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### Italian-American Literature and Working-Class Culture

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**Fred Gardaphe**

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## **Italian-American Literature and Working-Class Culture**

### *Introduction*

Italian-American writers, from the times of mass migration until today, have never fared well as a group in terms of widespread recognition for contributions to American literature. The reason is not due to a lack of talent; rather, it is a lack of critical attention to their works. The advance of ethnic studies movements of the 1980s and following decades did little to change this situation as Italian-American writers were rarely included in important multicultural anthologies and subsequently have remained off the academic radar of high school and college courses. One would think that with the recent advancement of working-class studies, their time to shine might have finally arrived since most of the writers have come from working-class backgrounds. But a quick glance at the major texts in the field shows that once again, with the exception of John Fante (born 1909; died 1983), American writers of Italian descent have been left out of consideration.<sup>1</sup>

In earlier articles I have discussed the role that class consciousness plays in the creation and interpretation of Italian-American literature.<sup>2</sup> Here, instead, I will present a number of writers whose work is essential to the study of ethnic and working-class cultures in the United States, with the hope that attention to their writings might bring about a greater awareness of the power that literature has to illuminate a culture.

In a time when cultural differences are exploited more than similarities are explored, when the idea of working-class unity is clouded by the competition for leisure time and credit card possibilities, it is hard even to imagine that there was a period when what happened to the working class mattered to intellectuals. But these days, as more and more intellectuals are reclaiming their working-class backgrounds, it is important to remember the cultural work done by those early immigrant intellectuals who dedicated their lives to raising and empowering working-class consciousness. If we begin to frame the questions of literary inquiry differently than they have been asked in the past, that is, focusing on

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<sup>1</sup> Fante has received some critical attention and publishing success in the USA, and more in Europe, through extensive translation and the annual literary festival *Dio del mio padre*, held in Taranta Pelliccia, his father's home town.

<sup>2</sup> See "Class Afterlife," "A Class Act," and the chapters "Left Out" and "The Consequences of Class" in my *Leaving Little Italy*.

social class instead of ethnicity, we will gain a better understanding of the importance of examining the many contributions of American writers of Italian descent.

One of the earliest, and most overlooked, American writers of Italian descent whose work concentrated on class struggles was Luigi Fraina (born 1892, died 1953), who later changed his name to Lewis Corey. Since the early 1900s, Fraina focused his efforts on social, economic, and political analysis, and was one of the earliest writers to publish Marxist literary criticism in the United States.<sup>3</sup> His life work represents the preoccupation of radical immigrant intellectuals with the obstacles they encountered in adapting to life in the United States. Fraina's life story is important for an understanding of American social history. The young boy's experience of selling newspapers in the city's slums turned him into a hungry reader of fiction, poetry, and social science. At the age of seventeen Fraina published his first essay, "Shelley, the Atheist Poet," in *The Truth Seeker*. The essay sets the tone for his adventure on the road to freedom from the constraints of traditional institutions such as the Church. Fraina's path took him through such movements as the Socialist Party, the International Workers of the World movement, and the Socialist Labor Party led by Daniel DeLeon. As a writer, a spokesperson, and an activist, Fraina impacted all of these movements at critical times in their development, without turning to his Catholic upbringing in order to connect to his readers as many other writers would do.

#### *Christ in Conceit*

The familiar image of Christ is used by a number of early writers to draw attention to the plight of the American worker of Italian descent. Through a poetic relationship of simple symbolism their work elevates the common worker to the status of a deity; in essence such representation becomes a way of dignifying the workers' plight and the sacrifices they made to improve the lives of their families and descendants. For example, the worker-poet Arturo Giovannitti (born 1884, died 1959) edited *Il proletario* and the political and literary magazine *Il fuoco*. His first collection of poetry, *Arrows in the Gale* (1914), gave a voice to the hundreds of thousands of Italian immigrants who worked their way into status as Americans. In one of his early poems, we find the idea of a god of work that formalistically imitates the well-known prayer "Our Father Who Art in Heaven," after the initial two-letter address to God, borrowed from the ancient hymn *Te Deum laudamus* (*We Praise you, o God*):

Te Deum of Labor  
Our Father Labor stern and kind

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<sup>3</sup> See Fraina's *The Crisis of the Middle Class, The Decline of American Capitalism, The House of Morgan*, and "Human Values."

Who art wherever life has birth,  
Thy will be done among mankind,  
Come thy republic on the earth;  
Give us this day our daily bread  
Our daily task, our daily song,  
Deliver us from all blood shed  
From greed and hate, from right and wrong,  
Save us from envy and discord  
And when our day is done and when  
The final whistle blows, O Lord,  
Spare us the fear of death. Amen.

*(The Collected Poems 45-46)*

Giovannitti replaces the sacred god of the original prayer with the profane god of Labor, and introduces the idea that work, like religion, is an institution that controls lives. While many critics might see this poem as a straightforward imitation of prayer without any sense of originality or irony, Giovannitti signifies on the New Testament and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Indeed, knowing that the Italian-American working class was composed of many who were anti-clerical, even agnostic, and yet quite familiar with the New Testament, we are able to see the parodic elements at work in the poem. This poem, in fact, does not address God as “Father,” as the case is for the Lord’s Prayer, but rather as the “God of labor,” thus bringing the supplicants back to God’s condemnation of Adam to work at the biblical origin of humankind.

