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**FATHERS AND SONS ON THE MOVE
IN JOHN FANTE**

(IS GOD ITALIAN-AMERICAN ?)

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MIKAËL HIRSCH

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"-Forse adesso, dicevo, salterà fuori anche mio padre.
-Tuo padre, mi disse, sei tu !
-In America, dissi, c'è di bello, che sono tutti bastardi."
Cesare Pavese, *La luna e i falò*¹

¹ PAVESE Cesare. La Luna e i falò. Torino : Einaudi, 1950,1977, p12

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INTRODUCTION

The death of John Fante in 1983 suddenly drew his work from the relative oblivion in which it had fallen, to restore the genuine vitality of his struggle against repression and hypocrisy in the American society. Nowadays he has been widely recognized as one of the very few American writers from an Italian background, and certainly the only one who turned his cultural identity into a literary issue. As a young man, he started publishing short-stories in various magazines including the *American Mercury*, which was a common way to begin a literary career before the Second World War, and then produced several novels, including some which were discovered and released only after his death. Fante achieved some critical success, but never reached fame as a writer during his lifetime. The numerous gaps which therefore occurred in his fiction-writing were usually filled by his work on scenarios for cinema and television studios in Hollywood. But the dichotomy between a frustrating though lucrative script-writing activity, and a fulfilling but non-profitable literary vocation, probably damaged his efforts as a novelist : "In many ways, i wish i had never worked for the movies. They have a tendency to spoil a good writer"². Besides a very modern tone, often rough, and a surprising freedom concerning sexual matters, unconventional and provocative for the time, Fante' s idiosyncrasy mainly relies on his approach of ethnic minorities after the great depression. Writing was always for him a way of understanding himself and his origins. His purpose was to : "cover the

² Selected letters (1932-1981), p14

true Italian-American scene, as yet pretty much untouched"³. Nevertheless, especially in his early years, it was intimately linked to a rejection of his past, yet no less a way of mastering the future and therefore proving himself to that past.

Although he never felt part of any particular literary movement, one could say now that he initiated with his friend and fellow writer William Saroyan a trend in American literature which has explored since then the various cultural, religious and linguistic diversities of the Immigrant communities at the basis of the American society. The specificities of Italian people in America, as well as the difficulties of integration, and eventually the possibility for an artist to express his quest for identity were Fante's creed. As a young man and would-be writer, he greatly suffered from the economic crisis which struck America at the end of the 1920's, and therefore his fictional background often appears as an urban chaos emerging from unemployment, poverty and marginality, which allowed him once to consider himself as a possible rival for John Steinbeck. Whether Fante equalled Steinbeck in his description of hopeless Californian derelicts or not, his novels sold poorly and his beginnings were overshadowed by the blooming of the "Lost Generation" which occupied most of the literary scene until the end of the Second World War : "It isn't John Fante who writes best-sellers (...) I am a universe removed from that, or from Faulkner or Wolfe or any of them"⁴.

Fante's childhood in the Italian community of a western suburban town, and his later striving as a would-be artist in poverty-stricken Los Angeles are the two main streams followed either separately or intermingling in his short stories and novels. John Fante pictured himself as a working class writer, and his characters, though deprived of a political agenda, embody very well this

³ Selected letters (1932-1981), p39

⁴ Selected letters (1932-1981), p131

community of blue-collar workers who belonged to the pauperized labor force, without never achieving a class-consciousness. The peripeteia of Fante's main character should be perceived as a contribution to this particular field of American literature in which, since Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, the author has dealt with a young American persona in quest of his own identity. Fante's protagonist and alter ego, who has grown up with its author, can therefore be perceived as the heir to an American literary tradition, as much as the precursor of other youth-oriented writers, such as Kerouac or Salinger, whose first person narrators also drew an accurate picture of America through their personal struggle. Moreover, Fante's approach of Literary fiction is mainly focused on what is happening in the character's mind rather than on the action itself. The combination of the first person narrative with the self-centered, and apparently autobiographical, anecdotes can give the impression of a non-fictional diary in the shape of a novel. But although Fante used his life and memories as raw material for his work, the purely fictional aspects dominate the whole creation. The best comment upon this technique of shaping the reality into fiction can be found in Fante's own literary work : " i told him about the blonde girl i met in the park. i told him how i worked it, how the blonde girl tumbled. i told him the whole story, only it wasn't true, it was a crazy lie-but it was something. it was writing"⁵. Fante knew perfectly how to capture everyday life events and to turn them into something valuable, as far as writing was concerned. Although he seldom suffered from racism, rejection and xenophobia are constantly present in his work for he understood they were important issues in the American society, and the conscious modifications and exaggerations of his own experiences are to be taken as relevant views in term of fiction writing and social criticism.

⁵ Ask the dust, p17

Fante's fiction quickly disappeared from the readers' memories, even hardly available on public library bookshelves, while Saroyan achieved a public recognition and was eventually rewarded of the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. It is not until the beginning of the 1980's that his work started to influence other writers and was eventually considered as a profoundly, innovatively ethnic piece of literature, one of the very first in America. The reissuing of his books initiated a sort of revival which has been going on since then, even if his popularity remains relative in America. This progressive increase in interest does not only reveal a better understanding of a long forgotten talent, but also that Fante's questioning of ethnicity and self integration seem to be relevant in a society which appears more fragmented than ever. In growing urbanized and cosmopolitan areas, the difficulties of a youth in quest of a multi-cultural identity seems to acquire a vivid dimension, and the profoundly human bitter-sweetness of Fante's alter ego sincerely appeals to the reader.

The purpose of this study will be to present a monography of Fante's literary work, considering his complete fiction as a macro-textual entity, made out of short stories, novelas, and novels, mainly built upon the multi-faceted relationship of a recurrent protagonist with his father. It will also be an attempt to place his work into the history of literature, by commenting upon its heritage and legacy. Through the various aspects of this family bond, which is here extended over four generations, we will analyze the evolution in terms of identity, in order to expose the complex linkage that exists between ethnic roots, the acquisition of Americaness, and the writing process. Moreover, Fante's biography will interfere as little as possible with the comment of his work, and this despite the fact that his books are partly autobiographical, for the aim of this study is to deal with what Fante wanted to express, and not what he actually experienced, or even the dichotomy between the two.

Above all, Fante's undertaking aimed to embrace the mythical Americaness, and to reach the lost unity of his fragmented self through the use of fiction writing. The transformations that he had to face had been initiated by his own father and the defensive reaction of his *doppelganger* Arturo Bandini was a shift in spiritual values, which enabled him to free himself from the burden of the past and to enter into the great wide openness of America. Eventually, the writing process which spurted from the wound created by this inner struggle, snuffed the initial spark of rebellion, and completed the circle by bringing the self back to where it started. This desire of accomplishment as a human being is but a metaphysical quest which attempts to reunite the different cultures, the child and the elderly, Man and God, in a universal and poetic fashion : one novel, half way between Italy and America.

I

A QUEST FOR AMERICANESS

Fante's protagonist, either called Molise or Bandini is the elder son of an Italian immigrant who founded a family in America. His fate is to escape the natural frontiers of his immigrant background in order to achieve social and cultural assimilation, without destroying the family patrimony. The fragile and almost impossible equilibrium between the preservation of traditions and the complete rupture with the past is the difficult way taken by the second generation of immigrants. From one extreme to the other , he will try to make peace with his tormented and divided self by accepting the contradictions of his nature, but this quest will remain a perpetual struggle.

CHAPTER 1

THE NEVER-ENDING VAGRANCY

Bandini' s desire to escape from the past in order to embrace his American present, is in keeping with the general pattern of his family legacy, whose evolving nature has been expressed by a constant need to travel, throughout the successive generations.

SECTION 1 HEADING WEST

The fascination for a mythical western land of plenty, in which material success as much as spiritual fulfilment would be possible, epitomizes the quest of the Bandini family, and replaces it in the general trend of American history. Nevertheless, this westward progression, achieved in several steps, suffered from the dichotomy between myth and reality

A MATERIAL AND SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS

Bandini's father arrived in America before 1910, the year during which more than a million poor Europeans crossed the Atlantic ocean to reach their promised land. Among them were many Italian peasants and craftsmen who considered themselves as rather Sicilian laborers or Calabrese ploughmen than Members of the Italian nation. By leaving their country for a better life in the United-States, they gained more than American citizenship, but the feeling of belonging to a community that was much larger than they had experienced in their villages. Receding from their home land, they started to feel closer to it than ever before.

Surprisingly, the very first trip of the father, from his original region of Abruzzi to New York is never mentioned directly in Fante's work, as if the initial gap created by the separation from the native soil was a silent burden, an unspeakable issue that drew an invisible frontier between the father and his sons. America was perceived as "a land of milk and honey" in which it was possible to go from rags to riches overnight, and this fascination for the West end of the world definitely cast Europe as the "East of Eden", thus modifying John Steinbeck's approach of the Bible. Therefore, the massive waves of immigrants were not only seeking fortune in : "the splendor of that new world"⁶ but, like the pilgrim fathers, were fleeing from "the country of Nod", in which they had been rejected since Adam.

Although, the crossing of the father remains untold, Fante dispatches some items of information about his family which let the reader know that the habit of travelling around was a common feature of his ancestors : "My father's father, he had been an itinerant knife-sharpener in Abruzzi"⁷. These narrative elements which enlighten Bandini's behaviour with hereditary causes tend to naturalism and determinism, as much as they announce a particular interest for restless people who struggle through life with the burden of their roots : "How beautifully he sharpened knives, the way he walked railroad tracks from town to town, with the heavy whetstone wheel strapped to his back"⁸. Bandini is a hobo, in keeping with the American myth, as much as with the European tradition of the *bildungsroman*. Even when he settles down the stomping of his feet goes on in his mind, for his family inheritance is to search the world like his father and his father's father : "transcients huddled over a red

⁶ Wait until spring Bandini, p238

⁷ The Brotherhood of the grape, p76

⁸ 1933 was a bad year, p114

and yellow fire. At midnight they would grab the freight for Denver, thirty miles away. He found himself scanning the faces, seeking that of his father"⁹.

The relation to the organic forces of the soil, a sense of communion with telluric powers seem to be the guiding lines of Bandini's father's way of life. As a stone mason and bricklayer, he is related to the mineral aspects of the world in his daily activity. His harshness and coldness literally embody his belonging to a universe of rocks, coming in a straight line from the whetstone wheel of his own father. A rock therefore, but also rolling stone, leaving the East coast for a more familiar landscape : "As far back as 1910, he had had train experience, coming out to Colorado from New York by rail, traversing the entire distance in a railroad coach."¹⁰ The repetition of situations, from Abruzzi to the Rockies, representing thus the failure of a dream trapped within a circle of contradictory desires : remaining in the safe and usual shadow of the mountains on the one hand, exposing oneself to the bright and frightening western sun on the other. The cold and massive figure of the peaks will keep the bricklayer in their dark side, crumbling the quest into small pieces of hopes for generations to come : "He could never understand why he didn't go to California. Yet he stayed in Colorado, in deep snow, because it was too late"¹¹. Nevertheless, carried away by the inertia of his travelling instinct, he kept on feeling at a loss : "he always walked with determination and purpose, going nowhere"¹².

Arthuro Bandini appears therefore as the heir of a fantasy which is two generations old. He is the unconscious product of a collective dream Which has contaminated all the successive males in his family, but since he was born in America, the struggle within him will be more destructive. The call of the

⁹ Wait until spring bandini, p233

¹⁰ Full of life, p59

¹¹ Wait until spring Bandini, p12

¹² 1933 was a bad year, p25

distant lands turns him to : "the glare of the white mountains towering in the West"¹³, and helps him overcoming the telluric forces which had restrained his father. Soon, he understands that his destiny is to go further West, to beat the road of the American West, long before Kerouac's Sal Paradise. Besides the fact that the original title of Ask the dust was supposed to be Ask the dust on the road, which would have deprived Kerouac from his most famous title, Bandini's odyssey foreshadows in many ways the Beat adventure, especially for its sense of moody roaming and almost glamorous raggedness. Everything begins with : " a lonely road at the west end of Rocklin"¹⁴, and a dramatic insight which seems to be anchored in the American spirit : " take the high road. It's your last chance, there is no second time around"¹⁵. Paradoxically enough, it is the pursuit of rumbling which appears to Bandini as the source of rest and fulfilment, as if the road itself had mesmerized the teenager, symbol of an American youth already at war with conventions and inspired by the frontier mythology : " There before me was the road, the signposts clearly marking the direction to peace of soul"¹⁶. Thus, it is conditioned by the economic and spiritual failure of his fathers that Arturo decides to open the Pandora's box of America and to embrace the Whitmanesque experience. Leaving Thoreau and Emerson's forest paths far behind, he takes the freeway, not even paying attention to the direction, just escaping from the poverty of his childhood, like his own father had done : "it did not matter which way you went, the road always stretched ahead"¹⁷. Nevertheless, the black and white setting sun of cheap Western movies (" the first of two features hit the screen. It was Tom Mix in The man from

¹³ Wait until spring Bandini, p236

¹⁴ Wait until spring Bandini, p170

¹⁵ West of Rome, p76

¹⁶ Full of life, p137

¹⁷ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p126

Nogales"¹⁸), kept on heralding the fascination of the poor for a twisted dream, a world of desires : Easy Street and strawberry blonde adventuress. Knowing that there is no possible turning back, and that the burden of other people's hopes was like a monkey on his back, Fante's hero walked out of town, like a lonesome cowboy in the reddish light of technicolor reality. By introducing this implicit comparison between a work of fiction, clearly identified, and the story itself, the author anchors his work down in reality and succeeds into pretending that the reader is not looking at a piece of fiction , but on the contrary at real life. Bandini has a deep but unconscious knowledge of all the forces at work within him and reacts from time to time in a very lucid way : " i(...) cried for my father and all fathers, and sons too(...) because i had to go to California now, i had no choice, i had to make good"¹⁹.

