

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 20 (2007)

Artikel: Making America : the narrative aesthetics of the early Italian American novel
Autor: Lucia, Francesca de
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100064>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 06.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Making America: The Narrative Aesthetics of the Early Italian American Novel

Francesca de Lucia

This paper investigates the development of the Italian American novel in the 1930s, illustrating how novelists of Italian descent combined in their works elements of their ancestral culture with those of the mainstream environment. I intend to use two key authors as case studies: Pietro di Donato and John Fante. Both display the traits of early twentieth-century tradition of the immigrant novel as well as specifically Italian American motifs and the influence of the wider literary trends of the time. While Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* and Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!* are different in terms of style and narrative tone, they also present a certain number of similarities, since they both focus on the growth of the second generation individual and offer a detailed psychological and social portrayal of the Southern Italian immigrant family. From this point of view, these texts bear the influence of what Michael Denning has defined as the "ghetto pastoral," that is, an insider's perspective of the immigrant milieu that became a widespread literary form in the 1920s and 1930s. In this context, they can also be considered as developments of the genre of the Depression-era proletarian novel, exemplified by Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. More specifically, *Christ in Concrete* and *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!* express the central Italian American founding myth, which sees the Italian immigrant contemporarily as a divine fabricator of the New World and as a Christ-like martyr. These two contrasting aspects derive, as suggested by Robert Viscusi, respectively from the legendary part played by Italian explorers such as Columbus and Vespucci and by the situation of oppression and marginalization endured by Italian immigrants in the United States. The study of these different narrative strands allows the observation of the development of the Italian American novel as a hybrid cultural product, encompassing disparate literary trends.

Ethnic fiction has long held a marginal place within the American literary canon, often being considered as sociological or historical evidence

related to immigrant groups or other ethnic minorities, rather than as a true form of literary expression. In *Ethnic Passages; Literary Immigration in Twentieth Century America* (1993), Thomas J. Ferraro observes that:

Ethnic novels have long been considered the poor stepsisters of a benighted realist family; stereotypical in plot and characterization, assimilationist in drive, contestable even as social evidence, and of interest only to group members and historians. (xiii)

However, authors who are usually relegated in this category can also be placed in the wider context of the American literary trends of their time, which they combine with elements deriving from their original ethnic background. In this article, I shall focus on two early examples of the Italian American novel, Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) and John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!* (1938). These two works have a different approach to the ethnographic and social themes that characterize the tradition of the pre-war "immigrant novel," yet they also reflect the influence of the mainstream literary trends and culture of the 1930s. Thus I intend to concentrate predominantly on the narrative structure and the aesthetic elements of *Christ in Concrete* and *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!*

Di Donato and Fante have a certain number of points in common. From the strictly biographical point of view, they were both sons of bricklayers from Abruzzi, and thus introduced in their work father figures practicing one of the typical professions of Italian immigrants. Moreover, *Christ in Concrete* and Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* both stage the experience of growing up as a second generation Italian American in a context of precariousness and poverty, creating protagonists who are presumably alter-ego characters. In more general terms, the two novels bear the influence of the genre of the "ghetto pastoral" as defined in Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: the Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, corresponding to an insider's perspective on the immigrant community. Ghetto pastorals developed particularly in the thirties, when second generation ethnic authors started to write. According to Denning:

[The ghetto pastorals] were tales of growing up in Little Italy, the Lower East Side, Bronzeville, and Chinatown, written by plebeian men and women of these ethnic neighbourhoods. [. . .] Unlike the turn of the century "naturalism" to which they were often assimilated, they were not explorations of how the other half lives. Rather, they were tales of how *our* half lives. [. . .]

The ghetto pastoral is less a form of social realism than a proletarian tale of terror, an allegorical cityscape composed in a pidgin of American slang and ghetto dialect, with traces of old country tongues. (230-231)

Di Donato and Fante also give relevance to the representation of Southern Italian Catholic mysticism as embodied by the mother figure and to the ambivalent relationship second-generation individuals entertain with the ancestral religion. At the same time, *Christ in Concrete* and *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!* present a certain number of significant differences in term of motifs, stylistic choices and attitudes towards Americanization. I will now analyze in turn these two novels, focusing on how they negotiate the blending of Italian and American cultural motifs and describe immigrant life in the United States.