This appropriation of common religious forms is prevalent in Giovannitti’s poetry. In *Arrows in the Gale* he revises the “Sermon on the Mount” into “The Sermon on the Common,” which he delivered to striking workers on the Lawrence Common in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in January of 1912. The speaker of the poem is an organizer who tells the crowd: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill through you what the prophets of mankind have presaged from the beginning. For verily I say unto you, While man lives and labors, nothing can destroy the eternal law of progress which after each advancing step bids him further” (*The Collected Poems* 194). His rewriting of Christ’s sermon fosters behavior that strays from fundamental Christianity:

Blessed are they that mourn their martyred dead: for they shall  
avenge them upon their murderers and be comforted.  
Blessed are the rebels: for they shall reconquer the earth.  
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after equality: for  
they shall eat the fruit of their labor....  
Blessed are ye when the scribes of the press shall revile you,  
and the doctors of the law, politicians, policemen, judges and  
priests shall call you criminals, thieves and murderers

and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for the sake  
of Justice.

(*The Collected Poems* 193)

The themes of class war and the exploitation of workers found in the poetry of Giovannitti become the foundation for the one writer who, along with him, can be found in *American Working-Class Literature*, the first major anthology of American working-class literature, edited by Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy: Pietro di Donato (1911-1992). Donato's highly mythic and poetic best-selling 1939 novel, *Christ in Concrete*, personifies work as "Job," the antagonist to the worker-as-Christ, the protagonist. The novel turned Pietro di Donato into a hero of the working class, a champion of the exploited worker struggling to express his/her experiences of being used and abused. Early publicity photos included some in which the author was bare-chested, laying bricks on a job site, as evidence of his worker-god status. The novel achieved such success that di Donato was able to hobnob with the likes of Ernest Hemingway in Havana and Key West.

Di Donato is by far the best known of the Italian-American writers whose works have received attention through the working class lens. While *Christ in Concrete* has garnered the most critical attention, equally interesting for di Donato's concepts about the working class is a yet to-be-published manuscript, *The American Gospels*. Composed in the late 1980s, this novel sat among his papers, with only an excerpt published in a 1992 issue of *Voices in Italian Americana*. When he was nearly 80, di Donato continued the cultural storytelling and criticism that he began with *Christ in Concrete*, though in *The American Gospels* he tells a prophetic story of life after the death of humanity, a life that speaks of pleasure for the just and pain for the unjust. *The American Gospels* sheds further light on di Donato's lifelong commitment to class criticism through a story that is a long overdue response to the injustices of American life in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, while presenting a new aspect of di Donato's perspective on Italian-American experience and work.

The man who wrote *The American Gospels* is very different from the one who created *Christ in Concrete*. Portraits of God-fearing and God-loving people are brought to different levels by an author who imagines Christ taking on a number of human forms, among which two are female, including one after whom the protagonist lusts. There is an historical sense similar to what we find in Dante's *Commedia*, but also resembling the predictive paranoia in Orwell's *1984*, for the novel projects itself into the future

It is 2000 anno Domini, advent of Apocalypse and threshold of the 21st Century that will know Earth only as another dead planet inhabited by insects. Orwell's '84 happened — skinhead rabble Nazis, Right-wing rich, religious reactionaries and self-serving patriots had won complete power with the collusion of the robot masses. The rare few — such as

I — had solely the freedom of mute invective. By coincidence or fancy of fate the four independent Christs, two male, two female, came out of Stony Brook U.

*(The American Gospels 6)*

The dead Christ of his first novel now becomes four living Christs, who realize that even God can be held accountable for not taking care of those humans who died through the injustices of others. This novel, inspired by the work of writers such as Dante and Orwell, as well as composers like Wagner, explores some themes present in his earlier works, but which are expressed in a very different style that can be characterized as *commedia* in the Dantean sense. Unlike Dante's *Commedia*, however, di Donato's *The American Gospels* features a storyteller who is clearly from and of the working class. Through his witnessing of the events that result from the second, third, fourth, and fifth comings of Christ, we are presented with the judgment through which the worker is elevated to paradise and the ruling classes thrust into hell. But unlike the working class victims of his earlier works, the working class of *The American Gospels*, often through the device of the "Chorus," is conscious of the role it plays in the injustices that it experienced:

CHORUS OF DEMOS

World's End is our fault our most grievous fault [...] without us the overwhelming multitudes HISTORY would not be [...] without we the lowly common people — we the faceless crowds, we the polyglot proles, we the hand-to-mouth wage-earning class — without us to bear all the world's burdens, there would be no Gods, no Lords, no Premiers, no powerful bestial incestuous Popes, no clown Presidents, no sacred-cow Leaders, no public wimp-overseers, no charlatan Dictators [...] we, Demos were the energy, the body, limbs, backbone, the essence, the force of the world — the tower of Babel world [...] we feared good, we were enchanted with evil [...] because we scorned love and loving kindness we forfeited the Earth world.

