, 1915, written on Ventresca's behalf to "The Chief, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Department of Commerce," by C.F. Marvin,

"Chief, Weather Bureau, Department of Agriculture" (187).

> Dear Sir:
>
> It gives me great pleasure to address this note to you personally and unofficially in behalf of Mr. Francesco Ventrasca....Mr. Ventresca recently took the special civil service examination for translator at $2000 in the Department of Commerce, and has just been informed that he stands third on the list of eligibles formed from that examination. Mr. Ventresca is personally known to me and I desire to heartily commend him to your favorable consideration for appointment in case his name is certified to you. He has devoted years of arduous study to the subject of literature, languages, history, geography, etc., and has acquired unusual attainments therein, speaking several European languages fluently and translating others with ability....Personally, Mr. Ventresca is not only a scholar and linguist but also a gentleman of fine instincts and sentiments, high honor, exemplary habits and charming personality. (187)

Ventresca's inclusion of the letter here reflects his ability to authenticate himself in 1915, at a time when such authentication as a valuable member of society might have proven indispensable crucial to the successful *impresa* of an

Italian immigrant; as it reflects his desire as author to present an authenticated American self at the late date of 1937.

As mentioned above, Ventresca returned to Italy and other countries in Europe on two separate extended trips. That the narrator/protagonist of an Italian American immigrant autobiography actually returns to the Old Country for an extended period of time is, on the face of things, unusual. But not so, if we read Ventresca's return as a turning back to the Old World, a search for keys to success in America and to his Italian American identity. In Ventresca's case the key to success is language. In the Old World he is able not only to hone his standard Italian--as opposed to the dialect he primarily speaks as a child--but also to gain a knowledge of other European languages, which makes his American career as an interpreter and teacher of foreign languages (and author) possible. At the same time, he pastoralizes the Abruzzi of his visit and of his youth.

> I made my last visit to our country estate where I had spent six months every summer when I was young and enjoying the fruits, nuts, flowers and vegetables, which delighted our eyes, our hearts, and our anatomies.
>
> And it was there that a rippling little stream, reminding me so much of Tennyson's "The Brook," ran past our country house, lulling us to

> sleep. The nightingale sang in the hedge during the night and the goldfinch and the linnet sang on the top of the trees during the day. The skylark, rising slowly from the wheat field took her position way up high like a modern airplane and there, hardly visible, sang her melodious strains to delight the country folk from dawn to dusk. (152)

Ventresca also presents the Italy he now sees from the idealizing point of view of a tourist.

> My friend and I had a characteristically Neapolitan meal with spaghetti, Roman cheese, rolled meat, tomato sauce and genuine, unadulterated wine, in a tavern but a few steps from the monastery. It was out in the country, upon a hill, surrounded by cultivated land and vineyards; seeming much closer to Heaven because of our distance from the shore of Santa Lucia (our Lake Shore Drive), because of the altitude and proximity to the monastery. (153-54)

As Boelhower claims of D'Angelo's "Happy Valley," Ventresca's rediscovered Italian countryside seems "much closer to Heaven" for its situation, which, in parentheses, he translates into American terms, nearly the language of a Baedeker guidebook. Thus, Ventresca mediates between Italian culture, his own sense of *Italianità* and the model Anglo

American reader. Significant too is that his *ripresa* of Italy stands in positive contrast to the bustling America Ventresca re-enters in succeeding chapters.

When Ventresca's narrative performs the *ripresa* of recalling Italy and Italian culture, it does not always do so in the service of his American *impresa*. Often the pastoral passages of the narrative perform a function more *characteristic* of modern pastoral literature, that of criticism of society by comparison. In chapter II, for example, the first chapter on Ventresca's life in America, he describes American railroad tracks--a powerful symbol of the American belief in progress and of America's industrial success.

> From the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from Canada to Mexico, one can see not only the whole rail but also the whole bedding of ties. The Italian would say this is not a bit artistic. But the American says: "never mind your art. We want efficiency, which means the greatest returns for the least outlay." And then, it would not be fair to draw seriously a comparison between a little old country like Italy and an immense new country like the United States. (28)

But of course that's just what Ventresca is doing here, contrasting the American world of efficiency with an Italian world of beauty.

Still, the narrative manifests Ventresca's concern for life in both of these worlds. He includes in it, for example, reprinted letters to the Board of Education that show both concern for American education and his role in it, and letters that appeal to American political leaders to support the territorial claims and defend the "honor of Mother Italy" (236), to which he remains as attached as he is to his "vita nova" in America.

Ventresca's double concern, the *impresa/ripresa* of his narrative, the double self it constructs, emerges from both of the worlds, American and Italian, to which he and the other Italian American selves of Italian immigrant autobiography will always belong.

I wish I could have known my great-grandfather better, but from stories about him I have gained a sense of *his* worlds, *his* complex self, a sense that he was a complex man who led a simple life. No one else's idea of an immigrant, through foresight and industry he achieved success great enough to recreate a life of beautiful Italian simplicity in Brooklyn. During the day, he labored at what he loved in America's greatest metropolis; the rest of the time he enjoyed the simple pleasures of his family, his grape arbor, his pipe.

He never returned to Italy, because, I believe, he thought he couldn't. Not because of Mussolini or World War

II, but because the Italy he knew, nineteenth-century life in the hill town of Prata del Principato Ultra, had ceased to exist, except (he must have known) in the streets of his Brooklyn neighborhood; in the well-tended Italian-style gardens overlooking the 60th street trainyard; in the shade of his imported grapevines; and in the initials he had cast in black brick on the red brick face of his *terrazzo*: "PP," the sign of his Italian name, the meaning of which remained with him and remains with us throughout the American Century.

Notes

1. 74.5 percent of Italian immigrants to the United States during the period 1890-1930 were men (Archdeacon 139). "During this period the immigration was characterized by a heavy preponderance of unskilled working-age males" (Nelli 42). This preponderance of young men made it easier for American nativists to paint Italian Americans as a menace to Anglo American life, as did *The New York Times* did, following, ironically, the 1891 lynchings of eleven Italian men by an angry New Orleans mob who suspected them, groundlessly, of murder. "While deploring what it termed the 'lawless and uncivilized' actions of the mob, the *Times*, nevertheless, argued that the citizens of New Orleans were compelled to use force to inspire 'a wholesome dread to those who had boldly made a trade of murder.' The *Times* remarked, 'These sneaking and cowardly Sicilians, the descendants of bandits and assassins, who have transported to this country the lawless

passions, the cut-throat practices, the oath-bound societies of their native country, are to us a pest without mitigation.'" (Iorizzo and Mondello 85).

The most significant statistic, because the most relevant to immigrant pastoral longing for the Old Country, is that 45.6 percent of Italian immigrants to American during the period of the Great Migration eventually remigrated to their native land (Archdeacon 139).

2. Restriction activists Prescott Hall and Robert DeCourcy Ward led a twenty-year campaign for a literacy test designed to curb the flow of unlettered immigrants (Curran 120). Congress made the test law as part of the 1917 Immigration Restriction Act (one of many passed from the 1880s to the 1920s), but it failed to achieve its goal of significantly restricting immigration, due in great measure to big business's continuing demand for cheap immigrant labor (128). Only the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, the so-called "Quota" or "National Origins" Act fully achieved the restrictionists' goals that previous acts had not, limiting the number of European immigrants to America to 150,000 per year, and limiting each national group to a percentage of this number based on their percentage of the United States population as recorded by the 1890 census (Higham 317-30).

3. Robert Orsi describes the tendency among Italian immigrants to glorify Italy and criticize America in his 1990 article, "The Fault of Memory."

The opposite of "Southern Italy," of course was "here,"

> "America." The imagining of "Southern Italy" was always structured in contrast to this other, equally imaginary, place, where money could be made more easily than in "Southern Italy," the immigrants conceded, but everything else was wrong. "America" was the structural inversion of "Southern Italy." In "America," the dead were not buried properly, and went unmourned; women and children ran wild; and men were not really men. In "America," children betrayed their parents, denying the fundamental bonds between them. As one woman told [Leonard] Covello, in "America" "there is no family, or anything" (139)....In "Southern Italy," women knew their place, married the persons they were expected to marry, and never went out at night. This was the land of order and propriety, where the appropriate norms, *il buon costume e l'ordine della famiglia,* were always obeyed. It was a geographical fantasy of entropy." (138)

4. Of the Italian immigrants, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan write, "Their horizon was limited to their own village; all outside of it were seen as foreigners" (184). This phenomenon is also known as *"campanilismo."* According to Alba,

> The southern Italian perceived a strong social boundary between the world of his town or village (including its fields, of course) and those of other towns or villages. The name *campanilismo* refers to the town

> bell, *il campanile,* implying that the margin of this world was where the bell ceased to be heard. Except for the military service of the men, which gave them a taste of the wider world, it was not unusual for a peasant to spend his or her entire life within this boundary" (30).

Italian immigrant men carried this mentality with them to the New World, as Italian immigrant autobiographers expressed it in their writing.

5. Their situation in Italy is described in detail in the previous chapter.

6. "At the turn of the century...Over eighty percent of the people of Italy depended on agriculture for their livelihood" (Iorizzo and Mondello 56).

7. The vast majority of Italian men who immigrated to American wound up in American cities, in occupations that alienated them from the land. The 1900 census revealed that most Italian immigrant men worked in personal and domestic service, transportation and trade, and manufacturing and mining, not in agriculture (Iorizzo and Mondello 60).

8. The autobiographers in this aspect of their writing function as the "pastoral poet" who "reverses the process and the progress of history" (Marinelli 9). Peter Marinelli's comments on modern applications of pastoral apply.

> For us [pastoral] has come to mean any literature which deals with the complexities of human life against a

> background of simplicity. All that is necessary is that memory and imagination should conspire to render a not too distant past of comparative innocence as more pleasurable than a harsh present, overwhelmed either by the growth of technology or the shadows of advancing age. (3)

9. The opening sentence of Harold Toliver's *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* should help clarify what I mean by "pastoralizing." In it, Toliver addresses

> the broadest implications of the idyllic element of pastoral--usually imaged as a paradisical place where *"Sei piace, ei lice,"* or where "if you like it you may have it"--which habitually calls forth an opposite and promotes a variety of "perspective by incongruity." Whether the scene is an explicit Arcadian society or some place of enclosed quiet, it [or its inhabitants] is likely to be exposed to such things as industrialism, death, unrequited love, unjust property division, or merely an opposing idea of perfection. (1)

As in Verga, as in the real lives of Italian immigrants, and as in the the constructed lives of immigrant autobiographers.

10. Ornitz's novel *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl* (1923) is the satiric story of ethnic characters' attempts to rise in America, and features an Italian ne'er-do-well criminal known only as "Dago Jack."

11. For a better account of Italian American language and its reflection of Italian American psychology, see Michael La Sorte's "Italglish: The Immigrant Idiom," in *La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience* and Hermann Haller's *Una Lingua perduta e ritrovata*.

12. Alger worked in conjunction with Giovanni Secchi de Casale, editor of *Eco d'Italia*, the Italian American daily, to investigate the padrone system as it operated in New York's Little Italy (Gardner 207-226). The system kept young children like Alger's fictional Phil working in the streets under conditions of virtual slavery. Secchi de Casale's tireless newspaper campaign and the publication of *Phil, the Fiddler* helped force passage of a state law creating the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (225-26).

Of course, in 1872, before the great wave of Italian immigration brought a perceived Italian menace, Italian immigrants, especially boys, made acceptable charity cases. Phil is a completely sympathetic character. The Irish Mickey Maguire, of *Ragged Dick* and other novels, as a representative of the then-dominant immigrant group, the Irish, draws Alger's narrative scorn.

13. Italian travellers to America published accounts of their travels in Italian prior to 1902. These include Giovanni Capellini's *Ricordi di un viaggio scientifico nell'America nel MDCCCLXIII* (1867), Carlo Gardini's *Gli Stati Uniti* (1891), and

Ferdinando Fontana's *Viaggi* (1893), the last of which includes a deeply personal account of Fontana's first encounter with New York.

14. By creating fully-dimensionally, emotionally and intellectually intelligible Italian American characters, Corresca allows the Anglo-American reader, which Gardaphè identifies as the model reader for Italian immigrant autobiography (*Italian* 48), to have what Gabriele Schwab calls "The Aesthetic Experience of Otherness," in which

> Reading not only reflects but also influences more general patterns of relating to otherness that are effective in a specific cultural community and for a specific phase of individual development. Like other forms of culture contact, reading affects boundaries, be they those of a self or of a culture. Literary texts as agents of culture contact work on the boundaries of their own culture or of those cultures that admit them to their canon. They also engage their readers in a process of dissolving, reshaping, widening, or transgressing their self-boundaries. (113)

15. Both James Olney and John Paul Eakin argue that metaphor is "the dominant trope of autobiography" (Eakin 187). In Olney's words,

> The self expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it

> did not exist as it now does and as it now is before creating its metaphors. We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch its metaphors: and thus we "know" the self, activity or agent, represented in the metaphor and the metaphorizing. (qtd. in Eakin 188)

I take their definition of "metaphor" to mean, broadly, the process by which a narrator uses the elements of narrative--point of view, plot, character, symbol, setting, diction, theme--to create a literary self.

16. By "the making of Americans" I mean the process of Americanization, and two varieties of it, assimilation and incorporation, which contended for intellectual and political ascendancy from the Progressive Era into the 1920's. "*Assimilation*...aims to make the foreign born similar to Americans in language, dress, customs, religion" while "*Incorporation*...aims at a natural and normal embodying of immigrants into the whole fabric of American life," "grants immigrants the right to use their native languages if they wish and even encourages their teaching the foreign languages to the young and thereby" builds "avenues of broader culture" (Panunzio, *Immigration* 254-55). Bolstered by World War I nativism and calls for "100 per cent Americanization" (Higham 249), assimilation eventually became the guiding principle of immigrant re-education and would remain so through the 1950s.

17. *Levinsky* remains one of the least appreciated American novels of the twentieth century, the story of a Jewish immigrant

who realizes spectacular economic success in America, largely because he is amoral.

16. I would argue, though I will not do so in this study, that for most immigrants to America and certainly for most immigrant authors, their Old World, whatever country it be, becomes a similar pastoral symbol.

17. In *Immigrant Autobiography,* Boelhower analyzes at great length D'Angelo's contrasting of Introdacqua as pastoral to his life in America.

> In describing the topology of his choodhoom [sic] world, D'Angelo says, "Introdacqua nestles at the head of a beautiful valley whose soft green is walled in by the great blue barrens of Monte Majella" (p. 13). The valley itself is a closed space, for "few roads run to this quiet land and the old traditions have never entirely died out there" (p. 13). It is a unified and sacred cosmos divided vertically into two spatial realms (sky and earth, light and darkeness) that are linked together by Mount Majella, the valley's kind of ladder for the inhabitants of the valley to communicate with the source of the trascendent spiritual forces and they organize their knowledge on the basis of these spatial combinations. The environment, however, is more than mere background, for the inhabitants are organically one with it. Not only is it always "our valley" (p. 7), not only is "our glorious Majella" the

"mother mountain" (p. 8), but "our race, the ancient Samnites, is said to have sprung from those sunny altitudes" (p. 13). The protagonist's world, in other words, is metaphysically grounded and has an evident genealogy. As D'Angelo says, "We are proud to call ourselves the sons of the majestic Majella" (p. 13). The purpose of the early chapters, then, is to give a morphological picture of this timeless, fairy-tale world and of the contending forces that animate this "happy valley" (p. 7), according to the seasons that come and go. (103)

Chapter III: John Fante's (Italian) Americanness: Family, Beautiful Women, and Stupid Ideas about Writing

"The publisher is spending more for advertising of my book than any other book on his list this Fall. Everywhere I go I get great praise of the book, but on the whole I think the book is a big success. I shall probably make a little money out of it."

"I am in a position—now that the book is going to see light—to apply for one of the Guggenheim Awards. It means $1500 and a year of research and study in Europe....On the basis of my Italian-American stories, I am going to request a year in Italy, with six months in Rome, and six months in Naples. Or better still, I may ask for a full 12 months in Abruzzi, where Papa's people come from."

"I have never and shall never be interested in anything but beautiful women."

"I have what may be called a lot of stupid ideas about writing, but it won't do any good to *tell* me they're stupid."

"This is no time for a writer, especially a young and starving writer, to take women seriously."

—from the letters of John Fante

My great-grandfather's English literacy and his marriage to an American woman made him at least part American. But like his more literary immigrant *paesani*, the immigrant autobiographers, Peter Patelli was not completely satisfied by making himself an American. As he worked to build his company, in the process getting rich by helping to build the New York subways, he continued to search for a more comfortable Americanness, Italian Americanness, unmaking some of the American America had made him.

He started with his house, which he built entirely of brick and mortar, an Italian art, an Italian fortress (bearing his initials, "PP", in black brick, over the

driveway), in a neighborhood of clapboard and shingles. When the house was finished, Peter added a grape arbor and vegetable garden. Finally, he discovered that he could, after work, ignore the world around him and retreat to his Italian garden, to read *Il Progresso* and smoke a pipe similar to the ones his *maestri* in the old country chewed as they worked new-cut strips of lumber with chisel and handsaw. In essence, my great-grandfather rebuilt Italy as he remembered it, recovering a culture he had seemed to leave behind.

Still, he never entirely retreated. Year after year, he worked in his and other American businesses, read *The New York Times*, vacationed in Cuba with my great-grandmother and his American business partner Mr. Wilson, rooted for the Brooklyn Dodgers, watched professional wrestling on television, and spoke to his children and grandchildren in English.

Peter felt the pull of two cultures throughout his life, pursuing the *impresa*, the enterprise, of making himself what he believed to be American, while simultaneously, in grand gestures of *ripresa*, recovery, reconnecting to the Italian life he had left behind. Luckily for him, my grandfather, while literate and intelligent, had little time to agonize over his bicultural dilemma, and if he did, he never let on.

Less lucky was the situation of American-born writer

John Fante. Fante's work reveals that he felt the pull of both Americanness and Italianness throughout his life. He was born in Denver, Colorado, in April of 1909, the eldest of six children, to an Italian immigrant father and an Italian American mother. Shortly after his birth, the Fante family moved to Boulder, where young John grew up in an environment rife with cultural and familial conflicts.

Fante's father, Nick Fante, an immigrant, worked as a bricklayer when the Colorado weather permitted. He also played cards, drank, and philandered, squandering his family's money. For this and other reasons, he often fought with Fante's mother, Maria, the child of immigrants, who did what she could to shield her children from her husband's tempers. The Fantes sent young John to Catholic schools, where he learned to despise his mother's religion, but where he discovered his three great passions: baseball, women, and writing.