The portrayal of the ethnic community in Christ in Concrete

Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* was the first Italian American novel to attract the attention of a mainstream audience, becoming a bestseller. While part of its success may be explained by the universal appeal of its social themes in the cultural context of Depression-era America, the general public was obviously drawn to the figure of Di Donato himself as a twenty-five year-old bricklayer of Italian descent who had taken up writing. This is shown for instance in an article in the 23 August 1939 issue of *The New York Times*. Here the reporter relates that he went to interview Di Donato on the building site where he was working. The latter expresses his intention of writing screenplays to reach a wider audience and is photographed sitting bare-chested by a pile of bricks and holding a trowel, in a pose reminiscent of the numerous descriptions of energetic builders contained in his novel. The allure of Di Donato's unusual situation as a novelist may also clarify why *Christ in Concrete* was chosen as Book of the Month over *The Grapes of Wrath*, the work of a better established author with a more conventional image. However, as an Italian American, Di Donato would remain a marginal figure in the context of the American canon, his much later subsequent novels being poorly received. Gardaphé points out that: "Di Donato was, in spite of his status as bestselling author, relegated to the freak show corner of the American literary circus" (Gardaphé 11).

Christ in Concrete presents most of the typical features of the genre of the "ghetto pastoral" as defined by Denning, since it offers a detailed picture of life in the immigrant quarters, focuses on the viewpoint of young boy, has a discontinuous narrative configuration and makes use of various different ethnic jargons, partly deriving from Italian dialects. The novel revolves around the experiences of the young Paul, who is forced to start working as builder at the age of twelve after his father, an immigrant from Abruzzi, dies in an accident on a building site. Each of its five sections depicts a moment in the life of the immigrant community, such as the moments of despair after the accident, Paul's introduction to the workers' environment, the moments of lightheartedness and feasting. The text has a circular structure: it starts with the death of the protagonist's father and finishes with the mother's death. These two events frame Paul's personal experiences of coming of age. The novel's lack of precise narrative focus and its stylistic experimentalism render it very representative of Depression era fiction, which, as Laura Browder suggests, tended to express through fragmentation and changes of register a sense of instability and restlessness characteristic of the time. Di Donato makes use of the techniques elaborated by canonical modernist authors such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and John Dos Passos, who "evaded narrative in their renderings of the everyday life of ordinary workers" (Denning 142). Stream of consciousness, for instance, serves to express Annunziata's grief and naïve mystical fervor after her husband's death. Furthermore, like Eliot or Dos Passos, Di Donato also blends different tones, introducing elements deriving from popular culture in his prose. Hence both traditional Southern Italian and American songs are quoted in the narrative, reflecting the Italian American characters' gradual cultural hybridization. More importantly, the choral aspect is predominant, since the figure of Paul often acts as a connecting thread between the various elements of the novel rather than as a true protagonist.

Di Donato places strong emphasis on the portrayal of community life. This emerges first of all in the representation of the workers' community, which offers Paul the only possible form of salvation. The group of Italian builders dominates certain sections of the novels, especially those dedicated to the world of "Job" or the feast scenes. They tend to be rather undifferentiated figures with very few individual distinctive traits, functioning more as a collective entity. The other communitarian aspect is represented in the depiction of the tenement, where

families from different immigrant backgrounds sympathize with and help each other, sharing the same precarious living conditions. Thus Paul reflects that:

So different were people, thought Paul in his bedroom darkness. After the show of day, after all the incidents and faces and voices and smells, what was he to think? Did they not live one atop the other and feel and taste and smell each other? Did not Job claim them all? With what all-embracing thought could he bless Amen today? They, like me, are children of Christ (Di Donato 105).

At this stage, Paul has not yet lost his childish faith. However, throughout the novel it will appear that the forms of support offered by the workers' group or by a network of neighboring families are ultimately linked to the idea of proletarian solidarity, rather than to Christian egalitarianism. These communitarian aspects underline the status of *Christ in Concrete* as a radical novel, ultimately urging the American working class to shun the illusions of religion or the American Dream mythology and to struggle collectively against exploitation.