(189)

He goes on to explain why the working-class masses behaved that way:

— yea we clamored for Hollywood, for baubles, glitz and show, we adored sleaze and hype, drums and fifes, balloons and trumpets and cheap shots and rags on sticks and pimp politicians and harlot officials, fraudulent heroes and we created government of super-rich ventriloquists and shoddy whore White House dummies to make covert and unconstitutional wars and genocide for what difference does it make when we all must die?... and why should we not want lies, reactionaries, contras, banana-republic death squads, conservatives, Nazis, Fascists, fables, fantasies, comic books instead of reality, travesty-Gods, illusions, rapes, arsons, violences, horrors, spies, informer-Ham Actors, finks, double-dealers when truth, honesty, intelligence, virtue, wisdom and brotherly-sisterly-love cannot possibly make us immortal!

(189)

Death is the price paid for creating injustice; eternal joy is the reward granted to those who suffered on earth:

But shame on applauding crowds [...] shame upon us screaming cowardly faceless headless torrents of ex-humanity [...] shame upon us incontinent hordes [...] unfathomable inexplicable Mystae Mysticus Mysterium justly destroyed our world and closed down the mankind drama because of our majority-slave-breed-excremental mind — given freedom of choice we the lumpen masses invariably elected the Shit-Man to lead us into committing ceaseless killings [...] we disobeyed the cardinal commandment THOU SHALT NOT KILL! [...] we earned eternal damnation [...] our world was [...].  
(190)

His criticism of all the world's religions is based on the inability of each one to follow one commandment: Thou Shalt Not Kill. For di Donato, life was energy, and death its absence; and as he grew closer to his own death, the power of that reality was fulfilled in his prose through the wild and scattered phrasings that seem to burst forward, in rapid, stream-of-consciousness fashion, toward the reader. The writing here is that of a man facing the end of his life, contemplating the eternity promised by Christianity, and facing his own final judgment.

Di Donato's *The American Gospels* can be seen as an attempt to resolve the sacred/profane dilemma presented in much of his earlier work, and in the process he shifts away from the material of his previous works. The redemption of the victims of capitalism through the final judgment of a female African American Christ becomes the matter of this novel, which should be read as his cry out of the world just as *Christ in Concrete* was his primal scream into the world. Through this resurrection of sorts, di Donato can have his revenge on society by revealing, as Huene-Greenberg points out, "all the nonsense of authority and of Church" through what he calls a "conscious evaluation of myself" (33-34). To di Donato, salvation for the world lies in humanity's ability to become its own god, to take responsibility and control of the world it has created, and to act for the good of all. Di Donato attacks the powerful forces that he believes are responsible for the suffering of the masses.

#### *Radical Rooting*

Government investigations into Communism, launched by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities sparked, the ire of many Italian-American artists, including Carl Marzani (born 1912, died 1994). A powerful example of the political persecution of this period is found in Marzani's novel *The Survivor* (1958). Written seven years after Marzani was convicted of "defrauding" the government by concealing a one-year membership in the Communist Party, the novel tells the story of Marc Ferranti, a Marzani-like character who is acquitted of a federal crime of concealing his membership in the Communist Party while he worked in the Office of Strategic Services. A story within a story depicts Ferranti's response to Fascism and his

family's flight from Mussolini's Italy to the democracy of the United States. During a bitter coal miners' strike, Giordano Aurelius, Ferranti's father, explains the miners' situation to his son:

A man doesn't crawl, that's what he means. Mussolini and Fascism are like all the companies and all the Sor Panunzios [a *padrone*] sitting on top of the Peppones [a communist strike leader]. By fraud and by force, and a man can't speak, only to say yes sir and thank you sir. They trick and force the people into slavery, beat them into submission so that we bend our backs, walk on four legs, until we are sick with fear and sick with shame and rage.

(135)

It is this strong sense of what happened in Italy to his father that leads Ferranti to stand strong against injustice, even if his actions are seen as un-American, a theme that replays itself consistently throughout the critical writings of Marzani.

Marzani authored a number of studies of American Cold War policy and Eurocommunism, and suffered a persecution similar to Fraina's. Until his death in 1994, Marzani had been writing memoirs that reveal a social conscience formed by his early political activity in the 1930s. Born in Italy in 1912, he was just ten years old when he published parodies of Fascist songs. Marzani struggled and worked his way through an education that earned him a scholarship to Oxford University. He was planning for a career as a dramatist when, in 1939, he left Oxford to fight alongside the anarchist brigades in Spain. *In Spain, Munich, and Dying Empires*, the third volume of his memoir, Marzani recalls how, out of curiosity and strong anti-Fascist beliefs, he visited Spain and found himself fighting against Fascism in the Spanish Civil War. The experience changed his life forever. When he returned to Oxford, he met up with actress Edith Eisner — a member of the American Communist Party, whom he would eventually marry. Giving in to her insistence, he reluctantly joined the Communist Party, without much thought about it, going on to become an honored veteran of World War II for his work in the Office of Strategic Services. After the war, he was indicted as a former communist under the Smith Act and spent over a year in jail as a political prisoner.

