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The question of Italianness in John Fante's Ask the Dust

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Ad Anna,

Ora sei sole

aria

vento

Vestita di parole

danzi tra lacrime di pioggia

e volerai sempre più in alto

dove finisce il cielo

e ti vedremo riflessa

in un arcobaleno

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INTRODUCTION

I decided to write my BA thesis on a topic in the field of Anglo-American literature and, in particular, I chose to focus on Italian-American literature which is, as I will explain in this introduction and, more in detail, in the following chapters, a field that still struggles to be fully recognized in all its worth. However, in the last few decades many professors, academics, and experts have written anthologies, essays, and articles about Italian-American literature, such as the well-known Fred Gardaphe with his *Italian-American Literature and Working-class culture* (2014) or Anthony Tamburri with *Re-reading Italian Americana. Specificities and Generalities in Literature and Criticism* (2015).

In order to fully understand the complexity of Italian-American literature it is essential to refer to the troubled history of Italian immigrants which, as it will be analyzed in the first chapter, dates back to the end of the eighteenth century. In fact, the first Italian travelers, between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, were attracted by the sensational political-institutional novelties of the U.S., such as the typically Enlightenment values of pragmatism, scientific curiosity, love of freedom, and civic rigor. Moreover, another aspect that caught their attention was technology: in the United States, scientists, academics, and experts had the opportunity to experience and observe directly in the field of their research. However, the first significant migration flows are to be found after the middle of the XIX century, with people coming from eastern and southern-Europe, but especially from Italy where the struggles to achieve national unity along with their repercussions for the economy and quality of life forced many Italians to escape their homeland. When they landed, in big cities such as New York with Ellis Island, Baltimore, Boston or New Orleans, they were subjected to a lot of examinations before being allowed to enter the country. After entering the country, they began their new lives in challenging conditions and cramped apartments where they sought to recreate a home away from their actual home in these new neighborhoods.

Besides the economic difficulties, Italian immigrants were subject to certain stereotypes rooted in English-speaking culture since the XVI century: there was a vision of Italian society as marked by corruption, violence, directly linked to the mafia and organized

criminality, loose sexuality, and laziness. As a consequence, during the first years of their arrivals, Italians had to face discrimination, rejection on the part of other citizens, and frustration.

In these challenging living conditions, it was inevitable that Italian immigrants felt the need to found their own cultural institutions, such as newspapers which became the site for the flourishing of Italian-American literature, whose early production consisted of poems, comic or dramatic vignettes, short stories, and novels.

With the passing of time, Italian-American literature flourished so much that today we can find, while analyzing its development and history, four different phases: the first one refers to the Italian-American authors of the first generation, including for example Gino Carlo Speranza (1872-1927) with his *Race or Nation: A Conflict of Divided Loyalties* (1927); in the second phase there can be found the second generation of authors with the well-known and influential John Fante with one of his masterpieces *Ask the Dust* (1939); in the third phase, during the '60s, we see the Beat Generation with avant-garde authors as Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919-2021), with one of his most famous and touching poems "*The Old Italians Are Dying*" (1979); and, finally, the contemporary phase which sees a new visibility and integration into the mainstream, a phenomenon which has involved also the lives of Italian Americans in the United States. In fact, they no longer live in the Little Italies, but they have become one of the best integrated and rich communities in the American society, whose essential contribution to American culture, cuisine, music, cinema, and politics is beginning to be fully recognized.

After the analysis and the explanation of the origins, and development, of Italian-American literature, my work focuses especially on the second generation of writers, characterized by a tendency to write autobiographies and fiction dealing with the experience of the Italian-American immigrants and their family institutions. In my BA thesis, I analyze John Fante, one of the most important, significant, and influential authors of Italian-American literature, whose novels are considered as masterpieces of American literature in general. It is for this reason that I have decided to analyze his writings and in particular his work *Ask the Dust*, which is the second book of a quartet in which the life of Arturo Bandini, John Fante's alter ego, is narrated. Arturo Bandini is an Italian-American man who struggles deeply with his identity: he wants to feel and to be seen as

fully American, but, in doing this, he rejects his Italian heritage and, moreover, he discriminates those around him such as Camilla Lopez, his Mexican lover.

Directly linked to this troubled relationship with identity and heritage, is the question of Italianness, which finds its roots in the phenomenon of discrimination perpetrated by Americans towards Italian immigrants.

As I analyze more in detail in the third chapter, the rise of the question of Italianness as an identity shaped by the social experience of discrimination can be explained if we think that Italians, when they first arrived in the big American cities, tried to preserve their traditions, as the religion, but also their language and dialects which made it difficult for them to be considered as fully belonging in the new society. All these aspects, together with Italianness, are topics widely covered in Italian-American literature, and especially by John Fante, who offers profound insights into this double identity struggle along with all its consequences on his life, on Arturo Bandini's life but also on Italian immigrants' lives.

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF ITALIAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE: FROM THE ORIGINS TO THE MODERN RENAISSANCE

1.1 The origins of Italian-American literature

When it comes to Italian-American literature it is fundamental to refer and to analyze all of those meaningful historical events that shaped the United States of America as we know them nowadays.

The United States of America began life as a British colony in the first decade of the 17th century even if, until the middle of the 1700s, little was known about these colonies outside the United Kingdom. In fact, the phenomenon of emigration, which would play an essential role in the history of the United States, was almost irrelevant and those brave few who embarked on this journey were driven by very different motivations from those who, in the following years, came aspiring to the myth of new American civil liberties and a bright new future.

One of the most important countries that took part in this great phenomenon was Italy which can be considered today as one of the nations, among many others such as China and Mexico that helped the creation of the so-called “melting pot”.

The first Italian travelers, between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, were attracted by the sensational political-institutional novelties of the U.S., such as the typically Enlightenment values of pragmatism, scientific curiosity, love of freedom, and civic rigor. Moreover, another aspect that caught their attention was technology: in the United States, scientists, academics, and experts had the opportunity to experience and observe directly in the field of their research.

In this scenario of interest for this overseas country, no wonder literature, art, theatre, and culture in general, started to take up America as a theme and a new exoticism began to affirm itself: many Italian authors included in their works characters, places, and themes that were directly linked to the New World colonies and later to the United States. An example could be *La corsara francese* - by Pietro Chiari (1767) or Vittorio Alfieri's poem “L'America libera” (1787) in which a strong opposition is set between Europe, seen as a,

as Alfieri writes, “*morta arbore*” and an America full of vitality, hope, and liberty, where the American man is considered to be the “true free and new man”. At the same time, with Vincenzo Martinelli’s *Istoria del Governo d’Inghilterra e delle sue Colonie in India e nell’America Settentrionale* (1776) British America started to be considered and studied in depth also from the perspective of historical and political matters.

Another author who deserves to be mentioned is Cesare Bressa (1785-1836) who arrived in New Orleans in 1817 and whose lifetime in the United States of America made him one of the most important emigration pioneers. His works, along with other, maybe less known, contemporary writers such as Giambattista Scandella (1763 – 1798) and Carlo Vidua (1785-1830), belong to the genre of travel-literature, which offered a view of this new American society, its potential and innovation together with observations on the natural landscape and technological advances. In fact, the idea of a nation focused on work, money, and success was already well spread by the early decades of the nineteenth century.

This lively cultural relationship between Italy and America is confirmed by the first real Italian-American author, James Philip Puglia (1760 ca.-1831) of whom extensive documentation remain until today: an example of his works is *The Federal Politician* (1795) which provides a close political analysis of the time. One of the main goals of Puglia’s literary production was to offer a taste of his American experience, which can be considered the outcome of the most advanced political debate brought up by the Enlightenment. In other words, he wanted to give concrete examples and testimonies to the Europeans who wished to set out on the difficult path of reforms.

In the first initial phase of Italian-American literature, along with James Philip Puglia, another fundamental author is Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749 – 1838). Da Ponte, with his over 30 years of staying in New York and his writing skills, is seen as the first prototype of what Italian-American literature will be in the following years. Among his works, it is essential to mention *Memorie* (1819) published in New York, *Storia della lingua e letteratura italiana a New York* (1827), and the long list of poems published in three different volumes (1829-30), in which the main theme is dissatisfaction and frustration with his life.

1.2 The encounter of Italians with the United States: difficulties, stereotypes, discrimination

As it is stated above, the Italian presence in the United States of America has distant origins and dates back to when emigration was caused by religion issues. Making a leap forward in time, the first significant migration flows are to be found after the middle of the XIX century, with people coming from eastern and southern Europe, but especially from Italy where the struggles to achieve national unity along with their repercussions for the economy and quality of life forced many Italians to escape their homeland. When they landed, in big cities such as New York with Ellis Island, Baltimore, Boston or New Orleans, they were subjected to a lot of examinations before being allowed to enter the country. The poem, “*New York Revisited*”, written by Joseph Tusiani (1924-2020), well describes the sense of loneliness and loss felt by immigrants:

and like new immigrants confused and stranded,
am seeking where to go or what to do

It is essential to underline this part of the history of Italians in the US because among those immigrants, who begun their new lives in challenging conditions and cramped apartments where they sought to recreate a home away from their actual home in these new neighborhoods for themselves and their families, were the great authors of Italian-American literature.

Besides the economic difficulties, Italian immigrants were subject to certain stereotypes rooted in English-speaking culture since the XVI century: there was a vision of Italian society as marked by corruption, violence, directly linked to the mafia and organized criminality, sexuality, and laziness. As a consequence, during the first years after their arrival, Italians had to face discrimination, rejection on the part of other citizens, and frustration. Moreover, Americans started to differentiate newcomers into good and problematic ones, provoking the rise of fears and concerns and making the problem of racism become stronger. In fact, Italian immigrants were considered to be inferior, not as white as Americans who saw them as a threat to their living standards and values.

In order to really give the due importance to this sad and frustrating situation, it is necessary to mention what is considered the most serious lynching in the history of the

United States, that is to say the killing of 13 Sicilian workers in New Orleans in 1891. Even the *New York Times* in its first page of the issue in 1891, while condemning the action of the assailants, stated “These Sicilian spies and cowards, descendants of bandits and murderers, who brought to this country the institutes of the outlaws, the practices of stokers, the silence of the secret societies of their country, are for us a scourge without remission...” (quoted in Villa 2005, pp. 166-167)

1.3 The rise of Italian newspapers and the first generation of Italian-American authors

Meanwhile, during the process of political inclusion, Italian immigrants felt the need to found cultural institutions such as newspapers in which, at least in the very first years, there could be found some sort of political thinking that followed what was happening in Italy during the war to achieve national union. In other words, in these years, one can find in New York the paper “L’Eco d’Italia”, founded in 1850 by Giovan Francesco Secchi de Casali, which was the first to be entirely focused on Italian-Americans matters and destined to turn into a daily newspaper during the ‘80s, and also “L’Esule Italiano” by Giovanni Battista Torricelli.