From a stylistic point of view, Di Donato pays great attention to the use of language. Unlike some other ethnic authors, he hardly ever introduces vernacular words in the dialogue, a technique that usually suggests a sense of exoticism. Rather, he represents the immigrants' speech by translating literally their dialect expressions. Thus, for example, he renders the insult "*morto ammazato*" (dead by killing) as "death-murdered" and the expression used to refer respectfully to the deceased, "*buonanima*" (literally "good soul") as "good-spirit." In the section entitled "Fiesta" Di Donato provides a convincing translation of popular Sicilian and Neapolitan songs. He also creates images based on the way immigrants integrate English words into their vocabulary. Thus the word "job" is always without articles and becomes an abstract concept, being almost personified on certain occasions: "Job loomed up damp, shivery, grey. Its giant members waiting" (16). "Job" is a threatening entity that offers a precarious form of sustenance but that can cause the workers' ruin. Yet it is also a source of fascination, as in the passages that describe Paul's work on the skyscrapers. In more general terms, Di Donato pays attention not only to the modes of speech of Italian immigrants, but also to those of the many different groups constituting the multiethnic working-class of the American metropolis. Thus, for instance, he introduces African American English in the encounter Paul

has with his black fellow-worker Rueben, in a way that the 1939 *New York Times* reviewer Charles Poore found more convincing than Di Donato's experiments with Italian dialects. This sense of a variety of registers reinforces the communitarian aspect of *Christ in Concrete*, which functions not only as an Italian American ethnic novel, but as a wider representation of proletarian life in a particularly difficult historical moment.

Furthermore, Di Donato's original linguistic devices make his Italian characters appear less alien, restricting the narrative emphasis on their "foreignness". This aspect is only present in the banquet section of the novel, which is related in a farcical and comic mode, contrasting with the bleakness characterizing much of the rest of the book. As suggested by William Boelhower in *Through a Glass, Darkly*: "There are few moments like the ethnic feast where ethnic identity can be so positively reaffirmed and socially reinforced" (113). Feast scenes serve to enhance the characters' ethnic identity, including the motifs of typical foods, music and reminiscences of the past, which are all present here. The narration underlines the variety of elaborate traditional foods that the characters consume, including in particular spaghetti with tomato sauce and red wine, which are stereotypically attached to Italian cuisine. Di Donato also mentions the singing of opera airs, hinting at a form of music considered to be typically Italian. The builders use talk-story to evoke incidents of their life in the old country or the vicissitudes of their emigration. Here Di Donato adheres more closely to the viewpoint of his mainstream, English-speaking audience, who may be interested in the cultural habits of a different group. Nevertheless, he also hints at an element of reverse assimilation, since Paul's Jewish friends and neighbors Louis and Avrom eventually take part in the banquet, eating spaghetti and dancing the tarantella with the Italians.

From the thematic point of view, Di Donato focuses on Christological motifs in his portrayal of Italian American proletarians. Christ-related symbolism dominates the novel, as suggested explicitly by its title. In the first chapter, Geremio's death is clearly paralleled with the passion of Jesus. The accident takes place on Good Friday; Geremio's body is contorted into the position of crucifixion. He is eventually discovered under the rubble on Easter Sunday, which implies an illusory resurrection. In the rest of the tale, other characters who serve as surrogate father figures to Paul undergo a similar process of martyrdom on the unsafe working sites. Hence his maternal uncle Luigi is maimed and

his godfather Nazone slips from a scaffold. Furthermore, the name of Paul's mother, Annunziata, recalls Mary's Annunciation and thus links her to the Madonna figure. Yet Paul is gradually deprived of the protection of all these characters and must struggle to survive and reach adulthood through his own means. Christ-related symbolism appears also in other circumstances. The description of churches and religious celebrations emphasizes the presence of crucifixes, as in the scene where Paul vainly seeks the priest's help. On another occasion, this element is re-introduced with a grotesque note, when the drunken bricklayers enact a blasphemous parody of Christ's passion.