Rushing toward the end of the line, the mystical ecstasy of the Pacific coast, Bandini finds himself caught in the flow of hungry mid-west farmers, unemployed rovers and uprooted provincials who slowly advance in miserable masses : "The old folks , dust of Indiana and Ohio and Illinois and Iowa in their blood"²⁰. Bandini' s journey belongs to the American Mythology as much as it is an open criticism of the good-will, hard work, undertaking state of mind of the stereotyped American citizen. Fante's narrative always stands on the edge of satire, and deliberately remains in and out of the class consensus, by challenging it, but from the inside. Therefore, one could say that Bandini is a passive trigger mechanism, he reveals the failure of the system, without being an offensive outcast. His inner, personal struggle overshadows the birth of a political consciousness, which is typical of the American society in the twentieth century. The ethnic origins, the overwhelming desire to belong to the American adventure and the confusion

¹⁸ 1933 was a bad year, p76

¹⁹ 1933 was a bad year, p127

²⁰ Prologue to "Ask the dust", p7

of the self prevented the appearance of a violent response to pauperization in the 1930's. Arturo Bandini arrives in Los Angeles with nothing but cynicism and lucidity, which unables him to draw an acute portrait of his fellow new-comers : "They came here by train, and by automobile to the land of sunshine, to die in the sun"²¹. In 1939, the year of Fante's Ask the dust release, Nathanael West also published a novel about Los Angeles in which he dealt with a very similar vision : "When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred. At this time Tod knew very little about them except that they had come to California to die"²². According to Fante, The American Dream has died in Los Angeles because it was unable to go further on, and the feeling to be one of these hopeless derelicts who crowded Southern California at the time, confuses his alter ego : "Driven because you were poor, fled from your Colorado town because you were poor, rambling the gutters of LA because you are poor"²³. Further more, the similitudes between Bandini's situation just after his arrival on the coast, and his father's coming to America obviously take part into the confusion that overwhelms the young man, and emphasize the duality of Bandini's psyche, rejection and respect for filiation. Therefore, the figure of the mid-west vagrant, lost and without bounds becomes identified with the untold and caricatured figure of the Italian father arriving to the new world, and this comparison awakens a feeling of shame as Dean Moriarty will later describe in Kerouac's On the road : "Oh these dumb dumb dumb Okies, they'll never change, how completely and unbelievably dumb, the moment it comes time to act, this

²¹ Ask the dust, p45

²² WEST Nathanael . The Day of the locust. New York : Random House, 1939; New York : Penguin Books, 1975,1991, p7

²³ Ask the dust, p20

paralysis, scared, hysterical, nothing frightens me more than what they *want*-it's *my father my father my father* all over again !"²⁴.

The facing of reality subsequent to the reaching of geographical limits reveals the true nature of the myth, a void in place of an Eldorado, like in Edgar Allan Poe's poem²⁵. The disappointment caused by the dead-end of the road and the falsity of the dream were emphasized by the economic difficulties of the time, which turned California into a dump of broken hopes. Bandini's sense of mobility : "When stuck, hit the road"²⁶, and reaction to various forms of oppression quickly become bitterness and self-hatred : "The pain and bruises of my interminable days, the poverty of my childhood, the desperation of my youth, the desolation of my future"²⁷.

However, the transformation which occurs between the Father and the son, the Rockies and the coast, that is to say a shift between the culture one is born with and Americaness that demands to be grabbed, does not take place quietly along the road, but emerges from gaps and snake paths.

B RUPTURE AND CONTINUITY

Bandini's chaotic progression on the way to self-respect and discovery of his own identity is not only a literal geographical trip, but an initiatory experience which contains various aspects. The natural attitude of the son opposing his father in order to deserve his place among the community of

²⁴ KEROUAC Jack . On the road. New York : Viking Press, 1957; Penguin Books, 1976; 1991, p215

²⁵ POE. Edgar A Eldorado, in The Raven and other poems. New York : Dover Thrift, 1991, p36

²⁶ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p126

²⁷ West of Rome, p43

adults has been regarded as a key rite in Human societies, but emancipation of the teenager is just one of the different layers in Fante's fiction. This desire for independence is here expressed through the ethnic and cultural conflict which both links and separates the father and the son. Fante 's purpose was to show how leaving childhood could turn into a dramatic betrayal of the father figure, but also that it was a necessary step toward the building of the self and the later recognition of a rejected heritage.

Although Arturo Bandini was born an American, he soon realised that Americaness had to be conquered. Brought up in an Italian family, his background appears early to him as a large amount of foreign habits which do not corresponds to his state of mind : "I smelled the rich odor of ravioli sauce through the house(...) i just want some bread and peanut butter, i said"²⁸. This "ravioli and peanut butter syndrome" as one could call it, personifies the immigrant's son, deeply related to the ground he is born on, brought up in the memories of a far away place he has never seen, torn apart between the past and the future, with no present to live in. Nevertheless, he is contaminated by a sort of nostalgia and cannot help aching a little "When his father sings of Italy, of an Italian sky, of a neapolitan bay"²⁹. He confusedly misses a world he has never known and suffers from a lack which is not his but his father's. Arturo finds himself caught between the rock of breaking loose from his family, and the hard place of forgetting the past, but does not realise that his desire of rupture still belongs to the dream of his fathers. As a matter of fact, the western migration of the Bandini family obviously needed a relative giving up of the past, if not conscious at least accepted afterward, turning Italian born members of the family into stateless individuals : "The mark of loneliness upon her too, inexpressibly alien, not an Italian and far less

²⁸ The Wine of youth, p76

²⁹ Wait until spring Bandini, p56

American, a fragile misfit"³⁰. Therefore, Bandini's reaction toward his childhood and his father's customs ("I make a great fuss because i can't have mayonnaise and other American things"³¹), is but a further step in the natural process of integration and the continuity of an evolution which is based on a succession of ruptures. The cruel irony of this chaotic and progressive settling down is that it is a source of conflicts among generations, which only emphasizes the differences that separate them : "he was a great bricklayer and a failure; i was a great ball player and i would fail too, with this difference : he was from Torricela Peligna, a foreigner, and i wasn't"³².

Using the symbolism of seasons, Fante describes this succesion of fractures which on the whole forms a rational chain of events and beings. The title of his first published novel Wait until spring Bandini explicitly deals with the roughness of Arthuro's father : "Those Colorado winters were merciless(...) my father was a bricklayer. Because of the snow, he couldn't work(...) and the long pull of white days exasperated him, and made him a dangerous man in an iron cage"³³. Winter being the natural season of the father, like in Thoreau's walden, he must wait for the spring to get himself back to work, but in the same time, the title also evokes Arthuro's departure who constantly postpones his trip and must wait to reach California, the land of eternal spring, and to leave the father's influence. Fante implicitly assimilates the seasons, the places and the periods of life to create two coherent spheres of fiction which coexist one beside the other : Colorado, winter, the father and childhood on the one hand, California, summer, the mother and Manhood on the other. Moreover, between these two contiguous worlds lie various attempts of communication and connection, among which several

³⁰ 1933 was a bad year, p19

³¹ The Wine of youth, p137

³² 1933 was a bad year, p100

³³ The Wine of youth, p21

aborted escapes : "-Still want to go to Arizona ? -sure, burt. i lied. How about you?"³⁴.

As far as the father and the son become strangers to one another, the differences in their idioms become emphasized : "All i know how to do is to string one word after another, like beads. All you know is piling one rock on another"³⁵, which links one more time the differences and the similarities of two people who look like each other but cannot communicate. As a matter of fact, they both try to create something but do not use the same material. On top of this, the linguistic gap which keeps the generations apart soon becomes a source of fun and a way for the younger ones to enforce their superiority : "My brother Tony will then say : cutton, cutton, cutton, where's my cutton ? (...) for he is mimicking the crippled English of my father"³⁶.

The impossibility to exist in between the cultures creates both a rejection of the origins and a disgust for America which does not correspond to the elaborated dream of the new settlers. By 1620, there was a country to build and the strength of Nature to shape into a heavenly vision, but in the 1930's there was nothing left for the new comers, no virgin space to explore, not even the remains of long-lived illusions. Therefore, Irony becomes necessary to fight back poverty and racism, the feeling of lack and the certitude to be at a loss : "I'm an American citizen. Been one for twenty-five years (...) she's a wondeful place this America. She's been good to all of us, this America. God bless the USA" ³⁷. The questioning of America's ability to integrate its immigrants through the use of mockery and sarcasm is typical of Fante's stylistic devices : "Is it the rich promise of golden America, land of equality and brotherhood, beautiful America, stinking like a plague ?"³⁸. The

³⁴ The Wine of youth, p223

³⁵ The Brotherhood of the grape, p43

³⁶ The Wine of youth, p151

³⁷ Full of life, p72

³⁸ 1933 was a bad year, p16

disappointment born from the dichotomy between the fantasized icon and the harsh reality is emphasized by the economic crisis and the segregation enforced by former immigrants : "For this i have traveled five thousand miles in steerage to a barbarian land ?"³⁹. America therefore becomes a shameful goal, a grail stained by the dirt of racism, poverty and born dead illusions ("So this is the American way, she said. to kill the soul of a man and then chop off his hands"⁴⁰), which still must be reached because there cannot be any turning back. Nevertheless Bandini clearly perceives the ambiguity of his metamorphosis. He longs for an almost mythical Americaness, but knows that the object of his quest is not that desirable : "You try so hard to be an American, i said. Why do you do that, take a look at yourself"⁴¹.

The gridlock of Bandini's situation corners him into searching for a third way, the sketch of a subculture which would be his own, and would find its place into the mosaic of the fragmented American society : "People, Papa ! Human beings like you and me. Sons of tailors and butchers and fishermen. Of barbers and coal miners. Italian-Americans from homes like ours, from all over the country in this land of opportunity"⁴². This original blend which is not exactly the facing of two different cultures but the fruit of their mixing, that is to say an unpredictable result, begins quite naturally with a modification of language.

³⁹ 1933 was a bad year, p17

⁴⁰ 1933 was a bad year, p112

⁴¹ Ask the dust, p121

⁴² 1933 was a bad year, p98

SECTION 2 A LINGUISTIC STRUGGLE

Since the process of integration is but a westward vagrancy, the language itself is to be modified by the continuous journey, in order to express the shift in cultures and the attempt to create a new individual . This transformation of the linguistic canvas heads in two different directions at the same time, the assimilation of foreign voices into American English on the one hand, and an attempt to outshine the Anglo-saxon protestants in their mastering of English on the other.

A THE FOREIGN VOICES

Fante's interest for immigrant communities was limited to his native Italian background, and to the Filipino workers of the California canneries, therefore his twisting of the language was only oriented towards these two minorities. Nevertheless, whatever the microcosm was, that he decided to focus on, there are two main linguistic devices which are to be found in his fiction to express the cultural struggle.

The intradiegetic first person narrator mostly adds Italian vocabulary to his English : "The language is in your blood (...) abbastanza !" ⁴³, thus trying to offer a spicy and Mediterranean touch to the English language. Yet, the Italian idiom does not contaminate English in its structure, but drops from time to time exclamations and insults which enlighten the narration with references to the Italian folklore : "Bruta animale, he said. Putana !" ⁴⁴. On top of this, the recurrent use of what could be identified as Mediterranean hyperboles

⁴³ The Wine of youth, p143

⁴⁴ Wait until spring Bandini, p265

emphasizes the fact that English is perceived by the narrator as raw material which can be carved, modified, and eventually turned into something genuine, English phrases spoken with a singing tone and the use of the hands to exemplify the meaning : "The cake was devil's food, with about a foot of chocolate icing"⁴⁵, or even : "the big crabs were the size of house bricks"⁴⁶.