Quickly, these newspapers became the privileged seat of literary Italian-American production: for example, in 1869 “L’Eco Italiano” published the short story *Il piccolo genovese*, an incunabulum of Italian-American narrative, which tells the success of an Italian beggar, welcomed in a WASP family, who thanks to his loyalty to the family will be allowed to marry their daughter.

However, the real spread of newspapers happened with the arrival, after 1880, of millions of Italians which completely changed the assets of the most important cities in the United States. As it is stated above, these immigrants settled in neighborhoods called “Little Italies”, which became the cradle of Italian-American culture. These places were no longer Italy, but they were not America yet. Here Italians started to produce a thriving ethnic press written still in Italian, such as *Il Bollettino della Sera* (1898), *Il Giornale Italiano* (1909), and *Corriere d’America* (1922), which was directed by one of the well-known Italian journalists, Luigi Barzini Senior. Already in 1909, there were eleven Italians daily journals and more than a hundred weekly newspapers.

It was inevitable that these newspapers became the site for the flourishing of Italian-American literature, whose early production consisted of poems, comic or dramatic vignettes, short stories, and novels. In fact, it goes without saying, that these first generation of authors belonged to the category of the so-called “colonial journalists”, along with all those teachers who arrived as immigrants. Among these teachers, we can find Luigi Donato Ventura (1845-1912) who, with “*Peppino*” (1885), which recalls *Il piccolo genovese* authored what can be considered as one of the first long stories dealing with Italian-Americans themes, and probably the best. In fact, Peppino is a boy who landed in the United States, precisely in New York, searching for better life conditions, job opportunities, and fortune and his goal is to return to his homeland with the amount of money necessary to build a life in Italy (here is also clear the theme of nostalgia felt by immigrants towards their country).

Another name that deserves to be mentioned is Bernardino Ciambelli (1862 ca. – 1931), who was the most productive novelist in Little Italy: he published a lot of novels and, many of them were posted following the French feuilleton system, that is to say they were published in episodes in different issues of the newspaper. Among his publications, the novels which made his career start were *I misteri di Mulberry Street* and *I drammi dell'emigrazione* (1893), but also *I sotterranei di New York* (1915). Ciambelli seems to aspire to give a pedagogical function to his works, since he continuously focuses on some themes like the exploitation of Italian workers by bosses and other dangers that immigrants can run into. Moreover, in order to give a more realistic view of the situation, Ciambelli mentions people's names, restaurants, and shops that really existed in those years. As consequence, he is the first author who succeeded in giving a testimony of the complex, and for many reasons frightening, reality in which immigrants had to live.

The first generation of Italian-American authors, a part of the literary production above-mentioned, was very active also in theaters: Little Italies were full of extraordinary actors, performers, and play-wrights who staged plays based on current events of the American or Italian society, but also represented the real-life conditions of immigrants both tragically and comically. An interesting aspect of this theatrical production is the use of language: in these works it is very common to find the use of the new immigrants' *pidgin*, which was an hybridization between English and a dialect such as the Neapolitan or Sicilian one.

Among the most famous playwrights, it is necessary to mention Eduardo Migliaccio (1882-1946), who, with his part sung and part acted comedy sketches in which he presented new characters, such as the “*bloffo*” (that is to say the “bluffer”), established his production as one of the most vital areas of this first generation of Italian-American literature. Migliaccio worked very often with another well-known author, Tony Ferrazzano, to whom we owe the drafting of what can be considered as the linguistic manifesto of the new Italoamerica. This manifesto, “*La lingua ‘taliana*” celebrates, with a comic tone, the superiority of the Italian language (Durante 2017, p. 51):

Nun già che fosse brutta
la lingua americana;
sarrá na bella lingua,
ma nun é ‘taliana

A very substantial part of the original Italian-American theatrical production belongs to the so-called social theater: a dramatic production, most of the times, which tried to bring up all of the problems, paradoxes, and contradictions of this Italian “colony” transplanted in the United States. In this subgenre, we can find also texts of social denunciation, such as “*Rapitori di fanciulli, ovvero La Mano Nera*” (1912) which reports the rising of organized criminality.

1.4 Writing in English in order to become American

A radical change in Italian-American literature of the first generation is directly linked to an important, but also very significant event, that involved the relationship between Italy and the United States. In fact, in 1941, Italy declared war to the United States so, as a consequence, all those Italians who were living in the country started to be seen as “enemy aliens” and they had to do their best in order to prove their loyalty to the adopted country. This was a watershed between a “before” and an “after” in the literary and journalistic production in Italian since, even though some works would be still published in Italian, the majority were directly written and released in English in order to be perceived as integrated in the mainstream literature of the time. This was an important departure from

the Italian-American literature of the origins in which the only language that could be used was Italian or its dialects.

However, one could witness an attempt to convert the literary production to English even well before 1941: many Italian-American authors had decided to express themselves in English with the aim of reaching a wider audience than the small circle of the Little Italies. Among these authors, we need to mention Gino Carlo Speranza (1872-1927) who wrote many articles, essays, and volumes, such as *Race or Nation: A Conflict of Divided Loyalties* (1927) in which he deals, as cultural mediator and writer, with the issue of Italian-Americans defending the phenomenon of immigration. Maybe the most interesting name during this period is Louis Forgione, who published three books that are considered masterpieces: *Reamer Lou* (1924) which is, at least partially, an autobiography and it addresses the challenging environment, the hard work, and the violence that immigrants had to face; *The Men of Silence* (1928) and *The River Between* (1928), probably his best known work, which is set in the Sicilian tenements in New Jersey, opposed to the riches of Manhattan on the other side of the river, and deals with two different kinds of rejection: on one hand one of the protagonists, Demetrio, refuses to integrate into the American society, but, on the other hand, Rose, Demetrio's wife, rejects her origins and the idea of being stuck in this neighborhood which does not allow her to fit in the society and culture of this completely new country. In fact, at the end, Rose, who represents America, will leave those tenements gaining a new life in the city.

1.5 The second generation of Italian-American writers: the question of identity

In the '30s the Italian-American narrative focuses mostly on the family autobiography, the heart of the immigrant's life. Being the second generation of authors raised or even born in America, the struggle with integration, with a battle between the old and new identity, will be another important theme of their works along with the feeling of nostalgia. Moreover, these literary works express the aesthetic, the values, and the contents of two different cultures, the original-Italian one and the Italian-American one. About this importance given to Italian culture and lifestyle, Guido D'Agostino (1909-1991), in *Olives on the Apple Tree* (1940), writes eloquently: "If you just landed and you are in a hurry to become American, you end up killing yourself little by little because

what you brought with you from your country to make it richer and better, you threw it and forgot” (Durante, 2017, pp.74).

It is as if they felt the duty to tell the story of their parents, families, and friends who had carried on a certain lifestyle distinct from the rest of the American society: the protagonists of these books, even though they are often illiterate people, are depicted as brave men and women who embarked on the most difficult journey that is re-building a life from scratch.

Moreover, this need to narrate the stories of their origins represents also a sense of strong loyalty towards the family institution and towards the community in general which is opposed to the unbridled individualism typical among Americans. However, some academics, such as William J. Connell, one of the leading experts in this field, claims that the family also represented a cage from which these authors needed to escape and the only way to do that was writing about it (Connell, Stanislao 2020, p.302).

According to Anthony Julian Tamburri, an important academic who is the author of *Re-reading Italian Americana. Specificities and Generalities on Literature and Criticism* (2015), an interesting aspect of this second generation of writers is the style and language employed: many authors insert Italian or dialectal words using also an Italian syntax, as for example does Pietro Di Donato (1911-1992) in the novel *Christ in concrete* (1939), in which he employs an indirect discourse similar to what Verga used in his masterpiece *Malavoglia*, where not only do readers hear the narrator’s voice, but they also have access to the characters’ thoughts.

Anthony Turano (1893-1991), born in Calabria but emigrated at eleven years of age, became a very important second-generation writer. His best known and touching novel is *An Immigrant Father* (1932), where the family is the main character. However, the author who truly marked this second generation is John Fante (1909-1982) with his first novel *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), whose plot is very simple, and essentially autobiographic. In fact, it is the story of a marital crisis between his parents narrated from the point of view of the young son Arturo. The father, an emigrated carpenter in Colorado, takes advantage of the long winter breaks to stay away from the family and cheat on his wife with an American woman. This work had so much recognition that, in Italy, Elio Vittorini, an important Italian writer and literary critic, decided to include Fante in the list of the authors who would be the future of American literature. John Fante’s success was

confirmed with *The Road to Los Angeles* (1935), and in particular with his masterpiece *Ask the Dust* (1939) which deals with the problem of integration. This novel again focuses on Arturo Bandini, who wants to become a writer and has a troubled love story with the Mexican waiter Camilla Lopez. As I will analyze and discuss more in details in the next chapter, Fante has come to be seen as one of the most unique authors of this period with a very impactful writing style focusing on themes like integration, discrimination, and violence. Besides these novels, another remarkable work would be *Full of Life* (1952), which is entirely autobiographical and narrates the nine months of pregnancy, with all the difficulties, of Fante's wife and all of the problems, linked to values and religion, he had with his father.

1.6 The Beat Generation in the '60s: a season of avant-garde

Another important revolution and serious shift in Italian-American literature's development can be found during the '60s. In those years, American society was living a period full of fundamental changes, for example: students riots, the emergence of hippie culture, rock music, women's liberation movement, civil rights battles (such as the fight against racial segregation and homophobia), and the diffusion of the pacifist movement, which spread in order to rebel against the war in Vietnam. It is right in this time that, probably due to this cultural transition, the original phenomenon of the "melting pot", with its many different ethnicities, finds its most fertile ground.

In fact, it is not a coincidence, that four of the best known authors of the so-called "*Beat Generation*" are Italian Americans. With the Beat Generation, a long season of avant-garde concerning many artistic expressions, such as literature, art, and music starts and will be especially pursued by young authors and will have its most dramatic moments with the Vietnam war, which will cause the mobilization of many young adults.

Among these four authors, it is worth of mention Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919-2021) who started to publish in 1955 dealing especially with the topics of pacifism, freedom, civil rights, and sexuality. One of his most famous and touching poems is "*The Old Italians Are Dying*" (1979) in which he makes some references to Italy, but, more specifically, he talks about the important Italian community in San Francisco presenting many typical figures (Durante 2017, p.105) :

the old ones with old pocket watches
the old ones with gnarled hands
 and wild eyebrows
the grappa drinkers with teeth like corn
the Piemontesi the Genovesi the Siciliani
 smelling like garlic & pepperoni
the ones who loved Mussolini
the old fascists
the ones who loved Garibaldi

Besides Ferlinghetti, another writer who had a prominent role in the poetic scene, was the Sicilian-American Diane Di Prima (1934-2020). Her well known work is *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), an autobiography which recollects all her life experiences, in which we can find the poem *April Fool Birthday Poem for Grandpa* in which she narrated the figure of a grandfather seen as an anarchist. In addition, this work is still seen as an effective model for current Italian-American autobiographies.