However, throughout the novel Paul moves away both from religion and faith in America. In the end, he can achieve a partial form of redemption through disillusionment. The novel closes with a scene in which Paul refuses the crucifix his dying mother is offering him. At this point, he may be able to overcome the role of victim that he has endorsed throughout the book. Previously, he has dreamt he was going to die like his father: now he is rejecting a destiny as another Italian American "Christ in concrete" who, as predicted by Geremio in his dream, cannot be freed even by death. Thus, in his introduction to the 1993 edition of *Christ in Concrete* Gardaphé suggests that:

Through the father, America remains the dream of an immigrant anchored in God and the belief that God will provide the means through which the immigrant shall prevail. [. . .] And so, what is a dream for the immigrant becomes a nightmare for the child Paul, who as a witness to the tragedies that have befallen his immigrant family must become not a new Christ, but more a St. John the Baptist figure who wanders through life preparing humanity for the revolution. (xvi)

In *Christ in Concrete*, the characters are denied all the opportunities America should offer them. Early on, Geremio has succeeded in buying a house, a gesture which is considered a step towards upward mobility. He fantasizes it as a familiar haven, showing a certain adherence to an American lifestyle:

That night was a crowning point in the life of Geremio. He bought a house! Twenty years he had helped to mould the New World. And now he was to have a house of his own! What mattered that it was no more than a wooden shack? It was his own! [. . .] "Ah, but day will end and no boss in the world can rob me of the joy of my home." (15)

However, after his death, Geremio's family must use the money for the house to pay for his burial. He had also imagined that his son Paul, a bright and sensitive boy, would be able to achieve an education, becoming more assimilated and eventually performing conceptual rather than manual work. He wishes that: "Son of Geremio shall never lay bricks! Paulie mine will study from books; he will be the great builder! This very moment I see him! How proud he!" (19)

But Paul also misses an education as a chance for social improvement, because he is obliged to start working on the building sites at the age of twelve in order to support his mother and numerous siblings. Most of the encounters Paul and his family have with mainstream America prove disappointing and embittering: the contractor Mr Mordin is careless and hypocritical; the city officials are cowardly and callous; the parasitical priest dismisses Paul's requests. Hence he can never adhere to the ethos of American mobility and freedom accepted to a greater or lesser extent by other Italian American writers. This sense of bitter disappointment is voiced by Nazone who, at the end of the novel, wishes only to return to his native Abruzzi. Recalling the mythical role of the Italian as an inventor and constructor of America, Nazone expresses a sense of betrayal: "Discovered by an Italian, named for an Italian – but oh that I may leave this land of disillusionment!" (259). The idea of "making America" is refuted and subverted, because the Italian builders who believe they are literarily molding the landscape of American cities are destroyed as a result of the country's indifferent and exploitative attitude towards immigrants.

Nevertheless, Di Donato seems to imply that the nostalgic recollection of life in Italy is not a source of salvation, since Nazone will eventually die in the United States. Paul himself undergoes a form of assimilation, even though he has not been permitted to grasp America's opportunities. His rejection of the naïve form of Christianity observed by his mother signifies that he is moving away from his roots. Moreover, interacting easily with the representatives of various groups and religions in the tenement as well as on the building sites, he remains part of a process of gradual Americanization, viewing the first generation of Italian Americans with a slight cultural detachment. This aspect of the experience of the second generation becomes central in the novels of Di Donato's contemporary John Fante, which investigate how American-born ethnics gradually detach themselves from their roots, often actively rejecting their origins.

Confronting the mainstream: Fante's Wait Until Spring, Bandini!