Most of the other characters, whether Italian relatives or Filipino fellow workers, do not import foreign vocabulary into their everyday life English, but speak a broken idiom which is a barbaric mixture of accents and empirical grammatical rules. This chaotic language, apparently incapable of following well-structured patterns is often opposed to the narrator's way of speaking and his punctual and rational imports : "She speaks English with a bad accent, her vowels rolling out like hoops (...) -you lika go to the seester scola ? My heart roars. Mannagia !"⁴⁷. The differences between the two clearly show the linguistic gap which separates the two generations, new comer fathers on the one hand, and second generation American born sons on the other. Nevertheless, education and adaptation cannot completely tear people apart, and Fante, lucidly enough, caricatures people who claim their differences over the traditional, uneducated, aliens : "Sixteen years ago i say to you : go to school, Julio Sal. Learn to read English, learn to write English, it comes in handy someday (...) me, i am different. I have big education"⁴⁸. The different languages, symbols of division among the communities tend to merge into a convenient and original slang, which fills in the holes between the cultures, by mixing Italian suffixes with Anglo-Saxon roots. Nevertheless, this particular idiom, though trying to relate the people, can also appear as the living disgrace of a community which is unable to cut with the past, and the herald of

⁴⁵ The Wine of youth, p204

⁴⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, p31

⁴⁷ The Wine of youth, p139

⁴⁸ The Wine of youth, p256

a taught inferiority facing the descendants of New England settlers : "Born in Chicago, knowing only the English language, my mother nonetheless spoke like a Neapolitan immigrant fresh off the boat whenever she and Harriet came together (...) Harrietta, i'm gonna aska yo wan beeg favor, si ? You tink she's all right iffen your husba stay two, three dayn maybe wan week ? He' sa help his papa, poor ole man, he' sa got the rheumatiz. I tink wan week"⁴⁹. This attempt to exist within a dominant culture by becoming one of its various componants was to be a reaction toward racism, rejection and fear of differences, but the new language which emerged from this reactive attitude did not succeed into being efficient, on the contrary it turned to epitomize the bastardy : "Mamma mia, he blubbered. Tummy Murray, he calla me wopa"⁵⁰.

The use of phonetics, disguised English and invented words based on a blend of real lexicons was an attempt for Fante to reproduce in a written form an oral dialect. Although the bastardy of the culture did not suppose its transcription in a literary way, Fante applied himself to describe the mould from which his dual nature had emerged. The linguistic interest of such a twisting mostly relies on its uncountable possibilities of inventions, new words, puns, which result in an overlapping of cultures, rich in misunderstandings. Out of this confusion stands the desire to cypher and to master the space left untouched between the languages and the continents. As a matter of fact, Bandini pulls his strength from his key position between the communities, and his cultural bastardy eventually appears as a linguistic lever to hide and and to reveal : "Steal if you must, a sob in her voice. From bankers, from the light company, from the tax collector, but spare the unhappy fruit of my womb. -What' s that Ken asked. What' d she say ? -I

⁴⁹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p56

⁵⁰ The Wine of youth, p133

told him it was hard to translate. A kind of Italian saying"⁵¹. Actually, the possibility to translate and to communicate from one language to the other is the immigrants' wealth. The coexistence of a dominant cultural sphere and the subculture of a minority allows the immigrant to protect his traditional heritage within the small circle of the family, but also to benefit from the common grounds of the majority. Just as Ebonics is for the Blacks, Italian-American appears in Fante's fiction as a great cultural wealth since it represents an intimate sphere of references, shared only by a few people, and this feeling of privacy can restore self-respect. Furthermore, as far as the writer is concerned, the symbiosis of languages is not only the community' s interest, but a stylistic device which enables him to play with meanings and pronunciations in order to enrich the structure of his narration.

Nonetheless, Bandini's behaviour regarding the use of language cannot be reduced to an attempt of merging between Italian and English. As a matter of fact, it is only one of the many ways successively chosen by Fante's alter ego to deal with his problems of identity. The broken English of factory workers and Italian craftsmen is often paralleled by a bombastic reaction of the narrator : "I show you. Come on boss orders. -The boss is a moron. He's dementia praecox !" ⁵², which reveals another aspect of Bandini's quest for a language which would match his shifting personality.

B THE CONQUEST OF LANGUAGE

Suffering from segregation, whether self-inflicted or enforced by a hostile social environment, Bandini starts to resent the world which surrounds him. Although he naturally belongs to America, his place in the society is

⁵¹ 1933 was a bad year, p112

⁵² The Road to Los Angeles, p96

rather determined by his ethnic roots and foreign type of education. Therefore, he feels like conquering what he is deprived of, starting with the English language. As a symbol of Americanness, the idiom becomes a tool of social integration as much as an intellectual challenge. In his attempt to prove his worth to the outside world and to himself, he learns how to use the language in order to outshine the American "racial nobility" that he considers as his rival. The mastering of English is here perceived as a stake of power and dignity which makes clear Bandini's sensible attitude towards his abilities : "I could not tolerate a remark like that. It burned me to the core. She could ridicule my beliefs and persecute me for my philosophy and i would not complain. But no one could make fun of my English"⁵³.

Although the efficient and precise use of the language can be a weapon against prejudices, Fante quickly caricatures the excessive pride of his protagonist and his zealous apprenticeship of intellectual lingo : "The callous vexations and perturbations of the night have subsequently resolved themselves to a state which precipitates me, Arturo Bandini into a brobdingnagian and gargantuan decision"⁵⁴. The evolution in language, which goes from Italian to Italian-American dialect and eventually to bombastic English parallels the geographical travel from Abbruzzi to California through the Rockies. This transformation is characterized by the necessity of assimilation and the rejection of the father, Nevertheless Fante comments the shift with a great deal of irony and self-parody, turning his protagonist into a ridiculous and quite grotesque actor rehearsing his conceited monologues in front of an astonished and scarce audience : "Jim, this pabulum is indeed antediluvian (...) the steak, i said, it's archaic, primeval, paleanthropic and antique, in short it is senile and aged"⁵⁵. The unleashed desire to do well, to dominate his father

⁵³ The Road to Los Angeles, p75

⁵⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p163

⁵⁵ The Road to Los Angeles, p14

and to strengthen his social position lead him to an artificial and absurd but terribly funny way of speaking, in which technical and sustained vocabulary mix up with common speech without any relevance : "I hurt it slaving my life away in that carnatic jute-mill ! I hurt it because the fungus mouths of two parasitical women depended upon me. I hurt it because of the idiosyncrasies of native intelligence ! I hurt it because my destiny would deny me no dogmatism ! I hurt it because the metabolism of my days would deny me no recrudescence ! I hurt it because i have a brobdingnagnian nobility of purpose"⁵⁶. As Bandini himself explains it, he is fascinated by the abstract power of the sign over the signification, the complexity of sounds over the clarity of notion : "My head swims in a transvaluated phantasmagoria of phrases"⁵⁷.

This delirious attraction toward the English language is nothing but an attempt of appropriation, the expression of a desire for possession which invests the linguistic structures like pieces of garments. Fante is here a puppet-master of , apparently having a lot of fun playing with words in a literary purpose ("i love its every connotation and ramification; every variation and implication fascinates me"⁵⁸) but justifying his manipulations by Bandini's ambition. Furthermore, Fante's linguistic game uses other devices to convey this sense of a "love affair" between Bandini and the language. Other aspects of the communication process are explored, such as the reduction of complete words to morphemes and eventually to meaningless onomatopoeias : "Look, pic, see, sic, sac, whac and all of them"⁵⁹. Through Bandini's fascination, Fante discovers and exploits the full range of

⁵⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, p115

⁵⁷ The Road to Los Angeles, p99

⁵⁸ The Road to Los Angeles, p75

⁵⁹ Ask the dust, p147

possibilities offered by literature to tell about feelings, characters and situations.

When the linguistic appropriation has completely invested the vocabulary, the transcription of oral dialects and the splitting of words into small sound units, Bandini turns to other texts and absorbs them into his own narration. This absorption can take place as a theft or rather as a borrowing of literary extracts, that is to say the pastiche and the disguised use of famous pieces of literature under the form of parody or palimpsest. Sometimes the borrowing is fully explicit but always revealed afterward in order to show Bandini's sincere feeling of appropriation : "I still hadn't written a poem to Camilla. As i lay there, inspiration came :

I have forgot much, Camilla ! Gone with the wind,
Flung roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;
But i was desolate and sick with an old passion,
Yes, all the time, because the dance was long;
I have been faithful to thee, Camilla, in my fashion;

Arthur Bandini

(...) I watched Camilla read it in the middle of the floor, watched her shrug and rip it to pieces (...) even the poetry of Ernest Dowson had no effect upon her, not even Dowson"⁶⁰. Arthur Bandini becomes a receptacle in which the flow of English written literature comes to mix. The feeling of embrace is so strong that he hardly distinguishes what is his own and what he has stolen from others. Nevertheless, the piling up of genuine and borrowed materials appears to him as a good basis on which to start a narration :

"The time has come, the walrus said,
To talk of many things :

⁶⁰ Ask the dust, p75

Of shoes-and ships-and sealing wax-

Of cabbages-and kings-

I looked at it and wet my lips. It wasn't mine, but what the hell, a man had to start some place"⁶¹. By quoting Alice through the looking glass, Fante implicitly compares Bandini with the voracious walrus just about to eat the oysters. Lewis Carol's assimilation of hunger and story telling ("talking of things") is here emphasized by the desire of manipulation which emerges from the pastiche technique. Bandini is a walrus, piling up various stories in order to manipulate the oyster-audience.

Moreover, Fante also imitates and mocks famous pieces of American Literature, which is a way for Bandini to criticize and to absorb at the same time. As a matter of fact, he tries to remain distant and to elaborate a culture of his own, but like with his own father, he cannot completely set himself free from the influence : "We met in the Catholic church of my boyhood (...) i dressed in the robe of a priest, stood with a scepter at the high altar. All around me on their knees were sinners (...) and not one of them had the courage to look upon me because my eyes shone with such mad holyness (...) then from the back of the church came this girl (...) knowing she was going to break me from my holy throne and force me to sin with her before the others, so they could mock me and laugh at me"⁶². Obviously, this passage is a transposition of Hawthorne's The Scarlet letter⁶³, suming up the plot of the novel and mocking it at the same time by seriously comparing reverend Dimesdale with Arturo Bandini. Here it is the putting together of two very different characters and situations which creates humour through the use of parody. The twisting of literary works, though consciously done in a humoristic

⁶¹ Dreams from Bunker hill, p147, from CAROL Lewis . Alice through the looking glass. New York : Penguin Books, 1960, p164

⁶² Ask the dust, p81

⁶³ HAWTHORNE Nathaniel . The Scarlet letter. 1840; New York : Dover publication, 1994

purpose, can be considered as a kind of respectful tribute to major authors. Besides the content of fiction itself, the tone and style can also be the subject of parody, when the narrator goes to a Californian supermarket for instance : "First, the grocery list; varoom ! and i roar down the cost highway in my porsche, seven miles to the mayfair market. Scree ! I brake to a stop in the parking lot, leap from the car, give my white scarf a couple of twirls and zap ! I enter the automatic doors. Pow ! The lettuce, potatoes, chards, carrots. Swoosh ! The roast, chops, bacon, cheese ! Wham ! The cake, the cereal, the bread. Zonk ! The detergent, the floor wax, the paper towels"⁶⁴. Here, it is the consuming, advertising pop culture of the 1960's, full of comic strips' exclamations which is parodied, as much as the famous poem by Allen Ginsberg, A supermarket in California : "I went into the neon supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations ! What peaches and what penumbras ! (...) Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes (...)"⁶⁵. These references to worldly recognized figures of the American literary landscape are a way for Bandini to assume his linguistic integration, and for Fante to claim his belonging to the pantheon of American writers, by showing his ability to realize transtextual allusions. Nevertheless, what could be perceived in the first place as a debunking attitude, is rather a disguised fashion to express his admiration toward such an achievement, and therefore reveals the paradox described by Harold Bloom in the Anxiety of influence⁶⁶. As a matter of fact, the use of caricature and parody is recognized as a way for the "ephebe", or begining writer, to liberate himself from the burden of his predecessors. Paradoxically enough, this liberation has to take place through a sort of literary submission, which slowly turns into a positive irreverence. Here, the

⁶⁴ West of Rome, p33

⁶⁵ GINSBERG Allen . Howl. Paris : Christian Bourgois, 1977, p38

⁶⁶ BLOOM Harold . The anxiety of influence. New York : Oxford Press, 1973

engagement of earlier texts is supposed to relieve the writer' s anxiety, as much as to reveal the possibility for both earlier and later writers to share an impulse, a stance toward society. Nevertheless, as far as Bandini is concerned, this limited use of references or rewriting is only a way to enforce his desire of conquest, and therefore to claim his natural belonging to the English language, and to the American letters.

As much as the bombastic trend was the linguistic result of a psychological evolution, the techniques of parody and pastiche are to be seen as elements of this natural process. The westward expansion of the Bandini legacy is but a part of American history with its geographical and linguistic aspects, but the quest also takes place in a determined social environment which contributes very much to its various failures and successes. Relationships between communities, segregation and urban settings appear as key factors in Bandini's transformation.

CHAPTER 2

MARGINALITY : A "WALK ON THE WILD SIDE"⁶⁷

The overwhelming feeling of exclusion and the desire to overcome the rules of a segregated society lead the younger members of the seclusive community to resent the established "hierarchy of races" inherited from nineteenth century social Darwinism. The settlers tried to avoid ethnic conflicts by strengthening the social and cultural walls of the ghetto they had built, when their American born sons strove to break through the artificial frontier toward the multi-cultural and urban frenzy of the metropolis. Nevertheless, resignation and rebellion, though apparently different, are both the expression of a common feeling of marginality, the intimate knowledge of being an outcast.