It is right during this time of radical changes and revolutions that Mario Puzo (1920-1999), who will become a well-known author, publishes *The Godfather* (1969) destined to be a world-wide bestseller with also two sequels (1974 and 1990). This novel, which was turned into a movie as well, focuses on the most negative stereotype related to Italians in the United States, that is to say the institution of “mafia”. However, Puzo manages to narrate Italian Americans’ most negative features and turn them into something positive that proves the values, the sense of community, and the loyalty to the family typical of Italians. Following this pattern, another famous writer is Gay Talese (1932-) with his *Honor Thy Father* (1971), which is a nonfiction novel about the Bonanno family in New York. Talese narrates the story of this family during a period of crisis in their criminal power by describing the day life of the mafia and the boredom that can occur also in a criminal and rich family.

In this regard, professor Fred L. Gardaphe published, in 1992, an article in which he talked about Italian-American writers of this period by including also Don DeLillo (1936), even though he never considered himself as Italian-American writer. In fact, DeLillo opted for

a partial integration as he thought that, only in this way, he could really analyze deeply America in his books, as it happens in *"The names"* (1981), *"White Noise"* (1985), and *"Cosmopolis"* (2003). However, the Italian-American background can be found in *"Underworld"* (1997), where the Italian protagonists are depicted as heroes of a modern era in which they are uneasy with themselves and uncomfortable with their ethnicity.

A different idea is carried out by Frank Lentricchia (1940-), a good friend of DeLillo, who is deeply proud of his Italian heritage and wrote *"Johnny Critelli, and The Knifemen"* (1996) in which he recalls the Italian community who tries to fit in the American one but clinging to their Italian traditions. In fact, Lentricchia stated: *"I was raised knowing that I was not like others, knowing that I was not an American" or "Nothing happens in the mind of somebody who has not a sexual, economic or racial difference"* (Durante 2017, p.117).

1.7 The rise of the studies about Italian-American literature: style, themes, gender issues

Despite their great relevance, Italian-American writers, from the time of mass migration until today, have never "fared well as a group in terms of widespread recognition for contributions to American literature" as the literary critic Fred L. Gardaphe explains in his article "Italian-American Literature and Working-Class Culture" (2014, p. 409). The reason of this rejection is to be found in a lack of critical attention to their works rather than a lack of talent: the advance of ethnic studies movements in the 1980s and following decades, did little to change the situation as Italian-American writers were rarely included in important multicultural anthologies and have remained, as a consequence, off the academic radar of high school and college courses. Gardaphe claims that the only exception of this lack of recognition is represented by John Fante, whereas the majority of American writers of Italian descendants have been left out of consideration. A direct result is that many works, articles, and literary productions were lost or are, still nowadays, extremely hard to find, to analyze, and to study: for example, we have only one copy of Camillo Cianfarra's *Il Diario di un emigrato*, which can be found at the Minneapolis Immigration History Research Center, currently one of the most important archives of Italian-American literature.

Because of this lack of studies, especially of the first generation of Italian-American authors, it was the duty of the second and third generation of writers to try to recollect and narrate the stories of this lost first generation, as happens in *Umbertina* by Helen Barolini or *Mamma Lucia* by Mario Puzo, a saga that dates back to the nineteenth century and narrates the vicissitudes of Italian-Americans in the U.S.

Many scholars, such as Fred L. Gardaphe, already mentioned, Francesco Durante or Anthony Tamburri found, in their investigation of Italian-American literature, many themes that seem to be relevant and common among Italian-American writers. Gardaphe, for example, in the above mentioned *Italian-American Literature and Working-Class Culture*, observes that “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” (Gardaphe, 2014, pp.410). Moreover, Gardaphe takes into account also the themes of class war and the exploitation of workers, especially in Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* (1939) in which he personifies work as “Job”, the antagonist to the worker-as-Christ, the protagonist. Not surprisingly Di Donato, thanks to this novel, became a hero of the working class of that time.

Another important recognized theme by both Durante and Gardaphe is the idea of familial sacrifice, social justice along with the use of the autobiography as the predominant genre. Infact, as Durante writes in his work *Storia e Letteratura degli italiani negli Stati Uniti. La scena di Little Italy* (2013), since the origins of Italian-American literature, that is to say since the very first immigrants who landed in the United States, the autobiography was the favorite genre as it allowed them to talk about themselves, narrate their journeys, recall the homeland, and talk about the U.S., their new homes.

Unfortunately, in the scenario of Italian-American literature, women encountered many challenges in being recognized as writers since the immigrant Italian woman was seen as a slave, tied to its traditional role within the family and it was very difficult, or almost impossible, for her to escape from this condition. While male authors did have some kind of accreditation along with some other non-wasp American female writers, Italian-American writings written by women remained buried and undocumented for years. In other words, these women did not belong anywhere: not to a minority, not to a mainstream, they were a silenced group. It is precisely in this context that the role of Suor Blandina Segale represents a significant example, together with her work *At the End of*

the Sante Fe Trail (1932). Infact, although she was a nun living in the far West between the nineteenth and twentieth century, she must be seen as a great model for all the following female writers: her voice was one of the first female voices to be heard in the Italian-American literacy production, making it possible to date the female contribution back to the XIX century. Her novel, which was written at first as a private diary, plays a fundamental role since it finally gives credit also to the female production. It can be said that Suor Blandina Segale leaves a stimulating testimony since she proves that Italian-American women could have an authorial voice even in contexts of femininity different from those defined by the society of that time.

Besides this work, we can find, in 1985, the first anthology completely dedicated to Italian-American literature written by female authors, that is "*The Dream Book*" by Helen Barolini. These works represent an important breakthrough in the history of Italian-American literature since, for the first time ever, through the reproduction of texts mostly forgotten, it was given recognition to all of those Italian-American women writers who were not considered part of that world always attributed to men. This anthology had a wide documentary value for a little known, but also little studied, tradition which was considered, until then, as something less important than the wide and important literary American corpus.

Since this anthology has the aim of taking into accounts also all of those women who played an active role in the history of Italian-American literature, it is important to mention at least two of them. The first one, the editor of the above mentioned anthology, is Helen Barolini (1925-), whose most important novel is the masterpiece "*Umbertina*" (1979), which narrates the lives of three women belonging to the same family tracing the history of Italian-American women from the nineteenth century. With this family saga, we witness a greater historical awareness and a need to fully discover the Italian-American experience taking into account also all of those existential and mental struggles that women, confined to their domestic obligations, but also immigrants in general, had to face.

The other female author who deserves to be cited is Tina De Rosa (1944-2007) with the autobiographical novel "*Paper fish*" (1980), set in the Little Italy of Chicago during the '40s and '50s. This book is considered one of the masterpieces of Italian-American literature in which the female voice is predominant.

1.8 The Italian-American Renaissance: new genres and academic recognition

An initial development of “*Italian American Renaissance*” was brought about during the ‘80s by the new phenomenon of women’s writings and the huge success of “*The Godfather*” by Puzo. Moreover, Italian-American literature, as Dana Gioia analyzes in her essay “*What Is Italian American Poetry?*”, was living a transitional period since it was almost part of the American mainstream literature, but maintaining some distinctive features, such as its focus on the themes of poverty, religion, and Europeans roots, and realism was the predominant expressive mode.

From the ‘90s until today we have to take into account the fact that Italian-American writers belonging to the third generation did not learn the Italian language from their parents but acquired it through education, that is to say their ethnicity and Italian heritage has become more complex and mediated. Also, their knowledge of Italian literature and culture is something that they have willingly recovered through study.

The Italian American Renaissance, above mentioned, was a phenomenon that did not involve just literature but also the lives of Italian Americans in the United States. In fact, they no longer lived in the Little Italies, but had become one of the best integrated and rich communities in the American society, whose essential contribution to American culture, cuisine, music, cinema, and politics was recognized. However, in spite of a general assimilation to the mainstream, they showed an attachment to their roots by maintaining their ancestors’ names together with a strong loyalty to their families and communities.

As regards literature, the most employed genres are the memoir, the short story, and the poem. For example, taking into account the memoir, it is fundamental to mention Louise A. DeSalvo (1942-2018) and her “*Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms our Lives*” (2000), or Kym Ragusa (1966-) with “*The Skin Between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty, And Belonging*” (2006). Besides the memoir, it is worth mentioning Joseph Luzzi (1967-) with “*My Two Italies*” which shows the relationship between an Italian-American professor and his homeland.

In addition, during this period, many academics felt the need to undertake a work of discovery of all those literary works that were missing and had left a void in the history of Italian-American literature. In fact, many anthologies were edited, such as “*From the*

Margin: Writings in Italian Americana” (1991) by Anthony Julian Tamburri, Paolo Giordano, and Fred L. Gardaphe (1991), which also includes a section of critical essays, “*Beyond The Godfather: Italian American Writers on the Real Italian American Experience*” (1997) by Kenneth Ciongoli and Jay Parini or “*The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian American Women’s Fiction*” (2007) by Mary Jo Bona. All of these works, together with many others, have the aim of giving due recognition to all those authors who have contributed to the history of literature and have fought in order to be seen, tolerated, and accepted in a country completely new to them.

CHAPTER 2

JOHN FANTE'S "ASK THE DUST" AND ITS PROTAGONIST ARTURO BANDINI

2.1 The second generation in Italian-American literature: John Fante, his life and works

As I explained in the previous chapter, Italian-American literature presents different stages during its evolution, such as the first and second generation, the Beat Generation and the current Renaissance. In this chapter, I am going to analyze in particular the second generation to which belongs a large number of authors whose relevance marked the history, the style, and the themes of Italian-American literature. In fact, as I have already stated, the second generation of Italian-American writers focused mainly, especially through autobiographies, on the family as an institution that offered comfort but, at the same time, has the capacity of oppress with its strong traditions, its devotion to religion and faith.

Among the authors of this second generation, it is important to mention Anthony Turano (1893-1991) with *An Immigrant Father* (1932) which has its main focus on the family, Guido D'Agostino (1909-1991) and his novel *Olives on the Apple Tree* (1940) dealing with integration, Pietro Di Donato (1911-1992) with his masterpiece *Christ in Concrete* (1939) addressing the problem of labor exploitation, and last but not least, the author who is the most brilliant, influential, and relevant in that period, that is to say John Fante (1909-1982).

Before delving into the analysis of John Fante as an author together with his works, I believe that it is fundamental to give some references to his life as an Italian-American, son of immigrated parents, living in the United States during the twentieth century.