Fante attended the University of Colorado for less than a year before dropping out. When, in the late 1920s, Fante's father left his mother, Fante moved to Calfornia with his mother and younger siblings. There, he worked in a fish cannery and in other unglamorous occupations, aspiring all the while to become a professional writer. Fante drew on his experiences during this period for the first of his four Arturo Bandini novels, the posthumously published *The Road to Los Angeles*. In 1932, Fante published his first short

story, the first of twenty-eight he would publish during his lifetime, in *The American Mercury*, whose editor, H. L. Mencken, he had hounded for months before winning his approval.

Flushed with this early success, Fante set out on a career as a writer of fiction. Over the next fifty years, however, Fante would publish only six books of fiction. (Since his death in 1983, his wife Joyce has published three more.)[1] We can attribute this meagre output, ironically, to Fante's literary livelihood, screenwriting. The rewards of contributing to the Hollywood dream machine, of earning a living, contended with the satisfaction of writing serious fiction, to "cover the true Italian-American scene, as yet pretty much untouched" (Cooney 39), for Fante's attention and his soul--as countless of Fante's letters and his last novel, *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, make clear. From 1934 when he sold his first screenplay to Warner Brothers, through the late 1960s, Fante spent much of his time and energy writing for the screen. In the end, only eleven of his many scripts actually became films, the most successful of which were *Jeanne Eagels* (1957), *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962), and *The Reluctant Saint* (1962).

In the 1970s, Fante developed diabetes and eventually went blind, dictating his final novel, *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, to his wife, who saw to its publication just months before his death. Since then, Fante's work has drawn some

critical attention, though by no means as much as it deserves. In 1995, the State University of California at Long Beach sponsored the First John Fante Conference. Many of its panels, as well as a forthcoming collection of essays which has grown out of the conference, focus on Fante as an Italian American writer and as a California writer. And while it is true that much of Fante's fiction revolves around Depression-era life in the Los Angeles area, some of his best work, such as the novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, is set in Colorado, his home state.

By Fante's account, his father worked hard to provide for his family; but as a bricklayer in Colorado--a place one of Nick's fictional counterparts, Svevo Bandini, considers "always frozen, no place for an Italian bricklayer" (Fante, *Wait* 25)--he met with little success. Svevo and Maria, the parents of Fante's fictional alter ego, Arturo Bandini, also struggle to make a living and keep their family together in the face of economic difficulty and prejudice. Maria is forced to buy groceries on credit, a necessity which leads her indirectly to discover her husband's infidelity with an Anglo woman, and leads young Arturo to feel shame that his family's economic failure might be part of their Italianness. "He hated Craik [the grocer], that skunk, always asking him if his father was drunk or sober, and what did his father *do* with his money, and how do you Wops live without a cent, and how does it happen that your old man

never stays home at night, what's he got--a woman on the side, eating up his money?" (99). Arturo equates economic failure with failure to attain something he often (though not always) craves: an American identity without the qualifier of an ethnic label or the ascription of foreignness.

In *Wait Until Spring,* Arturo's sense of Americanness develops, as Samuel Patti points out (Patti 333), in response to his parents and their situation. "His name was Arturo, but he hated it and wanted to be called John. His last name was Bandini, and he wanted it to be Jones. His mother and father were Italians, but he wanted to be a pitcher for the Chicago Cubs" (Fante, *Wait* 33). Of course, at other points in his fictional life, Arturo just as vehemently claims other Italian and Italian American identities.

As a fourteen year-old child, for instance, Arturo internalizes his father's ideal Italy as part of his identity, literally crying "for the walls his father had built, the steps, the cornices, the ashpits and the cathedrals, and they were all so very beautiful, for that feeling in him when his father sang of Italy, of an Italian sky, of a Neapolitan bay" (56). At moments like these, it appears that Arturo could not care less to be just plain "American." In Gardaphé's words, "Arturo is torn between love and hate of people he calls 'these Wops'" (*Italian* 62).

As Richard Collins suggests, the theme of Arturo's relation to his family moves "from obsession to alienation to reconciliation" (*Fante's* 3). I would say that Arturo moves back and forth among these responses, which engenders in him a lasting ambivalence toward both his Italianness and his Americanness. This ambivalence leads Arturo to seek resolution of his ethnic conflict, almost always in the form of a woman.

"After his twelfth year the only things that mattered were baseball," and later, in its stead, writing, "and girls, only he called them women. He liked the sound of the word. Women, women, women" (114). It makes perfect sense that the first "woman" to draw Arturo's attention is the adolescent Rosa Pinelli, an Italian American girl who can represent not just Italianness--as Ernesto Livorni suggests in his 1995 article "John Fante: 'The Saga of Arturo Bandini'"[2]--but also Americanness and a possible Italian Americanness. At the movies, Rosa is his means of identifying with twentieth-century America's greatest icons of Americanness, Hollywood stars.

> At once he was under the spell of that celluloid drug. He was positive that his own face bore a striking resemblance to that of Robet Powell, and he was equally sure that the face of Gloria Borden bore an amazing resemblance to his wonderful Rosa: thus he found himself perfectly at home, laughing

> uproariously at Robert Powell's witty comments, and shuddering with voluptuous delight whenever Gloria Borden looked passionate. Gradually Robert Powell lost his identity and became Arturo Bandini and gradually Gloria Borden metamorphosed into Rosa Pinelli." (78-79)

On the other hand, in environments more charged with anti-Italian and nativist sentiment--the streets and parochial (in every sense of the word) schools of the fictional Rocklin, Colorado[3]--Arturo thinks, "Rosa, me and you: a couple of Italians" (118)....I love you, Rosa...he envied her and was proud of her, wondering if those who listened ever considered that he was an Italian too, like Rosa Pinelli" (133).

Arturo's desire to please Rosa conflicts with his poverty, and he steals her a piece of jewelry, an act which leads her to reject him. Rejected, hearing that Rosa has taken sick, Arturo, fearing the permanent loss of Rosa and foreshadowing her death, pleads, "Oh Rosa, please don't die. Be alive when I get there!" (168). In his fantasy, Arturo returns trimphantly to her side, from Yankee Stadium where he is as a baseball star and mainstream American hero.

> Here I come Rosa, my love. All the way from the Yankee stadium in a chartered airplane. I made a landing right on the court house lawn--nearly killed three hundred people out there watching me.

> But I made it, Rosa. I got here all right, and here I am at your bedside, just in time, and the doctor says you'll live now, and so I must go away, never to return. Back to the Yanks, Rosa....The Yanks need me too; but you'll know where I am, Rosa, just read the papers and you'll know. (168)

Arturo will return to Rosa, his Italian American woman, but jet away again, to American adulation. If he could put aside his juvenile quest for American acceptance--as Collins claims he would be better off doing ("Stealing")'--Rosa could represent his Italian American place in America. "Rosa: tinfoil and chocolate bars, the smell of a new football, goal posts with bunting, a home run with the bases full. I am an Italian too, Rosa. Look, and my eyes are like yours" (116). Unfortunately for Arturo, after Rosa rejects him, she is distanced from him by an Anglo American girl, Gertie Williams, who writes Arturo that "*Rosa told me you made her shiver because you were so terrible. You are a foreigner, so maybe that's the reason*" (242). Then, Rosa dies. In this, she becomes the first of many women in Arturo's life whom he sees as a means of resolving his ethnic conflicts and whom he can never have.

Arturo's conflicts and frustrations parallel his father Svevo's, who "was a pure Italian, of peasant stock that went back deeply into the generations. Yet he, now that he had

citizenship papers, never regarded himself as an Italian. No, he was an American" (74). In the world of Fante's fiction, in which protagonists are obsessed with the word "Wop"[5]--alternately deploring the term and identifying themselves as Wops, Italian Americans W.ithO.ut P.apers--Svevo's papers are to him a declaration of Americanness. To other characters, Anglo Americans including the widow Hildegarde, he is "an Italian" (176), an "ignorant peasant" (198). And to Svevo's greater frustration, Maria, his wife, seems to be "not, after all, an American woman. Nothing about her, neither her complexion, nor her hands, nor her feet; neither the food she ate nor the teeth that chewed it--nothing about her, nothing, gave her kinship with 'the American women'" (74-75). Svevo neither succeeds in the American application of his Italian trade nor succeeds in finding an identity as either American or Italian. He remains frustrated.

Svevo takes out his frustration on his wife and children, verbally abusing them, carousing with Italian *paesani*, and committing adultery with Italian and Anglo American women. Fante grapples with the indiscreet and destructive behavior, immigrant identity, and legacy of the father in most of his early work, especially in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, the only Bandini novel narrated from a third person perspective, as if it were part fiction, part sociological case study of Italian American ethnic conflict.

This sociology provides the great theme of Fante's best succeeding work.[6]

In *Wait Until Spring, Bandini,* one of Svevo's illicit affairs says more than any other event in the novel about the external American sources of internal ethnic conflict. The Anglo American widow Effie Hidegarde takes a concupiscent interest in Svevo at least in part because he embodies the forbidden fruit of the lower class racial/ethnic (married) other. Of course, Svevo is subject to the same thrill. When her first attempt to seduce him seems to be falling short of success, she calls him a "fool" and "an ignorant peasant" (198), to which he responds by tearing off her clothes and leaving her "sobbing in her fulfillment" (199).

The affair comes to a brutal end when the Widow Hildegarde yells at the adolescent Arturo, "You peasants!...You foreigners! You're all alike, you and your dogs and all of you." At which point Svevo defends his son. "Mrs. Hildegarde...That's my boy. You can't talk to him like that. That boy's an American. He is no foreigner." To which the widow responds, "I'm talking to you too!" To which Svevo responds, in Italian, "*Bruta animale!...Puttana* [whore]*!*" (265). Svevo's epithet for the widow turns the stereotype of Italian man as brute and sexual predator on its head; the Widow Hildegarde is now the predator, Svevo and Arturo, the prey. More importantly, the outcome of their relationship

typifies Fante's protagonists' involvements with Anglo American women.

Fante portrays these involvements as futile attempts to (sexually) conquer a morally vacuous mainstream American society full of women like Miss Hopkins in *The Road to Los Angeles*, an Anglo American librarian, a "fair white princess" (53), whom Bandini the Italian American, "black and undeserving" (53), can never possess. Arturo's desire for Miss Hopkins stirs his feelings of ethnic, even racial, difference in America, feelings that his Americanness is inadequate. He admits that a "woman like Miss Hopkins upset me and made me feel absurd" (119). At the moment Arturo as narrator confesses these feelings, Arturo as protagonist transfers his desire for an Anglo woman to a derelict he encounters late one night on a Los Angeles street, who "was a sickly white, like the police photographs of a criminal female. Her eyes were starved and," like Miss Hopkins', "grey and big" (119).

Arturo shadows her along several blocks, but when he finally catches up, "something jammed in [his] throat" and he "couldn't even look at her" (124). Unable to approach Anglo America personified in woman, Arturo begins running down the street, fantasizing that he is "the greatest half-miler in the history of the American track and field annals....I was known jokingly among the sport scribes as a 'woman's runner,' because I was so tremendously popular

among the feminine fans....Women threw out their arms and begged me to win--for America" (125). This fantasy is not unlike the younger Arturo's fruitless fantasy of playing for the Yankees and Rosa Pinelli, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini;* and in the end, the latter fantasy costs him a chance at connecting with the mysterious urchin, another impossible woman. He laments, "You fool! You've lost her. She is gone forever" (126).

It's safe to say that here Arturo the narrator is mocking Arturo the protagonist's fantasy, vanity, and insecurity, but at the heart of that mockery and at the heart of the insecurity it mocks lies Arturo's burning desire to be recognized by mainstream Anglo America as an American. And while *The Road to Los Angeles,* the first novel Fante wrote, runs from pretentious *bildungsroman* to juvenile satire of the romantic *bildungsroman* voice, it does occasionally explore a tragic conflict of ethnicity: the ethnic American's desire and inability to feel fully a part of American society, not to feel he's "lost her."

In *The Road to Los Angeles,* Arturo in his young adulthood calls those who live in the American mainstream "sheep! Victims of Comstockery and the American system....Work for this system and lose your soul. No thanks. And what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Fante, *Road* 45).[7] Ironically, Arturo does nothing more than parrot a combination of

Nietzche and the communist propaganda so thick in the American intellectual air during the Depression. While Fante makes light of Arturo's anti-establishment denouncements of American materialism and soullessness in *The Road to Los Angeles*, in the more sophisticated *Ask the Dust*, he more seriously considers, through the consciousness of a more mature Arturo, the possible conflicts between American materialism and Italian immigrant values.

Fante's Italian immigrant characters frequently question American values, condemning American society for its emphasis on money and deemphasis of family as the focal point of life. Fante left unfinished the manuscript of a novel, "Ah, Poor America!", in which a family of immigrants from Italy continually curse America and each other. The immigrant father and son exchange mean greetings. "'Would that I were forty pounds heavier, three inches taller, and forty years younger! I would surely break your fingers, my beloved son.'...'I am sick'," the son replies, "'The sight of you twists my bowels" (177); while the immigrant mother exclaims, "'Ah, poor America!...Ah, bleeding heart of America, that makes all men dogs!" (Cooney 178). Traditional southern Italian life based on respect, duty, and family order (Gambino 1-38) degenerates in the "filthy American sunshine" (Cooney 178). A fate bewailed by the immigrant grandmother Donna Toscana, in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. "'Ah, America, thy children shall tear out one another's

throats and die like blood-thirsty beasts!'" (91).

The values of American society come regularly into conflict with the Italian immigrant values with which Arturo has been raised. His parents are, after all, the ghosts of Verga's peasants, nearly folkloric themselves. "He came along, kicking the deep snow....His name was Svevo Bandini, and he lived three blocks down that street. He was cold and there were holes in his shoes" (Fante, *Wait* 11). Peasants whose lives revolved around the preservation of the family and its members; the preservation of their well-being and honor (Covello 247; Manoukian 20); and who carried with them a conception of life as an unchanging cycle (of misery). Fante himself never lived as a peasant, but he knew the peasant mentality from Ignazio Silone (whose work he admired (Wills, qtd. in Cooney 337)[8]) and, of course, from his parents.

For Maria Bandini, the means--as it was for so many ethnic Americans alienated from the culture of their family's homeland and from mainstream American culture--is religion. The long-suffering Maria, like Handlin's peasants, fixes her "vision on that life eternal which would follow this....If injustice now seemed to triumph, then it was only that retribution should come after" (100); and so she finds comfort in religion as an escape from American life, one circumscribed by possession. "And Maria began to climb. Bead for bead, life and living fell away. Hail Mary, Hail Mary.

Dream without sleep encompassed her....She was away: she was free; she was no longer Maria, American or Italian, poor or rich...here was the land of all-possessing" (75). By withdrawing, Maria can overcome her material suffering. For Guido Toscana and Svevo Bandini, the means is women: either women who represent a pastoral return to Italian youth, like Coletta Drigo, "a flower from the hills of Sorrento" (Fante, *Wine* 96), in the short story "A Wife for Dino Rossi"; or women who represent an Anglo America to be mastered, like the widow Hildegarde in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*.

Arturo chooses neither of his parents' means of fulfillment. He endures the indignities of a Catholic school education and altar boy service, and then reads Nietzche. The result is his declaration, "'I reject the hypothesis of God! Down with the decadence of a fraudulent Christianity! Religion is the opium of the people!'" (*Road* 23). There is self-parody in Arturo's narration, but also real rejection of his mother's solution. Arturo is more comfortable, but not completely so, with his father's solution. He wants neither to return to Italy, to Italianness embodied in woman, nor give himself over to Anglo America in feminine form.

Yet, Arturo's attempted solution to his sense of ethnic alienation is no rebellion against his mother's Old World religion or his father's transethnic romantic adventures. Rejected by Rosa Pinelli, temporarily disgusted by Italian

women, he applauds his father's infidelity with the widow Hildegarde. "So give it to her Papa! I'm for you, old boy. Some day I'll be doing it too, I'll be right in there some day with a honey like her..." (Fante, *Wait* 166). In the end, Arturo combines both his mother's and father's means of fulfillment in America.

In his fiction, Fante presents the conflict of two sets of values, those of the Mezzogiorno peasant (as described in the first chapter of this study and expressed through Svevo and Maria Bandini) and those, as Fante perceived them, of Anglo America--a land of progressivism, industrialism, consumerism, individualism, dislocation, and discontent. These are the values John Dos Passos laments in the final novel of his *U.S.A. Trilogy, The Big Money,* published in 1936.

> The transcontinental passenger thinks contracts, profits, vacation-trips, mighty continent between Atlantic and Pacific, power, wires humming dollars, cities jammed, hills empty, the indiantrail leading into the wagonroad, the macadamed pike, the concrete skyway; trains, planes: history the billiondollar speedup....No matter, silver in the pocket, greenbacks in the wallet, drafts, certified checks plenty restaurants in L. A.)
>
> The young man waits on the side of the

> road...Eyes seek the driver's eyes, a hundred miles down the road...went to school, books said opportunity, ads promised speed, own your home, shine bigger than your neighbor, the radiocrooner whispered girls, ghosts of platinum girls coaxed from the screen... (494)

What the American everyman as "Vag" or vagabond sees is an America full of Americans, like the sailor Joe Williams, without family or roots; beholden to the pursuit of innovation and money, like Charley Anderson; spinning dreams of "opportunity," success, and fulfillment, like J. Ward Moorehouse and Dick Savage; obsessed with the divine celluloid (fake) images, "ghosts of platinum girls" like Margo Dowling. In this America, as Dos Passos (and Fante) envisions it, a relatively few revolutionary Mac McCrearys and activist Mary Frenches can redeem neither the nation's social inequalities, nor the individual emotional and spiritual emptiness, the loneliness of people like Eveline Hutchins, who can not bear the boredom and alienation of modern life.

Fante's observation of the peasant mentality--remaining, especially among Italian emigrants, unmitigated by a Mussolini whose impact they only superficially understood,[9] as we see in Fante[10] and Silone, an anti-Fascist writer--clashing with early twentieth-century America's hollow progressivism, consumerism, individualism, with the

discontents symptomatic of these, shaped his fiction. The result is a recasting of the moralistic Horatio Alger myth, to reflect what Fante portrays as America's amorality, what Decker sees as the early twentieth-century devaluation of "the idea of moral character" in the attainment and language of financial success (Decker xxii-xxiii). In the simplest terms, Fante juxtaposes traditional Italian peasant values with the amoral pursuit of money and dreams in American society.

In *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, the final installment of the Bandini saga, Fante presents an adult Arturo pursuing his American dream of literary/cinematic success and fame. Arturo describes the writing of "Sin City," his first screenplay (which he later disavows). "And away I went: up canyons and down ravines, horse careening, six-guns blazing, Indians falling, blood in the dust, screams of women, the burning buildings, the menace of evil, the triumph of good, the victory of love. Bang bang bang a thrill a minute, the greatest goddam western story ever written" (88). Arturo derives no satisfaction from his effort, concluding, "It was not a good picture, or an exciting picture, or a mature picture, and as it came to an end and the house lights went on, I saw the weary patrons half asleep in their seats, showing no pleasure at all" (127). It is cold comfort to Arturo that he has taken his name off the work in time for it not to appear on screen.