SECTION 1 THE GHETTOS

The power of the ghetto is to protect the community's safety when facing a hostile environment. Thus Solidarity is made possible by necessity, but enforced only to respect the cultural homogeneity of the minority. The contacts with the outside world are strictly limited because of reciprocal mistrusting, though the foreign community could get involved as a whole in the local life through the use of political machines. Actually, the protective cocoon was a very efficient way to offer likeness and peace of mind to the freshly arrived immigrant, but it also prevented the individual from reaching

⁶⁷ Fante largely contributed to the screen adaptation of Nelson Algren's novel.

what he had come for in the first place, a new identity : "I remembered the story of his youth in America, the loneliness, the injury he had suffered because he was of another race, and the hard shell he had nourished to protect himself"⁶⁸. The shield of the microcosm crushes individual desires by promoting the group consciousness, but the feeling of being at a loss, an uprooted alien in a strange world, remains alive to be restored and heralded by the next generation : "I believed it was his rage at the world, his desire for triumph over the establishment, his immigrant sense of being an outsider"⁶⁹. The lack of communication between the two spheres, equally due to self-segregation and racism, leads to a constant enlargement of the gap which separates them. The reciprocal fear becomes a factor of mutual rejection which turns into a vicious circle and tears the different communities apart : "I am nervous when i bring friends to my house; the place looks so Italian. Here hangs a picture of Victor Emmanuel, and over there is one of the cathedral of Milan"⁷⁰. The timid attempts to create links between the communities, to exchange cultural habits, and eventually to settle a climate of confidence are destroyed by the frontier like walls of the ghetto which emphasize differences instead of focusing on the necessity to live with one another : "I know that once my mother gave some macaroni to the Dows. They said it was good too. But Archer Dow said it tasted dirty"⁷¹.

The enclosure of the ghetto rises a questioning of Americanness since the prejudice of ethnic origins seems more important for the different communities than the actual belonging to the American State. As a matter of fact, people in and out of the ghetto pay great attention to cultural roots, drawing thus the map of a multi-national, fully segregated America. Fante

⁶⁸ The Wine of youth, p245

⁶⁹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p20

⁷⁰ The Wine of youth, p139

⁷¹ The Wine of youth, p61

describes a succession of coexisting ghettos unable to communicate and related to obsolete values : "A Sicilian he decided, Look how black he is, - how can he be a Sicilian, my mother asked. The paper says he was born in Boston. -I don't care where he was born. I know a Sicilian when i see one"⁷². Most of the time, purely European problems are transposed in the context of the new world, and the immigrated communities go on struggling over anachronic debates. Preconceived opinions and stereotypes inherited from the old continent turn America into the complete continuity of the Western civilisation and deny its will to achieve a new type of society : "Frenchy Dorais resigned.-If Adamic quit because of the war, i got to quit too. Blutcher's a German. My old man says they killed a lot of Frenchmen, i resign"⁷³. Prejudices exist between the different communities of new comers which segregate themselves by building up the social rules of their own ghetto, but the greatest gap of all remains the one between Anglo Saxon protestants and freshly off the boat catholics : "The bluebloods of the region, the protestant-Americans-the Schmids, the eicheldorns, the kisbergs and the dietrichs-suddenly found themselves horrified neighbors of noisy dagos working the tracks of the Southern Pacific. They propagated large and offensively dark families and built a Roman church to administer to their primitive superstitions"⁷⁴. The confrontation of these two antagonist communities awakens both the seventeenth century spirit of the reform which brought the protestants to America out of a rejection of "pagan" catholicism, and the rooted fear of the blackman. Although the rich Anglo Saxon protestants were as much self segregated as other and much poorer communities, they reacted with anxiety and violence to the creation of this little Italy : "Mrs Dietrich was fully persuaded that Italians were creatures with

⁷² The Wine of youth, p185

⁷³ The Wine of youth, p229

⁷⁴ The Wine of youth, p84

African blood, that all Italians carried knives, and that the country was in the clutches of the Mafia"⁷⁵. Nevertheless, the reactive trend in the process between the generations eventually breaks with the past, and rejects the old fashion hatred born from European history to create a new but artificial picture of America : "But this is America ! Jake said. We never thought of it any other way. Russians, Japs, Chinese, Poles, Italians. This was a hell of a way to figure people"⁷⁶.

As a matter of fact, the escape from the ghetto and its overprotective structure indicates a shift in perception, and the landmark of a better social integration for Bandini's generation. However, the idealistic vision of the emancipating son soon comes to face the reality of racism and disgust which stand erect along the community trenches : "I have vomited at their newspapers, read their literature, observed their customs, eaten their food, desired their women, gaped at their art. But i am poor, and my name ends with a soft vowel, and they hate me and my father, and my father's father"⁷⁷. Arthuro Bandini is suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling of belonging to a world which does not want him. Being inside the ghetto was suffering from a lack of freedom within the cultural embassy of a distant and forgotten country, but living outside of it means bearing the violence of a society which was born from a rejection process. This fear of the outside and outsiders, including cultural diversity, objects and even animals, is a common feature of the American society as described by John Fante : "Certainly he was a foreigner, with foreigner's adjustment problems in a wasp neighborhood, scorned by anglo dogs and hated by the german breeds"⁷⁸. Despite Bandini's desire for brotherhood, his reaction to racism and agressivity is to

⁷⁵ The Brotherhood of the grape, p84

⁷⁶ The Wine of youth, p230

⁷⁷ Ask the dust, p47

⁷⁸ West of Rome, p52

be explained by Fante as a logical and simple, yet uncontrollable mirroring effect, which pulls him into an endless cycle of violence : "When i was a kid back home in Colorado, it was Smith and Parker and Jones who hurt me with their hideous names, called me wop and dago and greaser, and their children hurt me, just as i hurt you tonight"⁷⁹. Memories of long gone pains, hidden behind the screen of childhood come back with all their strength to hit the fragile ego, and appear as a mere repetition of a trauma which needs to be repeated again and again in order to erase the shame and guilt of being different : "Those huaraches-do you have to wear them, Camilla ? Do you have to emphasize the fact that you always were and will be a filthy little greaser"⁸⁰. As long as the integration process is taking place, a distance is put between the genuine immigrant's son and the would be American middle average man. Deliberately forgetting his true nature, Bandini tries to play the part of the agressor, not to think that he has been the victim. Constantly reminded of his origins ("Why, you're not an American at all. Look at your skin. You're dark like eyetalians. And your eyes. They're black. -Brown, i said"⁸¹), he is also rejected when he succeeds in pretending to other immigrants that he belongs to the dominant group : "I don't like Americans in my crew, shorty said, they don't work hard like the other boys"⁸². Always feeling rejected, and cast out, he cannot help repulsing what seems different to him, even including the members of his own family : "These weren't my children. They were merely four seeds that got waylaid in some dark fallopian tube. These were her children, sprung from a breed of English and German stock that arrived in California from New hampshire and germany. Protestants,

⁷⁹ Ask the dust, p46

⁸⁰ Ask the dust, p44

⁸¹ Ask the dust, p122

⁸² The Road to Los Angeles, p56

too, and odd bunch, to say the least"⁸³. Eventually, the racist and aggressive behaviours that he used to point out and to denounce when he was within the walls of the ghetto, progressively become a part of his own attitude. Out of the fear and the pain of rejection emerge the will to reject as much as new prejudices : "-Dominic. Who ? She wouldn't play our game with him. There were black women in his future and even cynicism could not cope with them"⁸⁴.

The rupture between the passive and protected life within the community, and the aggressive but vulnerable existence of American backstreets goes along with a desire to break away from the father's influence and lifestyle. Therefore, the cultural emancipation becomes a factor of delinquency. The father being a modest and anonymous craftman, the son is going to express his wish for independence and Americanness by adopting a completely different attitude : "I got arrested for stealing carbide"⁸⁵. The repetition of violent acts epitomizes this stepping into America's roughness and the release of frustrations, fears and aimlessness in a partitioned society : "It was Sister Agnes who got me out of jail for breaking street lamps"⁸⁶. Although father and son both experience marginality, their perception and reactions are quite different . When the father segregates himself and lives as an outcast in a closed community to protect himself from the differences and dangers of the American society, his son escapes from his native environment and embraces violence as an outlet for anger and distress. Both feelings of bastardy and rejection lead to delinquency and oblivion : "She sat up, fumbled for the can of marijuana in her purse (...) she rolled one for herself (...) she lit hers, held the match for mine (...) i inhaled it, i held it. I held it a long

⁸³ West of Rome, p66

⁸⁴ West of Rome, p60

⁸⁵ The Wine of youth, p65

⁸⁶ The Wine of youth, p199

time, until it hurt (...) in the middle of the second it began to come, the floating, the wafting away from the earth, the joy and triumph of a man over space, the extraordinary sense of power"⁸⁷. As a matter of fact, the anguish and confusion of Fante's protagonist must be emphasized by the fact that it was not common at all to consume drugs in the 1930's, showing thus that Bandini's behaviour was actually quite radical.

The emptiness which remained between the communities, the cultures, the languages, was a world to create from nothing, the empty space of bastardy that Fante discovered and tried to fill in with his own experience and imagination. The marginality of bastardy and its recognition by the majority as a culture of its own is the struggle epitomized by Arturo Bandini who often faces incomprehension and irony : "He despised Italian-Americans, putting them down as cowards who had fled the beautiful poverty while he, the true patriot, had remained in the fatherland surviving the tragedy of two wars. If you protested that you had no choice in the country of your birth he insulted your father and your grandfather for seeking a better life in another land"⁸⁸.

The symbolic destruction of the community walls leaves Bandini on his own, roaming in the urban environment of the great depression, frontierless, fascinating, corrupted.

SECTION 2 THE URBAN RESTLESSNESS

The urban necessity has always been a tremendously important factor in the spiritual and cultural development of America since the arrival of the pilgrim fathers in 1620. In order to face the unknown and dangerous

⁸⁷ Ask the dust, p143

⁸⁸ West of Rome, p134

wilderness of the American landscape, as much as to fight paganism and the presence of evil, the enclosure of a civilized space appeared as the only proper way to settle down. The good christian does not inhabit the woods like a devil creature, but remains within the town among his fellow parishioners, which explains why the religious outcasts, the convicted heretics were condemned to live in the outskirts as in Hawthorne's The Scarlet letter. Nevertheless, the evolutions of technology and industry during the nineteenth century inverted this trend and the transcendentalists started considering cities as places of corruption, opposed to the lost and almost mythological primitive American wilderness. The way John Fante approaches the theme of urban spaces in his work is actually in keeping with this general pattern, dealing first with the town of his youth and then with the metropolis.

A FROM THE DULLNESS OF TOWN

The traditional scheme of relationships within the Bandini family defines the various reactions toward the urban and the open space. The father who is described as a heavy drinker and sinner often leaves the town to commit adultery and hit the bottle when the mother, who stands for the pillar of christianity, remains in her neighborhood, goes to church and pray : "She (...) saw the mine as a satanic hole in the side of the mountain where an evil atheist lured a good christian man to knock out his brains with wine"⁸⁹. Although Arthuro Bandini knows about his father's behaviour, his desire to break loose and flee from traditional and cultural influences, in order to achieve his quest for Americaness, forces him to look at his hometown with a great deal of cynicism and lucidity : "A lonesome town. All the valley towns were like it, desolate, mystically impermanent, enclaves of human existence,

⁸⁹ West of Rome, p174

people clustered behind fences and flimsy stucco walls, barricaded against the darkness, waiting"⁹⁰. As far as Bandini's Westward evolution is concerned, the typical midwest town is but an obstacle to the quest, an ordeal which must be overcome to reach independence, unity of the self and eventually success, like some of Sherwood Anderson's characters in Winesburg Ohio : "Ned Currie went away to Cleveland where he hoped to get a place on a city newspaper and rise in the world"⁹¹. Here, the struggle for a new cultural identity is mixed with a traditional theme of nineteenth century French novels, which influenced American literature through Naturalism, the departure of a young and ambitious provincial man to the glittering city : "Tonight, i depart for the metropolis (...) our own Los Angeles, the city of angels"⁹². The absence of mutability within the family frame is linked to the feeling of fragmentation and self-hatred which characterizes life in these small American towns, located on the edge of civilization, stuck between the big cities and the western wilderness : "The town had two worthwhile directions : East and West. East lay Los Angeles. West for a half mile lay the sea"⁹³. The attraction-repulsion toward these two possibilities appears as a mere repetition of the father's attitude regarding christianity, although for Bandini it embodies his reaction against the family values and especially the father's environment : "As soon as i touched the door knob, i felt low. Home always did that to me (...) i always wanted to get away from it"⁹⁴. For a whole generation of immigrants' sons, the rupture with the family microcosm and its small town setting seemed to be indispensable, beyond economic necessities in time of crisis, in order to reach the limits of integration and to reveal the cultural wealth of

⁹⁰ The Brotherhood of the grape, p50

⁹¹ ANDERSON Sherwood . Winesburg Ohio. 1919; New York : Oxford Press, 1997, p85

⁹² The Road to Los Angeles, p163

⁹³ The Road to Los Angeles, p152

⁹⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p16

bastardy : "My uncle gyko told me to get out of town and go to New York. He said, don't stay in these little town. Go to Nor York. I tell you, Aram, eat ease eansanity to stay here"⁹⁵. The need to assert his existence as an individual and not as a part of a cultural, religious or even linguistic community motivates his desire to leave the neurotic circle of his mid-West childhood : "The hunger to lust and achieve. To jump the fences of home and town"⁹⁶.