As I stated above, John Fante was born in 1909 in the city of Denver, Colorado, in an Italian-American family: his father, Nicola Fante, was native of Torricella Peligna (a small city in Abruzzo, Italy) and his mother Mary Capolungo was an Italian-American woman whose parents were originally from Basilicata. In Denver, he spent his troubled

childhood and adolescence until he abandoned his studies at the University of Colorado starting to perform precarious, as well as low-paid, jobs. After some time, due to his poverty condition and his continuous disagreements with his father, he decided to go away and moved to Los Angeles in 1930, where he devoted himself completely to writing since his biggest dream was becoming a professional author. Thanks to his first short stories published by some Californian magazines, his brothers and his mother were able to move to Roseville, in California too.

In order to earn money, but especially with the aim of becoming known in the industry, he wrote regularly for some magazines such as *The American Mercury* and *The Atlantic* with the support of Henry Louis Mencken, one of the most influential journalists and writers of the XX century. In the early thirties, even though he never really enjoyed this occupation, he started a collaboration with Hollywood working as screenwriter and this job took him also to Italy where he did some works for Dino De Laurentiis, a well-known Italian producer.

We can say that, in 1934, his career as author officially started since he wrote his first novel, *The Road to Los Angeles*, which was published only after several years, in 1985. However, the book that can be considered as his first masterpiece is *Wait until Spring, Bandini* (1938), followed by another great work, that is *Ask the Dust*, the following year. His writing career underwent a crisis because of the outbreak of World War II since, during that time, he worked also as informant and his four sons were born also in those years. At the end of the war, he was able to resume his career publishing the novel *Full of Life* (1952) which narrates a pregnancy and the solitude that can come with it: this work had a great success since it goes through all the difficulties that a writer and his wife have to face during a delicate time like this.

Unfortunately, in 1977, year that saw the publishing of *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, he started to suffer from diabetes which made him loose his legs and go blind. Despite this serious medical condition, the year 1978 was very significant to him since he met Charles Bukowski, a well-known poet and American author. In fact, Bukowski admired John Fante so much as a writer that he wanted to write a preface to the reprint of the novel *Ask the Dust*, where he stated “he is the best writer that I ever read”, “the most cursed narrator in America” or “Fante is my god” (Bukowski, *Ask the Dust*, pp. 5-7).

During this time of reprinting his works, John Fante lived a moment of pure joy and hope for his career and, as a consequence, he was motivated enough to publish, after dictating it to his wife his last novel, *Dreams of Bunker Hill* (1982), which narrates the end of the saga of Arturo Bandini, his alter ego. John Fante died in 1983, in a room of the clinic Motion picture and television country house in Woodland Hills, Los Angeles leaving a lot of unpublished works that, being discovered little by little, make us understand even more his greatness as an author.

2.2 An initial overview of John Fante's literary production and themes, such as the personal struggle with identity

As it is stated above, John Fante belongs to the second generation of authors in Italian-American literature but it is also relevant to underline that he started his writing career during a very specific period. By saying this, I am referring to the time in which, many authors, mainly belonging to the second generation, started to prefer using English rather than Italian in their literary production creating a watershed with the previous generation. Being John Fante one of these authors who broke with the past, it is not surprising that critical and sociological writings were released talking about him, his life, and his works. Moreover, over the years, many expert scholars of emigration published studies that focus on the multiple insights of the Italian-American experience, especially the second generation of immigrants, present in John Fante's books.

In order to understand better what is mentioned above, it is useful to refer to the investigation made by Gianni Paoletti in his work *John Fante. Storia di un italoamericano* (Paoletti, 2005, p. 195), where he reconstructs the collective itinerary of this generational group of Italians in America struggling for a lost ethnic origin, in this case the Italian one, and its recovery through a search for family roots. Paoletti states that this different, and struggled, relationship with the past is to be found in the main two phases of John Fante's literary production. In fact, in the first four novels, those set in Los Angeles, the relationship with the origin is configured as a simple disinterest, or even a refusal, towards his background. However, in the later works, Fante seems to have a strong curiosity for his origins, even if it is not caused by a sense of nostalgia or a search for identity.

As I will explain more in detail, during this process of identity reappropriation, the main figure who plays an important role, becoming also central, in John Fante's books is his father and the central theme is the troubled relationship with him. In fact, as Paoletti underlines in his study, John Fante's writings, after his father's death in 1950, took on new features as if he wanted to trace his family story through his father's eyes now closed forever. It can be said that Fante, as I will analyze, was able to narrate situations, events, and Italian-American experiences in a very effective way. In addition, in Fante's novels, as Gianni Paoletti points out in his work *John Fante: storie di un italoamericano* (2005), the characters experience a sort of double relationship between the two homelands, the original one and the adoptive one. A clear example of this identity division can be found in John Fante's *Wait until Spring, Bandini*:

His name was Arturo, but he would have preferred John. His last name was Bandini but he would have preferred to be called Jones. His father and his mother were Italians but he would have preferred to be American. His face was freckled but he would rather have it clean. (Fante, 1938, p.24)

To give further proof of John Fante's importance in the Italian-American literature scenario, it is necessary to refer also to Catherine Kordich work *John Fante: his novels and novellas* (2000), where she presents a really insightful analysis of John Fante as an author through his novels, taking into account also the historical period in which he lived: here, John Fante is presented as an outstanding American author considering his lyrical prose and the psychological complexity and development he gives to his characters.

2.3 John Fante's *Ask the Dust*: plot and characters

Among John Fante's already mentioned works, it is necessary to emphasize the importance and the success of four of his novels which led him to be the writer that today we recognize as one of the most influential and important in Italian-American literature.

To be specific, I am referring, in order of publication, to *Wait until Spring, Bandini* (1938), *Ask the Dust* (1939), *Dreams of Bunker Hill* (1982), *The Road to Los Angeles* (1985) which narrate the existence of Arturo Bandini in different stages of his life.

When I first started to study John Fante, I decided that, for the purpose of my BA thesis, the novel that would represent the best example of John Fante's writing style was *Ask the Dust*, especially for the plot that I am going to present in the following lines.

As it is stated above, *Ask the Dust*, the second most famous and admired novel by John Fante, was published in November 1939 by the publishing firm Stackpole&Sons in New York which had released, the previous year, *Wait until Spring, Bandini*. Linked to the above mentioned publisher there is an interesting anecdote, happened during that year, which makes us understand also John Fante's political belief. In fact, Stackpole&Sons, in 1939, decided to publish, without the permission of the German government, also the autobiographical essay *Mein Kampf* written by Hitler. This decision cost the publishing house its reputation causing a great loss of money and, in addition, John Fante claimed that his new published novel was not promoted enough leading him to change publisher. In the novel *Ask the Dust*, John Fante narrates a phase of the life of the protagonist Arturo Bandini who, as I already stated, can be seen as Fante's alter ego making it clear that we are faced with a highly autobiographical book since, like John Fante, Arturo Bandini leaves his family and his hometown in order to move to Los Angeles. Arturo Bandini is a man who, unfortunately, finds himself in a very critical life condition since he has no money to pay the rent of his hotel room in Bunker Hill, a rundown section of Downtown Los Angeles, or even to eat something decent besides oranges. In spite of this dire situation in which he is consumed by worries about his financial condition and his anxieties for a lack of sexual experiences, he dreams of becoming a well-known writer in order to get paid and start a new life. However, when the narration starts, he only has published one short story, *The Little Dog Laughed*, considered to be one of his greatest achievements so far. As I mentioned above, one of his greatest fears, and cause of anxiety, is the lack of sexual experience which he considers one of the reasons why he has so little success as a writer: he is convinced that only with some more experience with women he could become a successful author. As a consequence, one night, he accepts a prostitute's invitation but, as soon as they get to his room, he begins to remember the injunctions against sexuality engrained in him during his Catholic upbringing. In particular, it is

important to dwell on this religious aspect since it is much emphasized also in *Wait until Spring, Bandini*, the first novel of the quartet: here, Arturo Bandini is a child who reflects repeatedly on the difference between venial and mortal sin, two of the fundamental issues of Catholic belief. In fact, in the novel we can read “Arturo Bandini was practically sure that we would not end up in hell. To go to hell he would have to commit mortal sins. Actually, he had committed a lot of those sins, but the confession saved him.” or “But could not something be done to reduce the burning sentence of purgatory? In the catechism he found the answer to the problem,” or even “The only system, established by the catechism, to shorten the terrible period of purgatory was dedicating to good deeds, prayers, fasting, and abstinence.” (Fante, 1938, pp. 84-85).

To go back to the plot, Arturo Bandini, a few days after this unsuccessful attempt with the prostitute, goes to a pub called “The Columbia Buffet” where he becomes infatuated with the waitress, Camilla Lopez, a Hispanic woman. Although he is attracted to her, Arturo expresses his interest by taunting and discriminating her especially about her Mexican heritage by saying, for example, referring to her shoes, “Those huaraches-do you have to wear them, Camilla? Do you have to emphasize the fact that you always and always will be a filthy little Greaser?” (Fante, 2006, pp.44). In return she teases and sneers back to him “Then she said a strange thing; I remember it clearly. I hope you die of heart failure. She said. Right there in that chair (Fante, 2006, p.37).

One night Arturo and Camilla, after she has finished her shift at the restaurant, go to the beach but, when Arturo refuses to have sexual intercourse, Camilla feels offended beginning to ignore him. As a consequence, with the aim of gaining her back, Arturo sends her a lot of telegrams professing his love for her but Camilla keeps ripping them up. At this point of the narration, Fante introduces a secondary, but equally important and significant character, that is to say Vera Rivken who shows up at Bandini’s hotel room. After having refused her at first, Arturo realizes that she could represent his only chance to gain some experience and confidence with women, especially with Camilla, so he goes to see Vera at her house in Long Beach where they sleep together. Afterwards, when an earthquake strikes in Long Beach, he is so filled with guilt that, because of his religious belief, he feels as if he has brought the wrath of God down upon the earth (Fante, 2006, p. 98).

It was an earthquake.

Now there were screams. Then dust. Then crumbling and roaring. I turned round and round in a circle. I had done this. I had done this. I stood with my open mouth open, paralyzed, looking about me. I ran a few steps toward the sea. Then I ran back.

You did it, Arturo. This is the wrath of God. You did it.

After this painful experience, Arturo goes back to Los Angeles where, in order to take his mind off the event, he starts writing a story about Vera which would turn into his first published novel. Arturo, still in love with Camilla and proud of this major achievement in his life that made him earn some money, begins to pursue her again but he soon realizes that she is in love with Sammy, the bartender at the Columbia Buffet. One night, Camilla goes to Arturo's hotel room since she needs his help: Sammy suffers from tuberculosis and he is dying, so Camilla wants Arturo to help him editing some short stories Sammy has been working on.

However, Arturo soon understands that Sammy has no talent but, for the sake of Camilla, he tries to help him. Few nights later, Camilla returns to Arturo's room with a black eye confessing that Sammy is getting violent and he is beating her when she visits him at his home in the desert.