It would not have been possible in the Hollywood of the 1930s for Fante to explore in film, at least in any serious way, themes of ethnic conflict. Although nativism had been on the wane since passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 (Curran 145; Steele 11), anti-immigrant, anti-Italian feeling lingered. Salvatore LaGumina notes that Louis Adamic, "a famous Yugoslav immigrant scholar" and a frequent commentator on ethnicity during the period, "poignantly reflected, 'No one of any influence in America today seems to want to raise the old 'welcome' sign'" to immigrants. LaGumina adds that "Xenophobic legislators were quick to blame the aliens for America's economic ills" (248). This in spite of a net loss of immigrants during the 1930s (Curran 147).

Leading nativist writer Madison Grant, whose *Passing of the Great Race* had both reflected and fostered America's post-World War I nativism, and thus helped win passage of the 1924 Act, published the even more outlandish, racist *The Conquest of a Continent* in 1933, with Charles Scribner's Sons, a major publishing house, placing Italians into the spurious and, by Grant's estimation, "extremely inferior" "Mediterranean" racial category (231). Max Ascoli, an anti-Fascist Italian exile and commentator, who came to the United States in 1931, in his 1940 *Atlantic Monthly* article, "No. 38 Becomes a Citizen," remarks on the persistence of particularly anti-Italian racism.

> A Wop has to overcome more handicaps than a pure Anglo-Saxon, therefore he has to run twice as fast, or else he will be treated forever as a Wop. An alien, if he wants to have a chance, has to mix in some church or lodge or trade-union, just as, if he knows how to take care of his interests, he has to find his way into some political organization...in order to be fully admitted to the American community one must prove himself to have an American character and bent of mind. Which means, to put it broadly, that this country is made for natural-born Americans, and that Americans are born, not made. (qtd. in LaGumina 254)

So the vast majority of Fante's screenplays, like Arturo's, focus on the lives, loves and adventures of Anglo Americans, while most of his published fiction reflects his desire to "cover the true Italian-American scene" (Cooney 39),[11] to describe Italian American cultural traits and express Italian American views.

In Fante's 1936 story "A Kidnapping in the Family," The narrator, Jimmy Toscana, explains,

> My mother told me of her first meeting with my father. It was in 1910. It was in August of that year, on the feast day of Saint Rocco, the powerful patron saint of all Italians. On that

> great day the Italians lined the streets of the North Side, and down the middle of the street passed a gaudy parade, with three complete bands and the Sons of Saint Rocco in their red uniforms with white plumes in their hats. The Knights of Columbus were there, and they had a band, and the Sons of Little Italy were there with their band. In fact, everybody who counted was there, including a lot of Americans who didn't count but who came down just to look and laugh, because they thought feast days on the North Side were amusing. (Fante, *Wine* 14)

What the narrator describes above is a religious procession typical of southern Italian towns, captured in Verga's fiction, carried to America by the immigrants, and seen here to be "gaudy."[12] Notable is Fante's tactic, reminiscent of the immigrant autobiographers, of holding up an Italian American looking glass to the American observation of Italian American life; Jimmy Toscana's admission that to the residents of an Italian American ghetto other Americans "didn't count" lets readers know that the Italian Americans labelled "inferior" by writers like Grant and Ross might apply the same label to other Americans. Such a reversal would have suggested to readers then what might now seem obvious: that Italian American characters (and Italian Americans) are just as complex as other Americans and

deserve equal consideration.

Fante's narrators frequently confess their conflicts of ethnicity, like Jimmy Toscana, this time in "The Odyssey of a Wop." "Thus I begin to loathe my heritage. I avoid Italian boys and girls who try to be friendly. I thank God for my light skin and hair, and I choose my companions by the Anglo-Saxon ring of their names. If a boy's name is Whitney, Brown, or Smythe, then he's my pal; but I'm always a little breathless when I am with him" (137). Jimmy's confession reveals his complexity and allows the (non-Italian American) reader to understand and sympathize with his desire to move from Wop to Max Ascoli's "American character," and perhaps to applaud it--at least for a time in the narrative.[13]

Fante's Italian American characters run the behavioral gamut from what Italians would call *educato*, polite or well-mannered; to *rozzo*, rough or ill-mannered. Witness Dino Rossi and Guido Toscana in "A Wife for Dino Rossi." The *rozzo* Guido, who in mixed company chides his more financially successful "friend" Dino (one of his wife's former suitors), "'You, with all your money saved, and what has it got you? Nothing! Solitude, loneliness, gray hair, old age....Dino, you must have twenty-five, thirty thousand dollars in the bank, huh, Dino?'." The *educato* Dino, who responds by lowering his eyes, so that "all of us would suffer with him, for Dino was not a man who boasted of what he possessed; nor was he without generosity, Dino Rossi"

(73). These opposites, Fante's range of characters, discourage the stereotyping of Italian Americans.

Often, Fante's narrative assumes a particular character's point-of-view. At moments when the character's situation and feelings are obvious, Fante inserts an Italian word or phrase, usually an imprecation, which reinforces a sense of the character's Italianness and thus suggests that Italianness may play a role in the character's situation. The best example of this strategy is the narration of Svevo's affair in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, from Svevo's point of view. Svevo's initial impressions of the widow Hildegarde are mixed. He accepts her flattery, but recoils from her Anglo American version of domesticity. "A lunch of lettuce leaves, pineapple and cottage cheese....If Maria had served him such food, he would have thrown it out the window...Tea and cookies. *Diavolo!* He had always identified tea with effeminacy and weakness, and he had no liking for sweets" (180). Here is Svevo's Italianness at work in both consciousness and language. Tea, a symbol of Anglo American culture to a son and grandson of espresso drinkers, challenges his Italianness and manhood, and heightens his sense of difference and conflict over feeling attracted to an Anglo woman, someone alien to his way of life (and certainly to his wife). He falls back, then, on the Italian language, sending all that disgusts him, as well as his own feelings of disgust, to *Il Diavolo*, the devil. And, as

discussed earlier, not to be forgotten, is his final response to the widow's charging both him and Arturo with foreignness: *"Brutta animale!...Puttana!"* (265). Readers see Americanness through Svevo's eyes, and can thus understand his and Arturo's struggle to fit into American society.

Fante employs stock techniques of modernist fiction--hyperbolic psychological realism and the comedy (and tragedy) of anguish, of the little alienated soul--in his best work, the third Bandini novel, *Ask the Dust*. All of the young Fante's desires, aspirations, and anxieties over (Italian American) ethnicity and male identity, all his central themes, take their most powerful form in the 1939 tale, whose roots are deep in Italian, American, and Italian American experience, and entangled with the concerns of Italian and American modernist writers.

American modernist writers, the classic modernists of the 1920s and 1930s, belong, as Sam S. Baskett suggests, to "a generation attributing to love some of the functions of the God they had lost" (94). Among the classic modernist texts, Baskett cites three--Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Fitzerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*--as texts in which "a circumstance of chaos" is "counterpointed by [a male protagonist's] desire for a center of meaning symbolized by the attracting power of a woman" (94).

Brett Ashley, Daisy Buchanan, and the various incarnations of Eliot's hyacinth girl grow from what Robert Viscusi calls the practice of "identifying women with apocalyptic fulfillment" ("Debate" 155), which did not begin with modernism. This practice, in the Western tradition, finds its roots in Homer, in Lucretius, and in the Italian and Italian American literary tradition of which John Fante is a vital part. It runs from *The Odyssey* through "The Odyssey of a Wop."

In Italian love poetry of the Trecento and later, woman was, according to the pre-modern authority John Addington Symonds, "regarded as an ideal being, to be approached with worship bordering on adoration. The lover derived personal force, virtue, elevation, energy, from his enthusiastic passion" (51). This "ideal being" reaches the classic modernists from the classics via the Provençal troubadours, Cavalcanti, Dante (and his Beatrice), and the Seicento Sicilian dialect poet Michele Moraschino, among others. Moraschino's *"L'occhi sereni in cui lu lumi eternu"* ("The Peaceful Eyes in Which the Light Eternal") reflects the Italian tendency to equate the love of woman with "the consummation of spiritual felicity, which surpassed all other modes of happiness in its beatitude" (52).

L'occhi sereni in cui lu lumi eternu
si dimustra divisu in dui sblenduri,
su', fatali mia dia, s'iu ben discernu,

vivi furnaci di celesti arduri.
Su' stiddi amici a lu chiù forti invernu,
su' chiari aurori a li mei notti oscuri,
su' rai chi imparadìsanu l'infernu,
su' celi serenissimi d'amuri.

(Spagnoletti and Vivaldi 1207)

Recalling Beatrice, the eyes of woman here are *"rai chi imparadìsanu l'infernu"* ("rays that make paradise of the inferno"), portals to apocalyptic fulfillment.

Before and since Moraschino, poets and Writers of the Sicilian and Italian diaspora have never ceased creating male speakers, narrators, characters who see women as means of apocalyptic fulfillment.[14] One of these is Arturo Bandini, a narrator/protagonist as alienated (and at the same time comically conscious of his alienation) as Eliot's speakers, Fitzgerald's Gatsby, or Hemingway's Jake Barnes. Arturo acts and thinks like Jake Barnes, except that Arturo, an American by birth, though the child of an immigrant, remains throughout his fictional life within the geographical confines of the United States.[15] While it moves in opposite geographical directions, Arturo's story resembles Jake's: the attempt to lead a comfortable, comforting, familiar, fulfilling life in a world of uncertain values. Both attempts are mighty struggles.[16]

In spite of his demoralizing experience, Jake maintains a semblance of what we may call traditional American

Christian virtues of industry and sacrifice, particularly for his fellow disillusioned expatriates, especially for Brett. It is as Michael Reynolds claims, that "Hemingway constructed a test of values: he put a representative man of his culture down in a foreign country to see if his values could sustain him when separated from his nurturing society" (Reynolds 61). Arturo Bandini, too, faces a test of values; Arturo's test, however, occurs in America (his "native" society, but, significantly, one whose values he never fully internalizes, as he never fully internalizes his parents' Italian peasant values). 1930s Los Angeles is to Arturo as much a moral desert as 1920s Paris is to Jake a moral wasteland.

The Arturo of *Ask the Dust*, like Jake, faces his test in a hotel, a shelter but not a home. Living "in the very middle of Los Angeles," a city proverbially built of men's dreams, Arturo upbraids himself, "You dream and you wish, but you go on through the wasteland" (97). The wasteland Arturo sees is one not only of "restless dust" that sullies everyone and everything around him, but also one of hollow men and women.

> The old folk from Indiana and Iowa and Illinois, from Boston and Kansas City and Des Moines, they sold their homes and their stores, and they came here by train and by automobile to the land of sunshine, to die in the sun, with just

> enough money to live until the sun killed them, tore themselves out by the roots in their last days, deserted the smug prosperity of Kansas City and Chicago and Peoria to find a place in the sun. And when they got here they found that other and greater thieves had already taken possession, that even the sun belonged to the others...[they were] doomed to die in the sun, a few dollars in the bank, enough to subscribe to *The Los Angeles Times*, enough to keep alive the illusion that this was paradise, that their little papier-mâché homes were castles. The uprooted ones, the empty sad folks, the old and the young folks, the folks from back home. (45)

Arturo sees, like the apparition of faces in a crowd, "Faces with the blood drained away, tight faces, worried, lost. Faces like flowers torn from their roots and stuffed into a pretty vase, the colors draining fast" (161).

This "brutal wilderness" (164) of modern life, as Fante imagines it, arises from what C. Hugh Holman calls "a loss of love, of health, of meaning, and, most disastrously of all, of hope": a symptom of life in the twentieth century, related to the loss of "the traditional religious view of life and man, a view that gives life meaning" (139). In place of real hope for fulfillment, Fante's L.A. holds out to Arturo the illusion of hope; its amoral, desert climate

fosters what Jay Martin calls "imposture, ficticity, grotesque fantasy, self-deception" (4): in Arturo as well as others.

Although Arturo's disillusionment and sense of rootlessness spring from the same sense of alienation and homelessness Jake Barnes experiences, from some of the same sources that feed what Fante's fiction casts as the misery of west-streaming Anglo Americans--"Smith and Parker and Jones" (Fante, *Ask* 46)--they also spring from the Italian sources of his psyche. And herein lies the Italian American difference of Fante's brand of modernism.

It may be true, as Martin claims, that Fante never made the issues of race or ethnicity the *raison d'être* of his fiction, but it is certainly true that Fante was aware of his characters as ethnics and that Fante's fictional alter ego, Arturo Bandini, does not feel completely a part of Anglo America, in part because, Arturo explains, "It was Smith and Parker and Jones who hurt me with their hideous names, called me Wop and Dago and Greaser" (46). Like other Italian Americans and other ethnic Americans of the last two centuries (including the Mexican Americans and Filipino Americans Arturo himself calls Greasers), Arturo is made to feel ashamed of his ethnicity by American society. He reveals his shame and resentment as the narrative of *Ask the Dust* progresses, pronouncing himself repeatedly "an American, and goddamn proud of it" (44), but then railing

against Americans' anti-Italian American prejudice, as in the above passage. As he struggles to resolve the conflicts of his Italian Americanness, he maintains an attachment to his heritage and his people. Studying the boxscores of baseball games, he notes "with satisfaction that Joe DiMaggio was still a credit to the Italian people" (11),[17] and admires other Italians, Casanova and Cellini (90).[18]

But Arturo lives doubly alienated. Even the American keeper of the hotel in which he is a paying lodger frowns upon his Italian name, while his Italian family remains at a geographical and emotional distance, unavailable. All he can do is write his mother of his troubles and wait for inadequate written responses. Longing for home, he thinks,

> If someone only loved me, even a bug, even a mouse, but that too belonged to the past...I thought of home, of spaghetti swimming in rich tomato sauce, smothered in Parmesan cheese, of Mamma's lemon pies, of lamb roasts and hot bread, and I was so miserable that I deliberately sank my fingernails into the flesh of my arm until a spot of blood appeared...I was God's most miserable creature, forced even to torturing myself. Surely upon this earth no grief was greater than mine. (28)

Arturo pines for the comforts of family, in this case the culinary comforts--spaghetti, tomato sauce--easily

identifiable as Italian by Fante's American readership. As in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* and *The Road to Los Angeles,* Arturo tries to construct an idealized Italian family life that for him at least, as we know from the whole Bandini saga, never exists. At the same time, he internalizes twentieth-century American images of Italians as spaghetti benders, in an attempt to Americanize his view of the world.[19]

As Arturo lacks the comfort of his mother's food, his worldview lacks the comfort of a divine Madonna, of religion, which he also misses, admitting, "Myself, I am an atheist" (22)..."all the gods have deserted me, and like Huysman I stand alone, my fists clenched, tears in my eyes" (27). Arturo wants to believe, but as "God's worst enemy" (Fante, *Road* 158), when he "said a prayer"..."it was dust in my mouth" (Fante, *Ask* 99).

To make matters worse for Arturo, the Anglo American world around him, as Fante portrays it, is itself on if not over the brink of moral bankruptcy. It is the world of Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust,* full of bitter Todd Hacketts, wretched Homer Simpsons, and idolized Faye Greeners; a world of masqueraders without religion from which "Perhaps Christ heard. If He did, He gave no signs" (West 129); a world akin to the religious and "moral vacuum in which the expatriate veterans of the First World War," men and women such as Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, were

living (Holman 139). In order to sustain himself in this world, Arturo seeks, as does Jake, to replace lost values and beliefs. He seeks a way into an America he can live with, a viable center of his universe. Fante locates this center in a woman.

As Brett is to Jake "an uncertain image of great value," an icon, Camilla Lopez is to Arturo. Camilla, a character inspired by Fante's romance with artist's model Marie Baray, is Arturo's non-Anglo, non-Italian woman idol. By having Arturo tenaciously pursue Camilla, Fante commingles modernist deification of women in fiction with Italian and Italian American Madonna worship.[20] Into the mix, Fante adds a distinctly Italian American sense of optimism and possibility: what Rose Basile Green identifies as "the same optimism as that with which [Italian American writers'] ancestors had become a part of the American race and nation" (24). This optimism, though oft-disappointed, permeates Arturo's narration. "Los Angeles, give me some of you!," he exhorts, "Los Angeles come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town" (Fante, *Ask* 13).

Arturo's persistence in pursuit of Camilla (the saddest of all flowers in the L.A. sand), if not always hopeful, creates, at least, the illusion of hope, the illusion of an optimist, a persistent illusion shattered only at

narrative's end. "The Arturo of *Ask the Dust,*" as Martin tersely asserts, "often prefers illusion to reality" (7). This pursuit of illusion has always been a quintessentially Italian art form. Luigi Barzini writes that in Italian culture "transparent deceptions are constantly employed to give a man the most precious of all Italian sensations, that of being a unique specimen of humanity" (79). Arturo's narrative illusion of optimism is likewise a form of deception, delusion; it is his attempt to persuade himself and Fante's audience that he is a classical hero by virtue of possessing the object of his imaginings, Camilla Lopez.

For Arturo, Camilla is "a Mayan Princess and [The Columbia buffet]"--Columbia was, of course, the pre-Anglo name for America--"was her castle" (Fante, *Ask* 41). He calls her, over her objections, "Little Mexican princess" (61). For him, she embodies the New World in its pristine state, before it fell subject to the corruption of Spanish conquistadors and then the racism of Anglo Americans.[21] For him, California itself is "Camilla's land, Camilla's home, the sea and the desert, the beautiful earth, the immense sky, and far to the north, the moon, still there from the night before" (159). But Arturo's visions of Camilla and her land are simply that: visions, projections of his own long-standing desires.[22]

Even before meeting Camilla, Arturo wants to possess a "Mayan princess." "Oh for a Mexican girl!", he exclaims, "I

used to think of her all the time, my Mexican girl. I didn't have one, but the streets were full of them...Aztec princesses and Mayan princesses" (15). Worth mentioning here is Robert Viscusi's observation that *Ask the Dust* "very elaborately displays how you cannot put a circle around a Beatrice in a city like Los Angeles, which has no walls, and that in any case you cannot idealize a woman when you do not have the slightest idea who, coming as she does from another place and another people, she may be" ("Debate" 169). It is not, though, Arturo's ability to idealize Camilla which is at issue; it is his success in doing so. Collins believes that by embracing Camilla, Arturo learns "to embrace his own status as an alien and outsider" ("Of Wops" 48). In this sense, embracing Camilla equates to transcending American cultural history, or, as Homi Bhabha puts it, successfully displacing "the historicism that has dominated discussions of the nation as a cultural force." Arturo pursues not only Camilla, but also one of the many "complex strategies of cultural identification" (*Nation* 292) open to ethnic Americans alienated from Anglo American society.