The "bored, sprawling, swollen towns beyond the Ohio"⁹⁷ of Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Which are to be found in Fante's novels, belong to the mythology of the American West as footprints of a civilization in progress, empty shells inherited from a recent past. Once boomtowns on the edge of the frontier, and nowadays ghost towns of a culture which has made Tabula Rasa of its own memory, as Cesare Pavese described it : "In America si faceva cosi-quando eri stufo di una cosa, di un lavoro, di un posto, cambiavi. Laggiù perfino dei paesi intieri con l'osteria, il municipio e i negozi adesso sono vuoti, come un camposanto"⁹⁸. The transcient quality of objects and people is at the core of Americanness, and the constant shift of mood which roots the cult of the present into Society is the energy that Bandini tries to capture in order to flee his native environment which he perceives as on the verge of decay : "A sick town. One had the feeling that bulldozers lurked at the city limits, waiting for the death rattle"⁹⁹. The small towns, living on the remains of a long finished conquest, and thriving on the eve of standardization and development of suburban America, resisted the general trend by enforcing the family bonds. Nevertheless, when the emotional link came to be broken, these places appeared for what they really were,

⁹⁵ SAROYAN William . My name is Aram. New York : Laurel, Dell Publishing, 1937,1967, p145

⁹⁶ The Brotherhood of the grape, p81

⁹⁷ FITZGERALD Francis S. . The Great Gatsby. 1925; New York : Penguin Books, 1926, 1994, p183

⁹⁸ PAVESE Cesare . La Luna e i falò. Torino : Einaudi, 1950, 1977, p103

⁹⁹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p35

temporary hearth of dull conservatism and stillness : "Without my father, the town had vaporized into a wasteland of so many places like it"¹⁰⁰.

Along with the aching of a divided self goes a hunger for success and the fascination for the American dream in Bandini's departure motivations. As a matter of fact, the dullness of a small town does not fit a young man's ambitions who is longing for the wealth, previously promised to his father, and the fulfilment of personal aims : "walking across town to Roper high, i had the clean, sweet feeling i would never walk those streets again. No more bitterness, no painful memories. It had been a great town, a fine place to launch a career"¹⁰¹. At this precise moment of his evolution, Athuro Bandini shares a lot with Scott Fitzgerald's James gatz whose "imagination had never really accepted (...) his parents at all"¹⁰², whose fate was conditioned by his escape from the middle-West, and eventually by his discovery of wealth and the wealthy : "On the decks of the yachts, lay men and women in careless white suits. These were fabulous people (...) yet they seemed so far away that i hated them, and hating them made them nearer. Some day they would be mine"¹⁰³. The rich Anglo-Saxon Dan Cody¹⁰⁴, and his fellow American aristocrats do not know how much influence they have had on fictitious young mid-Westerners with foreign names.

¹⁰⁰ The Brotherhood of the grape, p171

¹⁰¹ 1933 was a bad year, 120

¹⁰² FITZGERALD Francis S. The Great Gatsby. 1925; New York : Penguin Books, 1926, 1994, p105

¹⁰³ The Road to Los Angeles, p90,91

¹⁰⁴ FITZGERALD Francis S. The Great Gatsby. 1925; New York : Penguin Books, 1926, 1994, p104

B TO THE CITY LIGHTS

Fleeing from the conditioned and predictable world of his early days, Arturo Bandini eventually reaches the "land of plenty" which attracted his ancestors in the first place. By leaving his father, he actually tries to achieve the final step of a long begun family quest. Passing through the Western states to the ocean, he perpetuates his father's journey across the ocean to the United States. This chiasmatic comparison between the two successive journeys shows the desolation of the "dust bowl" in the 1930's as a kind of lethal sea which must be crossed from one island of life to a brand new continent full of promises. The lost American town and its neurotic influence seems surrounded by a "wide dry waste-land, full of nothing"¹⁰⁵ as Saroyan put it, which emphasizes the singularity and the brightness of the distant metropolis: "Reno is one of those American towns that lives on nothing but the disease of people. the only thing there is gambling and whoring. Consequently the city lights are bright"¹⁰⁶. Los Angeles acquires a mystical dimension, the end of the journey as much as the physical end of the continent, it embodies a pre-lapsarian world in which the unity of the self has to be possible anew. For many writers of this period, including Nelson Algren, the big city at the other end of the deserted and impoverished country, reflected the same hope of salvation as the skyline of Manhattan and its statue of liberty did for the previous generation of immigrants : "Then it began to grow dark, and he forgot all that had happened at home and all that he had been on the road, for the lights of New Orleans came on, and he had

¹⁰⁵ SAROYAN William . My name is Aram. New York : Laurel, Dell Publishing, 1937, 1991, p145

¹⁰⁶ SAROYAN William . My name is Aram. New York : Laurel, Dell Publishing, 1937, 1991, p145

never seen any lights quite so bright. The lights of the city !"¹⁰⁷. Bandini's expectations are great, but unlike Charles Dickens' s Pip, he does not benefit from the help of a deus ex machina who pulls the strings in secret and manipulates fate toward a melodramatic happy ending. His eagerness for success and spiritual harmony only depends on his ability to become a part of the city, to melt into this global entity, to give and to receive, to establish a relationship with his new environment : "Los Angeles, give me some of you ! Los Angeles come to me the way i came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town, i loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town"¹⁰⁸. Here the pleading gets close to incantation, turning the city into a god, unreachable and almighty, whose name must be called and repeated to obtain favors, but also reducing it to the helplessness of a "town" in order to control and to limit in a semantic way its potential power. The dichotomy between a fading rural America, and the increasing urbanity, has been a common subject for American writers since the end of the nineteenth century. This disappearing wilderness, which was inherent to the continent as much as to the hearts of pioneers, left important traces in the flow of American literature. Its best literary embodiment, symbolizing the untamed nobility of a land made out of mud, raw blood and animality, remains Faulkner' s Bear, whose first appearance captures the blend of anguish and fascination of men toward Nature : "Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear : It was just there, immobile"¹⁰⁹. In Fante, Nature has almost completely disappeared from the literary landscape, and its remains are deliberately left behind or even satirized, in order to show the blind domination of men over an environment completely deprived of magic. As a matter of fact, Faulkner' s bear still

¹⁰⁷ ALGREN Nelson . Somebody in boots. New York : Thunder's mouth Press, 1935, 1987, p47

¹⁰⁸ Ask the dust, p13

¹⁰⁹ FAULKNER William . The Bear, in Go down Moses. New York : Random House, 1942, p209

survives in Fante's novels, but its reappearance in a Californian suburb is rather pathetic, and eventually turns to be illusory, though showing the fear of "civilized" people toward a nature from which they have been separated : "- What the hell is it ? -I think it's a bear. -Where ? -On the lawn, Under the kitchen window. -Maybe it's one of the kid. - With fur ? - What kind of fur ? - Bear fur ! (...) Then i saw it, a dark, piled-up mass, motionless and tumbled like a rug (...) -It's nothing of the sort. All fear drained from her voice. -It's just a dog !"110. The city embodies for a while the oneness of creation, being thus the hope of a new life and the fear of death, the alpha and the omega of Bandini's America, the dead end of Kerouac's future transcontinental odyssey : "LA. I loved the way she said LA; i love the way everybody says LA on the coast; it's their one and only golden town when all is said and done"111. Escaped from the emptiness of his small community, Bandini like the millions of poverty stricken people who migrated to California in the 1930's, discovers with naive and provincial eyes the size and the life style of the metropolis : "i went to the window to look at all the great city spread below me : it was like a view of the whole world"112. Millions of fatherless people, who had left their families behind, started to crowd the West coast after 1929, orphans of a reckless and prosperous America, but most of them were born from Anglo-American protestant mid-West families, Consequently Bandini remained an outsider, even among the huge community of migrants. He was prevented from integrating with the flow of drifters and Okies because of an already existing self-segregation. Nevertheless, he benefitted from the fact that he had always felt uprooted and that his departure had been motivated by personal rather than economic reasons. The mystical and even sensual

110 West of Rome, p10-12

111 KEROUAC Jack. On the road. New York : Viking Press, 1957; New York : Penguin Books, 1991, p81

112 Dreams from Bunker Hill, p20

relationship with the woman-like Los Angeles epitomizes the desire and success of an Americanization in the making. Whether intense and passionate or sulky and dim, the two "lovers" struggle and dance together a melancholic waltz in a glittering but cheap dance hall : "Ah, Los Angeles ! Dust and fog of your lonely streets, i am no longer lonely"¹¹³. In the beginning, the fascination for the city and its shiny body overshadows the real murk of American back streets ("Beyond my window spread the great city, the street lamps, the red and blue and green neon tubes bursting to life like bright night flowers"¹¹⁴), turning the metropolis into a phoney masquerade, a game of hide and seek between the harshness of human life and the mesmerizing glow of street lights. The confusion of the senses is so complete that the frontiers of time and space seem to be abolished ("Where was i ? Liverpool ? Singapore ? Marseille ?"¹¹⁵), superimposing the urban microcosm and the godly macrocosm, forgetting about the world to celebrate the expansion of a "meta-city" in which the dreams of a nation come to merge and decompose at once.

Nevertheless, the exaltation due to the new freedom and discovery of the city soon has to face earthly matters and disappointment, for the appearance of entertainment and leisure are the baits of an economic bargain : "Most of all, i thought about the money, i never did have much money"¹¹⁶. The attractive and superficial glitter actually reveals greed and the cynical exploitation of naive and poor immigrant workers : "Main street after the show, midnight : neon tubes and a light fog, honky tonks and all night picture houses. Second hand stores and filipino dance hall, cocktails 15 c, continuous entertainment, but i had seen them all, so many times, spent so much Colorado money in them"¹¹⁷. After a while, the Hollywoodian setting falls

¹¹³ Ask the dust, p125

¹¹⁴ Ask the dust, p31

¹¹⁵ The brotherhood of the grape, p65

¹¹⁶ The road to Los Angeles, p85

¹¹⁷ Ask the dust, p22

apart, and under the careless make-up, Bandini discovers the reality of striving men, broken women and shabby places. The descriptions of the city suddenly shift from bewilderment to melancholy, the bright colors of the neon signs turn to dust and grey, and the music of local orchestras comes to be replaced by traffic noise : "And so i was down on 5th and olive, where the big street cars chewed your ears with their noise, and the smell of gasoline made the sight of the palm trees seem sad, and the black pavement still wet from the fog of the night before"¹¹⁸. Bandini's growing lucidity is proportional to his economic situation, and his interest for urban diversities mostly depends on his potential income. Money conditions the way he looks at places and people as much as the desired objects : "When you're a drifter, you take notice of places to bed down, abandoned buildings, open basements, sheds"¹¹⁹. Another reality emerges from the social struggle, the dark side of the American Dream, the back streets of Sunset Boulevard in which a lumpen proletariat gathers to fight against loneliness and oblivion : "Down on Spring Street, in a bar across the street from the second-hand store (...) it was a saloon where old men gathered, where the beer was cheap and smelled sour, where the past remained unaltered"¹²⁰. The labyrinthian structure of the city with its dual aspect, parallels Bandini's inner self, bright appearances of the present which cover up the dark reality of the past. Therefore, the exploration of forgotten streets, ancient buildings and abandoned places coincides for Bandini with the study of his own social and psychological hidden reality : "I prowled the city with my Ford : I found mysterious alleys, lonely trees, rotting old houses out of a vanished past"¹²¹. Los Angeles with its huge grid-iron pattern becomes a literary cortex which John Fante used to

¹¹⁸ Ask the dust, p12

¹¹⁹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p68

¹²⁰ Ask the dust, p34

¹²¹ Ask the dust, p152

express both complexity and helplessness of Human nature. Since the metropolis neither offers the social progress nor the expected restoration of the self, the overwhelming sensual presence of the city is eventually perceived as a direct aggression : "The queer noises of the city pounding in my ears and burying me in an avalanche of banging and screeching"¹²². The various components of the city life come to be identified with this notion of potential danger and what used to be considered as the epitomy of the urban promised land soon turns to be seen as a factor of chaos : "The palm was blackish at its branches, stained with carbon monoxyde coming out of the third street tunnel, its crusted trunk choked with dust and sand that blew in from Mojave and Santa Anna desert"¹²³. The excess of noise and light, the excess of polution and dust suddenly reveal the terrible emptiness of human relationship, the total absence of feeling between dehumanized and uprooted communities. The city, previously so full of everything, starting with the hopes of a whole nation, finally appears as a desert only inhabited by broken dreams : "Except for the stevedores in the next block and the circling of the moths around street lamps, the boulevard was deserted"¹²⁴. The hungry derelicts, Bandini' s fellow drifters are but the moths circling around the burning lights of California. The once crowded city seems to be now the empty skeleton of a broken down America, drained of its energy : "The heat of the town driving all the natives to sleep so that not a soul stirred in the streets of that early day of Los Angeles"¹²⁵. Nothingness has spread all over the city ("The length of Avalon Boulevard showed not a sign of life"¹²⁶), and

¹²² Ask the dust, p43

¹²³ Ask the dust, p16

¹²⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p126

¹²⁵ The road to Los Angeles, p82

¹²⁶ The road to Los Angeles, p120

the living dead have returned to their shabby shelters : "Are the dead restored ? The books say no, , the night shouts yes"¹²⁷.