That night represents a turning point in their relationship since the two make love and starts spending a lot of time together, even if Camilla begins to be increasingly unstable and alcohol addicted when Sammy, who beats her and treats her like a servant when she is at his house making her cooking and doing his laundry, makes it clear that he wants nothing more to do with her. Unfortunately, Camilla, as a consequence, has a mental breakdown and she is placed in a mental hospital where visits are not allowed: now, for Arturo, it is impossible to know anything about her. In fact, only few months later, when Camilla goes to his hotel room in order to see him, he discovers that she escaped from the hospital even though she is still very fragile and emotional and relies heavily on drugs.

Towards the conclusion of the novel, Arturo makes a big decision: he wants to move with her to Long Beach, rent a house on the coast and live with her. After doing it, while being temporarily in Los Angeles to pay the hotel bill, Camilla runs away in the desert returning

to Sammy's house but, when Arturo finds out, she is nowhere to be found. Arturo, now hopeless, decides to take his personal copy of his recent published first novel and dedicate it to Camilla before throwing it out into the desert in the direction that she went.

2.4 Analysis of John Fante's *Ask the Dust*: style and success

While reading John Fante's novel *Ask the Dust*, it is immediately clear that this book is closely related to the other books of the quartet already mentioned above but, in particular, *Ask the Dust* is more connected with the first novel written in the early thirties by Fante, that is to say *The road to Los Angeles*, than with *Wait until Spring*, *Bandini*. In fact, the last mentioned one is set in the cold state of Colorado in a family environment where Arturo Bandini is still a child who tries to survive in a family with an absent father and a poor economic condition. Whereas, *Ask the Dust* and *The road to Los Angeles* share some common characteristics: Arturo Bandini is now a young man of twenty years who left behind him his family and his hometown to try to get lucky as a writer in Los Angeles. Besides this interconnected relationship between the novels, it is interesting to underline the fact that John Fante used different styles of narration. In fact, after writing *Wait until Spring*, *Bandini* in the third person, he completely changed style by narrating *Ask the Dust*, for example, in the first person causing, as a consequence, a different perception of the story on the part of the reader.

Regarding this change of narrative style and the difference between these two books, also John Fante gave his personal explanation in a letter included to *Letters, 1932-1981* (1991) by saying "...I believe...that the writing of *Ask the Dust* is superior to the one of *Bandini*, even though *Bandini*'s story was much closer to me than *Ask the Dust*'s one. For this reason, I could not narrate this new book with the lyric tone of *Bandini*. The first book came out of my heart; the second one of my head" (Fante, 1991, pp. 209).

As I said before, *Ask the Dust*, along with the other novels that deal with Bandini's life, presents a lot of autobiographical elements together with some recollections of Los Angeles reality in the early thirties. In particular, regarding this book, there is a picture, often reproduced in the books on John Fante, that shows the Hotel Alta Vista in South Bunker Hill which is likely to be the model of the hotel where Bandini lived. Moreover,

another photo has been preserved of Marie Baray, the Mexican waitress who helped John Fante in the creation of the female character Camilla Lopez.

Another interesting aspect about Arturo Bandini, who, as I have already stated, narrates his life and its events in the first person, is successfully presented in Suzanne Roszak's article "Diaspora, Social protest, and the Unreliable narrator: Challenging hierarchies of race and class in John Fante's *Ask the Dust*" (2016) in which she states that "*Ask the Dust* ultimately presents us with a protagonist whose own investment in joining this white society is matched by his disdain for the non-white city residents with whom he is so routinely associated in the eyes of others" (Roszak, 2016, p. 186). With this statement, Suzanne Roszak wants to underline that Arturo Bandini, in spite of his Italian origins, does not want to be seen as an immigrant or the son of immigrants: he just wants to be considered white as mainstream Americans are and, in order to do so, he discriminates all of those who have a different heritage (as it happens with Camilla, who is Mexican). By considering all these interesting elements, it is hard to think that *Ask the Dust*, even though it has now its place among the classics of American literature, struggled to achieve its success until the eighties. A similar situation happened also in Italy where the novel was almost immediately translated by Elio Vittorini, an important writer, translator, and literary critics, with the title *Il cammino nella polvere* and published by the publisher Mondadori in 1941 but, despite this prestigious translation, the novel was soon forgotten also in Italy.

Ask the Dust reached its deserved success thanks to Charles Bukowski who, after the Second World War, found a copy of the novel in a library remaining amazed while reading it. As a consequence, Bukowski, by the mouth of his alter ego Hank Chinaski, writes about John Fante in his work *Women* (1978) saying that Fante was a very brave man. Bukowski was so impressed by the narrative style in the first person with strong autobiographical components that he decided to write the preface of the new edition of the novel in which he stated that Fante was a fearless writer who was able to easily braid together irony and pain.

The American rediscovery did not delay to generate consequences also in Europe, especially in France, where Philippe Garnier spread the cult of John Fante translating the saga of Bandini, but also in Italy where a new translation, in 1983, is published by Maria Giulia Castagnone and later also by Francesco Durante in *Romanzi e Racconti* (2004), a

collection of the most important novels written by John Fante and published in the twentieth anniversary of his death in order to give a tribute to his significant literary production.

In conclusion, it can be said without any doubt that John Fante can be considered as the most famous “forgotten” author of the world. His style, his novels, and his stories are perfect for those who love reading about irregular characters and their struggles in life. Moreover, John Fante’s works are accessible to read, but they hide a very complex scheme within them, for example, while reading *Ask the Dust* one can distinguish between three different stories: the first one, regarding Arturo Bandini and the publishing of his first novel, has an happy ending; the second one, that is to say his personal struggle with identity, discrimination, and Italianness; and the third one, the love story with Camilla, which ends pretty badly.

Ask the Dust is surely a novel worth reading and it has to be considered as one of the fundamental books to study when it comes to Italian-American literature. In fact, Italian-American literature must be studied by paying careful attention specifically to John Fante since his novels present all the most significant elements of this literary phase: struggles with the Italian origins, discrimination, hunger for success, and Italianess which I am going to analyze in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

THE QUESTION OF ITALIANNESS IN JOHN FANTE'S *ASK THE DUST* AND IN ITALIAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

3.1 How Italian emigration in the United States brought up the question of Italianness

When we refer to the question of Italianness it is useful to differentiate two main concepts: what is Italianness and what is the question of Italianness. Italianness, as an isolated idea, can be defined as all those characteristics and qualities of being Italian and, as consequence, a state or condition of being Italian. At the same time, the question of Italianness refers to the phenomenon of discrimination and emargination Italian immigrants had, and still have, to experience just for being Italian.

Before delving into the concept and the question of Italianness, which was something that weighed on Italians' shoulders making them feel neither fully Italians or already Americans, it is necessary to resume some ideas that I have explained in the first chapter regarding Italian emigration in the United States of America.

As I already stated, the United States began life as a British colony in the first decade of the seventeenth century becoming, three hundred years later, a world-renowned melting pot. In fact, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States opened its doors to twenty million immigrants, mainly from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, in particular more than four million came from Italy alone especially from Campania, Sicily, and Calabria. Many were the reasons why Italians, in particular those who lived in the South of Italy, were forced to leave their hometowns, but one of the most crucial was the lack of working opportunities,

As soon as they landed in the US, in big cities such as New York, Baltimore or Boston, Italian immigrants had to pass a lot of examinations in order to be allowed entering the country. Moreover, if they were eligible to enter, they had to face discrimination, rejection, intolerance and hostility from Americans who considered Italian people not worthy of any kind of recognition: in their eyes, Italians immigrants were unclean,

unhealthy and careers of diseases arrived in the United States with the purpose of stealing American jobs and money.

To better understand how Italians were perceived when they first arrived in America, it could be useful to make some references to the neighborhoods they created in the cities. In fact, Italians, who felt unwelcome and bewildered in a such different reality compared to their homeland, naturally founded these neighborhoods which testify the need of those men and women to recreate a new home, away from home, for themselves and their families. Aldo Lorigiola, president of the association A.N.E.A. (Associazione Nazionale Emigrati ed ex-Emigrati in Australia e Americhe) and emigrated in the United States at a young age, explained very clearly, in his book *Radici al Sole* (1987), the nostalgia and the consequent need of the homeland for immigrants. In fact, he stated: “For immigrants the homeland is Italy, but without its geopolitical meaning. For them it is something more limited: the homeland is represented by the villages, the few houses they knew and remembered; it is the family, above all the role of the mother. They keep thinking about these things during the adaptation period to the new living situation in the United States while dreaming about the security they felt back home which seems to be lost forever” (Lorigiola, 1987, p.13).

This need can be easily understood if we take into consideration that most Italian immigrants arrived in this whole new country with little education, not knowing any English word, having a thick accent that made it impossible not to be recognized as different from the locals, and being forced to live in tiny apartments in cramped tenement buildings, as well as working long hours without any kind of working rights.

Moreover, in this already difficult living situation, Americans, together with other immigrants such as the Irish, who were for example in a position of privilege since they knew already the language, or the Jews, encouraged the diffusion of stereotypes and negative judgements towards Italians: for example, they claimed that all Italians were criminals belonging to the well-known organization of the mafia, that they were anarchist or that they were not actual and active members of the church since they were Catholic instead of being Protestant.

In this situation, it was inevitable that the question of Italianness would come up and become an important matter.

3.2 The question of Italianness: its consequences and how it has affected Italian immigrants

As I stated above, Italians' arrival in the United States of America was marked by a lot of difficulties, challenges, and distresses caused, not only by the several examinations immigrants had to pass when they landed in the country, but also, and I would say mainly, by the great amount of discrimination they had to suffer and endure.

The living conditions proved to be particularly complicated for the first generations of Italians immigrants, who divided between two different worlds: on the one hand Italy, which represented the homeland, the family, and their roots; on the other hand the United States which was seen as the land of opportunities where Italians could finally hope and aspire for a better future.

Taking into consideration this tough start, before delving more deeply into the matter of Italianness, it is interesting to make a reference to the response of Italian immigrants to the wide spread phenomenon of discrimination. In order to do so, it can be useful to mention the book *Sinatra, Scorsese, Di Maggio e tutti gli altri* (2004) written by Erik Amfitheatrof where he states that, despite this continuous denigration, Italians were completely devoted to the United States. In fact he makes reference to an essay of the early thirties on Italian-American immigrants published by William Foote Whyte, an important American sociologist, in which he writes: "I never heard expressions of love so moving as those that I heard among Italian-Americans. However, if someone wanted to forget that he is Italian, the society would make it impossible. He is branded as being inferior, as the rest of Italians. To strengthen his self-respect, he has to tell himself and to others that Italians are an important people, that their culture is not secondary and that anyone has never overtaken their greatest men" (Amfitheatrof, 2004, p. 287).