Arturo is an Italian American, not quite low man on the American ethnic totem pole--as he frequently makes clear with his slurs of Camilla--but still a racial and cultural other in modern America.[23] He acts out of a "sense of ethnic (and class) alienation" (Cooper 91). In trying to connect with a Mayan princess, Arturo strives for unity with the

land before it became an America that makes him feel his Italian difference. At the same time, he looks to absolute racial otherness in an Anglo world, to American Indianness, as an alternative to assimilation. He seeks, in short, to alleviate his feelings of alienation from American society, to resolve the conflict between his Italian identity and American identity, through Camilla.

Although she turns out to be too worldly for her own and Arturo's good, Arturo persists in his belief that Camilla is "so charming, so innocent" (Fante, *Ask* 61). He repeats this bit of self-delusion with the far more jaded and literally scarred Vera Rivken, insisting that she too, a Jewish woman from the East Coast, is a "Mayan princess" (94). As his lips kiss the surrogate Vera, his mind conjures Camilla.

> "Open your long fingers and give me back my tired soul! Kiss me with your mouth because I hunger for the bread of a Mexican hill. Breathe the fragrance of lost cities into fevered nostrils, and let me die here, my hand upon the soft contour of your throat, so like the whiteness of some half-forgotten southern shore. Take the longing in these restless eyes and feed it to lonely swallows cruising an Autumn cornfield, because I love you Camilla, and your name is sacred like that of some brave princess who died with a smile for a love

that was never returned." (130-31)

Here Arturo fancies Camilla *in absentia* more than a vision of pristine Columbia; he fancies her a "sacred," Madonna-like conduit to "a half-forgotten southern shore" (130), a reminder of Italian roots and of an earlier, kinder American society of his dreams, a victim of European exploitation, of a "love that was never returned," which he fears he himself may not return. As he embraces Vera/Camilla, Arturo announces, "I'm a conquerer...I'm like Cortez, only I'm an Italian" (94).

Arturo also makes of Camilla a touchstone and positive reflection of his own otherness. Though several times he anguishes over his *italianità*, at other times--alone and with Camilla--he affirms it by refusing to identify with Anglo traits. When Camilla remarks on his freckles, stereotypically Nordic specks of physiognomy, Arturo replies, "They don't mean anything" (42). He seeks an alternative identity, holds on to his *italianità*, which, while it is not necessarily palpable, links him with DiMaggio, Cellini, and *La Madonna Santa*.

After committing the "mortal sin" (96) of adultery (imaginatively speaking) against Vera, Arturo exhibits discomfort with (Northern) European rationality in the face of what Grant, Ross, and other American racial theorists of the early twentieth century might have called his Mediterranean passion.[24] "This is bad, Arturo. You have read

Nietzsche,[25] you have read Voltaire, you should know better. But reasoning wouldn't help. I could reason myself out of it, but that was not my blood. It was my blood that kept me alive, it was my blood pouring through me, telling me it was wrong...let it carry me swimming back to the deep sea of my beginnings" (96). This sort of blood imagery recurs in *Ask the Dust* and is associated with *Italianità*. Anglo Americans and those under the influence of Anglo American culture appear to Arturo to have "faces with the blood drained away" (161). Their passions and morality are attenuated. Arturo, on the other hand, feels the blood of Italian tradition, as well as passion for an ideal America, coursing through his veins.

After considering the tragedy of "Smith and Parker and Jones," Arturo sends Camilla a telepathic apology, and expresses the difference they both share.

> I have vomited at [Anglo American] newspapers, read their literature, observed their customs, eaten their food, desired their women, gaped at their art. But I am poor, and my name ends with a soft vowel, and they hate me and my father, and my father's father, and they would have my blood and put me down, but they are old now, dying in the sun and in the hot dust of the road, and I am young and full of hope and love for my country and my times, and when I say Greaser to you it is not

> my heart that speaks, but the quivering of an old wound, and I am ashamed of the terrible thing I have done. (47)

Camilla's and Arturo's compatability with each other, as Arturo understands it, stems from an essential otherness, the "wound" of prejudice they two (and Vera Rivkin) suffer in Anglo America. Arturo perceives his and Camilla's essential connection in Camilla's voice that "talked to my blood and bones" (114): the sense that America is made up mainly of a "they" to be daily confronted.

Arturo grows ever more staunch in the belief that he should protect both Camilla and himself from corruption by forming a family with her. "I love you Camilla I want to marry you," his telegram to her reads (71). She tears it up, but each time she rejects him for Sammy, her Anglo lover, instead of giving up, Arturo steels his resolve, until, in a final futile attempt to reestablish family life, he carries Camilla wasted and broken to a new house on the shore. Arturo's interior monologue makes plain that Camilla might signify family and not just--though it is something he certainly seeks--romantic passion. "We didn't have to be married," he insists, "brother and sister was alright with me. We could go swimming and take long walks along the Balboa shore" (156). More than anything, what Arturo seeks on the shore belonging to Camilla, to Balboa, to the American Indian tribes, and *not*, in his opinion, to Anglo

America, is companionship, support, the understanding of a familiar.

When Camilla and Arturo finally do try to make a home together, Camilla is unable to perform her wifely duties as Arturo would define them. Instead of cooking and cleaning and staying home, she smokes marijuana and, from time to time, runs away. Such behavior displeases Arturo, whose Italian American heritage dictates that the woman of the house manage domestic affairs.[26] In the end, Arturo reluctantly recognizes that it is too late: Camilla is already corrupted. He comes to believe that in modern Los Angeles, she is a "captured child" living inside a "curtained trap," "a creature without spirit or will (151, 148, 138); or, as Fante calls her in a 1938 letter to his cousin, Jo Campiglia, "a beautiful Mexican girl who somehow didn't fit into modern life" (Cooney 152). Arturo, like Jake Barnes, remains impotent, unable to free his idealized woman, powerless to save her, his potential family, from the degradation of modern (American) life. Camilla is too indigenous to the land, the dust, for Arturo to possess as his own symbol both of perfect assimilation into an ideal America and imperfect ethnic identity.

As *The Sun Also Rises* casts, in Reynolds' words, "man's sexual inadequacies as a sign of his moral and spiritual failings" (Reynolds 93), so does *Ask the Dust*, revealing modernism's influence on Italian American literature in a

startling way. Consider that the sexual manifestation of moral failure, the physical incapacity (like Arturo's) to possess a woman sexually, is rare in Italian and Italian American literature[27]--a literature whose male protagonists often feel compelled to lay claim to the right woman, regardless of circumstance (Dante), and often to marry outside of the Italian tribe, like Puzo's Michael Corleone (Viscusi, "Debate" 157-65). In *Wait Until Spring, Bandini,* for example, Arturo's father fails morally and economically in America, but succeeds sexually with a wealthy Anglo widow.

Nevertheless, in *Ask the Dust,* Arturo finds himself impotent to lay sexual claim to Camilla. He confesses that "I drew my hands over her belly and legs, felt my own desire, searched foolishly for my passion, strained for it while she waited, rolled and tore my hair and begged for it, but there was none, there was none at all...no lust, only fear of her, and shame and humiliation" (Fante, *Ask* 68). Alone later, Arturo fashions himself a comical Jake Barnes.

> All that day it was on my mind. I remembered her brown nakedness and her kiss, the flavor of her mouth as it came cold from the sea, and I saw myself white and virginal, pulling in the pudgy line of my stomach, standing in the sand and holding my hands over my loins. I walked up and down the room. Late in the afternoon I was

> exhausted and the sight of myself in the mirror was unbearable. (70)

Jake Barnes, who admits,

> Undressing, I looked at myself in the mirror and the big armoire beside the bed....Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny....My head started to work. The old grievance....Probably I never would have had any trouble if I hadn't run into Brett when they shipped me to England...the Catholic Church had an awfully good way of handling all that. Good advice, anyway. Not to think about it....Then I couldn't keep away from it, and I started to think about Brett and all the rest of it went away. I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry. (Hemingway 30-31)

If he were not pursuing a woman, Jake would have no trouble. But pursue he must. He perceives in Brett a life force, a center that he feels he needs. A similar imperative, "the delight to know that I could possess her" (Fante, *Ask* 124), drives Arturo. Sadly for him as for Jake, circumstances do not allow.

Both Arturo Bandini and Jake Barnes are impotent, because both are victims of the idealized woman's corruption and their own. Jake is a victim of World War I, its physical

toll and disillusioning outcome; Arturo is a victim of the American Dream of equality and success, its economic and social disappointments resulting from cut-throat competition and prejudice. Jake's corruption is obvious: a war wound rendering him incapable of making woman and family the moral center of his universe; Arturo's corruption is less so: a mysterious inner ache brought on by Fante's projection of the American Dream, one which deemphasizes morality, while emphasizing individual achievement and material success at any cost.

Although he worries about Camilla and the idea of family, Arturo spends more time and words worrying about the success of his literary career, about individual fame and prestige. He acknowledges that "I had come [to California]," away from family and traditions, away from his Italian half, "with no purpose save to be a mere writer, to get money, to make a name for myself and all that piffle" (123). For him, as for Jake, writing provides the only path to glory: a path that, Fante intimates, is a poor substitute for the satisfaction of family and (com)passion. In this context, writing becomes "piffle," nonsense, the practice of meaninglessness, the absence of fulfillment.

At the very moment Arturo finds himself unable to possess Camilla sexually, he retreats to his editor "Hackmuth's letter and thoughts that remained to be written" (68). Arturo further associates writing with spiritual

sterility and moral as well as literal death, in the person of Sammy, to whom Camilla remains tragically devoted, whose name, cool posturing, and romantic notions of the Wild West symbolize Uncle Sam. Sammy spends his dying days writing bad westerns he hopes will sell, rather than embracing Camilla--whom he refers to, in a letter to Arturo, as "the Little Spick" (121). Through Arturo's account of Sammy, Fante criticizes the American substitution of profit for love as the artist's inspiration: a poor motive that corrupts Arturo too,[28] robbing him of his (com)passion.

Still, if *Ask the Dust* implies a hierarchy of degraded romantic nobility, Arturo is king. He may belittle Camilla, he may not love her for herself--as many critics, notably Cooper,[29] have claimed--but at least he loves and respects her as someone "deeper rooted than I" (123), as a symbol of ideal America, an alternative to his conflicted Italian American identity. Camilla occupies a lower station in the hierarchy, because she loves Sammy out of denial of her ethnicity. She insists, "I'm *not* a Mexican!...I'm an American" (61). Denying her Mexicanness, she covets Sammy, what she believes to be Americanness personified. Sammy, the least noble of the trio, only wants Camilla in order to live out his male Anglo American fantasy of dominion, sexual and social, over the (Indian, foreign, dark-skinned, female) other. He advises Arturo that "Mexican women...don't like to be treated like human beings. If you're nice to them, they

walk all over you" (121).

The corrupt realm he shares with Sammy and Camilla forces Arturo to delude himself about the pursuit of his ideal woman, his ideal life in America. When Camilla asks Arturo, "Why are you so mean?", he replies, "There is not the slightest drop of enmity in my system. After all, you can't be mean and still be a great writer" (115, 116). By that point in the narrative, Arturo's actions have, of course, entirely contradicted his claim to writerly grace. He has already damaged or threatened to damage Camilla, Sammy, Vera, and a host of neighbors. Certainly, Arturo never calls another character "friend," and although he wants and needs her, his corruption and selfishness render him "not good for Camilla Lopez" (128).

Camilla provides Arturo only fleeting "beauty like the love of some dead girl" (97). Even before she disappears, Camilla dies as Arturo's Beatrice, she all along as wounded as he, as Jake, as Brett. In the end, Camilla's death is also "the failure of a dream as" Arturo's "projected image of himself"[30] as a comfortable and viable ethnic American.

Arturo's failed dream of an ideal pre-Anglo America and a comfortable Italian American identity expands and deepens the dialogue, the dialectic between the desire to succeed in America and the desire to flee its dog-eat-dog reality for a pastoral Italy of imagination that "reverses the process (and the progress) of history" (Marinelli 9)--an Italy

> culled from the "dream stuff" of Svevo's old world stories (Fante, *Wait* 41). The stories that cause Arturo to feel a sense of difference from Anglo Americans, the kind of stories that have come down to me from my great-grandfather who may, in the twilight of his arbor, and with the help of his son and grandson, have invested the life of Prata del Principato Ultra, his forsaken town, with the qualities its name, "meadow of the furthest principality," suggests.

Notes

1. The nine books of fiction published to date are the novels *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), *Ask the Dust* (1939), *Full of Life* (1952), *The Brotherhood of the Grape* (1977), *Dreams from Bunker Hill* (1982), *1933 Was a Bad Year* (1985), and *The Road to Los Angeles* (1985); and the collections *Dago Red* (1940), *The Wine of Youth* (1985), and *West of Rome* (1986).

2. Livorni writes, "another kind of daydreaming will lead Arturo towards the rescue of his ethnic identity: it is the imagined love story with Rosa that leads the young protagonist to recognize himself as Italian" (65).

3. Early stories such as "Big Leaguer" and "Odyssey of a Wop", and passages of *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, especially those involving the widow Effie Hildegarde, depict the older Americans' anti-Italian and nativist behavior.

4. Collins writes, "Baseball has been used *ad nauseum* as a symbol for the American dream, especially in the movies. As a screenwriter himself, Fante was aware of the easy scenarios; and

as a writer of serious fiction, he was also aware of the power of the cliche, especially in the way it gives unrealistic hope to certain classes, like the sons of working class immigrants. Fante's contribution to the motif is to show the corrupting power of such boyish dreams, how the moral fabric and the family structure can be undermined in the pursuit of the innocent cliche" (91). To what degree boyhood fantasies can "corrupt" the family, especially Arturo's seemingly impossible prospective family with Rosa, I am not at all certain.

5. This fixation with the word "Wop" is the subject of Fante's 1933 short story published in the *American Mercury*, entitled "The Odyssey of a Wop." Jimmy Toscana, the narrator and protagonist, explains,

> From the beginning, I hear my mother use the words Wop and Dago with such vigor as to denote violent distaste. She spits them out. They leap from her lips. To her, they contain the essence of poverty, squalor, filth. If I don't wash my teeth, or hang up my cap, my mother says: "Don't be like that. Don't be a Wop.' Thus, as I begin to acquire her values, Wop and Dago to me become synonymous with things evil. But she's consistent. But my father isn't. he's loose with his tongue. His mood create his judgments. I at once notice that to him Wop and Dago are without any distinct meaning, though if one not an Italian slaps them onto him, he's instantly insulted. Christopher Columbus was the

> greatest Wop who ever lived, says my father. So is Caruso. So is this fellow and that. But his very good friend Peter Ladonna is not only a drunken pig, but a Wop on top of it; and of course all his brothers-in-law are good-for-nothing Wops. (Fante, *Wine* 135)

In *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, Arturo calls himself "the only freckle-faced Wop on earth" (48), as if the freckles ruin his Wopishness.

6. Fante proposed such a study to H.L. Mencken, his editor and mentor, in a 1933 letter. "'In it,'" Fante wrote, "'I shall attempt to prove that the Italians in the United States are not only unprincipled murderers but also a stupid gang of lost yokels whose social significance is not in their ability to be good citzens, but bloody clowns: a ludicrous and unsocial people who have forsaken poverty and accepted harlotry'" (qtd. in Collins, "Of Wops" 47). Later in the same letter, Fante backs off his extreme judgment, admitting "his lack of experience with Italians anywhere but in the West, his inability to speak Italian, and the cruel futility of attacking 'the supidities of a few ignorant immigrants'" (47).

7. It's worth noting that Fante had equal disdain for Italians too devoted to their national system. He wrote his mother in 1935, "Every time I see a picture of those Italian fellows going to war--going like a lot of sheep and yelling 'Duce!' it makes me laugh" (Cooney 107).

8. Silone recreates and explains this conception of life in *Fontamara*. To the peasants of Southern Italy,

> there was the same land, the same rain, the same snow, the same saints' days, the same food, the same anguish, the same pain, and the same misery--the misery received from the fathers, who had inherited it from the grandfathers, and against which honest hard work has never been good for anything. The cruelest injustices there were so old that they took their places among the natural phenomena like the wind, the rain and the snow. The life of the men, the beasts and the land seemed fixed in an inflexible circle...." (15)

9. Mussolini is often recalled, by Italians and Italian Americans both, in relatively positive terms, as the man who made the trains run on time. During the 1930s, "the bellicose nationalism of the Mussolini government added to the prestige of Italy and caused many Italian Americans to feel a pride of identification with a renascent *Italia*" (Alba 77).

10. The father character, Guido Toscana, in Fante's 1940 novella, "A Wife for Dino Rossi," takes such superficial pride in Mussolini in the form of a photo, a close-up of Il Duce, hanging over his desk; while at the same time he calls him "'That damn bum of a Mussolini!'" (Fante, *Wine* 102), upon reading about one of the dictator's "accomplishments" in an American newspaper.

11. Fante was also interested in covering the Filipino American scene. Throughout the 1940s, he worked on a novel--never

completed--to be entitled, "The Little Brown Brother," in which he would "make the little Filipino a hero" (Cooney 175). Fante claimed, "I understand them. I like them. I see them because I am Latin and their tradition, if any is Spanish and Latin too" (175). For Fante's musings on this unfinished project, see Cooney, *Selected Letters of John Fante 1932-1981,* 175-216.

12. A number of social historians have since written about these processions, with the best account coming from Robert Orsi in *Madonna of 115th Street.*

13. I say "for a time," because Fante's narrators often end up renouncing Anglo Americanness with even greater vehemence than Italianness. In the final few paragraphs of "The Odyssey of a Wop," for example, Jimmy meets an Italian American assimilationist and tells readers, "I'd like to paste him. But that won't do any good. There's no sense in hammering your own corpse" (146). The implication, of course, is that Jimmy assimilationist self is dead.

In the 1952 novel *Full of Life,* Fante mocks his own transformation into a "nouveau-riche pseudo-WASP suburbanite" (Cooney 226).

14. Mario Puzo's Michael Corleone and the narrators of Anthony Valerio's fiction come immediately to mind. Michael seeks in Kay Adams a way out of the immoral family business and into "legitimate" American society, while Valerio's narrators frequently seek out non-Italian American women as a means of finding happiness in life beyond Italian and Italian American

cultural tradition.

15. These geographical confines are also the tragicomic confines of the American-in-the-making, the subject of assimilation. As Gardaphè makes clear, "Fante's contribution to the Italian American tradition is his depiction of the myth of assimilation" in which "many of the children of Italian immigrants" moved "away from their Italian heritage, through materialism, and toward full membership in American culture" (*Italian* 60-61). I would hasten to add that this is not Fante's only contribution to the tradition, although it is an important one.