His writing career covered seven decades during which he wrote six books, dozens of pamphlets, and film documentaries. In each case, his goal was to make America a better place to live in by keeping vigilance over corporate capitalism's Fascist tendencies. Among other books, he wrote a history of the Cold War, *We Can Be Friends* (1952), introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois, where he argues that the Truman Doctrine and the Korean War were nothing more than acts of US aggression. In 1957, Marzani published *The Open Marxism of Antonio Gramsci*, a translation and annotation of a number of essays from Gramsci's prison notes; in the 1970s he continued his study of European communism, writing *The Promise of Eurocommunism* (1980), a detailed and

critical analysis of Western European communism in the 1960s and 1970s. Late in his life, the writer, whom Italo Calvino called “the only man truthfully and completely in love with the United States” (qtd. in Marzani, *The Education of a Reluctant Radical* vii), shifted his focus to recount the story of his life in a five-volume memoir, *The Education of a Reluctant Radical*.<sup>4</sup>

The radical heritage at the basis of the lives of Giovannitti, Sacco and Vanzetti, and New York congressman Vito Marcantonio, can also be found in the poetry of Vincent Ferrini: *No Smoke* (1941), *Injunction* (1943) and *Know Fish* (1979). A labor activist, Ferrini (born 1913, died 2007) carried on the worker/writer tradition using the experience of work and injustice to dignify the world of American workers, the same heritage that members of “The Beat Movement” would also celebrate. America’s Beatniks arose in response to an apolitical complacency that seemed to set in directly after World War II. As precursors of the 1960s “hippies,” the Beats, including Italian Americans Lawrence Ferlinghetti (born 1919), Gregory Corso (born 1930, died 2001), Diane di Prima (born 1934), and Philip Lamantia (born 1927, died 2005), fused art and politics to raise political consciousness about post-war America. The work of these writers, nearly all children of immigrants, became the foundation for the development of the next generation of Italian-American working class writers.

#### *Class and Contemporary American Culture*

While the conceit of Christ is not predominant in the Italian-American writers who followed the likes of Giovannitti and di Donato, the ideas of familial sacrifice and social justice become prevailing themes in their writings.

In *Sweet Hope*, Mary Bucci Bush (born 1950) fills a great historical void: the story of Italian-American life on southern plantations in America during the early 1900s. Though this experience was common, very little has been published about it. At the time, laborers were shipped directly from Italy to these plantations, which were called Italian colonies, even though the life imposed on these laborers was little more than a glorified version of slavery. Bush’s grandmother had gone to the American South when she was seven years old. Bush, whose interest was fueled by her grandmother’s stories, discovered that African-Americans and Italians lived next door to each other, in separate plantation shacks, and socialized with each other. The author’s research into her family’s immigration to the South turned into a story that rivals the best of Toni Morrison’s tales of life in that region in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century as Italian immigrants moved in to fill the void created by the flight of former slaves. Bush makes clear the reasons why Italian immigrants made their way to work on those plantations in the post-Civil War South:

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<sup>4</sup> By Marzani, see also *From the Pentagon to the Penitentiary* and *Roman Childhood*.

Italy was a dried-fig, all leather and seed, hard and bitter on your tongue [...]. But we're not starving, some said. Not like in the south. And even if we're lean, we're not dying from hunger. Not yet.

But what about the Antonellis? Did they lose everything and two of them dead besides? What about the Gregantis losing their land? Their fishing boat? Sending a child here, another there to live?

They said many things. They had many ways of saying the same thing, but all the ways came back to a single meaning: the children. It was for the children that they left Italy and came to this place.

(7)

Based on actual experiences in the Sunnyside Plantation of Arkansas, *Sweet Hope* dramatizes a reality that is never mentioned in U.S. history books, and should cause all Italian Americans to reconsider the privileges of being white in a country founded on racism.<sup>5</sup> Bush focuses on two families — one black, the Halls, and one Italian, the Pascalas — who reluctantly turn to each other for help in making their way under inhumane conditions. The plantation's overseer is a rogue manager fronting for the owner, an aspiring politician who tries to keep his distance from the unfair treatment of his tenant farmers and the economic prison in which he has them trapped.

Bush captures the daily life struggles, loves, lies, friendship and fears, dreams and nightmares shared and deferred, of Italian- and African-American families. Old-fashioned American racism comes to the surface through the interactions of the children: one, named Isola, is the daughter of Italian immigrants while the other, Birdie, is the daughter of freed black slaves who have become sharecroppers. In the following passage, Isola divulges a secret that identifies a key tension in this historical fiction:

"My mother says we all have to watch out now," Isola told Birdie. "Maybe the Americans make more trouble for us if they see us playing with the Sant'Angelos [a troubled family]." She lowered her voice. "If we play with Nina the Americans will shoot us." Birdie took a step back and looked at Isola. "Where you got such a crazy idea?" "That's what Mr. Gates' men do," Isola said. "That's what my Papa told me." Birdie put her hand on her hips. "You dumb or something? White folks don't shoot white folks." She walked faster, so that Isola had to trot to catch up with her. "But we're not white," Isola told her. "We're Italian."

(228)

This distinction, between Italian and white, has never before been dramatized with such power and precision in American fiction. In the end, the novel becomes a great awakening to the realities of a past that has been hidden but now speaks to a present that will benefit through such awareness.

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<sup>5</sup> For an interesting volume on this topic, see Guglielmo and Salerno.