Furthermore, it is interesting to take into account also William Connel and Fred Gardaphe's work *Anti-Italianism: Essays on a Prejudice* (2016), a collection that recounts the experience of American anti-italianism combining historical, sociological, and personal perspectives, in which they position anti-Italian discrimination in the context of racial discourses and civil rights struggles in American history. In fact, in the detail, they argue that Italian-Americans were once considered people of color: they tried to find

refuge under the cover of whiteness but they never received its full privileges (Connel, Gardaphe, 2016, p. 169).

To analyze better what Italianness is and its consequences, it is necessary to ask ourselves, “Why Italians were perceived so differently from other immigrants?”. In order to answer this question, it is fundamental to underline that these poor immigrants came from small villages, mainly in the South of Italy, characterized by old traditions together with a deep bond with their ancestors that were difficult, if not impossible, to abandon once arrived in the United States. In fact, besides living in their Italian neighborhoods and interacting the bare minimum with the rest of the American society, immigrants were easily identified since they continued to follow their traditions: for example, they hung the crucifix on the walls of the houses as well as garlic crowns on those of the kitchen which had the power to keep the evil away.

Moreover, apart from these traditions and customs, Italian immigrants, at least the first and second generation, still talked to each other in dialects which made the process of integration and acceptance extremely difficult: not only it was impossible for them to interact with the locals but, when they tried to do so, their accent was the first thing Americans heard causing contempt and disrespect. Eventually, they developed a sort of hybrid language, a mixture of English and dialect, which enabled them to express themselves at least in some aspects of their daily lives. I believe that it could be interesting to look at an example of this new language, where we can read words with English and dialectal influences such as “bricchelieri” which means “muratori” in Italian from “bricklayers” in English or “ruffo” which means “tetto” from “roof” in English.

Vengono i bricchelieri a cento a cento

Tutta una ghenga co' calli le mani

Per far la casa di quaranta piani

Senza contare il ruffo e il basamento (Amfitheatrof, 2004, p.299)

So far, I pointed out some of the reasons why Italians were discriminated but, besides what I stated above, there are two more motives that caused this phenomenon of discrimination which led to the rise of the question of Italianness.

The first motive I am referring to is the fact that Italians were extremely bound to their culinary traditions: in fact, as Amfitheatrof pointed out in his book, “no ethnic group has remained so faithful to their food or had such a great influence on Americans food habits as Italians had have introducing colour and savor to Americans’ tables” (Amfitheatrof, 2004, p. 291).

One of the causes of the attachment to their culinary culture can be found far back in Italian history. In Italy, especially in the South, the farmers’ diet had been almost exclusively vegetarian for centuries: they would eat pasta, potatoes, vegetables on a daily basis, while meat was considered to be food for the rich. As a consequence, even this apparently easy aspect that is common to all of us, caused a lot of differences and conflicts: in fact, for Italians immigrants it was very challenging to adapt to the American diet based on pieces of meat boiled for a long time and tasteless food such as porridge.

Moreover, the culture of food represented for Italians a very meaningful moment since eating and cooking was the only time of the day in which families spent some quality time together drinking also some glasses of wine. However, when they arrived in the United States they had to face prohibitionism which represented that puritan side of America that Italians struggled to accept and to fit in.

The emergence of Italianness and the emargination of immigrants is also the result of another aspect of Italians’ lives, that it is to say religion and faith: in fact, the Catholic Church, played a fundamental role in their lives. However Americans, who were Protestant, were so bothered by this dedication that they decided, during the first years of the Italian immigration, to ward off Italians from Catholicism since they were convinced that conversion was one of the most important steps in the integration process.

All of these reasons affected profoundly Italian immigrants in the United States: their everyday lives and existences were constantly challenged by Americans who were afraid that Italians, with their idea of the weekly rest day, the socialist conception of the government, and the paganism of their religion, wanted to change and disrupt the country. It is interesting to delve more into the idea of socialism and work that Italians tried to bring into American society. In fact, some of the early twentieth century immigrants

brought with them a political disposition toward socialism and anarchism and many of them were in the forefront of organizing Italians, but also other immigrants, labourers in demanding better working conditions and shorter working hours in the mining, textile, garment, construction and other industries. However, these efforts often resulted in strikes, which sometimes erupted in violence between the strikers and the strike-breakers and, since, at that time, American anarchy movement was responsible for bombing in major cities, Italian immigrants were branded as “labor agitators” and radicals by many of the business owners and the upper class of the time, which resulted in further anti-Italian sentiment. Moreover, Italian immigrants, as soon as they entered the country, started to compete with earlier immigrants for lower-paying jobs and housing causing the development of hostility towards them.

Another element, which I have not already mentioned and caused the rise of anti-Italian sentiment and the question of Italianness, is the stereotyped idea, many Americans had, of Italians being criminals. If we go back in time, we see that this idea can be easily related to when the Fascists came to power in Italy making the destruction of the Mafia a priority: the direct consequence was the flight of hundreds to the United States, in the early twenties, in order to escape persecution. Furthermore, the restrictions of prohibition, enacted in America in 1920, proved to be an economic windfall for those in the Italian-American community involved in illegal activities: they smuggled liquor into the country and sold it through a network of outlets and speakeasies. As a consequence, Italians became associated with the prototypical gangster in the minds of many, which had a long-lasting effect in the Italian-American image.

Unfortunately, the majority of Italians lived normal and honest lives only desiring to have better life conditions but they had, as a response intolerance, emargination, and discrimination for decades. Americans developed what we called anti-Italianism or Italophobia which is a negative attitude regarding Italian people, or people with Italian ancestry in general, often expressed, as I have already stated, through the use prejudice, discrimination, and, aboveall, stereotypes.

3.3 The question of Italianness in Italian-American literature

The matter of Italianness is a topic quite discussed also in Italian-American literature but, before talking and analyzing how John Fante, through his alter ego Arturo Bandini, dealt with Italianness, it can be interesting to make some references to Italian-American literature and how authors faced this question.

One of the authors who dealt directly with Italianness was Helen Barolini, one of the most influential contemporary female Italian-American writers. In fact, she wrote an important collection titled *Chiaroscuro: Essays of Identity* (1997), whose major topic was the problem of rejected identity in the migratory context. Helen Barolini pointed out that American authors were used to analyze immigrants' identity from a double perspective: from the point of view of Italian immigrants facing difficulties imposed by the new reality, and from the point of view of immigrant writers obliged to censor themselves because of the stereotypes existing in the local culture. In particular, by referring to this self-censorship, Barolini wrote "In America, the newcomers were forced to face the cultural imperative of the dominant society: in order to be accepted you had to let go of your identity and, in some sense, become a stranger in your own life" (Barolini, 1997, p. 212).

Regarding this feeling of non belonging, extranety, and alienation it is useful to report a poem written by Maria Mazziotti Gillan, a well known American poet born in 1940, in her collection of poems *What we pass on: Collected poems 1980-2010* (2010), in which she testimonies the struggle with identity felt by Italian-Americans:

Miss Wilson's eyes, opaque
as blue glass, fix on me
We must speak English
We're in America, now
I want to say, "I am American"
but the evidence is stacked against me

Without words, they tell me to be ashamed
I am
I deny that booted country
even for myself
want to be still
and untouchable
as those women
who teach me to hate myself (Gillan, 2010, pp. 306-307)

Under such circumstances, it was inevitable that this question of identity would become one of the key topics covered by Italian-American authors, proving to be extremely difficult to solve. However, despite the tough challenge and situation, from the point of view of Italian-Americans, the desire of becoming writers was very helpful and necessary: writing was an important way to dialogue with themselves, with their culture of origin, and with the culture of arrival, that is to say the American one.

As I stated before, Italian-American authors suffered a lot from this discrimination and emargination phenomenon and censorship was one of the major consequences of this problem. There were two main ways of censorship: authors could be censored by editors forcing to follow some kind of writing guide, especially about the topics they decided to base their books on (for example, editors wanted Italians to write about either criminality or familiar solidarity in order to please the local market) or some writers felt the need to censor themselves in order to make their works published, for example by changing their names to a more English-sounding version.

This scenario had huge negative consequences for Italian-American writers' careers, for the success of their literary works, but also for the entire Italian-American community. In fact, the change of their names led to a total indifference towards the Italian-American contribution to American literature: Americans did not recognize that those writers, whose name was just a kind of disguise, were actually Italians.

Among these authors, we can mention Gay Talese who openly discussed about the struggles he had to face as Italian-American and the obstacles he had to overcome in order to be a successful writer; but also, without any doubt, John Fante who, over the years,

coped with his internal identity problems also through his, already mentioned, alter ego Arturo Bandini. For this reason, in the next paragraph I am going to address the question of Italianness in his masterpiece *Ask the Dust*.

3.4 How the matter of Italianness is covered in John Fante's works and in *Ask the Dust*

As I stated in the previous chapter, one of the most important, and known, books written by John Fante is his masterpiece *Ask the Dust* (1939). Since I have already presented briefly the plot in the second chapter, I am going to analyze here one of the many complex topics dealt by John Fante in his work, that is to say Italianness.

It goes without saying that, in John Fante's literary production, the matter of Italianness is widely discussed considering that the author is one of the most influential authors of Italian-American literature. In fact, in his books, John Fante, through his alter ego Arturo Bandini, deals with the question of identity, the sense of not belonging either to the Italian culture or the American one, and the feeling of alienation felt by Italian immigrants. Regarding this perspective, Fred Gardaphe stated that, through this kind of narration, the writers of the second generation revisit the emigration experience in the awareness of belonging to the culture of arrival as well as to that of origin.

To begin, we can find the first references to Italianness, which can be very useful to analyze later *Ask the Dust*, in John Fante's first published work which is *Wait until Spring, Bandini* (1938). In this novel, Arturo Bandini is a child, son of a strong and tough Italian man, Svevo Bandini, who struggles with his identity since he feels completely different, both aesthetically and culturally, from the rest of his friends and neighbors. From this perspective, it is clear that John Fante, along with Arturo Bandini, suffered an identity crisis and an alienation from others throughout his entire life.

We can say that Arturo Bandini is the son of the first generation of Italian immigrants since his father escaped from Italy in order to find better life conditions and, for this reason, Italian culture is strongly present in his every-day life: he has to attend catechism, he has to help during services in church, and he hears every day his mother, or his father, talking Italian, which is a constant reminder of himself being different from his peers (for

example, his father curses frequently in Italian by saying “Diavolo!” or even worse expressions and he sings Neapolitan songs to Maria, his wife). However, Arturo Bandini does not feel connected to this culture and, precisely for this reason, he tries to rebel against it: he does not stand a culture so attached to faith and religion, as we can read in the next few lines, although he forces himself to obey since he is afraid to go to hell and he wants to make his mother happy. In the following lines, I am going to report a passage of the book in which Arturo clearly explains what really drives him to attend church and to follow some customs of his Italian culture even without believing in them:

The road to eternal joy wasn't for him. To get there he'd have to take the hard way, take a detour. Here's a reason why Arturo was an altar boy. He had to show a certain devotion on this earth if he wanted to shorten purgatory. There were two other reasons to be an altar boy. First of all, despite his screams of protest, his mother wanted him to. Then, during the Christmas holidays, the girls of the congregation organized a banquet (Fante, 1938, p. 90)

As in *Wait until Spring*, *Bandini*, the question of Italianess, along with discrimination, is widely covered also in *Ask the Dust* where the struggle with identity is still something which the protagonist faces and has to deal with daily.