16. We can say with a good degree of certainty that Hemingway's Jake is older cousin to Fante's Arturo. In his 1941 article about Fante for *Common Ground,* Ross Wills makes clear that Hemingway is on a short list of American contemporaries Fante admired. "[Fante] frankly looks up to Steinbeck, Hemingway, and James T. Farrell, although he has no doubt that when he has as many books behind him as they, he will have equal recognition" (Cooney 337). In *The Road to Los Angeles,* Arturo tells Jim the Bartender that when it comes to writing, "'I'm like Hemingway. I always do it second-nature" (Fante, *Road* 118).

17. During the 1930s and 1940s, an era of continuing Italian American struggle to find positive Italian American images--struggle that continues today--DiMaggio was an important symbol of "Italian success in America...an almost perfect hero for projecting a strong, positive view of the Italian American" man (Moore 171).

18. It is no coincidence, of course, that Arturo mentions these two Italians, both notorious lovers of women. Like his two idols, Arturo will narrate, with another Italian variation on ironic detachment, similar but far less glorious romantic exploits.

19. I agree with Gardaphé's assessment, that "The market calls for gangsters, spaghetti dinners, and the trials of the displaced immigrant" *(Dagoes* 98).

20. As Orsi and other critics and historians have shown, Italian and Italian American men demonstrate "in their devotion to the Madonna a faithfulness to the women they had left behind" (Orsi, "The Religious" 323). Devotion to the Madonna is also, of course, an idealization of woman absent or present.

21. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a more recent, more expansive, but thematically similar pastoral evocation of America's pre-Columbian past.

22. For further discussion of twentieth-century novelists' treatment of this theme, see Richard Lehan, "The Los Angeles Novel and the Idea of the West."

23. Much of Depression-era America regarded Mexican Americans--typically swarthier than Italian Americans and in a better geographic and political position to immigrate to America--with even greater suspicion than they did Italian Americans. In a 1930 article for the *Saturday Evening Post*, entitled "The Mexican Invasion," Roy Garis urged further restriction on immigration and labelled Mexicans in particular as undesirables, "men of few wants, apathetic, without ambition, not concerned with the

future" (Simon 89). In many quarters, Mexicans remained anathema to an American society clinging to notions of Nordic superiority--witness the 1930s publications of Madison Grant's *Conquest of a Continent* and Kenneth Roberts "The Existence of an Emergency" in *The Saturday Evening Post* (Simon 88)--and built on notions of progress.

24. As I suggested earlier, Grant's treatises on the distinction between "Nordics" (the most intellectually complete group and the group most culturally familiar to "Native" Americans (not American Indians)), "Alpines" (further down on the intellectual and cultural scale), and "Mediterraneans" (the crudist thinkers and the people most alien to "Native American" (Anglo-American) ways. Southern Italians, to Grant's mind, fell into the last category, and, according to commentators like Edward Ross, lacked the rational ability to care for themselves. For similar assessments from the period, see LaGumina, *WOP!*. Published a quarter-century ago, *WOP!* remains the best compendium of anti-Italian mythology and propaganda available. For an elaboration of Grant's terms, see *The Conquest of a Continent*.

25. Nietzche is especially important to Arturo. His *Beyond Good and Evil* is the subtext for *The Road to Los Angeles* and most of Arturo's interactions with women. Section 232 of *Beyond Good and Evil* resonates most clearly. "[Woman] does not want truth: what is truth to a woman! From the very first nothing has been more alien, repugnant, inimical to woman than truth--her great art is the lie, her supreme concern is appearance and beauty. Let us

confess it, we men: it is precisely *this* art and *this* instinct in woman which we love and honour: we who have a hard time and for our refreshment like to associate with creatures under whose hands, glances and tender follies our seriousness, our gravity and profundity appear to us almost as folly....We men want woman to cease compromising herself through enlightenment: just as it was man's care and consideration for woman which led the Church to decree: *mulier tacean in ecclesia!*" (164). Arturo's Nietzchean attitudes implicate both him and Fante as mysogynists, but more importantly, they reinforce the notion that he seeks to possess his woman, his women, as powerful social, ethnic, and sexual fetishes.

26. Women often functioned, in the words of Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, as "family manager"s. For a fuller account of women's obligation and power to hold the family together, see Mangione and Morreale, *La Storia* and Gambino, *Blood of My Blood.*

27. Late in life, Fante, recalling (tongue in cheek?) the experiences on which he based *Ask the Dust,* remarked, "You see, the theme running through *Ask the Dust* is very subtle, and it might even escape some people because I never hit it head on, and that was the fact that I never screwed this girl" (Pleasants 95).

28. In his letters, Fante himself shows an obsessive interest in making money from his writing (Cooney).

29. See Cooper, "John Fante's Eternal City," 91.

30. I borrow this quotation from Collins' commentary on *1933 Was a Bad Year,* as it applies perfectly not only to its protagonist,

Henry J. Molise, but also to the Arturo of *Ask the Dust*. For context, see Collins, "Fante's Families and the Epiphany of Failure."

Chapter IV: Electric Blue Italian: Anthony Valerio's Italian American Circuitry and the Rewiring of Italian American Male Identity

"The making of an ethnic identity has become...a complicated business for Italian-Americans. I use "making" deliberately...For them, the question, "Who am I"? demands a conscious answer. The ingredients which they have at hand from which to assemble the Italian part of their identity are varied and incongruous. They include the *contadino* values of la *Nonna*; the media images of *The Godfather*; the classical heritage of Leonardo da Vinci; and the contemporary Italy of Federico Fellini. Folk, popular, and high cultures all meld in the miniature melting pot of the Italian-American identity."

–from "The Search for an Italian-American Identity," by Rudolph J. Vecoli

"Sonny Corleone was tall for a first-generation American of Italian parentage, almost six feet, and his crop of bushy, curly hair made him look even taller. His face was that of a gross Cupid, the features even but the bow-shaped lips thickly sensual, the dimpled cleft chin in some *curious* way *obscene*. He was built as *powerfully as a bull* and it was common knowledge that he was so generously endowed by nature that his martyred wife feared the marriage bed as unbelievers once feared the rack. It was whispered that when as a youth he had visited houses of ill fame, even the most hardened and fearless *putain*, after an awed inspection of his massive organ, demanded double price."

–from *The Godfather*, by Mario Puzo

"Bensonhurst is a neighborhood dedicated to believing that its values are the only values; it tends towards certain forms of inertia."

–from *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, by Marianna De Marco Torgovnik

My great-grandfather might have known Anthony Valerio from the old neighborhood in Brooklyn, Valerio's Italian American pastoral homeland, America's largest Little Italy, Bensonhurst. Valerio came of age within a few blocks of Peter Patelli's brick home/fortress and peaceful grape arbor. And I have my father's word that the whole Guida family was familiar with one "Johnny Bath Beach," a Valerio acquaintance

and character in his latest novel, *Conversation with Johnny* (a different Johnny). This novel and Valerio's two previous books of fiction, *The Mediterranean Runs Through Brooklyn* and *Valentino and the Great Italians*, are the author's fictionalized life story, and the most important literary constructions of Italian American culture and male identity since John Fante.

One evening over dinner I asked Valerio how he had developed his free associative, tragicomic narrative style. He answered that he couldn't help it. He explained that when he sat down to write, he had an idea of the way whatever narrative he was working on would go, but after a while, that idea gave way to what he called the flow, the "electricity" of his brain. It is this electricity, I have concluded, that charges Valerio's fiction with exquisite wisdom and humor, and makes it an essential literary representation of Italian American consciousness.

Valerio's works of fiction themselves form narrative circuits connecting his characters' consciousness to the consciousness of other important Italians and Italian Americans, as they connect the characters and Valerio's audience to the eternal sources of Italian American culture and identity. These circuits glow blue with the characters' sadness at the initial distance of these sources, at their own distance from the past and from their Italian (American) heritage--as we shall see further on.

Valerio was born on May 13, 1940 to two Italian American Bensonhurst natives, William and Gertrude Valerio, both of whom figure prominently in his work. He passed his childhood in Bensonhurst, a then exclusively Italian American section of Brooklyn, rebuilt by and for immigrants like my great-grandfather and first generation Italian Americans, who used their post-War American wealth to surround themselves with the comforts of Italian cafès, Italian bakeries, Italian groceries, Italianate two-family brick houses, and hand-painted shrines to the Madonna, Saint Anthony, and other favorites of hagiolaters.

William Valerio earned a good living as a beloved resident dentist, and so Anthony enjoyed a comfortable upbringing amidst a sea of relatives and colorful Italian American personalities. A natural comedian, the younger Valerio was expelled from several schools,[1] before graduating high school and enrolling at Columbia College, from which he received his Bachelor of Arts in French literature in 1962. During his college years, Valerio discovered writers such as Gogol and Proust, who would become his first literary influences, the first writers he admits to mimicking (Valerio, Personal).

After college, Valerio decided to attend medical school in Italy. He left for Bologna in the autumn of 1962, and spent some of the next three years studying medicine, but more time writing and wandering Italy and Spain. It was while

living in Barcelona that Valerio first began to think of himself as a writer (Valerio, Personal).[2] Filled with romantic notions of the writer's life, he returned to America in 1965 and sought out a career compatible with that life. In 1967, he entered the publishing industry and within a few years had become a successful editor, freelancing for firms such as McGraw-Hill and Grove Press, all the while cultivating an original narrative voice--sometimes waking up at three a.m. to write before work (Valerio, Interview, "Italian"). In 1972, Valerio left publishing to teach creative writing, which he has done intermittently for the past twenty-five years at New York University, The City University of New York, and other institutions in America and abroad. Since the early 1980s, Valerio has devoted most of his time to writing.

Although he claims "I had no desire to publish at that point," and claims never to have measured his success in terms of publication or financial reward (Valerio, Personal), Valerio admits that what most writers he knows call his "big break" came in 1977, when George Plimpton's *Paris Review* published his short story "The Skyjacker." It is a story told from the point of view of its protagonist, an Italian American soldier, who hijacks a commercial flight from California, and forces the pilot to land in Rome. Valerio wrote the story in order to find out, he half-jokingly claims, "what the soldier was thinking" (Valerio, Personal).

The soldier's return to Italy, it turns out, is an important precursor to the comic, nostalgic, pastoral elements in Valerio's later fiction; an early indicator of his characters' Italian American hardwiring.

This is where the story of Valerio's life as a writer of Italian American narrative begins, and where the story of my great-grandfather's life ends. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, Peter Patelli watched as his friends' children and grandchildren, and even his friends themselves, left a close, concrete Bensonhurst of neighbors' open doors, front porch conversations, and walks to relatives' houses and Sunday *mangioni*, for the lawn and two-car comfort/isolation of suburbia. He worked, but for someone else now, his own company and American success story part of the past. He drove home from work past the ever-changing Italian American cafès, bakeries, and groceries, past the buzzing artificiality of their red, white, and green neon signs advertising *Italianità* (not yet understood as *Italo-americanità*) to suburban exiles and American tourists. He dreamt now not only of his memorial Italy but of the old American face of its memory. That face, in its changes, grew both less and more familiar with time.

As he drove along, Peter thanked America for a prosperous life, and was glad to have taught his children and grandchildren to do the same. He had also taught them to remember their Italianness as much as their Americanness,

instructing by example, by traditional habit. He dreamt of another time, but took comfort in the signs that the spirit of the Bensonhurst he--like Jack Cusimano, Valerio's fictional "master builder of Bensonhurst" (Valerio, *Valentino* 47)--had helped construct, lived on, not only in its streets and two-family brick fortresses, but in the minds of its Italian American descendants. Anthony Valerio is one of these descendants. His wistful, whimsical narrative transports his characters and his audience back to Bensonhurst, to and from the timeless power sources of Italian American identity, along a roundabout course to its pith.

The narrators of *Valentino and the Great Italians, According to Anthony Valerio* and of *Conversation with Johnny* live disconnected from the sources of their ethnicity by ambition and alienation from larger American society. Valerio makes their contemporary lives one terminal point of his narrative, which he links, often humorously, often poignantly, to the sources of Italian American culture and identity, to the real and mythological lives of other Italian Americans past, present, and future.[3]

"Having a lot of trouble" with his girlfriend (Valerio, *Valentino* 16), Anthony, the synonymous and romantically challenged narrator of Valerio's second book of fiction, *Valentino and the Great Italians,* transmits his sad reflections to one great Italian American personality and

source of Italian American male identity, Frank Sinatra; he hopes for a surge of enlightenment in return. "On this forty-sixth celebration of my name day, St. Anthony of Padua, I would like to send Frank Sinatra my condolences. Now I am able to commiserate with him when on entering his forty-sixth year he sought to settle down with a good woman too. His friends were married: there was a Mrs. Martin, a Mrs. Bishop, a Mrs. Davis and a Mrs. Lawford" (18). Commiseration allows Anthony to examine Sinatra's dilemma for possible solutions to his own; to connect with a useable Italian American past.

The narrative collapse of time involved and the reference to Saint Anthony also allow for simultaneous connection to other great Italians.

> A name day is a day of truth. Just as on their daughters' wedding days all Dons grant any wish whatever, on their name day they are obliged to tell the truth. The truth is that St. Anthony was not born in Padua, he performed his miracles there. He was born in Portugal. As an infant he was sickly and was transported with care to Africa. He gained strength and on the way back to Portugal stopped off in Padua and stayed.
> The truth: is it possible for one man, even an Italian one, to romance the likes of the following women, with prime time taken out for a marriage to his first and eternal love, his Italian

> sweetheart: Lana Turner, Jill St. John, Princess Soraya, Ava Gardner...?
>
> A name day is also a festive one, but the truth is I've been alone all day with northerly gales blowing pollen in through my window. My door is kept open a body's width by a dagger. (19)

I do not imply here, nor does Valerio, I think, that "all Dons" are great Italians in the manner of Saint Anthony (although Anthony's contemplation of them does prefigure Valerio's use of Don as truthteller in his third novel, *Conversation with Johnny*). Rather, important here is the narrator's associative search for truths, stereotypes, ironies along the circuit of Italian American culture. In a matter of a few paragraphs, Anthony wires his life to the lives of Frank Sinatra, St. Anthony of Padua, Garibaldi (by the allusion to Garibaldi's use of dagger as doorstop), and unnamed mafiosi--drawing from them, he hopes, the power to solve his problems and achieve a fulfilling Italian American identity.

Valerio's most powerful associative search of this sort is 1986's *Valentino and the Great Italians*. The book grew from a brief piece entitled "The Great Lover," which appears in his first book, *The Mediterranean Runs Through Brooklyn*. After reading *The Mediterranean*, an editor at Freundlich Publishers requested more portraits of great Italians and Italian Americans. Eventually, Valerio would complete and

publish twenty-two of the portraits in a single hardcover volume. In an interview I conducted for television, Valerio calls the book "a document rather than something that fits a genre," "a weave between history and personal history" (Valerio, Interview, "Italian")--the personal history not of Valerio himself, but of Anthony the narrator as representative Italian American man wired to Italian and Italian American history.

On the occasion of its 1994 re-issue by Guernica Press, Peter Carravetta, to date one of the few serious commentators on Valerio's writing, called *Valentino* "writing that makes you think of an autobiography, creative journalism, or semiserious *scherzi* [jokes or tricks] worthy of the highest journal tradition, pictures drawn through words, frames of life....Or a book about the social imaginary of a binational, bicultural group, melding History with Fantasy" (Carravetta, Review 348-49). What this "weaving" or "melding" of "history and personal history" "with Fantasy" amounts to is a novelistic portrait of a current Italian American man reactivating his cultural hardwiring, to receive messages from forgotten or previously undetected cultural sources; a narrator/protagonist harnessing the current of Italian American cultural history[4] as seen through his life and the lives of significant (to him) Italian (American) personalities. The narrator's electric desire to reclaim but not be imprisoned by his Italian American past activates the

narrative circuit.

This desire arises from Anthony's dissatisfaction with the process and product of Americanization, symbolized by movement away from Valerio's Italian American pastoral homeland, Bensonhurst. In a portrait of his male cousins, "The DiGeorgio Boys," Anthony imagines the personal life of a cousin who has forsaken the old neighborhood and his ambition to follow in his father's footsteps and his family, for a life apart.

> Instead of looking back to Bensonhurst for a new way, he goes to a college up in Buffalo. Here his voice deepens, his genitals flourish, he discovers psychology. In the laboratory one day the aspiring psychologist next to him, a girl...They go outside and knee-deep in snow Bobby Boy says, "You Italian?"
>
> "No," says the girl. "A problem?"
>
> "No. I've been through enough upheavals without insisting on a cultural link."
>
> "Well, thanks a lot," the girl says, affronted.
>
> "There I was," he goes on, "about to be an engineer, we move to Connecticut, my father gets fired, and now I'm up to my ass in snow, surrounded by nervous laboratory animals."
>
> "I love you, Bobby."

"You do?"

"Yep. You know, we could make a life together concentrating on the abnormal personality."

"Think so?"

"Yes, I do."

They hug and kiss...He commits himself to the girl and in the privacy of his mind decides to exercise [sic] the DiGeorgio spirit amid the mountains, fresh air and psychotics of upstate New York. (Valerio, *Valentino* 199-200)

Anthony's disapproving tone comes through loud and clear: Bobby Boy is wrong for exorcising the DiGeorgio spirit and, by implication, psychotic as well for giving himself over to America outside the Italian American circuit of acquaintance and custom. He, Anthony, sees better than to disconnect himself from Italian America.

At the same time, Anthony is wary of becoming trapped in the Italian American circuit of tradition. In the portrait entitled "Enrico Caruso," he considers the case of uncle Mike,

> the first doctor in Bensonhurst to convince Italian cardiacs that they might have to leave Bensonhurst a while in order to go to the Mayo Clinic in a place called Minnesota for what was called a bypass. Mike himself traveled alone to Texas to witness experiments on a dog's heart.

> Mike DiGeorgio was also the first doctor in Bensonhurst to convince Italian cardiacs that they had to spend a little time in a hospital--it wasn't a disgrace, their families could come." (219-20)

Mike is a cross-cultural pioneer, discovering and naming practices foreign to his community. Eventually, Mike's forays and non-traditional practices and manners earn him a bad reputation in Bensonhurst. He marries a non-Italian and accumulates "a stock portfolio worth millions" (224). Anthony describes his ostensible transgressions in a communal voice. "Only the Syrians in Bay Ridge accumulated that kind of portfolio--was he keeping information from his landsmen? He had bought into a loan company--was he squeezing debtors? After Don Salvatore died, Mike became Head of the Family, and we cared about his reputation. His reputation was also ours" (224).

The community's concern for Mike's unorthodox (from their perspective) upward mobility arises from Southern Italian values born of traditional economic deprivation, suspicion of the nobility, and perilous attempts to advance one's status. According to Richard Gambino, "The pattern of work and savings channeled into home and property, which might include a family business, remains [as of 1974] strong in Italian-Americans. The mind behind this economic structure thinks of secure but gradual low-growth returns rather than

the lucrative and faster but more risky possibilities of speculative investment" (131).