John Fante wrote a lot about poverty and roaming American derelicts during the years following the great depression. Nevertheless, his approach is clearly different from Steinbeck' s since he never mentioned the economic and social problems of rural population. Fante's books remain above all urban. On top of this, his criticism of inequalities and his picture of city poverty is always tinted with an almost glamorous touch, a romantic and morbid interest for misery : "I went for a walk through the streets, my god, here i was again, roaming the town. I looked at the faces around me, and i knew mine was like theirs. faces with the blood drained away, tight faces, worried, lost. Faces like flowers torn from their roots and stuffed into a pretty vase, the colors draining fast"¹²⁸. This fascination for gloomy settings, murky ambiances and freaks, probably inherited from the French Nineteenth Century Novel, brings him closer to the Beat generation than to Steinbeck : "But what happened to your mouth Vivian, who dug it out with a knife ? (...) and almost a virgin too, just a few men short of being a virgin (...) even if your mouth looks like it had been dug out with raw fingernails and your old child's eyes swim in blood written like mad sonnets"¹²⁹, which is very alike Kerouac's future interest in weird and physically twisted characters : "The kid had no money; he was about seventeen, pale, strange, with one undevelopped crippled hand"¹³⁰. In Fante, the city is the mirror of all illusions, the "emerald city" of Dorothy-Bandini which soon becomes the stage of a miserable and often hopeless reality. The desire for Americaness bumps into the wall of an impersonal society, indifferent, standardized, and living in the anonymity of

¹²⁷ Ask the dust, p19

¹²⁸ Ask the dust, p160, 161

¹²⁹ Ask the dust, p77

¹³⁰ KEROUAC Jack. On the road. New York : Viking Press, 1957; New York : Penguin Books, 1991, p164

poverty : "Looking at a room like ten millions of California rooms, a bit of wood here, a bit of rag there, the furniture, with cobwebs in the ceiling and dust in the corners, her room, and everybody's room, Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Diego"¹³¹. The emphasis put on the gloom ("The halls smelling of cockroaches, a yellow light at the ceiling"¹³²), eventually creates an atmosphere in which humanity is stripped from the appearances of social and cultural backgrounds, from the phatic aspect of language, and therefore reveals its bare core. Despite the common suffering of poverty and loneliness in a violent world, the different communities do not mix in a single ebb of human misery, but on the contrary oppose the individuals who prefer to gather according to ethnic values rather than class consciousness : "We drove into the black belt of Los Angeles, Central Avenue, night clubs, abandoned apartment houses, broken-down business houses, the forlorn street of poverty for the negro and swank for the whites"¹³³. Nevertheless, below the surface of behaviours, the fears and hopes of Mankind remain similar, as Cesare Pavese described it talking about America : "Vivere in un buco o in un palazzo e lo stesso, che il sangue e rosso dappertutto, e tutti vogliono esser ricchi, innamorati, far fortuna"¹³⁴.

Since the artificial city does not fulfill Bandini's expectations, just like the American society had not accepted his father, the natural elements which surround the metropolis start to play an active part in the miserable existence of urban outcasts. The Mojave desert and its dust express the restoration of ancient powers facing the injustice of modern life and the transiency of Human egotism : "it was a hot night. Sand from the Mojave had blown across the city"¹³⁵. The progressive transformation of the urban landscape marks the

¹³¹ Ask the dust, p91

¹³² Ask the dust, p24

¹³³ Ask the dust, p140

¹³⁴ PAVESE Cesare. La Luna e i falò. Torino : Einaudi, 1950, 1977, p116

¹³⁵ Ask the dust, p40

recovery of natural and immanent responses to Human excess : "Over the city spread a white murkiness like fog, but it was not the fog : it was the desert heat"¹³⁶. The multiple embodiments of Nature, circling around the city, announce for Fante the failure of the American Dream, as much as the foreshadowing signs of a possible catastrophe, which shake the consciousness and disturb the quietude of oppression : "The restless dust of Los Angeles fevered him"¹³⁷. Los Angeles, the epitome of modern America, becomes the most probable location for a new Sodom-like godly punishment, the symbol of evil in "the hands of an angry god". According to Fante, the price to pay for the city's wickedness is but a biblical type of destruction, in which the character of Bandini could figure a new Loth. In this renewal of the Old Testament, which introduces into the fiction a sort of eschatologic dramaturgy, the overwhelming and eternal forces of Nature should enforce the holy judgement : "Here was the endlessly mute placidity of Nature, indifferent to the great city; here was the desert beneath these streets, around these streets, waiting for the city to die, to cover it with timeless sand once more"¹³⁸. The precarious situation of the city, as far as geology is concerned, adds to the power of nature over Man's ambitions : "It had to come again, another earthquake to level the city and destroy it forever (...) it would kill a lot of people, but not me. (...) Los Angeles was doomed. It was a city with a curse upon it"¹³⁹. If Fante believes in the immanence of Nature, other writers such as Nathanael West, who also dealt with the unavoidable destruction of the City, believed in the revolted madness of the masses : "The angelenos would be first, but their comrades all over the

¹³⁶ Ask the dust, p151

¹³⁷ Ask the dust, p51

¹³⁸ Ask the dust, p120

¹³⁹ Ask the dust, p101

country would follow. There would be a civil war"¹⁴⁰. One of his character, Tod Hackett, even describes in his painting *the Burning of Los Angeles* : " The burning city, a great bonfire of architectural styles (...) the mob carrying baseball bats and torches (...) The people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview watchers-all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence"¹⁴¹. Both West and Fante condemned the city for its sins, its inhuman mingle of loneliness and despair, its false hopes, its wicked promisses.

What used to be perceived as the one and only lamp-house of the American night has turned to be the bonfire of Bandini's expectations, the funeral pyre of a whole generation. The dreams of success have failed, as much as the possibility to create a new self from two different identities. Bandini's wish for rebirth eventually aborts under the Californian sky, leaving not the ruins of the destroyed city, but the ruins of the individual. The desert sand and the Californian earthquakes are much more perilous for the fragile Ego than for the actual city. The previous feeling of fascination soon turns to Hatred : "I hate this place, this friendless city. Why was it always thrusting me like an unwanted orphan"¹⁴², and eventually to nihilism : "There is no California, no Los Angeles, no dusty streets, no cheap hotels, no stinking newspapers, no broken uprooted people from the East, no fancy boulevards"¹⁴³. The disgust for a merciless city, full of nothing, violent and sick, initiates an attempt of departure : "I wondered how many like myself took the road merely to escape the city"¹⁴⁴, but where to go when you are at the end of the continent

¹⁴⁰ WEST Nathanael. *The Day of the locust*. New York : Random House, 1939; New York : Penguin Books, 1975, 1991, p81

¹⁴¹ WEST Nathanael. *The Day of the locust*. New York : Random House, 1939; New York : Penguin Books, 1975, 1991, p166

¹⁴² *Dreams of Bunker Hill*, p132

¹⁴³ *Ask the dust*, p94

¹⁴⁴ *Dreams of Bunker Hill*, p126

? Kerouac's Cassidy will come back East to eventually undertake a never-ending journey, but Bandini remains bound to the city of his scattered dreams, the golden cradle of sins, the threatened shelter of American misfits and losers. Arturo Bandini used to be fascinated by the city's illusion of grandeur and is now attracted by the morbid reality of its decadence. On top of this, the healing of the self has to take place away from the father's influence, in order to create a balance between the cultures, the two halves of Bandini's identity. Therefore, there was no other way at the time but the way back to the city : "Then i got back to the car, started the engine and drove back to Los Angeles"¹⁴⁵.

The various aspects of marginality, whether a means to express one's own differences, or manifestations of a decaying world are important elements of Fante's fiction. From the family ghetto, to the metropolis, through the small American town, the refusal of conformity and the quest for a new self prevail over anonymity and inaction. The marginal way of life adopted by Bandini is both a reaction to the average inertness of the American society and the consequence of his rejection by the different communities which deny his bastardy. Therefore, the corrupted and global city seems to be the only place where to find a shelter. Nevertheless, the city does not seem able to fill in the blanks of Bandini's psyche, but the discovery of literature will provide a certain amount of masculine figures to replace the missing link in the father-and-son relationship, which represents a new step in the process of self-recognition, and therefore in the pursuit of Americaness.

¹⁴⁵ Ask the dust, p165

CHAPTER 3

A NEED FOR GODFATHERS

The emotional gaps created by the attitude and the absence of his father will force Bandini to find comfort in the discovery of very powerful substitutes, that is to say books. The encounter of the novels, and especially American novels, will offer the reader-Bandini the possibility to trade his past and present for new imaginary ones, and eventually his real father for a chosen mentor.

SECTION 1 LITERARY INFLUENCES

The harshness of the father is the source of Bandini's passion for books. The lack of human warmth between father and son ("He was afraid of his father, scared to death of his father"¹⁴⁶), mainly caused by the cultural differences from one generation to the other, is at the basis of an intellectual reaction. The father who does not recognize himself in his son, who does not recognize his own Italian origins in his American son, unconsciously draws a frontier line between his long gone past and the future of his descendant, between two different worlds which cannot communicate : "He did not like us particularly, and certainly he did not love us at all"¹⁴⁷. The seclusion of the father, within his own family which he does not fully understand, within himself, due to the fact that he does not belong to the world he lives in, are causes of an inner struggle which is expressed by violence : "He' s a mean vicious old man, and the longer you lock him up, the meaner he gets. He' s a mad

¹⁴⁶ Wait until spring Bandini, p235

¹⁴⁷ The Brotherhood of the grape, p17

dog"¹⁴⁸. Consequently, Bandini' s reaction will be to emphasize the differences between them, in order to acquire his own legitimacy, his own twofold identity, thus entering a vicious circle of provocation and retortion. Bandini' s father being a stone mason, Arturo finds himself a passion for literature, trying thus to reach a fantasized Americaness and to enforce an intellectual segregation toward his own father. The world of American literature starts to fascinate Bandini because it represents the epitome of the American culture and at the same time a world from which his manual and uneducated father is excluded : "What did he know ? What had he read ?"¹⁴⁹. The emptiness of life and the existential crisis provoked by the loneliness of Bastardy are to be filled with an ostentatious desire of rupture, a sudden and unexpected passion which will shape a new pattern of segregation within the family : "For books were a drug, and my addiction was alarming, and i was hardly his son anymore"¹⁵⁰. If this crush on literature seems to be misplaced in a social milieu which was not at all in contact with books, it is rightly because Bandini, looking for a way to get out, chose to express his differences through radicality. Thanks to its supposed inadequacy in a proletarian environment, literature enabled him to oppose his father and eventually to flee from the oppressive humdrum of his small native town : "You find comfort in whores who are less deceitful, and if you are lucky, you learn to read"¹⁵¹. The discovery of literature for the young and revolted Bandini emphasized the anguish and ignorance which prevailed in his life during the previous period, thus stressing the lethal influence of the father : "Who was it that had stunted my brain, kept books out of my range, ignored them, despised them ? My

¹⁴⁸ The Brotherhood of the grape, p3

¹⁴⁹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p61

¹⁵⁰ The Brotherhood of the grape, p61

¹⁵¹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p61

old man"¹⁵². The widening gap, between two people who do not share the same references, slowly becomes a battle field in which the adversaries observe each other with bitterness and hatred due to misunderstanding : "He pointed at me and began to laugh. He pretended to read a book and laughed. It was not amusement. It was rage and disappointment and contempt"¹⁵³. Therefore, the figure of the father will be slowly replaced by books and their authors.