Unlike Di Donato's work, Fante's novels do not portray an immigrant community, even though their focus on the immigrant family and on the growth of an individual means that they retain some of the defining elements of the "ghetto pastoral." Arturo, the protagonist of the Bandini saga (composed also of *The Road to Los Angeles*, *Ask the Dust* and *Dreams of Bunker Hill*), finds himself in an environment of ethnic isolation as an adolescent in his tiny Midwestern hometown or as a young man in drab Depression-era Los Angeles. Thus, unlike Paul in *Christ in Concrete* he does not receive the support of a proletarian ethnic community. Gardaphé indicates that:

Most of Fante's works concern the development of the social and aesthetic consciousness of a child of Italian immigrants, and the contribution of that consciousness to the child's fantasy of assimilation into mainstream American culture. [. . .] Fante's early writings focus on the development of an American identity through attempts to distance his characters from their Italian and working-class roots. [. . .] Not having been born in a little Italy, Fante [. . .] became hyper-aware of the ethnic differences between his family and other members of the community. (Gardaphé, "John Fante's American Fantasia" 44)

Furthermore, Fante is different from Di Donato in terms of stylistic choices, since his novels have a more coherent and structured narrative form and are devoid of the linguistic experimentalism of *Christ in Concrete*. However, he shares with Di Donato the influence of the oral dimension of storytelling, since his choppy prose imitates the patterns of speech.

Wait Until Spring, Bandini! is the novel in the Bandini tetralogy where Italian American themes are most visible. In this text Fante represents Arturo in his teens, also portraying his parents: first-generation Svevo who has emigrated from Abruzzi and second-generation Maria. In the following novels, the Italian American identity of the main character tends to remain in the background, appearing only when he interacts with other ethnic individuals, especially non-European immigrants such as Filipinos or Mexicans. *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!* is also the only novel of the four to be written in the third person. This creates a sense of detachment and gives the narration a wider perspective, focussing not exclusively on Arturo's viewpoint but also occasionally on his brothers and parents. Unlike Paul, who remains close to his origins despite a certain

degree of Americanization, Arturo obviously experiences double consciousness, since he has more constant contact with members of mainstream society, rather than exclusively with Italians or representatives of other immigrant groups. The phenomenon of double consciousness was first pointed out by W. E. B. Du Bois in relation to African Americans. He suggests that blacks will eventually perceive themselves according to the mainstream's prejudiced view:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (5)

Du Bois was writing at a time when Southern and Eastern European immigrant communities were still at a relatively early stage of their development. From his perspective, ethnic clashes in the United States exclusively concerned relations between blacks and whites, as he declared that the question of the color line constituted the crucial problem of twentieth century America. Nevertheless, the notion of double consciousness elaborated by Du Bois may also be applied to minorities other than blacks, and in particular to the American-born children of immigrants, who were subject to discrimination as ethnics yet were exposed to mainstream culture to such an extent that they endorsed the prejudices of which they were victims. Thus Arturo views his family with a sense of spite, because their behavior allegedly does not correspond to that of mainstream Americans and appears to him stereotypically exuberant and disorderly:

What kind of people were these wops? Look at his father there. Look at him smashing eggs with his fork to show how angry he was. [. . .] Oh sure, he was a dago wop, so he had to wear a moustache, but why did he have to pour those eggs through his ears? Couldn't he find his mouth? Oh God, these Italians! (26)

In this context, he has endorsed the discriminatory attitude of which he himself is a victim. Throughout the novel, Arturo is constantly attracted to activities closely associated with what is considered typical mainstream culture, in particular playing baseball and watching Hollywood films, wishing to distance himself from his origins. Yet somewhat irrationally he associates Rosa Pinelli, who also comes from an impoverished Italian family, with the United States, including her name amongst

those of the movie stars he idolizes. Possibly this is because, unlike Arturo, she is a bright and popular student in the Catholic school:

[Rosa] had a way about her. She was poor too, a coal miner's daughter, but they flocked around her and listened to her talk, and it didn't matter, and he envied her and was proud of her, wondering if those who listened ever considered that he was an Italian too, like Rosa Pinelli. (105)

Thus Arturo may see a romance with Rosa as a way to reconcile the Italian and American aspects of his identity. George Guida points out that:

It makes perfect sense that the first "woman" to attract Arturo's attention is the adolescent Rosa Pinelli [. . .] who can represent not just Italianness but also Americanness and a possible Italian Americanness. (*The Peasant and the Pen* 48)

Throughout his fictional life in the novels of the Bandini saga, Arturo will constantly see real or imagined romantic partners as a way to assert himself as an American and to overcome ethnic marginalization.