The operative communal desire here, and the one with which Mike must contend, is the lingering desire for what Mangione and Morreale call "security in tight little islands" (129), circuits, those Italian American enclaves that preserve old country wisdom, custom, and preconceptions. Those "enclaves were [and to some extent still are] formed of people who had come from the same region or village, sometimes even the same part of a village that had been home for centuries. They clustered together for comfort, for security from the animosity of those who had come from other countries before them, and for the sociability of being with those who spoke their language, ate their foods, and understood their humor and insecurities" (130).[5] In this sense, the Italian Americans of these enclaves, the residents of Valerio's Bensonhurst, carry on the legacy of Verga's peasants.

The community's sentiments are heard, as they are in Verga, through the narrative voice. Don Salvatore, recognizing Mike, his son, is ready to marry and settle down, says to him, "'It's sad, Mike, and a tragedy when you think that Caruso's wife didn't know how to make spaghetti either! So marry an Italian girl, *figlio mio*, and live in Brooklyn--otherwise, what will you eat?" (220). Food here, treated as a sustaining force, symbolizes *Italianità* resistant to all

manner of geographic, political, economic and social change. Other powerful fetishes of *Italianità* in Valerio's fiction include the "mushroom noses" shared by the majority of Italian and Italian American characters in all three of his books. In the manner of a certain well-loved reindeer proboscis, these noses, figuratively speaking, radiate Italian American identity, distinguishing Italian American characters from others, and joining them in Carravetta's "social imaginary of a binational, bicultural" (actually *multinational, multicultural*) group.

Mike's reaction to Don Salvatore is typical of Italian American characters caught between *impresa*, their strivings toward American economic and social success, and *ripresa*, their continual recourse to Italian and Italian American culture for mental and spiritual fulfillment. He remains, to borrow Alba's phrasing, "snagged in an uncomfortable conflict between two alternatives, each of which" is "hedged with risks. One" is "to identify with the Italian group," which affords "the satisfaction of membership in a group of ethnic peers, but" risks "complete exclusion by other Americans and the loss of any chance for social mobility. The other" is "to identify with the American group," which is "attractive because it" lies "on the pathway to mobility, but" is "riskier than the first. There" is "no assurance that others" will "accept an individual of Italian ancestry," especially for characters facing this choice prior to the 1970s when

"prejudice against Italians was prevalent, as indicated by the widespread use in ordinary conversation of such epithets as *wop* and *guinea*" (75).

Mike resolves his dilemma by remaining in Bensonhurst, but secretly wanting his and his wife's mutual "love to congeal into an impenetrable barrier against the Italians in the neighborhood, his insulated family" (Valerio, *Valentino* 222). His answer to communal objections to his lifestyle is

> Who cares! What was I supposed to be? A bricklayer with dignity? A mafioso with the reputation of being a good family man? A smiling, sweet-talking barber who doubles as a bookie? A longshoreman who drives his kids crazy because he wants them to become professional men? A housepainter who plays a good game of pinochle? I became a doctor, a good doctor, and if they want to call me a prick, let them! At least I'm a consistent prick! (225)

In rehearsing a litany of Italian American male stereotypes, Mike nullifies them; in him, Valerio's narrative electricity brings the Italian American professional man to life in American fiction.

Valerio, who himself has chosen a profession far less common than doctor among Italian American men, presents male characters who desire to live both within and beyond the circuit that is Bensonhurst. Their dichotomous desire takes a dichotomous narrative form: a rendition of the Italian

American cultural circuit, the Italian American social imaginary, as concurrently pastoral and mock pastoral. Valerio's narrative implies the modern pastoral choice, as Williams figures it, between "economic [career] advantage" on one side and "other"--pastoral, spiritual, social, cultural, non-economic--"ideas of value" (61), here the values of Bensonhurst, on the other.

For this reason, Valerio's narrator lives in self-imposed "exile in Manhattan," sad "that there are no more Christmas Eves in Brooklyn" (211), that the Italian American traditions he associates with his family and with a long lost Bensonhurst of the 1940s and '50s are unavailable to him. Clearly then, as much as *Valentino and the Great Italians* is a celebration and narrative connection to Italian and Italian American cultural icons and of the Italian diaspora beyond the New World village of Bensonhurst, it is Valerio's reconstruction of Bensonhurst as Italian American pastoral. It is a place to which his narrators repeatedly attach the epithet "God's country" (221); a place, like the native villages of the immigrant autobiographers--places William Boelhower sees as "ladder[s] for the inhabitants of the [happy] valley to communicate with the source of transcendent spiritual" and, in the case of Bensonhurst cultural, "forces" (Boelhower, *Immigrant* 103); a place and time inhabited by God-like figures like the ancient Pietro LaClacca, Anthony's boyhood neighbor.

The adult Anthony describes LaClacca from the point of view of "little Anthony boy," out for a bike ride around his tree-lined block.

> He would be working in his garden, stooped low among his flowers and ivy, and he emerged from it like a beast from the forest, slowly, with measured steps. He was big...He had hair white as snow and a square, red face...
>
> "Hi there, little Anthony boy!"
>
> It was a great booming voice. It shook the trees and froze the boy. He dropped his hands from the wheel, tensed his arms and surrendered his neck. The old man pinched a section of skin and pulled up. The boy rose to his tiptoes and raised his head as high as it would go. He looked at the tops of the trees. Gritting his teeth, he said, "Hi, Mr. LaClacca.
>
> The old man didn't let go. He squeezed harder and said it again: "Hi there, little Anthony boy!"
>
> The boy's mind fought for the magical words that would release the grip. (Valerio, *Valentino* 113)

The narrative not only casts LaClacca as a folkloric giant, but also as an immigrant, a direct link to Old World language and customs, a conduit to some pastoral Italian village like those reconstructed by immigrant autobiographers, a

connection to "a closed but dynamic folkloric environment" (Boelhower, *Immigrant* 106), a source of the cultural current that feeds Anthony's identity.

> [Little Anthony boy] might also understand that his old neighbor with the white hair and eager face was lonely, his heart was in the country of his native language, and that in America he had used his hands instead of his mouth. The vise-like grip of the neck, the pain, was a way of saying that he *understood* English and was waiting to hear something meaningful, something other than hello or goodbye. Something about the work he had done with his hands maybe. Yes, that was it--he was waiting for a compliment on his cement work. Fixed in the cement that bordered his garden and the iron fence that separated his house from his neighbors were thousands of semiprecious stones. (Valerio, *Valentino* 113-14)

Notable in this passage is the Italianate cement work, of course--still as much a feature of Bensonhurst masonry as the masonry of Southern Italian villages, defying location and chronology--and also the shift to LaClacca's point of view. Suddenly, in a supreme act of what Boelhower calls "ethnic semiosis,"[6] Valerio enables little Anthony boy (or grown-up Anthony as Narrator) to transcend time and space by splicing his consciousness onto that of an old Italian immigrant.

Suddenly, little Anthony boy can read the mute flourishes of ancient Italian "genius" (114) in their signal modern American form, from the creator's vantage.

Peter Marinelli claims that "from the Romantics thenceforward...all pastoral myths are essentially private pastoral myths" (5). These private pastoral myths form the base of Valerio's pastoral operations. One central private myth appears in *Valentino*, and recurs throughout Valerio's fiction: the narrator's epic infantile tears.

> [F]or the first five years I cried. Night and day I cried, sometimes eighteen hours at a stretch, and the day I was administered morphine, I cried twenty hours....I stopped crying for longer periods outside than in, and so every mid-afternoon, my mother wheeled me away from the El, I cried, but if she wheeled me toward New Utrecht Avenue, I stopped crying even when my carriage was still. A train passed every ten minutes or so, twenty-four hours a day...my mother turned the carriage around and tilted it so that I could see the train in the full glory of its roar and speed, the tracks tremoring, sparks shooting down into the shadows. I goo-gooed and drooled and tried to sit up. A serious look came over my face as my eyes followed each window, each car. When the last one sped by, I was now looking at the immense

> azure sky and fell back and listened to the train slow down as it pulled into the Seventy-ninth Street station. (238-39)

Adult Anthony links infant Anthony's tears to the movement of trains: a real electric and preternatural force connecting the pastoral Italian American homeland of Bensonhurst to the world beyond. "[M]y mother burrowed the carriage through the snow and stopped in the middle of the street to show me the train from directly underneath...She allowed the sparks to rain down on us, they diffused before reaching us, but for a few seconds up there it was like a spray of Stardust" (240). From the time he is a baby, Anthony is a creature of the pastoral homeland, but an uncomfortable one. Throughout Anthony's life and the lives of Valerio's other narrators, psychic connection to Bensonhurst remains a powerful source both of comfort and discomfort.

In *Conversation with Johnny*, for example, the narrator, Nicholas, responds to his don/confessor's wish to know "the whys and wherefores of your fuckin' tears" (62). Nicholas continues the lachrymose macrotext, tearfully explaining to the don, Johnny, how the powerful memories of Bensonhurst's affections assuage his sense of alienation, yet how those same memories never fail to turn him blue with sadness.

> The women shopping in the shadows of el, they waited for me. In front of Termini's bread store, Arturo's photography studio, Mrs. Palermo's

> grocery store. They gathered around the carriage,and my mother proudly stepped aside. These women looked down at me, smiling, tears flowing. They said that in their entire lifetime they had never seen such long curly lashes..."We will never again see such beautiful eyes, such beautiful lashes."
>
> "And you did!" Johnny exults, his voice cracking. "You stopped crying and blinked and blinked your eyes for them! Your screams cleared the way for a lifelong image, a pair of beautiful eyes shining in the center of a hard life." (63)

As Valerio's narrators often do, Anthony uses the quaint phrase "the shadows of the el" to mark the boundaries of his Bensonhurst and suggest the pastoral feeling of security he derives from recalling it. The women of Bensonhurst, Italian American in the entirely Italian American world of Termini's, Arturo's, and Mrs. Palermo's, adore the baby Anthony; the memory of their communal love continues to sooth him (and them) throughout his narrative life, and becomes a part of his identity. When, as an adult, he boards the Manhattan-bound train, Anthony remains connected to Bensonhurst and his part in its life, as if by the electric coursing through the rails beneath him.

From book to book, Valerio sheds ever brighter light on episodes of family history that idealize the qualities,

virtues, and deeds of those who populate his Bensonhurst pastoral--the narrators' friends, family, and most significantly, the dead father character. In *Conversation with Johnny*, it is Nicholas's father sacrificing the love of his life out of a sense of duty to Nicholas's mother. In *The Mediterranean Runs Through Brooklyn*, it is the beauty of the dying father Nunzio. In *Valentino*, it is the beauty of the dying father Edward Valerio.

> [P]erhaps my father would recall his own physical beauty, of which he was so proud. Women in their seventies stop me on the street and say, "Are you Edward's son? You look just like him."
>
> "Yes," I answer with pride.
>
> "Your father was so handsome." (Valerio, *Valentino* 117)

Moving from a description of his father's beauty, Anthony recalls the time of his mythic ugliness, his cancer-riddled body. "My father was grotesque now. Only I could look at him. His grotesqueness compounded my love. I adored him. Exactly half of his head was bald and half had some prickles of gray hair." (118). Significant here is that both images of Edward are larger-than-life. His life and death become first actual, then memorial force, pulling Anthony--though he is no longer subject to the geographical and social limitations of Brooklyn--back to a folkloric Bensonhurst life of pure qualities--ugliness and beauty.

Anthony splices together the beauty and tragedy of Edward's life and that of the eponymous lover Rudolph Valentino. Anthony speculates that as a child his father may have gone to see Valentino's *The Four Horsemen;* and when he further along identifies the aged Edward as an Indian, he again identifies him with Valentino, by announcing in the next sentence, without any narrative transition, "One of Valentino's guides was an American Indian named Black Feather" (118). Apparent in all of Valerio's writing, this flow of narrative current across time and space links the power of diverse Italian and Italian American personalities, aspects of culture, and myths to pastoral Bensonhurst.[7]

Anthony explains,

> It does not matter where Valentino was born, he is immortal, exists in the air everywhere, but when he was walking the earth he felt that he had left a part of himself in his homeland...Italy...a part as real as an arm or a leg to which he joined himself whenever he returned home. It was a warm, intimate, secure feeling that he could not capture except at his birthplace and its vicinity, a feeling so strong that it displaced disappointments and expectations and elevated the commonplace to wonders of the world. (143-44)

Of course, both Edward and Anthony himself are infused with Valentino's spirit, the feeling of belonging to an ideal

homeland, an ideal Italy or Italian America. By recognizing that "Between Valentino and his father was a psychic connection the way there is between lovers and birds flying in a flock" (150), Anthony recognizes and names his own connection to his Italian American father; their common "loneliness so desperate that it threatened his existence and could only be assuaged by a woman, a kind word from her, a caress" (151). A woman like the memory of the women who adored baby Anthony; or the women whom, as I will later discuss, Anthony and other of Valerio's characters, in the way of Arturo Bandini, seek out as a means of fulfillment.

Time and again in the narrative, Valerio connects a Bensonhurst character like Edward to a mythic Italian American personality, pushing the boundaries of Bensonhurst, enlarging the Italian American circuit to near infinite circumference. This connection of Bensonhurst history with Italian (American) myth operates also on the level of language. Anthony imagines a conversation between Valentino and the townspeople of Valentino's hometown. When the pragmatic villagers tell Valentino they would like to buy his dead parents' house because they could use the land, Valentino's response takes the poetic tone of an Italian folktale.

> "What are you talking about?...First of all, from wherever I am I will come back when it snows to clear a path for the passing carriages. With my

> massive shovel I will remove the snow from the winding path leading to the front door. I will come back for the garden, to trim the hedges and water the honeysuckle and snowballs, and I will clean the windows so that the sunlight will continue to shine in. I will come back just to sit in the chairs, move among the rooms where we ate, laughed and worked." (147-48)

The honeysuckle and snowballs appear also in Anthony's own parents' garden, as a comfort to his dying father; the presence of the flowers here implies that Anthony, animated by Valentino's own electric spirit, or transferring his own desires to the Italian American legend, will never give up his connection to Bensonhurst, the homeland of his people. Of course, the villagers' reply to Valentino, in turn, hints at the difficulty of maintaining that connection once one has left: Why, that little prick!...He needs a kick in the ass!" (148). Their vulgarity literally translates the coarseness of the Italian (American) peasant into Bensonhurst-ese, drawing Old World Italian *cafoni* and New World *paesans* into one continuous circuit of ethnicity.

The tone of the above exchange reflects the comic electricity of Valerio's narrative, and suggests that his pastoral of an Italian American homeland is, in equal measure, a mock pastoral: that is, a pastoral lit by a narrative consciousness aware of the limitation and irony

inherent in pastoral memory (as in Proust) "miraculously" repairing "the ravages of time [and experience] through a complex aesthetic" (Stead 297). All of Valerio's narrators, after all, live in self-imposed exile from Bensonhurst, the cultural homeland, the circuit they idealize and could tap into again--through closer contact with other family members and childhood friends--but choose not to. They would like to comfort themselves by reentering the circuit, reprising the culture of their origin, while at the same time they would like to remain outside the circuit, to transcend its cultural biases and join a larger American (and global) community.

When Anthony's Argentine lover charges him with homophobia, he responds by blaming the community whose cultural forces have shaped him, and by mocking its values.

> "You have to understand...that where I come from, Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, there was no such thing as a homosexual. Nobody lived alone or with just another man or woman. The houses were too big, two- and three-story brick and shingle. Married couples lived in them and they had kids, the kids I played with in the street. Each member of the couple had known each other since they were kids. The prospective brides hung around while the boys played ball in the lots." (Valerio, *Valentino* 182)

Anthony's affection for Bensonhurst remains, but so does his desire to move beyond Bensonhurst's circuit of traditional

Italian American (Roman Catholic) values; so when Anthony calls Bensonhurst "God's country," he does so with more than a hint of irony.

Anthony's desire to transcend Bensonhurst leads him to include many historical citizens of the world among his "Great Italians": including Christopher Columbus, the Mona Lisa, Giuseppe and Anita Garibaldi, and Enrico Caruso. Among these, Giuseppe Garibaldi occupies a central symbolic place: as champion of Italian unity, an early Italian (North) American (Garibaldi lived for several years on Staten Island, sharing a house with the inventor Antonio Meucci), bi-continental Italian crusader for liberty, and global Italian cultural icon.[8] The stories Anthony tells of Garibaldi connect him to the hero's generosity of spirit, vision, and practice of universal brother/sisterhood.

On a "visit with" the statue of Garibaldi in Washington Square Park, Anthony reflects on the great Italian's early life.

> During his lifetime he saved sixteen people from drowning. When he was eight years old he saw a woman washing her clothes in a deep, wide ditch. She fell in, pinioning her head beneath the pool. Encumbered by his game pouch, the boy nevertheless lifted her head gently and eased her over onto his lap. During his first days in Rio de Janeiro, where he had exiled himself following an abortive

> attempt to rouse to revolution the Royal fleet in Genoa, Garibaldi saved a Negro slave from drowning. As the youthful exile walked past the three-story white granite houses, he heard the crackling of whips and cries of pain. In Rio de Janeiro of 1832 slaves were not allowed to wear shoes or ride in the mule-drawn buses, and when they died their bodies were tossed into a pit. While strolling along the waterfront he saw a slave fall into the sea. Garibaldi saved him. The slave was a giant of a man, Santos was his name; and with boiling eyes he said to Garibaldi, "I wish to join you..." (79).

Anthony's Garibaldi moves freely between Italy, South America, and New York, achieving communion as easily with an African slave, an Argentine farm girl (Anita Garibaldi), the uncredited inventor of the telephone (Meucci), and anyone he finds in need, as with the people of his native land. In short, he transcends his original community, connecting himself to the world beyond--as Anthony and Mike DiGiorgio attempt to do.

What Valerio says of himself applies also to his narrators: "I was set off on a journey [by my original community]...I take with me all the nurturing, positive and negative" (Valerio, Interview, "Italian"). One effect of this

nurturing is Valerio's sensitivity to prejudices and stereotypes. Of *Valentino*, Carravetta writes that

> [the] interest and novelty of these tales by Anthony Valerio consists in part in the way he spins out prejudices on commonplaces and with a light hand unknot [sic] them in a variety of settings and situations, leaving us to savor the disturbing possibility that these stereotypes may indeed be, if not pre-determining the fate of certain encounters, then probably co-determining the unfolding of the semantics, disclosing newer understanding. (Carravetta, Review 351)

These "prejudices on commonplaces" include American prejudices toward Italian American men: lingering stereotypes of Italian American men as criminal brutes and/or sexual predators.