In fact, Arturo Bandini has not accepted yet his mixed identity, that is to say that he can be seen as a man divided between an Italian and American culture at the same time since he was born in America but raised by Italian parents: throughout the entire narration, he claims to be American denying his Italian origins as we can read in the following lines

She looked at me from an even higher view over her glasses. “Young man,” she said, “are you a Mexican?”

I pointed at myself and laughed.

“Me, a Mexican?” I shook my head. “I’m American, Mrs. Hargraves. And that isn’t a dog story, either. It’s about a man, it’s pretty good. There isn’t a dog in the whole story.”

“We don’t allow Mexicans in this hotel,” she said.

“I’m not a Mexican. I got that title after the fable. You know: ‘and the little dog laughed to see such sport.’”

“Nor Jews,” she said. (Fante, 2006, pp. 48-49)

In this passage, it is clear that Arturo does not want to be considered as nothing else but American: he is even offended if people mistake him for Mexican or for some other ethnicity. Furthermore, from his words and from his body language (“I shook my head”), it can be easy to capture a lot of racism and discrimination towards other cultures such as the Mexican one.

Moreover, we can find Arturo perpetrating this biased approach also towards who he considers to be his lover, that is to say Camilla Lopez, the Mexican girl. In fact, from the very beginning, Arturo starts to insult her, racialize her, and discriminate her addressing, for example, her way of dressing and her appearance.

Her nose was Mayan, flat, with large nostrils. Her lips were heavily rouged, with the thickness of a negress’ lips. She was a racial type, and as such she was beautiful, but she was too strange for me. Her eyes were at a high slant, her skin was dark but not black, and as she walked her breasts moved in a way that showed their firmness.

Those shoes, they were huaraches, the leather thongs wrapped several times around her ankles. They were desperately ragged huaraches; the woven leather had become unraveled. When I saw them I was grateful, for it was a defect about her that deserved criticism. (Fante, 2006, pp. 34-35)

It is clear that Arturo Bandini does not have issues just with his (double) identity but also with the origins and different identities of others. From this perspective, we can say that he is not capable of accepting himself for who he really is and this attitude has horrible consequences also in his actions and in his behavior with others.

As I stated before, one of the main traits of Italian culture was religion, together with faith, which is something dealt with by John Fante also in *Ask the Dust*. In fact, as in *Wait until Spring*, Bandini, Arturo Bandini still feels this strange and twisted connection with religion: he always experiences a sense of guilt if he does something wrong as religion, but also his mother and father, has taught him and he even believes that, God was punishing him for some reason when the earthquake happened in Los Angeles. Moreover, to give an example of his distorted relationship with God and faith, it is interesting to report a passage in which Arturo rails at God blaming him for the pain Camilla Lopez is being put through. This passage is very interesting and useful to understand also the amount of anger he holds towards religion which he often sees as something only negative.

I went down to the end of the hall to the landing of the fire-escape, and there I let go, crying and unable to stop because God was such a dirty crook, such a contemptible skunk, that's what he was for doing that thing to that woman. Come down out of the skies, you God, come on down and I'll hammer you in the face all over the city of Los Angeles, you miserable unpardonable prankster. (Fante, 2006, p. 89)

To give a further example, I mention here some lines in which Arturo seems to be talking to himself overthinking about the sense of guilt he is going to feel if he steals some milk which shows how much Arturo, even if he wants to deny it, is influenced by his culture in every single action of his life.

But it would not happen that way, because nobody knows Arturo Bandini, and you'll get six months, they'll take you to the city jail and you'll be a criminal, and what'll your mother say? and what'll your father say? and can't you hear those fellows around the filling station in Boulder, Colorado, can't you hear them snickering about the great writer caught stealing a quart of milk? Don't do it, Arturo! If you've got an ounce of decency in you, don't do it! (Fante, 2006, p. 31)

In conclusion, we can say that Arturo Bandini is a troubled man who does not know how to live a normal and balanced life with his Italian heritage and American culture. During all his life, he struggles with this sense of alienation and not belonging to a specific culture and, from my point of view, this will have some significant, but also catastrophic, consequences on his entire existence: he is not capable of connecting and interacting with other people, especially women, in a healthy and respectful way; he will suffer, every day, the guilt imposed on him by religion; and, maybe for his identity struggle which does not allow him to accept himself, he will have various difficulties in finding the right track for his writing career and his success.

3.5 How the question of Italianness is still present nowadays

John Fante's literary production and the themes dealt with by him, including precisely the phenomenon of Italianness, still have their influence nowadays. The question of Italianness, and discrimination in general, did not disappear with the passing of time, quite the opposite happened, and still happens: in fact even when immigrants decide to go back to their homeland, Italy in this case, they have to deal with a further feeling of alienation and estrangement from the Italian society even if it is supposed to be familiar to them and it is supposed to represent their home. Unfortunately, the returnees suffered a very painful discrimination experience, together with the question of Italianness, as immigrants in the United States did. However, as Aldo Lorigiola wrote in his book *Radici al Sole*, "the repatriates were not poor people seeking for acceptance, they had a lot to offer to the Italian society: they had a human experience full of new stimuli and examples coming from a society, the American one, which was more advanced and from which they had learned a lot. Moreover, they had developed an open, helpful and, probably more tolerant, mind strengthening the virtue of solidarity while becoming citizens of the world" (Lorigiola, 1987, p. 25).

To conclude, John Fante and his books are a significant and very powerful literary tool which help us to understand better the complexity of identity, the consequences that a

twisted relationship with identity can have, and the hard work an immigrant has to do to accept himself in a society that does not accept or even tolerate him.

CONCLUSION

In the wide world of literature, the Italian-American one struggled, and still struggles nowadays, to find its validation, recognition and acceptance since, for many decades, it has been considered to be the literature of a minority, that is to say Italian immigrants and their descendants in the United States.

In fact, Italians, because of the conditions of poverty and the lack of work opportunities they experienced in Italy, started to escape from their homeland with the aim of finding better life conditions, more work opportunities, and a future for their kids and the future generations.

As a consequence, between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the United States of America witnessed a real phenomenon of mass migration which did not involve just Italians, although they represented the largest group, but also people coming from Africa and Mexico.

As I summarized in the first chapter, as soon as immigrants landed in the United States of America, they had to pass a lot of examinations in order to be allowed to enter the country and, on top of that, if they managed to enter the country, they found the complete opposite of what they were searching for: they had to live in cramped apartments with little hygiene, in poor life conditions working lots of hours without any kind of labor rights.

In spite of this disastrous scenario, or maybe because of it, Italian immigrants felt the need to found cultural institutions, such as newspapers, where people could find some sort of comfort, a sense of community and the possibility to express themselves.

In fact, it is right in that situation that Italian-American literature started to rise and spread first with poems, comic or dramatic vignettes, and short stories but later, with the passing of time, also with novels, family sagas, and autobiographies which are considered today masterpieces and fundamental tools to understand what immigrants faced and their challenges and achievements.

Among the various Italian-American authors, I believe that John Fante, an author belonging to the second generation of Italian-American literature, is one of the most significant and influential ones worth studying since he gives to his novels, mainly a

personal perspective. In fact, John Fante, in his quartet of books in which we can find also *Ask the Dust* (1939), recalls his life and its most significant events through the protagonist, that is to say his alter ego Arturo Bandini. In fact, in this quartet, which includes also *Wait until Spring, Bandini* (1938), *The Road to Los Angeles* (1985), *Dreams of Bunker Hill* (1986), John Fante narrates, first in the third person and then in the first one, the life of Arturo Bandini from when he was a child living with his parents until he was a man who wanted to become an author.

Personally, I have decided to focus more on the second novel of the quartet, which is *Ask the Dust*, because I believe that is the one which best represents, and presents, one of the main themes of the literary production of the Italian-American literature of the second generation. In fact, in reading this novel, together with *Wait until Spring, Bandini* and the other ones of the quartet, we can find a leitmotif, that is to say the struggle with identity. In particular, I am referring to the difficulties Italian Americans, especially the sons and daughters of immigrants, had to face in order to accept their double identity: they belonged to American society because they were born in the United States of America but, at the same time, they had Italian origins which were almost impossible to forget since they were constantly discriminated against and emarginated by being reminded that they will never be considered as totally Americans.

The struggle with this double identity caused a lot of problems, difficulties but also frustration in Italian Americans' every-day lives and this can be seen clearly in John Fante's *Ask the Dust*. In fact, Arturo Bandini, although he wants, with all his power, to be considered as American as the others, he faces everyday discrimination and alienation from the rest of the society.

As I stated in the second chapter, this situation has huge consequences on his existence since he struggles to find his success as an author, he does not know how to interact with other people, especially women, and he always feels a great amount of guilt imposed on him by religion which he sees as something negative that weighs on his shoulders constantly. Moreover, this inability to interact with others brings him to behave badly towards them, for example he discriminates the woman he considers to be his lover, Camilla Lopez, because of her Mexican ethnicity.

Italian-American literature dealt also with another fundamental topic, that is the question of Italianness which I have analyzed in the third chapter. As we can read in the chapter,

the question of Italianness is something directly linked to the struggle with double identity, the phenomenon of discrimination, and the existence of radical stereotypes regarding Italians in the United States. In fact, Italians were a Catholic minority in a Protestant society, which tried to preserve their traditions and their dialects making it very difficult for them to melt into the society.

Regarding Italian-American literature, authors suffered because of their ethnicity since censorship was one of the major consequences of this problem: authors could be censored by editors forcing to follow some kind of writing guide, for example they wanted Italians to write about either criminality or familiar solidarity in order to please the local market or some writers felt the need to change their names to a more English-sounding version. This phenomenon had disastrous consequences on Italian-American literary production: a great amount of publications did not seem to belong, because of the authors' names, to the Italian-American production and, as a consequence, they got lost or they did not obtain the deserved recognition.

Even if the matter of a divided identity could be seen as something related to the past, it is fundamental to specify that it is something that immigrants continue to experience to this day even when they return to their homelands. In fact, as soon as they go back to Italy, they continue to feel the sense of alienation and unfamiliarity since everything, while they were gone, has changed: the reality they knew does not exist anymore causing a lot of doubts and estrangement forcing them to adapt to another new reality.

What I wanted to give with my BA thesis is a tribute to Italian-American literature which can be seen as a real representation of Italian immigrants' history during more than two centuries. In fact, Italian-American authors always tried to narrate the difficulties, challenges, and achievements immigrants experienced giving them the importance they deserved for being brave enough to embark in a very tough journey in order to find a better life. I strongly believe that John Fante gave a significant contribution since, while reading his novels, we understand the difficult lives immigrants lived with their double identities facing all the consequences brought with it.