Winner of a 2012 Tillie Olsen Prize for Creative Writing, awarded by the Working Class Studies Association, poet and fiction writer Paola Corso (born 1958) has produced a wealth of fiction and poetry representing working-class culture. Her first collection of stories, *Giovanna's 86 Circles*, presents a certain slant of realism that skews the ordinary in strange ways. In this manner, she takes the mundane, daily lives of workers and shows us that there is more to a life than one's work, and that there is more to work than simply the means to a paycheck. A young woman working in a hospital laundry can tell the future in the sheets she folds. A woman's knitting unravels and stretches outside the house to wind its way through the neighborhood. A mayor leaks the date of his death to the press, and proves himself right. "Yesterday's News" opens the collection describing a woman who takes her dead mother's clothing to a second-hand clothing shop and is convinced by the clerk to keep one item that changes her life. "Between the Sheets" finds us in the laundry room of a hospital, where one worker tells another about her husband's illness. Things start getting strange when the window of one of the washing machines turns red, and one of the worker's realizes she can see the future in it. "Unraveled" is a great example of how the repression of the real story by the imagination can create a tension that turns a story we have all heard before into something we want to hear again. Especially poignant is "The Drying Corner," in which a young girl finds a way to make her own space in her *nonna's* deteriorating fruit and vegetable store. Corso mines her Pittsburgh memories for what she needs to create fiction that records the past and shows us that paying attention to the little things in our own lives might just improve our ability to see below the surface of it all. This message comes through clearest in "Shelf Life," wherein a woman, who is thought to be crazy, teaches a young girl how to live off what others ignore, revealing that craziness is sometimes the ability to live safely outside the normal.

In her second collection, *Catina's Haircut*, Corso creates a saga of immigration to the United States out of seven stories. While, like Bush, she elaborates upon experiences from her own family's history, ideas for her stories also come from researching newspapers and the Oral History Collection at the Heinz History Center's Italian-American Collection in Pittsburgh. The result is a novel woven through stories working as a whole because its parts, while quite different from each other, provide an overall narrative united by characters and an overarching thematic unity. The main characters of each story are all related to Antonio Del Negro, whose rise and fall are part of the first story. Using historical underpinnings gleaned from her research, Corso builds a tale of innocence and loss by a young man who finds himself out of work and trapped between the landowners and the rebel farm workers who have decided to defy fate and determine their own future.

The setting for some of the stories is Calabria, a land where, in Corso's vision, droughts can swallow men alive and where floods chase people up trees

and to America. Corso's mastery of magical realism appears in "St. Odo's Curse," as a young girl tries to help the village's suffering through a drought by seeking aid from a local *strega*, and, when that does not work, turning to the local priest. Later, when spring floods chase people out of their homes, the Del Negro family must find other ways to save itself. The family joins relatives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a city where, as we learn in "Hell and High Water," life is not that much different from Calabria, as the famed three rivers cause the Great Flood of 1936.

Other stories happen in this U.S. setting, and we follow generations of the family as they learn English and ways of surviving in this new land. To do so, Grandpa Giorgio carries with him the family legacy in things like his father's old hat. "Giorgio's Green Felt Hat" thus becomes a symbol of this grandfather's attempt to hold on to his past since, as his wife says, "he'd wear it in the shower if he could figure out a way it wouldn't get wet [...]. She was always trying to get him to take it off, because she said it made him look like a peasant, and yet that's why my grandfather liked it so much. Because he would never be mistaken for a 'patrui' in that hat" (63). The story of the lost hat becomes his granddaughter's lesson in what happens when one tries to hold on to material legacies. This novel speaks about the reasons families left Italy, giving us insight into how Italian immigrants turned *miseria* into miracles, and moved away from working-class identities as they achieved material success. In the process, they also moved away from the values and life skills that had enabled them to survive the tough transition to a new world.

The working-class majority is also central to the first collection of short stories by Valerie Fioravanti (born 1968), *Garbage Night at the Opera*. Though the demographic importance of this working class is ignored by pundits, and politicians court its needs only when they want its votes, its members are those who make it possible for great amounts of wealth to be amassed by the very few. What Fioravanti does better than anything else with these stories is to create a world that rarely makes it into the media these days in any positive light. Politicians talk around it; pundits pretend it does not exist; and those who live in it are led to believe that they are not part of it. That is the world of the working-class majority — the people who make it possible for great amounts of wealth to be amassed by an incredible few. These are the people who have been duped into accepting cutbacks in all areas of their lives. The result? They receive less than previous generations for their work, turning the dream of working one's way out of poverty into a recurring nightmare not unlike the myth of Sisyphus. Fioravanti's characters are those who lived in the little Italys long after they became viable as ethnic islands. These are the people who worked the docks, the factories, the bottling plants; they pursued higher wages rather than higher education, turned to drink when it hurt to think, and to violence fueled by the frustration of their inability to deal with overwhelming problems. But even in

these dismal, destiny-driven lives there remains the hope that something — be it religion, art, love — will help them transcend their daily drudgery.

In the opening story, the only thing Massimo, an out-of-work father, wants for his daughter is to see an opera at the Met so that she can experience the beauty that is often denied to workers, who do not have the time, the energy, and the money to enjoy the arts. When they arrive at a sold-out performance without reserved tickets, they take refuge in Central Park and find treasure in what others have abandoned as junk on the streets. Behaviors peculiar to the working class are highlighted in this and most of the other stories, which depict women and young girls as protagonists who must navigate their way around school bullies, randy neighborhood boys, and men who drink their way to power. Whether it is a first kiss, as in “Kissing Decisions,” or earning money to support a family of the unemployed, as in “Earning Money All Her Own,” we witness women raised in the traditions of patriarchy, fighting to hold families together without losing their self-respect. Some win, some lose, but all of them reveal the reality of lives dependent for survival on forces outside their own control.