According to Rudolph Vecoli in his trenchant 1984 article, "The Search for an Italian American Identity," as recently as thirty years ago--it could be argued even now--"The Mafia was kept before the public in an unending series of newspaper and magazine articles. Americans appeared to believe that all criminals were Italian, and that all Italians were at least potential criminals" (47). Ron Scapp considers more recent American stereotypes of Italian American masculinity in "Watermelons, Tee Shirts, and Giorgio Armani: Eight-and-a-Half Epigrams on Italian American

Culture." "Just as there is a macho, violent dimension of Italian American masculinity," Scapp concludes, "there is also a gentler, more sensitive opposition," most often "the Latin lover (seducer) of women" (37).

A few years ago, John Gotti was making the cover of *Time* magazine; while much to the chagrin of Italian American critics like Pasquale Verdicchio, Spike Lee, in films like *Jungle Fever* and *Do The Right Thing*, was exploiting what Robert Viscusi identifies as the preconception of an Italian American male "penchant for violence, and sexist relations with women" (Viscusi, qtd. in Verdicchio 187); around the same time, the cast of Saturday Night Live was running a series of sketches in which a pair of lecherous waiters with Italian accents would smother a female patron of their restaurant (usually a guest host of the show) with unwanted amorous attention, calling her *"Bellissima!"*, until they succeeded at forcing her into a sexually compromising position. And then, of course, there is and has been Puzo, whose *The Godfather* "continues to be widely read, its sales fueled by the popularity of the filmed version" (De Marco Torgovnik 115) which enjoyed a 1997 re-release in theaters and on video as part of *The Godfather* trilogy. Not to mention the best-selling 1996 novel and 1997 hit Mafia miniseries *The Last Don*, which "captivated over fifty-two million viewers," according to network promos for its 1998 sequel, *The Last Don II*.

Thus what Vecoli could legitimately claim in 1984 remains true today--especially when we consider the impact of cable television, syndication, and video.

> Italian-Americans are still bombarded with negative sterotypes [sic] in the media....Among other characterizations are those of "Fonzi" of "Happy Days", a macho, tough [Latin lover] "greaser"...A recent study of the images of Italian-Americans presented on television concluded that negative portrayals outnumbered [sic] positive ones by two to one, one out of six was engaged in criminal activities, most held low status jobs, and the majority did not speak English correctly. During the seventies, there was an explosion of Italian-American talent in the film industry. As directors and actors, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Michael Cimino, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Sylvester Stallone, and John Travolta, created powerful images of Italian-Americans on the screen. Some like *Mean Streets* and *Rocky* were sympathetic, if grimy, portrayals of workingclass life, while others like *Saturday Night Fever* were vile caricatures of Italian-Americans" (53).

Whatever we may think of these models, great numbers of Italian American men have found sources of identity in the

stereotypes that films like *Saturday Night Fever* and *The Godfather* promote. In Vecoli's words, "The response of Italian-Americans to *The Godfather* was most curious. Some organizations protested and picketed the films, but for many it appeared to be the Italian-American equivalent of Alex Haley's *Roots*. Many, especially among the younger generation, embraced the Corleone epic as a source of identity...Such self-caricature and self-denigration is a sad commentary on the lack of cultural resources upon which many Italian-Americans have to draw in defining their identities" (55).

So, as much as anyone, Italian Americans themselves have been responsible for the stereotypes. Valerio's comment to National Public Radio host Leonard Lopate holds true: "We [Italian Americans] create our own myths." Puzo, Coppola, Scorsese, and others have nurtured myths, mostly negative, that continue to attend Italian American manhood. Sonny Corleone is a creature of lust and brute force, but we continue to grieve his brutal death. Goodfella Tommy is a demented Napoleon, possibly more criminal and ruthless than the original, but he wins Joe Pesci an Academy award. It is to these phenomena and to the "lack of [Italian American] cultural resources" available to Italian Americans and others that Valerio responds in 1986's *Valentino* and in 1997's *Conversation with Johnny*.[9]

As he reactivates his narrator's cultural hardwiring in *Valentino*, Valerio rewires and re-presents contemporary

Italian American male identity in *Conversation with Johnny*. Valerio charges *Conversation* with satiric energy, transforming current stereotypes of Italian American men by making those stereotypes the subject of a mock-Socratic dialogue between two such men: Johnny, the Italian American don, and Nicholas, the Italian American artist--also the narrator--who identifies himself as a lover, with the qualification that "By lover I don't necessarily mean a big man with the ladies, I mean the way I view everything" (128). Nicholas is a successful writer who has left the Brooklyn source of his Italian American identity for a life in Manhattan and parts beyond, a artist in search of beauty. According to Valerio himself, Nicholas is also, with regard his links to Italian American culture and society, "at the end of the line. Not only is he allergic to wheat" and therefore pasta--a symbol of cultural sustenance in the book and in Italian American culture in general--"he's also having an affair with a Jewish [read "non-Italian] young lady," and "[h]e's living in Manhattan" (Valerio, Interview with Lopate), a world away from Bensonhurst. One day, Nicholas, lonely and alienated from the society in which he lives, "thinks of going home and sitting down with the local don" (Valerio, Interview with Lopate) and saying, "Now I want the truth--what went wrong, Johnny, what went wrong with me?" (Valerio, *Conversation* 16). This is a supplicant sit-down of the kind Puzo made famous, except that here the don is more

cultural therapist/confessor than benefactor or powerbroker. This twist is one way Valerio succeeds in his attempt to "humanize the don" (Valerio, Interview with Lopate), having him sit and listen as Nicholas begs him, "Help me to change, Johnny. Help me to change from a lover to an ordinary man" (128)

During their first session, Nicholas tells Johnny that he has returned on a whim of essential connection. "'I saw your eyes on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*...I knew they could see into everything, even into my subconscious, and they cleansed it of its penchant for debunking my own, for creating the beautiful lie. Rather than the stereotype, I opted for the beautiful lie" (16). But the "beautiful lie" Nicholas has opted for is actually another Italian American male stereotype. He has eschewed the role of don and chosen instead that of Latin lover.[10]

> Instead of becoming a doctor or a businessman, I became a lover. I, a Brooklyn boy, born the same year as you, at the outset of the war, from a good family, father a doctor, half-Sicilian, half-Neapolitan, the Sicilian predominant in that it was handed down by my mother. Every day for the past nine years I sat alone with my notebooks and gave love away to strangers. No Puccini, no family, no *paisani*--alone and silent. My desk looked out toward the Hudson River, and on the

> sill was a white scalloped bowl replenished each day with fresh water for the sparrows....After bestowing the daily gift, I was still alone in a ramshackle pre-war building a block away from Christopher Street when I love women, Johnny, love them as much as my distant children and dead mother." (16-17)

Through Nicholas and Johnny, two apparent stereotypes, Valerio projects novel images of Italian American men: the *cultivated, vulnerable* lover and the *compassionate* don. From their first encounter on, their Socratic dialogues, in both form and substance, further defuse stereotypes and reconfigure Italian American male identity.

Throughout the narrative, Nicholas plays Socrates to Johnny's Glaucon, responding to the latter's unreported questions with digressions on his life as lover, writer, Italian American. In appropriating this classical model of reason, Valerio counters the myth of Italian "hot-bloodedness" identified by Scapp (37) and others.[11] In response to Johnny's quiet prompts, Nicholas uses reason as a gauge to read the emotion, passion, and action of his and Johnny's experience as Italian American men.

He begins by reading the stereotypes of Italian American men that *The Godfather* (which Nicholas mentions several times in the book) perpetuates. The first of these is the sexual predator, embodied in Sonny Corleone, who is "so

generously endowed by nature that his martyred wife feared the marriage bed as unbelievers had once feared the rack" (15). The folkloric language of the passage presents Sonny literally as well as figuratively larger-than-life. It also reveals that like most of the women characters in Puzo's novel, Sandra Corleone suffers for a Corleone man: in this case, for Sonny's sexual satisfaction. Lucy Mancini, the lover whom Sonny shoots through with the "savage arrows of his lightning-like thrusts; innumerable; torturing" (28), likewise suffers; though she suffers indignity in her relations with physically normal men, for the same sort of generous genital endowment that makes Sonny legend. The only sexual consolation for her abnormally large genitalia is Sonny's abnormally large genitalia, which she loses, along with Sonny, when he is gunned down. In this sense, like Sonny's wife, she is sexual prey.

Valerio recalibrates this relationship in *Conversation.* Nicholas, "the lover," instead of preying upon his lover, is preyed upon by her. Lefty uses Nicholas as an orgasm machine and tortures him with talk of marriage, though she herself is married and never commits to divorce. "[I]f you marry me," she teases, "you'll have to make love to me every night. Every single night" (26). While admitting he would marry her, Nicholas struggles to keep up with her sexual demands. During one interview, he confesses to Johnny that after one sexual encounter with Lefty, he find himself "totally spent, ricotta

through and through" (22). Here Valerio only hints at Nicholas's vulnerability; he fully explores it in a chapter entitled "The Paramour." "After I revealed my symptoms to the doctor," Nicholas explains, "I was prepared to drop my pants so that he could examine my muscle, determine whether it had the capability any longer of filling with bone. I was prepared to stimulate myself behind a curtain" (42). Nicholas learns from the doctor that his problem is psychosomatic. The treatment: a virility pill which Nicholas comically Hellenicizes. "Xanax, the Sicilian champion come to fight for the Greeks, steps out from the ranks, and with a booming voice heard all around the countryside calls out the Trojan champion...."Stressimpotence! Stressimpotence! Let's you and me settle this dispute with hand-to-hand combat. Winner take all!" (43).

Nicholas winds up winning the battle but losing the war. Lefty ultimately leaves him, calling him after their breakup to ask if she can include in her novel a death scene of their relationship that he has conjured. He becomes her literary as well as sexual victim. Thus, Valerio not so much explodes as transposes the stereotype. Now, the Italian American "male who is already sensitive" can not only be, as Scapp suggests, "the Latin lover (seducer) of women" (37), but also the seduced. Valerio transforms the stereotype of Italian American man as criminal brute through similar means.

Nicholas suspects that Lefty has been using him for

literary inspiration and, especially, for sex, responding to the Italian "animal" she sees in him. Valerio pushes this ethnic exoticism *ad absurdum*. Instead of having his characters refute Italian animalism--an artless move--he allows them to acknowledge a grain of truth in the stereotype while at the same time exploding it. "Let's face it, Johnny--all of us, we *are animals*....There's Jake the Bull, Sly the Stallion. Each and every one of us is a fox. But the winds may be changing. Stallone has a script on his desk about the life of Giacomo Puccini" (Valerio, *Conversation* 66).

Nicholas himself admits to being a chimp, nearly as intelligent as Lefty, but not as cunning in desire. Over the phone she wheedles, 'Your prick is beautiful. I think of it every night before I go to sleep.'" (68). Later, Lefty "instructed, 'Make me wet.'...The chimp's hands, fingers, lips, tongue--all worked up a prodigious lather. Lefty bolted from the yellow club chair, eyes, darting wildly. 'Get in bed. I must have you inside me.'" (68). Nicholas may be the chimp, but it is Lefty who acts from animal desire, not love. Thus Nicholas is neither seducer nor brute, though it is possible that his Beatrice, the American woman in whom he seeks fulfillment, may be both.

According to the brute stereotype, Johnny, the don, should whack those who don't accept the offers they can't refuse. Valerio takes the expectation of such violence and obliterates it with a jolt of absurdity. Michael Corleone

sends his lieutenant and even his own brother out for rides from which they never return. In the chapter "Lesson on Paradise Island," Nicholas suggests that Johnny take a similar ride with an Italian American "kid professor," whose father was murdered, who disrespects his wife, who invents a gangster past, and who generally does his best to live up to Italian American male stereotypes.

> So what do you say, Johnny? Let's take this kid aside and talk to him, put the arm on him a little bit. Let's you and me and couple of the boys take him away for a weekend from the environs of his dark memories and his misrepresented wife. We'll fly down to Paradise Island, and over cocktails on our veranda overlooking the palm trees and emerald ocean, you place your arm gently around the kid's shoulders, muss up his hair a little like he's a boy again, and softly, your compassionate eyes staring into his frightened ones, you say, "We understand about your father, that the image of his bullet-riddled body is all-powerful, that you feel profound pity and filial love and well-founded hatred and bitterness and shame--but all this can dwell inside side by side. Keep them the fuck that way. And your wife, it looks funny how you're talking about her. She's loyal and hard-working, supportive and, from all reports,

> beautiful. You secretly love her, don't you? See...It's alright to proclaim your love for her to the world. Finally, remember, always remember, that you're a professor now and not a thief. For the time being, we have to tolerate our crime and our culture, but your job is to promote the culture, not the crime." Here, Johnny, I suggest you make a wide sweep of your free arm, taking in all of us and the trees and the ocean, and your face suddenly goes dead and you say in your most ominous, sweet tone: "Do this for me. Do this for Johnny, at least until the likes of us are gone. OK...? Good. Now let's all go to the jai alai games." (*Conversation* 53-54)

Johnny will take a little ride to rehabilitate, not brutally punish his quarry, his fellow Italian American. As Nicholas imagines the scene, Johnny's voice will not sound ominous, deadly, in that order, but "ominous, sweet." He will not teach an Italian lesson by making an example of his victim, but teach his victim a lesson by unmaking an American stereotype. He speaks against, not to, macho gangster posturing; for emotional honesty and balance; against stereotypical hot-headed, hot-blooded "'sexist relations with women'" (Viscusi, qtd. in Verdicchio 187).

Letting the current of absurdity flow freely, Valerio introduces later in the novel the surreal Don Pippo, a

composite of Nicholas and Johnny. Suggesting the power of Italian American artistry and culture to transform identity (of The Don, The Artist, and all Italian Americans), Don Pippo begins his narrative life as a character in one of Nicholas's short stories. Later, Valerio animates him, his soul symbolically rising from Johnny, inhabiting Nicholas's place (literally his apartment), and dying. Dying, he frees Nicholas, as Edward Hack claims, "from the repressions of his old neighborhood whose landscape, moods, needs, stories, and characters are the subject of his art" (4). Nicholas is free now not only from these old repressions, but free also to forge an identity that includes the old neighborhood without feeling shame for it and for his Italianness in America.

Don Pippo, in announcing his own demise, sets a vision that Nicholas and other Italian Americans might follow.

> I am Pippo Napoli-Sicilia and I am the last of the great Dons, the last Godfather. After me, after I join Dante in the empyrean, my family of thirty million or so will not need crime to get on, because in their dark souls and untrustful minds I have placed love and beauty and imagination and understanding. Their olive faces will be raised to the Crystalline Heaven. They will be at the point of assimilation into the American race, prepared to ponder the American Revolution and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and Alexander

> Hamilton. They will look into one another's eyes and, instead of sensing alarm, will see brother and sister in Faith, Hope and Charity." (108)

Don Pippo's vision, it turns out, is the life beyond the Italian American enclave, which Nicholas has attempted to lead. A life, however, still connected to the Italian American circuit, now a circuit of brother and sisterhood, "Faith, Hope, and Charity", open to all; not a limited, limiting circuit of shame of olive skin or a sense of difference antagonistic to the rest of American society. Don Pippo's vision includes a degree of assimilation as well as allowance for ethnicity, for "Yang the Japanese shoemaker and Bella the female butcher and Juan the Spanish fish vendor and Jake the Jewish pizza maker...Samir, the gay Palestinaian restaurateur, and Gari, the albino Russian musician" (110-11) joined in society with Nicholas the Italian writer.

Valerio's fiction, then, rewires Italian American male identity, connecting it not only to the actions and images of seducers, criminals, brutes, but to great Italians and Italian Americans, the interaction of Italian American men with other Americans, people of other races and ethnic heritages, and particularly with women. As the final passage of *Conversation* intimates, women--like Odysseus's Penelope, like Dante's Beatrice, like Arturo Bandini's Camilla--for men, often symbolize fulfillment. In this passage, Nicholas, speaking to a gathering of the Dante Society of Westchester

(at which he meets Lefty, his Beatrice (Hack 4)), tells the story of "the first Italian patriot, Silvio Pellico" (145). Imprisoned in a Venetian dungeon, Pellico, upon seeing women prisoners in a courtyard, exclaims, "'Woman is for me a creature so admirable, so sublime, the mere seeing, hearing and speaking to her enriches my mind with such...'" (146). The ellipses imply Valerio's ambivalence toward Pellico's vision of women. His male characters may expect fulfillment in them, but should they? And will they find it?

Hack points out that as "Aristophanes insists" in Plato's *Symposium*--that "Human sexual attraction," the mutual desire for male/female union is really the desire "to recapture the wholeness of personality that existed before Zeus divided us"--so Nicholas believes that he will be made whole in the synergy of his union with a woman, namely Lefty (Hack 2). The text bears Hack out. Nicholas enviously tells Johnny, "Wherever you go, your wife and mother make you whole" (Valerio, *Conversation* 71). And declares later, "I want to go home, Johnny. That is, I want to make a home with the woman I love. My home doesn't have to be in Brooklyn or Queens or on Staten Island. It could be anywhere on the face of the earth, and I'll buy nice things and learn to care for them. Cook and in my garden grow broccoli-rappe"--which earlier in the novel is a symbol of Nicholas's romantic fulfillment--"and arugula. Despite my age"--around fifty--"I'm even thinking of having children. Tell me what to do"

(30). Johnny answers with a job offer, which is not, however, a viable solution to Nicholas's romantic dilemma. Nicholas acknowledges to Johnny that the job, as mâitre d' of a Brooklyn restaurant, would lead him to romance "the widows" (30), women too old and sad to fulfill him. The rest of the novel's romantic plot, Lefty's departure from his life, implies further that Nicholas may have to depend on the memory of interaction with women--and not the women themselves--to make himself whole.

For Valerio's Italian American men, fulfillment means an Italian American identity free of conflicts between Italian custom and American aspiration. Their desire for women to help create that identity, may, as Hack suggests, stem from Plato as well as from the "original loss of [Italian American] Mama" (5).[12] Or it simply may echo Dante and Fante in presenting us with the continually disappointed male hope that women will solve the conflicts of time, of space, of society, of ethnicity, by simply loving men.

Valerio presents us, finally, with men who define themselves in relation to women and who define themselves on the page, as a means of mediating between Italian American subject and American audience, of transforming the Italian American energy into American voltage. Of his first encounter with Johnny, Nicholas recounts, "Our first shared look is hard, wildly physical, at the level of the *coglioni* [testicles]--this is how Italian men know they are men. Light

from our hearts shines up to our eyes when we are with our mothers and our children, and sometimes, after giving them a hard time, our women" (*Conversation* 14-15). It is notable that Nicholas refers to "Italian" and not "Italian American" men in this passage. By emphasizing Italianness, Nicholas emphasizes ethnic difference. He and Johnny are American, but they are also, at some essential level of the *coglioni*, Italian, and as such their actions require translation for an American audience. This is Valerio's recognition of Italian American male hardwiring.