ITALIAN SUMMARY

La letteratura italoamericana può essere, anzi deve essere direttamente e strettamente, collegata al fenomeno di migrazione che coinvolse una larga parte della popolazione italiana, a partire dalla fine del diciannovesimo secolo, e che la condusse negli Stati Uniti d'America in cerca di una vita migliore con più occasioni lavorative e la possibilità di riscattarsi dalla condizione di povertà in chi viveva in Italia.

Originariamente, a partire dal diciassettesimo secolo, gli Stati Uniti d'America erano una colonia che apparteneva al Regno Unito ma, al tempo, si conosceva poco riguardo alle colonie britanniche fuori dal perimetro inglese. Il vero e proprio flusso migratorio, verso gli Stati Uniti d'America, iniziò alla fine del diciannovesimo secolo e l'Italia, insieme al Messico e alla Cina, era uno dei paesi più coinvolti in questo fenomeno che portò alla nascita del cosiddetto “melting pot” e degli Stati Uniti così come li conosciamo oggi.

Gli italiani che migrarono negli Stati Uniti, soprattutto durante le prime ondate, oltre a cercare migliori condizioni di vita, erano fortemente attirati dalle interessanti novità politico-istituzionali che includevano i valori dell'Illuminismo come il pragmatismo, la curiosità scientifica, l'amore per la libertà ed il rigore civico.

Quando gli italiani sbarcavano negli Stati Uniti, erano soggetti immediatamente a molti esami, sia fisici che mentali, per dimostrare di poter essere utili per il paese ed il suo sviluppo: chiunque non passasse queste ispezioni sanitarie veniva imbarcato nuovamente e obbligato a ritornare in Italia.

Purtroppo però, anche coloro che riuscivano ad entrare nel paese non andavano in contro ad una vita facile: erano costretti a vivere in stretti e piccoli appartamenti con scarsa igiene lavorando molte ore al giorno senza alcun tipo di diritti o protezione e ricevendo pochi spiccioli per poter vivere. È facilmente comprensibile che, in questa situazione di estrema difficoltà, gli italiani sentirono la necessità di fondare delle istituzioni che li facessero sentire parte di una comunità ed è proprio per questo motivo che cominciarono a nascere i primi giornali italoamericani come, per esempio, “L'Eco d'Italia” o “Il Bollettino della Sera”.

Una delle prime conseguenze della fondazione di questi giornali, è la nascita delle prime pubblicazioni della letteratura italoamericana dal momento che, in queste sedi, gli scrittori italoamericani avevano la possibilità di esprimersi.

Nei suoi primi anni di sviluppo, la letteratura italoamericana vede il susseguirsi di molti autori appartenenti alla cosiddetta prima generazione nella quale, la maggior parte degli essi, si esprimevano ancora con la loro lingua materna o addirittura attraverso il loro dialetto, soprattutto il napoletano. È fondamentale menzionare alcuni di questi autori che, attraverso le loro opere, posero le basi per lo sviluppo della letteratura italoamericana delle generazioni successive che studiamo e conosciamo oggi. Gli autori a cui mi riferisco sono, per esempio, Bernardino Ciambelli (1862 ca. – 1931) con le sue prime opere come *I misteri di Mulberry Street*, *I drammi dell'emigrazione* (1893) e *I sotterranei di New York* (1915) o Louis Forgione che pubblicò tre libri che sono considerati dei capolavori dei primi anni della letteratura italoamericana, tra questi è fondamentale nominare *Reamer Lou* (1924) che è, almeno parzialmente, una autobiografia che racconta l'ambiente pieno di sfide, duro lavoro e violenza che gli immigrati italiani dovettero affrontare.

Proseguendo nel suo sviluppo, troviamo un'altra fase molto importante della letteratura italoamericana che è rappresentata dagli autori della seconda generazione i quali concentrano le loro opere sulla famiglia che può essere considerata come il cuore pulsante della vita degli immigrati: è proprio per questa ragione che, in questa fase, la produzione letteraria è rappresentata dalle cosiddette autobiografie familiari o saghe. Uno tra i più importanti scrittori di questo periodo è John Fante (1909-1983), considerato lo scrittore italoamericano più influente della letteratura italoamericana del ventesimo secolo. Uno dei suoi più grandi capolavori è la saga, composta da quattro libri, ossia *Aspettando primavera*, *Bandini* (1938), *Chiedi alla polvere* (1939), *La strada per Los Angeles* (1983), *Sogni di Bunker Hill* (1985), che racconta la vita di Arturo Bandini, alter ego di John Fante, da quando era un bambino fino a diventare un uomo adulto che vive a Los Angeles e sogna di diventare uno scrittore di successo. Di John Fante avrò modo di parlare più nel dettaglio nelle prossime pagine, quindi ora farei una breve carrellata delle correnti che ci sono state, e ci sono ancora oggi, nella letteratura italoamericana dopo la seconda generazione.

A partire dagli anni '60 la società americana stava vivendo un periodo di grandi cambiamenti con conseguenti proteste da parte degli studenti, la diffusione di nuovi stili di vita come quello hippie, il successo della musica rock e di movimenti femministi e per i diritti civili con l'ideale di pacifismo che si sviluppò contro la guerra in Vietnam. Proprio in questi anni di cambiamenti, si sviluppò la generazione Beat che portò con sé una lunga stagione ricca di avanguardie in letteratura, arte e musica. Tra questi artisti della generazione Beat troviamo, per esempio, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919-2021) che pubblicò lavori che trattano di pacifismo, sessualità, libertà e diritti civili come "*The Old Italians Are Dying*" (1979).

Come ultima fase, almeno fino ad oggi, della letteratura italoamericana troviamo lo sviluppo negli anni '80 della "*Italian American Renaissance*" che fu una conseguenza del nuovo successo della produzione letteraria femminile e della notorietà acquisita dal capolavoro di Puzo, ossia *Il Padrino*. In questi anni, la letteratura italoamericana appartiene ormai alla cultura americana mainstream, dal momento che gli italoamericani non vivono più nei loro quartieri separati dal resto della società parlando una lingua che non permette loro di comunicare. Allo stesso tempo però, quest'ultima fase della letteratura italoamericana mantiene alcune tratti caratteristici come la povertà, la religione, le radici europee ed il realismo come modo di esprimersi predominante.

Per l'obiettivo della mia tesi, ossia analizzare e investigare la questione ed il problema dell'italianità, ho deciso di concentrarmi sulla produzione letteraria della seconda generazione e, più in particolare, sull'autore che ho nominato precedentemente: John Fante. L'opera che più, a mio avviso, aiuta a comprendere cosa è, ma soprattutto che conseguenze ha, la questione dell'italianità è *Chiedi alla polvere* (1938), il cui titolo originale in inglese è *Ask the Dust*.

In questo romanzo, John Fante racconta una parte molto importante e decisiva della vita del protagonista, Arturo Bandini, il quale, dopo essersi trasferito a Los Angeles, sogna di diventare uno scrittore di successo. Nello svolgimento della narrazione, vediamo come Arturo si innamora di una ragazza messicana, Camilla Lopez, la quale però non ricambia l'amore di Arturo anzi, lei è innamorata perdutamente di un altro uomo che però è violento con lei e la respinge continuamente portandola ad abusare di droghe, alcol fino a farla impazzire. Il rapporto tra Arturo e Camilla sembra, a noi lettori, molto controverso dal momento che inizialmente Arturo la discrimina, insultandola molto spesso, per le sue

origini messicane ma, allo stesso tempo, quando ha bisogno di aiuto, o si trova in qualche situazione spiacevole con l'altro uomo, Sammy, decide sempre di aiutarla ed amarla per quello che realmente é.

Oltre a questo rapporto disturbato tra Arturo e Camilla, uno dei temi fondamentali del romanzo é, come ho detto prima, la questione dell'italianità, ossia quella discriminazione che subirono gli immigrati italiani per il fatto di essere italiani e di aver portato i loro ideali, tradizioni e costumi in America dove però venivano visti come criminali, poveri e ladri di lavoro, e la difficoltà di vivere con una doppia identità: gli italoamericani infatti, così come Arturo Bandini e John Fante, avevano da una parte un'identità italiana ereditata dai loro genitori, ed antenati, italiani ma, d'altra parte, essendo nati e vivendo negli Stati Uniti d'America, avevano sviluppato anche una forte identità e cultura americana.

Nel caso specifico di Arturo Bandini, l'aver una doppia identità lo porta a vivere una vita molto complicata su cui gravano catastrofiche conseguenze: non samcome comportarsi e relazionarsi in un modo sano con gli altri, soprattutto con le donne, finendo, come per esempio nel rapporto con Camilla, a discriminarli, insultarli ed offenderli; soffre costantemente del senso di colpa imposto dalla religione che sempre vissuto come qualcosa di negativo; in più, molto probabilmente per questo poco equilibrio nella vita, ha continue difficoltà nel trovare la giusta strada per la sua carriera lavorativa. A mio parere, Arturo é un uomo che, purtroppo, non sa come vivere una vita normale ed equilibrata dal momento che lotta contro questo senso di alienazione e non appartenenza a nessuna cultura in particolare: si sente come in mezzo fra due mondi senza appartenere a nessuno di loro. Per comprendere meglio questo concetto, possono essere utili alcune linee del romanzo *Aspettando primavera*, Bandini nelle quali Arturo, ancora bambino, attraverso le parole dell'autore, esprime il suo desiderio di essere considerato americano e non italiano.

Di nome faceva Arturo ma lui avrebbe preferito chiamarsi John. Di cognome faceva Bandini ma lui avrebbe preferito chiamarsi Jones. Suo padre e sua madre erano italiani ma lui avrebbe preferito essere americano. (Fante, 2015, p. 31)

Per concludere, credo fermamente che John Fante e le sue opere siano degli strumenti letterari di fondamentale importanza per capire meglio la complessità dell'identità, le conseguenze che essa può avere e il duro lavoro che gli immigrati dovettero, e devono ancora fare, per accettare loro stessi in una società che non li tollera o accoglie. Inoltre, le opere di John Fante non presentano grosse difficoltà nella lettura anche se nascondono una schema più complesso: per esempio, nel romanzo *Chiedi alla polvere*, troviamo tre storie diverse: la prima che riguarda Arturo e la pubblicazione del suo primo romanzo, la seconda che racconta del suo dramma interiore a causa della doppia identità e la terza che narra la storia d'amore con Camilla. Sono dell'idea che John Fante sia uno degli autori fondamentali da studiare quando si parla di letteratura italoamericana: questo autore è stato capace di presentare nelle sue opere gli elementi più importanti della produzione letteraria italoamericana, ossia la lotta interiore con le proprie origini, la discriminazione, la fame di successo e, con il tempo, l'accettazione di sé stessi.

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