Those who do succeed in getting ahead can take vacations, as in “Mayan Sunset,” but when they leave the neighborhood for a well-earned escape, they find the time to contemplate the “what ifs?” that change the ways they look at their lives. Indeed, when they leave their neighborhood, for school, for work, for play, class becomes a marker by which they are often recognized and restrained by those who think themselves to be above the working class. For example, Tessa’s family had valued hard work over education, and believed that these two things were mutually exclusive. Men worked with their bodies, not their minds. Women were their bodies. Their work was marriage and motherhood — first you worked to find it, then you worked to hold it all together. Tessa absorbed these beliefs without question, but the old ways did not work for her. The neighborhood no longer sustained working men, traditional stay-at-home moms, or large extended families who retain working-class identities. To survive as her family split apart, Tessa had to open herself up to new ways of thinking.

A more experimental writer is Joseph Torra (born 1948), who uses working-class material to create literary art. His first novel, *Gas Station*, was named a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year in 1996, and since then he has published numerous other novels, many books of poetry, and a memoir. In his novel, *They Say*, Torra plays with the way people speak to create dynamic storytelling. Who “they” are and why “they” get to tell us how things should be done is hardly ever discussed. What matters is that the social authority behind the shadowy “they” forms a sounding board against which the author plays out the most evident issues pertaining to being Italian American in a new reality.

Torra’s “they” are the brothers and sisters of one Louie Pelligrino, whose strange behavior leads his family to think he is *pazzo*. Louie’s pathetic, often tragic world is comprised of an abusive father, an elusive mother, and a society that does not know how to extract the artist’s talent from his temperament. Here

is an immigrant saga from a very different perspective. The Pelligrinos are not the usual lovely, honorable, happy urban family, whose trials and tribulations in poverty are overcome to lead them all to the promised land of the suburbs and middle-class bliss. Torra's writing has a freshness that is rare in today's world of fiction. He is not afraid to take chances or to make his reader work. The reader needs to get used to reading "they say" and it takes more than just a few pages. First of all, "they" are all the brothers and sisters of Louie, who is trapped in a working-class immigrant family that can handle his talent but not his eccentricities. Second, most of them speak in a vocabulary and style that has not left elementary school, and so one finds oneself mouthing the words out loud in order to follow the normal non-sequiturs that happen when people speak. Only when we access Louie's perspective does the language shift to standard English, a strange occurrence because, according to the other characters, Louie is the one who is crazy. There is no punctuation and no chapters, so readers must pay close attention when one voice begins and another ends. There are very subtle differences among the siblings and sometimes the reader cannot discern who is talking since brothers and sisters all form that nebulous "they" who hover above Louie and his inability to realize his artistic talents. Yet, Torra's use of linguistic techniques typical of high modernism, such as stream of consciousness, is not applied to the mind and thoughts of his protagonist, rather to the voices of those who surround him. In this way, the "sane" world of the protagonist is threatened by the "insane" chaos created by others.

Each of the ten Pelligrino kids (there were twelve, but two died young), weighs in on the events that follow their tyrant father, their traumatized mother, and the strange dynamics of this seemingly normal, yet really dysfunctional family as it struggles to survive through the Depression, World War II, and its own extended family history. While the father is willing to help his oldest son through art school, which is more than he considers doing for his other children, his unchecked drinking splits the family into many pieces that find any number of ways of coming together to help, and sometimes hurt, each other.

Someone who is better known among Italian-American critics is Tony Ardizzone (born 1949). One of the best fiction writers of Italian descent, Ardizzone has been winning literary prizes for years. His *Larabi's Ox: Stories of Morocco*, published in 1993, earned the Milkweed National Fiction Prize, the Chicago Foundation for Literature Award for Fiction, and the Pushcart Prize. His first story collection, *The Evening News*, from which come half of the stories in *Taking it Home*, won the prestigious Flannery O'Connor Award in 1986. Ardizzone's stories have been and continue to be selected for important anthologies.

Vince Sansone, the protagonist of Ardizzone's latest novel, *The Whale Chaser*, comes from a long line of fishermen; he also suffers a great wound from his past and spends his life trying to heal it in the strangest ways. *The Whale Chaser* is Sansone's coming-of-age story in the US during the 1960s and 1970s,

when old neighborhood identities are obscured by times that, in Bob Dylan's words, are "a-changin'."<sup>6</sup> Sansone is the grandson of Italian immigrants who left Italy, settled in San Francisco, and lost their livelihood on the Pacific Ocean to World War II restrictions on enemy aliens.<sup>7</sup> Vince's father becomes a fishmonger in Chicago and takes to selling fish and newspapers in order to make a living. Since Vince is the only boy in a family of girls, he becomes his father's target whenever the old man needs to express his working-class frustrations, eventually forcing Vito to take off for safety and freedom.