Arturo's unsuccessful struggle for acceptance and assimilation is parallel to his father's predicament as he interacts with the mainstream. *Wait until Spring* alone among the Bandini novels includes the perspective of the first generation. Indeed, the novel opens by introducing Arturo's father Svevo. While he maintains throughout the novel his stereotypically rash and impulsive behavior, in the book's opening he also voices the immigrant's sense of disillusionment. The snowy, mountainous landscape of Colorado reminds him of his native Abruzzi, which implies that coming to the United States has brought no true change. As in *Christ in Concrete*, buying a house is seen as an important step towards integration. Yet while Geremio's wishes would have been fulfilled if an unjust social system had not crushed him, Svevo views his situation of poverty and failure with a sense of outrage:

The house was not paid for. It was his enemy, that house [. . .]. Whenever his feet made the porch floor creak, the house said insolently: you do not own me, Svevo Bandini, and I will never belong to you [. . .]. Once it had been like a challenge, that house so like a woman, taunting him to possess her. But in thirteen years he had wearied and weakened, and the house had gained in arrogance. Svevo Bandini no longer cared. (8-9)

At the same time, Svevo resembles Di Donato's characters because he sees his work as a bricklayer as a definer of identity and endows it with an almost sacred aura. Nevertheless, even though he is not a triumphant and integrated immigrant, neither is he a victim like the immigrants in *Christ in Concrete*. Like Arturo, Svevo sees romantic and sexual relations as a source of upward mobility and integration. Thus he moves away from his hapless Italian American wife Maria to engage in a tryst with a wealthy Anglo widow, Effie Hildegarde. The latter endorses the traditional positive stereotype of Italy, connecting the country with the high classical culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance as well as with the regions of the Center and North, rather than with the destitute working-class background that characterizes most immigrants. When Svevo points out that he has never seen any part of Italy other than the Abruzzi, the widow starts associating him with d'Annunzio, who is indeed a native of Abruzzi like Svevo, but who is otherwise a representative of an extremely elitist and highbrow form of literature, evoking his region in poetic and mythical, rather than realistic terms. Just as Rosa rejects Arturo, so Svevo ultimately fails with the widow, since the latter exploits him sexually and has no real sympathy for his struggle as an immigrant. She moves from positive to negative clichés, in the end labeling Svevo and Arturo peasants and foreigners. The novel concludes with father and son walking back towards their house and origins, debating whether spring will arrive soon. The "Bandini" of the title signifies both Svevo and Arturo, who are oppressed for different reasons by the long and harsh Colorado winters. For the former this means difficulty in working, whereas the latter cannot play baseball, the only standard American activity in which he succeeds.

The unsuccessful struggle for integration and the notion of double consciousness are also visible, to a lesser extent, in the character of Arturo's mother, Maria. Like him, she is attracted to the idealized version of life offered by the mainstream media: in her case women's magazines rather than Hollywood films. In spite of having been born and brought up in the United States, Maria does not consider herself American, since her appearance and underprivileged lifestyle do not correspond to the standards suggested by the "sleek bright magazines that shrieked of an American paradise for women" (56). Yet she is able to overcome her sense of frustration thanks to a naïve and popular version of Christianity. Her conception of religion is somewhat similar to Annunziata's, since she uses prayer as a means to escape the hardships and disap-

pointments of her life. Thus Fante shares with Di Donato the portrayal of the Italian American mother as a generous and suffering figure, her role as *mater dolorosa* being reinforced by her name. Otherwise, although Catholic themes are present in *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!*, they receive a generally much lighter treatment than in *Christ in Concrete*. For example, Fante's evocation of Arturo's Catholic school is hardly ever solemn. Arturo sees Catholicism as a source of oppression, as the notion of sin clashes with his individual aspirations and desires. Unlike Paul in *Christ in Concrete*, he is unable to show true fervor but is also unable to rebel against the religion that has been imposed on him. Moreover, Fante makes a clichéd representation of the school, introducing for instance grotesque caricatures of nuns. Catholicism is reduced to a further obstacle to Arturo's assimilation, partly because being in the Catholic school means forced contacts with other Italian Americans.