Bandini's approach of literature is a passionate discovery of the main writers who occupied the literary scene during Fante's time, a charismatic encounter with fictitious worlds in which the characters share a common feeling of inadequacy. Since the references are all explicit, it is very easy to draw a map of Fante's literary roots and of their influences on the character of Bandini, beginning with the nineteenth century trend of realism and naturalism : "Yes, i got away (...) the writers drew me away. London, Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Silone, Hamsun, Steinbeck"¹⁵⁴. The enumeration of talents, as an ancient and secret incantation, is often used by Fante in order to put himself and his alter-ego under the protection of his revered "masters". Moreover, the life of fiction soon appears for Bandini as more relevant, and more satisfactory than real life, thus granting the writers with a godly and benevolent quality, which must be continuously praised in order to receive the expected "literary grace" : "I went to the library and found again the books that had changed my life : Sherwood Anderson, Jack London, Knut Hamsun, Dostoyevsky, D'Annunzio, Pirandello, Flaubert, De Maupassant. The welcome they gave me was much warmer than the cold curiosity of old friends i met in town"¹⁵⁵. The explicit literary references are

¹⁵² The Brotherhood of the grape, p61

¹⁵³ The Brotherhood of the grape, p62

¹⁵⁴ The Brotherhood of the grape, p60

¹⁵⁵ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p139

numerous in Fante's work, as if the author had humbly wanted to pay a tribute to his imaginary fathers, and in the same time had tried to take cover behind their prestigious achievements, thus following the pattern described by Harold Bloom. The vivid quality given to other writers' fictitious characters by John Fante enlightens the relationship author-Alter ego, and thus grants a great deal of independence to the figure of Bandini : "And all the books i'd read came alive at once and i saw better people out of books, like Philip Carey, Eugene Witla, and the fellows Dreiser made"¹⁵⁶. The influence of French Naturalism, either directly from the Goncourts and Zola, or through the prism of social American Novels greatly shaped the pattern of John Fante's early works, which constantly referred to this particular universe ("Across the room, big and solid, stood the desk of Emile zola as i had seen it in a book. I would be sitting there reading the last pages of Nana, that passage about the death of Nana"¹⁵⁷), or using Sinclair Lewis' s dialectic and vocabulary based on social criticism : "You're a bourgeois Babitt. You'll never know good prose as long as you live (...) You American boor"¹⁵⁸. Nevertheless, as time goes by, Fante will get rid of this literary burden, without completely turning his back on it. Using irony to comment his own work, he describes in his very last novel Dreams from Bunker Hill, a satiric universe in which the whores themselves read Zola' s Nana : "The girl from the trolley stepped out. She still carried the book. It was Zola's Nana (...) How much ? I asked - A fin, she said (...) She spread herself on the bed out naked and i lay beside her (...) Do you mind if i read, she said. Hand me my book"¹⁵⁹. As much as for the conquest of the English language, attempted through the use of palimpsest, the explicit literary references are tinted with the influential anxiety. This fear

¹⁵⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, p28

¹⁵⁷ The Road to Los Angeles, p80

¹⁵⁸ The Road to Los Angeles, p40

¹⁵⁹ Dreams from Bunker Hill, pp18, 19

that nothing significant remains to be written leads to an extensive use of genuine or distorted allusions, which are supposed to protect the author from the void of creative impotence, but also to relieve him of the silent burden of the literary tradition that precedes him. Bandini' s quest for Americanness needs the constitution of an imaginary and literary family which will replace the absentee father and his Italian background. This new and adoptive family contains people whose experience of life is closer to Bandini than his father' s memories, and therefore relates him to the world he lives in : "One day i went to the bookshelves, and pulled out a book. It was Winesburg Ohio. I sat at a long mahogany table and began to read. All at once my world turned over. The sky fell in. The book held me. The tears came. My heart beat fast. I read until my eyes burned. I took the book home. I read another Anderson. I read and read and i was heartsick, and lonely and in love with a book, many books"¹⁶⁰. The extreme desire to escape from his social condition and family circle makes him hungry for American writers, such as Sherwood Anderson, but also for philosophy, being influenced by the germanophilic trend which spread in America between the two world wars. As a matter of fact, turning his back on his father, he expects to become an intellectual : "Schopenhauer and Kant and Spengler and Strachey and others. Oh, Spengler ! What a book ! What weight ! Like the Los Angeles telephone directory. Day after day i read it. never understanding it, never caring either, but reading it because i liked one growling word after another marching across the pages with somber mysterious rumblings"¹⁶¹. Reading reveals its twofold nature, the imaginary escape from the harsh reality on the one hand, and the access to knowledge on the other. Nevertheless, the act of reading offers to Bandini another dimension, the possibility to express a simple and ostensible behaviour of

¹⁶⁰ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p57

¹⁶¹ The Road to Los Angeles, p47

rebellion against his family : "Bring me Auguste Comte and Immanuel Kant. Bring me books the rabble can't read (...) i read them all, most of them very hard to understand, some of them so dull i got to pretend they were fascinating, and others so awful i had to read them aloud like an actor to get through them"¹⁶².

The use of literary influences can also be unconscious or deliberately sunk into the text, rather than fully explicit, which could explain the similarity of situations and characters between Fante's own creations and his masters' work. As a matter of fact, Bandini' s reading of Dostoyevsky is in the first place clearly exposed ("I held his book in my hands and trembled as he spoke to me of Man and the world, of love and wisdom, pain and guilt and i knew i would never be the same. His name was Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoyevsky"¹⁶³), and then implicitly referred to in Ask the dust, through the Athuro-Camilla relationship whose hatred and masochism (I hate you, she said. God, how i hate you ! (...) She did not hate Arthuro Bandini, not really. She hated the fact that he did not meet her standard. She wanted to love him but she couldn't"¹⁶⁴) seems very close to the ambiguous Alexis-Paulina relationship in Dostoyevsky's The Gambler : "I hate you, precisely because i I have allowed you so much and even more because i need you so much"¹⁶⁵. Thus, the weaving of genuine fiction with whether explicit and incantatory or implicit and sunk literary references is but an attempt to substitute the influence of fatherly figures to the burdening influence of the real father. And this attempt eventually succeeds, thanks to the particular qualities of Literature, immortality and subjectivity : "My beloved Papa was gone, but

¹⁶² The Road to Los Angeles, p85

¹⁶³ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p62

¹⁶⁴ Ask the dust, pp126, 127

¹⁶⁵ DOSTOYEVSKY Fyodor. The Gambler. 1867; New York : Penguin Books, 1966, p24

Fyodor Mikhailovich would be with me to the end of my life"¹⁶⁶. Nevertheless, after preferring fiction to reality, immortal godfathers to a mortal father, the choice of a living and single mentor becomes necessary, to improve the validity of the quest, to watch over the process of integration, to restore self-esteem.

SECTION 2 THE SHADOW OF MENCKEN

John Fante kept up a correspondence with the writer and journalist Henry Louis Mencken during twenty years. His admiration and gratefulness to the Literary pundit, editor of the most revered literary magazine of his time: *the American Mercury*, never decreased and certainly had an influence on his fiction writing. Although the two men never actually met each other, they exchanged viewpoints on American literature, and Fante found in the East coast intellectual the advice he needed to pursue a literary career. Whatever the essence of their relationship was, it would be mere conjecture nowadays to study the influence of Mencken fatherly figure on Fante's life, and the reader interested in biographical details can easily refer himself to Fante-Mencken correspondence¹⁶⁷.

Nevertheless, this actual relationship finds an important echo in Fante's literary universe, and the various avatars of the Baltimore brahmin have a great influence on the character of Arturo Bandini : "The American Phoenix, edited of course by the most renowned personage in American literature, none other than Heinrich Muller, good old Muller ! How i loved that man"¹⁶⁸. Bandini chooses a mentor, a distant and sophisticated character whose very name reminds of an old Anglo-dutch stock which epitomizes the community

¹⁶⁶ The Brotherhood of the grape, p171

¹⁶⁷ FANTE-MENCKEN : A personal correspondence, 1930-1952

¹⁶⁸ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p9

of original American settlers. Whatever pseudonym Fante uses to personify Mencken's embodiments, it is always a protestant one, originated from Northern Europe, thus expressing a certain American nobility. The figure of the mentor expresses therefore the triple incarnation of Americaness, Literature and the new father, symbolically associated to the westward move : "Hackmuth must hear of this, mighty Hackmuth who fostered genius in the pages of his magazine, dear mr Hackmuth, i wrote describing the glorious past, dear Hackmuth, page upon page, the sun a ball of fire in the west"¹⁶⁹. The continental distance separating the two men, the wise and paternalist writer on the one hand, and the revering apprentice on the other one, enables Bandini to fantasize an emotional relationship which slowly replace the unsatisfactory reality : "I spent whole hours writing a dedication : to J.C Hackmuth for discovering me, to J.C Hackmuth in admiration, to Hackmuth, a man of genius. I could see them, those my critics, crowding Hackmuth at his club; you certainly found a winner in that Bandini kid on the coast. A smile from Hackmuth, his eyes twinkling"¹⁷⁰. Moreover respect and admiration linked to a desperate need of recognition gradually turn into mere veneration : "He had a way that Hackmuth; he had a style; he had so much to give, even his commas and his semi-colons had a way of dancing up and down"¹⁷¹. The mentor becomes a new father, a chosen one, for a new life and a career. Even more than a fantasized father he appears as a guardian angel, a supernatural being whose shadow can shelter the poor, and whose anger strikes evil : "Great Hackmuth, with a pen like a sword"¹⁷². Bandini' s reactions verge on uncontrollable fascination for this character who symbolizes the complete opposite of his real father. The missing relationship due to

¹⁶⁹ Ask the dust, p28

¹⁷⁰ Ask the dust, p113

¹⁷¹ Ask the dust, p56

¹⁷² Ask the dust, p16

generational conflicts and cultural divides is eventually replaced by this imaginary link which sharpens Bandini's sensitiveness : "There was a letter from Hackmuth in my box. I knew it was from Hackmuth. I could tell a Hackmuth letter a mile away. I could feel a Hackmuth letter, and it felt like an icicle down my spine"¹⁷³. This sensitiveness, almost religious, increases to the point that the substitution of a disappointing reality by a glorious dream reveals its weakness and leaves Bandini in a state of great confusion : "I'd stand before Hackmuth's picture crying out of both eyes"¹⁷⁴. The confusion of the senses due to the city lights and their gloomy shadows eventually turns into a confusion of the mind in which the characters and the values they embody mix and melt. God, the biological father and the writer-mentor fuse and dislocate at the same time, in quest of the literal meaning of "God-Father". This phenomenon is expressed by the juxtaposition of all these notions in only one sentence, revealing the failure of the quest and its consequent feeling of dizziness : "Good God, what if my mother were to walk in ? Or my father , Or Heinrich Muller ? Where would it all end ?"¹⁷⁵.

The relationship between Bandini and Mencken's doubles, or more generally the need for a god-father in place of a father, ends on a confusion between father and god, which leaves Bandini alone in a decaying city, full of misfits and derelicts. The westward move being in a geographical dead-end, and the attractive neon signs being fake, nothing is left to Bandini but a feeling of loss, thus introducing in the fiction the theme of the American loser, his helplessness, his broken dreams, and eventually his rage toward society. Nevertheless, the failure of the quest, the material impossibility to reach the true nature of Americaness opens the secret doors of the self, and lead the protagonist toward the inner dimension of his struggle. After being misled to

¹⁷³ Ask the dust, p56

¹⁷⁴ Ask the dust, p17

¹⁷⁵ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p19

the Californian mirage and its real unhappiness, Arturo Bandini starts retiring into himself in order to explore the dual aspect of his own nature and eventually to discover the reality of his identity.

II

A SPIRITUAL SHIFT

The coming to an end of Bandini's dreams, due to ethnic and social antagonisms, naturally leads to a crisis which is both moral and spiritual. As a matter of fact the failure of a quest, which had been the invisible link between successive generations, eventually questions the validity of family values, relationships, and established religious principles. The collapse of Bandini's American Dream, as described by Benjamin Franklin that is to say, "the economic success, the rise from dependence to independence, and eventually the victory of free-will against determination", strongly shakes the basis of an education which revealed itself unable to success into reaching the essence of Americaness. The end of Bandini's Western move is replaced by an individual revolution in the shape of a constant revolving, thus epitomizing the whole American society in the twentieth century, in control of its geographical space, but uneasy with its European roots, and therefore questioning ancient values. In the case of Fante's fiction, this quick evolution especially concerns the patriarchal figure and its weaknesses, the relationship to bodies due to the Catholic education, and eventually a denial of God.

CHAPTER 1

THE FOURTH COMMANDEMENT

The biblical injunction, deeply rooted in Bandini' s psyche, contributes to the passionate aspect of his relationship with his father, fearfully respected on the one hand, and shamefully rejected on the other.

SECTION 1 FROM THE GODLINESS OF THE PATRIARCH...

The natural duality at work within Bandini, added to the disappointment of the Californian "dump yard", emphasizes the ambivalent feelings which prevail in Bandini' s behaviour. The extreme confusion which results from the material and moral failure links more tightly the twin figures of the Catholic dogma, the father and the creator. Fante, playing with the homonymy of christian linguistics, reveals Bandini' s religious devotion for the figure of the father, despite his need for independence : "He was more than the head of the family. he was judge, jury and executioner, Jehovah himself"¹⁷⁶. The father is always staged among the family as a living god, abusing the patriarchal traditions of Mediterranean cultures to enforce his power. Here the patriarch is either a Platonic demiurge ("Papa would begin (...) i created these boys, i and i alone (...) my spirit goes on and on in the flesh of these boys, and their sons, and their sons' sons¹⁷⁷), his main christian embodiment ("He said i was Judas who killed Christ. He said i wasn't his son anymore"¹⁷⁸), or a king whose strength and right are divine : "There Papa sat,

¹⁷⁶ The Brotherhood of the grape, p18

¹⁷⁷ The Wine of youth, p73

¹⁷⁸ The Brotherhood of the grape, p4

a Nero on his throne"¹⁷⁹. In this case, the choice of a latin tyrant is obviously symptomatic of Bandini' s fear and servitude, implicitly associating the absolute power of the father and his Italian origins. Nevertheless, Bandini' s God is very far from the Catholic conception of the supreme being, loving and generous, but closer to the fearful God of the Hebrews, demanding and always ready to strike out of revenge. Actually, Arturo' s education meant to enforce a tradition of devotion and respect ("Then fourth commandment, you know ? The fourth commandment ? Honor thy father and thy mother"¹⁸⁰), which elevated the father to a divine position, and therefore crushed the son under the weight of a family slavery. The superimposition of Father and God is always, in Bandini' s consciousness, linked to the fear of punishment : "I said God strike me dead, ma. Then my father came home (...) I got a hell of an awful licking"¹⁸¹. Here Fante shows that for his protagonist, the fear of God is followed by a punishment carried out by the father. If not God himself, Arturo' s father is at least his diligent factotum, as far as corporal punishments are concerned.