Alternating between Tofino (British Columbia) and Chicago, the story abounds with scenery from the Canadian wilderness and the wildness of Chicago's streets. The narration shuffles between the Canadian surf and Chicago turf, as Sansone wanders from the fish his father feeds his family and the meat his girlfriend's father butchers, to the fisheries and whale-watching business in Canada where he has come to hide from his thieving crimes. And while he makes immediate material restitution to his victims as a good boy should, it takes him years to find his way to mental health. In Tofino, Vince begins to find balance, but not before he almost loses himself in the sex, drugs, and music of the 1970s. Sansone cultivates marijuana for a local dealer, offers his home to hitchhikers, and keeps it together through the jazz of great musicians like Ben Webster and Miles Davis. When he befriends a native Indian named Ignatius George, he learns to read the wonders of the land in new ways that keep him healthy and give him the wisdom he needs to survive on his own.

Ardizzone recreates Catholic school education and teen dances through vivid scenes of corporal punishment, intellectual rebellion, and cheek-to-cheek slow dancing. When Vince meets Marie Santangelo he never expects that this childhood sweetheart will eventually make him run away from his abusive father and the neighborhood that seems to be suffocating his only chance to be himself. Then, after he turns to one of his buddy's girlfriends for comfort, ruining the relationships he has with the buddy and his own girlfriend, he begins to think that he breaks everything he touches.

Ardizzone has a gift for saying out loud the things one always feels, but could never put into words, as in Vince's meditations on meat sauce:

When the history of food in the New World is written, some astute researcher will record the importance of pork neckbones to Midwest American's children from Southern Italy. Take an impoverished population deprived of meat, expose them to an inexpensive and

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<sup>6</sup> The expression "a-changin'" is from Bob Dylan's famous song and album by the same title, "The Times They Are a-Changin'" (1964).

<sup>7</sup> On December 11, 1941 Italy declared war on the US. This act of aggression resulted in restrictions being placed on un-naturalized Italians living in the US, who were considered enemy aliens, culminating in the evacuation and relocation of a number of them as a result of Executive Orders promulgated under the War Relocation Authority in 1942.

plentiful source, and watch them use it to transform one of their most cherished dishes [...]. pasta cu sugu [...].

(105)

A different type of writer is Emilio De Grazia (born 1941), a prize-winning author who has managed to stay out of the limelight, avoiding fame and fortune by writing well about what matters to him and much of his readership. His latest work, *Walking on Air in a Field of Greens*, is a hymn that borders on a dirge to Italian-American identity. There is a wonderful sense of wholeness to the collection that opens and closes with meditations on the fig tree. In between the preface and last essay lies an uncovering of a life lived in various stages of ethnic explorations. At times, the author is proud of his heritage, at others, he cannot seem to relate to its demands. All in all we get the truthful struggle of what it means to have roots in Italy and branches spreading out throughout the U.S. What is consistent throughout the collection is the fine quality of writing that takes us through each subject. Whether it is a return trip to Italy for the first, second, or third time, of a son who has been back to San Pietro in Calabria more than his mother or father, or a visit to his retired parents' new home in Florida, the essays here are filled with expressions that concern those claiming or denying their Italian-American identities: "Was San Pietro my beginning point? Maybe I was at root Italian rather than American, even though I did not feel self-conscious about being 'Italian' until some of my Waspish college friends jokingly called me 'the Wop' and 'the Mafia'" (23).

"If you want to eat, you have to work" (47) becomes the mantra that surfaces throughout the collection. It keeps the locals tied to their homes and away from the tourist sites that their visiting American relative sees and tells them about. Privileged in ways they could never be, the author often feels that his father lost out on much by leaving his ancestral land with its healthy air, peaceful surroundings, the camaraderie found when friends work together, the talking, eating, and drinking with relatives long into the night, all things that the author would like to take home with him.

After his first trip back to Italy at the age of 26, De Grazia realizes that while things have changed, the past needs to remain where it is: "As the train took me farther from that strange familiar land I realized that I could not carry the past across the sea. I knew now that a connection had been severed. There would be letters and memories, and always a sense that I had come from this land and these people. But I didn't think I would ever go back" (40). But he does return — more often through thought than travel — making a few other trips throughout his life to deal with his father's land and with his own curiosity. While all the essays are strong testaments to life through thought, the one that stands out in terms of working class studies is "Ragionare," a powerful recollection of men working out their grief over a friend's suicide as they work scythes together across a field:

What I saw in the humor of their talk was the grief weighing down their hearts. Secretly and collectively they knew they had to let Silvio get away from them, that they had failed to anticipate what was on him and failed to take small steps to prevent the suicide. Now they wondered too: if suicide was a way of getting revenge on family, was it Silvio's way of getting revenge on them?

(123)

By the time one reads "Burying the Tree," about the rise and fall of fig trees in unnatural places, one senses that De Grazia has talked about all that matters in ethnic identity and family without ever once referring to a theory or some history larger than his own, and yet somehow has incorporated all of that material in his autobiographical meditations.