We can and should read Valerio's work, then, as an act of ethnic clarification and a symbolic act of resistance to new versions of 100 Percent Americanism and to any version of 100 Percent Italianism. In addition to a chicken in every pot, a white picket fence, Elvis on every cd player, *Profiles in Courage*, he suggests the possibility of an Italian America: "two pans of lasagna on every table and a Chrysler mini-van"--the brainchild of Lee Iacocca--"in every garage. Caruso singing in all the parks and from loudspeakers attached to buses and trains, GPO manuals on all the great Italians" (Valerio, *Valentino* 230)--manuals like *Valentino and the Great Italians* itself.

Valentino and Valerio's other works of fiction are finally, according to the author, an attempt to "fill a gap in the culture," by which the author means Italian American culture (Valerio, Interview, "Italian"). They fill this gap

by connecting contemporary characters and situations, contemporary Italian American identity, to a rich legacy of positive (as well as negative) history, culture, and myth. They respond to the needs of those Italian Americans who have pursued American economic success and total identification with an American culture that has downplayed or ignored the contributions their ancestors and "landsmen" have made: people like those Vecoli describes, "who have been rejected and even some who have 'made it', alienated by the impersonal, cold atmosphere at the top, [who] have experienced a reawakening of ethnic consciousness" ("The Search" 52). People like Mario Cuomo, whom the narrator Anthony addresses directly in *Valentino*.

> Maybe you looked back over your shoulder and didn't see another great Italian politician to style yourself after. After all, there had never been an Italian governor of New York, and you didn't feel quite comfortable styling yourself after a Rockefeller or a Lehman. You say yourself that you inherited very little of Roman sculpture and law and opera and philosophy. That's what I'm here for! Leave it to me to tell you about the Medicis, Machiavelli, Caruso, Petrarca, Benedetto Croce. I fully understand how you feel culturally starved. Sons of immigrants like you and my father and Lee Iacocca and my Uncle Mike--you didn't have

> the time or motivation to study your culture. You were expected to improve on your parents, uneducated and, as my girlfriend Elsa says, ignorant, to take advantage of the college education they never had by using it to enter the mainstream of American life, blinding you somewhat. But isn't it wonderful, Mr. President, how God created us Italians in such a way that we complement one another so perfectly?" (235).

Here, Valerio raises the possibility--by now a fantasy with regard to Mario Cuomo--of a culturally connected Italian American President whose America is charged with the electricity of *Italianità*.

Valerio's work provides the residents of that "social imaginary," the circuit of Italian American culture (including in it non-Italian Americans), with recognizable and/or usable "[m]emories of warm, intimate relationships in the 'Little Italies', even if imagined," which "have brought some home in search of community and identity" (Vecoli, "The Search" 52). Through circuitous *ripresa* of Italian and Italian American culture; through reconnection and renegotiation with them via a pastoral Italian America, Valerio's *Valentino and The Great Italians* and *Conversation with Johnny* take up the *impresa* of rewiring Italian American male identities for viability and new forms of visibility my great-grandfather Peter Patelli would have appreciated in his

America.[13]

Notes

1. As Gardaphé relates in his collection of book reviews entitled *Dagoes Read*, "one form of punishment" for Valerio's antics "was to watch the other kids play" (219), which taught him to bear witness to the Italian American scene in Bensonhurst (Valerio, Personal). "Little did he know that this exile from activity would be training for a career as a writer" (Gardaphé, *Dagoes* 219).

2. Valerio took an immediate interest in Italian and Italian American cultural history as fictional subject. One of his first efforts is a story about Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Patacci, and the events leading up to their hanging--written, in Bohemian style, on Japanese rice paper in red typewriter ink (Valerio, Personal).

3. Helen Barolini, in *Umbertina* (1978), and Robert Viscusi, in *Astoria* (1995), also link their narrators and characters to other figures and events in Italian American cultural history. Standing before the tomb of Napoleon, Viscusi's narrator expostulates,

> I began at last to discover in myself, under the character of irascible and disappointed tourist, the incommensurable energies of a pilgrim, arrived at last at what I had been seeking all along in this city full of imperial attitudes: Italy...[Napoleon] was us, Italian to the exact degree he

> had escaped being Italian, Italy because he had succeeded in escaping Italy, his great originality nothing other than the completeness of his recapitulation of the whole story, the outsider in Italy become an outsider from Italy become a general and a republican become first consul become emperor become his own successor become an exile become an exaggeration in red stone, he was everyone from Romulus and Servius Tullius down through and including Julius Caesar, Machiavelli, Cesare Borgia, Mussolini, and my grandfather, that much of him was as clear as if the pool of tears around his tomb had been filled with the orchestra of La Scala playing *Aida*, clearer, as we were, out of Italy than he could ever have been inside it. (99-100)

Barolini's and Viscusi's narratives are the other two noteworthiest bits of narrative circuitry carrying the current of Italian American culture of the past half-century.

4. I see the same type of narrative dichotomy here as in the Italian American autobiographies discussed in Chapter 2, insofar as Valerio's narrator tells his story as protagonist with disdain for the protagonist's (and other characters) desire to escape the Italian elements of their Italian Americanness. The narrator thus often represents the pastoral *ripresa* of Italian (American) culture, in the face of the protagonist's American *impresa*.

5. Salvatore La Puma's *The Boys of Bensonhurst* (1989) presents a portrait of Bensonhurst during World War II that captures the essence of this mentality. The following passage is a fine

example.

> Guido worked for the Sicilian Social Society in the storefront under the BMT elevated line on New Utrecht Avenue. Membership in the club was for men only, mostly grandfathers. They sat around and played poker and pinochle, smoked black cigars, drank black coffee, and talked only in the Sicilian dialect....When the men wouldn't be going home for dinner on time, because they were playing and winning, or playing and losing, Guido would explain matters to the wives. Guido could stand up for the men, and the men knew he wouldn't flirt with their women" (26).

6. In *Through a Glass Darkly,* Boelhower defines "ethnic semiosis" as "nothing more nor less than the interpretive gaze of the subject whose strategy of seeing is determined by the very ethno-symbolic space of the possible world he inhabits" (86-87).

7. Valerio links his narrator and characters to other "Great Italians" such as Giuseppe Garibaldi, Cesare Pavese, Enrico Caruso, Joe DiMaggio, and Mario Cuomo, by the same means of free association, a discursive movement unfettered by syntactic connection, a habit Valerio calls "part of my nervous system" (Valerio, Interview, "Italian").

8. Valerio has repeatedly turned to Garibaldi's story as object for admiration and aspiration. Judging from Valerio's work on the subject, Garibaldi is as important for being Anita Garibaldi's lover as he is for being a model of generosity and courage. In *Valentino,* Valerio recreates their life together as epic love

story. At their first meeting, Giuseppe tells Anita, "*Tu devi esser mia*" ["You must be mine"] (81). And, tragically, as she is dying of fever, he tells the attendant physician, "You can not imagine...all that his woman has done for me, and how tenderly I love her" (170). The story of Garibaldi becomes then, for Valerio, the story of a bygone love, like the love Valerio's narrators remember receiving from the women of Bensonhurst and the love they long for from their impossible mates.

A note: Valerio's most recently completed manuscript is a biographical narrative of Anita Garibaldi's life, which should see print sometime in 1999.

9. In the interim between 1986 and 1997, Valerio published a pastiche biography of another significant contemporary Italian American, entitled *Bart: A Life of A. Bartlett* Giamatti (1991), which draws parallels between Giamatti's American love of baseball and Italian love of Renaissance gardens.

10. Valerio admits in his interview with Leonard Lopate, "I felt, as I was creating [*Conversation with Johnny*], that I have the potential for both [don and sensitive lover/artist], as I think maybe many Italian Americans would feel."

11. By way of anecdotal evidence, a story. Recently, while describing the Sicilian American lover of her German American girlfriend, my mate's German American mother asked me if Sicilian men were more "hot-blooded" than other Italians.

12. Another significant contemporary novel, Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), also suggests that the

loss of another Latin Mama, Cuban Mama, defines the Latin lover's identity.

13. Valerio's current project--a memoir of his life with the Toni Cade Bambara and his relationships with other African American writers and cultural workers--promises the exploration of other American identities as well.

Postscript: Italian American Made:
On Life in an Italian America of Words

the old dagos dying out
in Little Italys all over America
the old dead dagos
hauled out in the morning sun
that does not mourn for anyone

--from "The Old Italians Dying," by Lawrence Ferlinghetti

What does it mean to be American?
It doesn't mean anything to me.
It's only a place--but I have
blood, red and warm. I was Italian
when they called us wops. Now
they like us so they assure us
we no longer need to suffer as
Italian--now, we're just as
American as anyone. But my blood
will not change.

--from "But My Blood," by Rose Romano

As I cruise Peter Patelli's old neighborhood, searching for a place to park, I wonder if I am, if we are, making all of this up. Am I, are we, really "Italian American"? If so, what does it mean?

I know what Werner Sollors says. In *Beyond Ethnicity,* he claims that we can all consent to be ethnic, to be American, and/or to be both. Still, I may also consent to be a five-foot, eight-inch white donkey, but what would that make me?

I am definitely a member in good standing of the Italian American Writers Association, the American Italian Historical Association, and the National Italian American

Foundation. In fact, I am partially responsible for incorporating I. A. W. A., which serves the "Italian American community" with readings, book presentations, and contests. I am in touch with key members of each organization, and, at last year's A. I. H. A. conference, I delivered a paper on the need for Italian American writers and artists to work together. I am also returned from Italy, where, like a number of my Italian American colleagues, I learned to speak standard Italian and even some dialect, and where I lived for a year in Italian society.

Aside from that, I can fall back on the women in my family, who have always cooked dishes I know only by the names of *braciol, 'ruccali rappe,* and *suffrit;* and remember the men, most of whom have worked construction at some point in their lives, whom I have seen at other points playing a voluble game of chance which--I have since learned from reading Italian American stories--is the southern Italian game of *morra*. Two of my uncles own Italian restaurants, one of them in Bensonhurst. My mother once unwittingly made a Christmas wreath for Gambino family boss Big Paul Castellano's house. And I myself have been called "guinea" and "wop"--though never in this polite era to my face--more than once in my life.

Which leads me here, to my place as organizer and host of the Bensonhurst Readings Series--a project designed to bring Italian American and other writers together; to give

the residents of America's largest Little Italy a chance to hear and meet them, and to present their own work. Over the last several years, my life has revolved around Italian American literature and culture. Aside from learning Italian, I have attended readings and cultural events too numerous to count. I have proposed a dissertation on Italian American narrative. I have read as many "Italian American" books as I could lay my hands on. I have written poems and stories about my heritage. I have made myself Italian American.

A possible meaning of all this effort occurs to me as I finally park the car, walk up the avenue, open the restaurant door, and see Anthony Valerio and Maria Mazziotti Gillan sitting across the dining room of Benedict Michael's (formerly Mona Lisa), a neighborhood restaurant on the corner of Bensonhurst's busiest intersection. For the moment, the dining room is itself a busy intersection of Italian American culture. Two of the foremost living Italian American writers are here, sipping Montepulciano d'Abruzzo over *primi piatti*. Anthony's fiction speaks for itself, as does Maria's honest, moving poetry. He spends his days writing for what he calls "the community"; she writes and promotes "the community"'s literature--along with the literature of other ethnic communities--through her nationally prominent Poetry Center.

It is May, 1995, the fourth reading in the series.

Valerio reads "Pietro LaClaca," a piece from his novel *Valentino and the Great Italians*, based on his boyhood encounter with the sadness of an Italian immigrant living in Bensonhurst. Mazziotti Gillan reads several poems, including "Growing Up Italian," about changes in her attitude toward being Italian American, which concludes,

> and I celebrate
> my Italian American self
>
> rooted in this, my country, where
> all those black/brown/red/yellow
> olive-skinned people
> soon will raise their voices
> and sing a new anthem:
>
> Here I am
> and I'm strong
> and my skin is warm in the sun
> and my dark hair shines,
>
> and today, I take back my name
> and wave it in their faces
> like a bright, red flag.
> (Gillan and Gillan 384)

I wonder for a minute about her pronouns: what "I" means; does "they" matter to the meaning of the poem.

When the two featured readers finish, A sign-up sheet for the open reading makes its way around the room. I'm hoping that with a crowd of thirty or so present at least seven or eight will bare their written souls. The open reading begins. The tinkling of forks and hum of conversation fades. A young woman approaches the podium, a few sheets of typing paper vibrating in her nervous hand. I take my place near the front, off to the side of the podium, tucked between the wood-panelled wall and pink-clothed

dining table I share with my mother--"like Garibaldi" in her Italianness, Valerio has said of her--and my father--a former cop, construction foreman, Peter Patelli's grandson. A waiter dims the lights. My head resting on my fist, I sit, eyes closed, waiting to hear a bright voice saying something I and the world have never heard before. The meaning of all this becomes clearer.

With any luck, this new voice will agree to show up at the The Italian American Writers Association monthly open, a springboard for a growing number of young writers with something to say about being not just American, but Italian American. I am beginning to see that though I am not sure what "Italian American" is I am that convinced it exists and that it would be shameful to do without it. None of this, I realize, was anyone's plan. This project is something we all felt in various sensations and expressed in diverse languages throughout our lives. It is a deep connection to cultural sources beyond Hollywood, the Old West, and the Founding Fathers. It is those words that growing up, we understood but could not define.

The sense of it all comes through in the words of Valerio, Mazziotti Gillan, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Rose Romano, Robert Viscusi, Diane DiPrima, Jerre Mangione, Tina DeRosa, Gilbert Sorrentino, Helen Barolini, P. J. Corso, Vittoria repetto, Joseph Papaleo, Dominick Preziosi, Anthony Vitale, Salvatore La Puma, Sandra Gilbert, Phyllis Capello,

Pater Carravetta, Adele Regina LaBarre, Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, Fred Gardaphè, Christine Palmidessi Moore, Mary Bucci Bush, Louise DeSalvo, Gay Talese, Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, Antonio D'Alfonso, Theresa Carilli, Peter Covino, Gianna Patriarca, Edvige Giunta, Richard Gambino, Rudolph Vecoli, Dana Gioia, Nancy Caronia, Pasquale Verdiccio, Justin Vitiello, Jay Parini, Daniela Gioseffi, Anne Paolucci, Rachel Guido deVries, Rita Ceresi, and every other Italian American writer whose name escapes me now, but whose words have signaled a *ripresa* of *Italianità* in the *impresa* of making sense of our America.

I suppose I will never be entirely sure if this *impresa* is worth the trouble. I have come to realize, however, that, like the sharp-edged words--*ciucc, faccia tost, spustad*[1]--my parents unsheath to cut through the stringy syntax of English that still feels, after several generations of family residence in America, less than native in their mouths, our words will mold us and our literature into an Italian American form--one my great-grandfather would recognize if he could light up one more cigar, or a few, and, as the sun disappeared behind Manhattan, read this book in the shade of his Brooklyn arbor.

Notes

1. "Fool," "bald-faced liar," "scatterbrain," in Neapolitan dialect.

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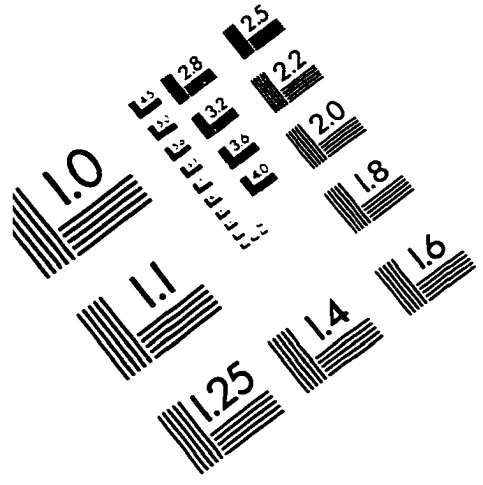

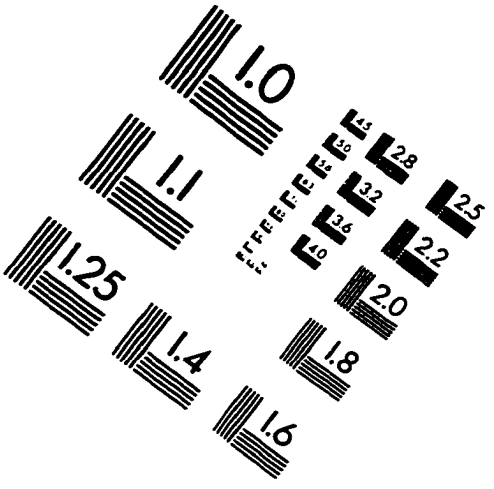

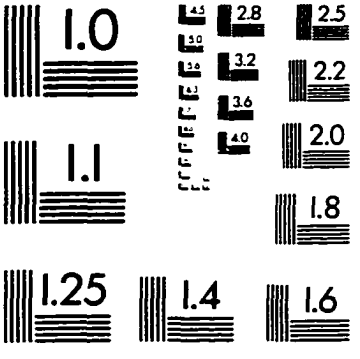

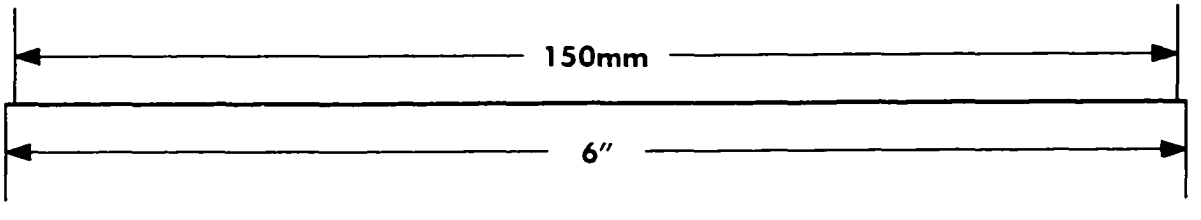

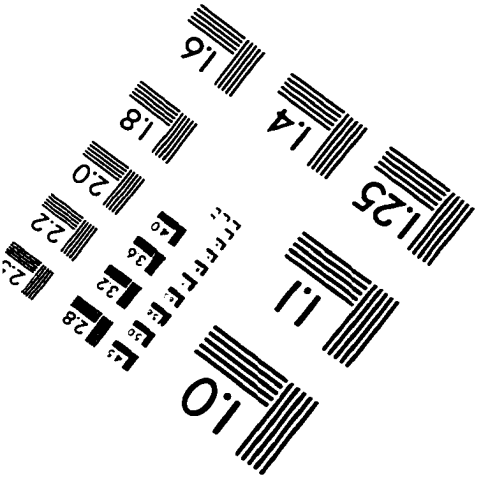

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