In a wider perspective, Fante's tone is often slightly humorous; consequently he does not endorse the myth of the Italian immigrant as a suffering Christ, whose attempt to "make America" proves destructive, even though the image of the Italian immigrant bricklayer as a creating or suffering god is faintly present in the character of Svevo. Unlike many writers of the 1930s, especially those with an ethnic background, Fante is not truly preoccupied with inserting a message of social protest into his prose. *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!* for instance depicts a situation of working-class impoverishment, yet the Bandinis' indigence is attributed almost exclusively to Svevo's negligence rather than to an environment of oppression or discrimination. Fante's view of the American Dream is ambivalent: while he does not reject it entirely like Di Donato, he emphasizes the difficulties and the marginalization encountered by Italian immigrants and their families in America, rather than the opportunities.

Conclusion

The works of Di Donato and Fante give a general overview of the first stage of the creation of the Italian American self as a cultural hybrid. The Italian American authors of the first half of the twentieth century evoke in their works certain crucial cultural tensions. As suggested by Gardaphé, they belong to a generation that:

would come of age to write the stories their parents could barely recount in English, to document the injustices faced by immigrants, and to describe their own experiences as new Americans. [. . .] by recording reality, they would explain the differences between Italian and American cultures, creating a synthesis that can be called Italian Americana. (56-57)

Thus *Christ in Concrete* and *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!* form the aesthetics of the early Italian American novel, establishing many of the literary themes and stylistic elements that would be re-elaborated and transformed by younger, more assimilated Italian American writers.

References

- Basile Green, Rosa. *The Italian American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1974.
- Boelhower, William. *Through a Glass, Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Browder, Laura. *Rousing the Nation: Radical Culture in Depression America*. Amherst: Massachusetts University Press, 1998.
- Chow, Rey. *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Verso, 1996.
- Di Donato, Pietro. *Christ in Concrete*. London: Gollancz, 1939.
- . *Christ in Concrete*. New York: Penguin, 1993.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Durante, Francesco. *Italoamericana: Storia e Letteratura degli Italiani negli Stati Uniti, 1776-1880*. Milano: Mondadori, 2001.
- Elliott, Emory, Louis Freitas Caton and Jeffrey Rhyne (eds.). *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Fante, John. *The Bandini Quartet*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004.
- Ferraro, Thomas J. *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993.
- Gardaphé, Fred. "John Fante's American Fantasia." *John Fante, a Critical Gathering*. Ed. Stephen Cooper and David Fine. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- . "From Oral Tradition to the Written Word: Toward an Ethnographically Based Literary Criticism." Ed. Giordano Tamburri and Fred L. Gardaphé. *From the Margins: Writings in Italian Americana*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1991.
- . *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.
- Guida, George. *The Peasant and the Pen, Men, Enterprise and the Recovery of Culture in Italian American Narrative*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003.
- Lagumina, Salvatore, Frank J. Cavaoli, Salvatore Primeggia and Joseph A. Varacalli (eds.). *The Italian American Experience: An Encyclopaedia*. New York: Garland Publishers Inc., 2000.
- , ed. *WOP!, a Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States*. New York: Straight Arrow Books, 1973.

- Lopreato, Joseph. *Italian Americans*. New York: Random House, 1970.
- Mangione, Jerre and Ben Morreale. *La Storia: Five Centuries of Italian American Experience*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- , ed. *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*. London: Macmillan Press, 1996.
- Tamburri, Anthony Julian. *A Semiotic of Ethnicity: In (re)cognition of the Italian/ American Writer*. Albany: SUNY University Press, 1998.
- Viscusi, Robert. "A Literature Considering Itself: The Allegory of Italian America." *From the Margins: Writings in Italian Americana*. Eds. Anthony Julian Tamburri, Paolo A. Giordano, Fred L. Gardaphé. 265-281.
- Weiss, Richard. "Ethnicity and Reform: Minorities and the Ambience of the Depression Years." *The Journal of American History* 66. 3 (December 1979): 566-585.