To a different genre belongs the work by Thom Tammara (born 1952) *When the Italians Came to My Home Town*, published in 1995. His first major book of poetry, it was well received, allowing the author to continue editing poetry anthologies, teaching, and working on new poems that are now collected in his latest publication, *Holding on for Dear Life*. This collection of fifty poems is divided into four distinct sections that take us back and forth through the poet's real and imaginary lives. Section One is filled with hometown memories as a baby boomer born in Pennsylvania. The best poems are filled with stark studies of working-class life, exemplified by "I And the Village," a poem so terse that it conjures up black and whites photos of the 1950s: "Back then, it was all gray skies; / Brown and gray clapboard houses; / Soot on the chrome bumpers / Of black cares, bed sheets [...]" (15). Tammara includes some historical subjects like "First Murder in My Home Town" and the "Cuban Missile Crisis" that remind those who lived during this time of the fears created by air-raid drills and by being trained for what to do if captured by communists. Like many poets of this generation, Tammara was influenced by Beat writers like Lawrence Ferlinghetti to create poetry in beautiful, clear language. In "The Ferlinghetti Reading," he offers a great view of his first Ferlinghetti sighting and the impact it had on his imagination then and now. The act of finding a bottle of "Lupinis" (lupins) in the gourmet aisle of a grocery store ignites a prose poem that helps him connect the snack of lupins with its humble origins. This mock ode of sorts cannot but water the mouths of anyone who has ever purchased a nickel bag of these beans in an old neighborhood store or at a street festival.

Section Two is perhaps the darkest, and is dedicated to his father, who died a slow and painful death from cancer. The poems here recount the experience of being with and away from his father during this time. Tammara writes in a variety of verse styles, and is especially adept at the prose poem. His "In the Room" recounts the moving experience of his father renting the house that has the room in which he knows he will die. In Section Three, Tammara focuses on the poet's professional life, and the book concludes with a section of poems primarily about travelling.

*Holding On* is Tammaro at his best: whether he is meditating on flowers, family, work, laughter, love, or death, his poems deal with issues of social class. In other words, they are class acts both in style and social reference: they relive, rejoice and remember working class identity while consistently resonating as high works of art. Tammaro creates a spectacle of the mundane, the everyday matter that is too often ignored in the rush of moving forward. In the sweep of a prose poem and the nudge of a tight lyric, the poet stops life long enough to craft art out of memory. His meditations on family, work, love, and death help us all to let go of the real and hold on to the spiritual.

Finally, Tony Romano (born 1958), a Chicago native, is an award-winning fiction writer whose work has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, among other prominent publications. He has also been a producer for National Public Radio's series "The Sound of Writing." In his first book, *When the World Was Young*, he creates a new view of the old country that reminds Italian Americans of shared emotions that transcend time, nation, and culture. Set in Chicago in the 1950s and 1970s, the novel centers on the family created by Agostino and Angela Peccatori, who immigrate to the U.S. to start a family. Agostino turns an old funeral parlor into a bar called "Mio Fratello," which serves as the site for much of the action. Through the stories of the main family members, Romano renders the results of the sins of the father and the curses of the mother as they affect their descendants, who must find new ways to deal with the same old problems of life.

Santo, the oldest son, begins to physically act on his attractions to women and in the process picks up pieces his father leaves behind, first through one of Agostino's flirtations and then with one of his indiscretions. The son inherits his father's temptations, and attempts to right his father's wrongs. His brothers, Anthony and Alfredo, are two peas in a pod and in many ways avoid the worst of what happens to the Peccatori family by developing strong lives of their own and, for a while, supporting each other through their childhood. Later life trials push the two brothers away from each other. Their sister, Victoria, is a young woman who wants nothing more than to get beyond the old-world constrictions placed on a teen born of immigrant parents. Through confession to a young priest she searches for a spirituality that can work and help her survive the contradictions of her life.

The tragedy of death begins with Benito, the youngest child and perhaps the only innocent character in this story, who contracts an illness and dies before he is two. His death affects the entire family and this is the crux of the novel's development. Through powerful dialogue, peppered with Italian dialect and Chicago slang, Romano crafts a narrative that moves well and shows us all how death can overshadow life. The focus on the fate of the family enables us to see how working-class characters can both build and destroy the one social institution they can control. While the family can provide what capitalist society cannot, through the sharing of resources, for example, it is also there to bear the

brunt of the frustration caused by an economic system that has no regard for the immigrant's needs.

Each member's story of survival serves to create the novel's narrative structure. Angela, with her sister Lupa, takes off for Italy, bringing along Victoria, who they believe will benefit from time in the old country. Away from the temptations of modern American life, she becomes a wiser woman. But there is no sweet resolution to the problems. The beauty of this novel is that it reminds us that life has ups and downs that are never neatly resolved as movies and romance stories suggest. Romano's strong sensory depiction, in the fashion of American realist writers of the 1930s, accurately recreates a world that resembles the Little Italys of Chicago's past.

### *Conclusion*

As I hope to have shown through this overview, Italian immigrants eschewed education in favor of work in their efforts to become American. Only later, on the shoulders of money, would they begin to consider the benefits of formal education that would make it possible for the children and grandchildren of immigrant workers to perform the cultural work of turning their ancestors' lives into works of art. It is in this literature, then, that we can find both accounts of working-class life and a sense of how working-class identities are created and dissolved in pursuit of the mythic American dream. Attention to these and the many other writers of the Italian diaspora can shed great light on what American writers of Italian descent have contributed to American literature and the understanding of the role which the working-class culture has played and continues to play in the development of working-class identities in the United States.

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