On top of this twisted assimilation, the mystical cannibalism, inherent to the Catholic liturgy, emphasizes Bandini' s fear and uneasiness toward his father. As a matter of fact, the non-symbolic but literal meaning of Catholic Eucharist reveals a deep-rooted fear of being devoured by the father, as the parishioners each week eat the body of the Son. This, Fante explains by reporting an altar boy' s anecdote in his collection of short stories The Wine of youth : "He was going to take the sacred host out of his mouth after he received, and then take it home (...) He put the sacred host in a dirty handkerchief (...) when this rotten guy got home, he took out his handkerchief and for gosh sakes, was he scared ! his handkerchief was all bloody. Our

¹⁷⁹ The Wine of youth, p73

¹⁸⁰ Full of life, p85

¹⁸¹ The Wine of youth, pp68-69

Lord' s blood was all in it"¹⁸². The father and son relationship which is developed throughout the Catholic dogma has a tremendous influence on Bandini' s reactions, and his perception of religious rites such as the holy communion have a direct consequence on his attitude, for he decyphers the mysteries of religion thanks to his family relationships and vice versa. Therefore, the misunderstandings and confusions due to the complexity of religion ("When you said we had human sacrifices at mass, and the priest drank blood of young girls (...) i took that"¹⁸³), are cause of greater misunderstandings within the family. Although irrational, the fear of being devoured by a Baal-Moloch father remains : "God' s victims, my father' s victims"¹⁸⁴. The father and son relationship slowly becomes an executioner-victim relationship in which the protagonists accept their parts and play it to the end. The father-Abraham sets Bandini-Isaac ready for the psychological holocaust, but not to please almighty God, or even to guarantee victory over the trojans like in euripides version of Iphigenie' s sacrifice, but only out of jealousy, to satisfy his ego : "He knows that i too have the seeds of greatness in me, but my father believes they will be choked up by the treachery which is the heritage of both father and son"¹⁸⁵. The father constantly undertakes to crush his son' s ambitions, to maintain his own fading domination, and strangely enough the son accepts for a while to play the part of the victim : "Vent your tolerance, i said. Persecute me ! Put me on the rock (...) Gibbet me ! Stick hot pockers in my eyes"¹⁸⁶. Nevertheless, Bandini' s lucidity eventually prevails, and the desperate and cruel motivations of the father emerge from the darkness of his face : "He was telling me i was weak,

¹⁸² The Wine of youth, p51

¹⁸³ The Wine of youth, p171

¹⁸⁴ 1933 was a bad year, p54

¹⁸⁵ The Wine of youth, pp152-153

¹⁸⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, p23

my own father, and it depressed me to realize that he was judging me on the basis of himself"¹⁸⁷.

The paradoxical situation and the prevailing ambivalent feelings enable the reader to understand that the respect, tinted with fear and outrage, is linked to a desperate need : "How could a man live without his father ? How could he wake up in the morning and say to himself : my father is gone forever"¹⁸⁸. This ambiguity, inherent to Fante' s work, adds to the complexity and vividness of Arturo Bandini, but also epitomizes the fact that the perpetually evolving relationships can easily go from one extreme to the other, as much as the most solid standards can eventually be questioned and outruled. Therefore, the supremacy of the father leads to the son' s reaction.

SECTION 2 ...TO A DEBUNKING OF IDOLS

In order to reach recognition as an individual, and to achieve a necessary strengthening, the fearful pedestal on which stands the figure of the father must be criticized and then debunked, in the name of the son. The biblical principles are therefore put aside, and eventually crushed under the burden of frustration. The so called fourth commandment falls into pieces out of discontent. Nevertheless, the crumbling of the statue like patriarch is not due to any kind of provocation from Bandini, but on the contrary to the father' s own attitude who jeopardizes his power of influence by exposing his weaknesses. As a matter of fact, Bandini' s discovery of his father' s sins deconstructs the piling up of the Catholic education and seriously questions the validity of the fourth commandment : "In the darkness i saw a man and a woman making love against a telephone post (...) the man was my father.

¹⁸⁷ 1933 was a bad year, p99

¹⁸⁸ The Brotherhood of the grape, p136

The woman was Della Lorenzo (...) i hated my father (...) When Mrs Lorenzo died of a breast cancer the next year i was indifferent (...) no doubt she was in hell making a place for my father"¹⁸⁹. Sin brings the god down to the level of Men. The almost mythical figure suddenly does not impose his strength anymore but appears as a simple man with his weaknesses and defects : "A grown man of forty two years old, weeping because it was christmas eve and he was returning to his sin, because he would rather be with his children"¹⁹⁰.

The sin in itself is a catalyzer of truth, but would be morally acceptable for Bandini only if his father were able to assume it. Actually, more than the sin and its consequences on the family life, it is the dichotomy between the fulfilled desire on the one hand and the shameful attitude on the other one which creates a feeling of hatred and disgust toward the father : "I lay there tearing my hair and thinking. Stop it father, you are drunk and full of self pity and you must stop it. You have no right to cry, you are my father and the right to cry belongs to my wife and children, to my mother, for it is obscene that you should cry. It humiliates me"¹⁹¹. The discovery of human qualities, and especially of sadness and regrets, in the supposed godly character reveals the deep and unconscious desire to remain for ever a son in the shadow of a patriarchal power. The crumbling god brings down the whole frame of values with him and therefore destroys Bandini ' s view of the world, society and life. This impulse of voluntary submission is therefore an attempt to grasp the falling pieces of a well-ordered and structured world, the remains of a pre-lapsarian universe which would be both Childhood, and America before the crisis. Since Gods are able of cruelty and not of sorrows, Bandini starts to regret his father' s harshness, which after all was the warrant of a solid, definite

¹⁸⁹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p106

¹⁹⁰ Wait until spring bandini, p171

¹⁹¹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p108

and understandable existence : "I hated the sorrow upon his face, i liked him better when he was arrogant, selfish, tough, a bastard to the core"¹⁹².

Eventually, the impossibility to superimpose the reality of a weak and human father with the child' s dream of a godly sovereign creates a situation of rejection, which is initiated by doubts : "Say mister, are you really my fahter ? You there, why such a little guy, such a runt, such an old looking fellow ! You look exactly like one of those immigrants carrying a blanket. You can't be my father ! Why, i thought...i've always thought"¹⁹³. The dichotomy between reality and fantasy, which forces Bandini to reject the patriarchal figure, goes along with a necessary separation of the tradition and culture inherited from the old continent, in order to emerge as a new individual, more adapted to his American environment. Nevertheless the facing of reality, as much as the quest for a mysterious and invisible American essence, fails due to an excess of imagination. In Fante' s the figure of the father is very much comparable to the mysticism of Americaness. They are both supposed to be magic and outstanding, and eventually prove to be either disappointing or unreachable. Rejection is an escape from reality which slowly grows into anger : "I began to curse him for neglecting my mother, and he cursed me for the misery i had flung upon her, and we grew angrier and angrier"¹⁹⁴. Since the father is not a god, he does not deserve the worship he previously inspired, and the former pious adept, who hates himself for being abused, turns his rage against the object of the cult, and then preaches the separation : "I said : look, Mamma. We're not getting anywhere (..) I think you ought to sue him for divorce"¹⁹⁵. Anger soon becomes hatred, because the father reflects both unbearable images of the fallen angel, and the outcast foreigner : "There was

¹⁹² The Brotherhood of the grape, p100

¹⁹³ The Wine of youth, p140

¹⁹⁴ The Wine of youth, p148

¹⁹⁵ The Wine of youth, p105

no answer for that street-corner dago, that low-born Abruzzian wop, the yahoo peasant ginzo, that shit-kicker, that curb crawler"¹⁹⁶.

Paradoxically, the father appears at the same time as a fallen angel, and as an elevated devil. Angel fallen from the heavens of Bandini' s imagination to the earthly reality, but also European devil elevated heavenward to the promised and "celestial" America. Nevertheless, his devilish quality starts to prevail, and eventually overcomes the rest of his personality as soon as his son turns his back on him : "They did not hear me (...) nor did they even see me in the frenzy of their cleaving together, grunting and sucking and squirming in the naked heavy slithering of arms and legs, caught up like a ball of squirming white snakes, bodywhite under the moon, grinding on a blanket all knotted together with them, clawing, gasping, groaning. Then i saw my father' s face. It was the face of the devil on the door"¹⁹⁷. Insisting on the animal vocabulary, using a succession of geronds which evoke the soft and sensual movements of the devilish creature par excellence, John Fante clearly exposes the reification of Bandini ' s father toward basic animality. The debunking process initiates a trend of regression which transforms the figure of the father from God, to Man, and then from Man to the rank of Animal, in two steps : "I held his thick calloused hand, and it was like the hoof of an animal"¹⁹⁸. The diminishing influence of the father is proportional to his decreasing symbolic embodiments, and the reactive process eventually verges on his complete disappearance : "A ghost he was, a goner, a stiff"¹⁹⁹.

On top of the biological father, his numerous substitutes, among the literary world, also endure a severe debunking which go beyond the simple

¹⁹⁶ The Brotherhood of the grape, p61

¹⁹⁷ West of Rome, p186

¹⁹⁸ West of Rome, p187

¹⁹⁹ The Brotherhood of the grape, p119

criticism. Bandini' s idols seem to collapse at once, marking the end of childhood and the beginning of a rather unstable period. It is interesting to notice that the main reason of the debunking is always the same, that is to say disappointment, and that the process is equally identical, a reification which goes from godliness to animality, out of anger and frustration : "Dear Sinclair Lewis : you were once a god, but now you are a swine. I once revered you, admired you and now you are nothing. I came to shake your hand in adoration, you Lewis, a giant among American writers, and you rejected me. I swear i shall never read another line of yours again. you are an ill-mannered boor. You have betrayed me (...) PS : I hope you choke on your steak"²⁰⁰. The new Tabula Rasa which results from these conflicts is due to an affirmation of the Self, but also to the complete failure of Bandini' s American Dream : "I was tired of defeat and failure (...) The books i had not written, the places i had not seen, the Maserati i had never owned, the women i hungered for"²⁰¹. Through debunking Bandini acquires independence , for he has deliberately destroyed all the references to authority, as much as the social frame of his past life. Nevertheless, the cutting of his family and literary bonds reveals the cost of his independence, that is to say Loneliness and the lack of meaning which slowly gnaw the integrity of the self.

²⁰⁰ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p52

²⁰¹ West of Rome, p42

CHAPTER 2

A CRUMBLING EGO

Bandini has killed the myth in which he believed so piously until then. Thus he finds himself caught between a rock and a hard place, between a world in ruins and a world to be born. Nevertheless, his fear of doing wrong, his anxiety due to the incertitude of the situation increase the ambiguity of his actions. He is at the same time Moses destroying the pagan gold calf²⁰², and Jesus on the cross calling after his father : "Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani"²⁰³. This "entre deux" situation, between rebellion and adoration, separation and impossibility of separation epitomizes Bandini' s attitude toward his fathers. He has to struggle within a space imbedded between the two Testaments, somewhere in a frameless world, a universe to be defined, the secret home of the self. In order to emerge from this transcient, unstable period, and to make this new loneliness bearable, he uses various psychological devices, expressed by Fante through the use of tropes.

SECTION 1 **IDENTIFICATION AND PERSONIFICATION**

The sudden absence of frame and guide lines in a fatherless environment leaves Bandini in mere solitude, in search for the meaning of his own life. Furthermore, the personal decay resulting from the symbolic death of the father weakens a fragile and already divided ego. The natural frontiers of the self seem to be blurred and the lack of identity born from the cultural

²⁰² Exodus 32 : 1-6

²⁰³ St Mathiew, chap 27, 46-50

dichotomy increases. The intra diegetic first person narrator expresses this literary schizophrenia by mentioning himself with the third person, thus creating a feeling of uneasiness and disorder : "Bandini does not falter. Bandini knows what to do, don't you Bandini ? Of course i do"²⁰⁴. This unusual literary device elaborates an intimate and twisted dialogue between a volountarily distant part of the narrator referred to as "he" and his coexistential other half, known as "i" the story teller.

On top of this, Bandini projects on his material environment the fragments of his crumbled psyche, giving thus a small amount of Anima to objects and animals, in order to crowd the deserted and meaningless world of his own. The various elements of his everyday life eventually become alive, ready to embody human qualities : "oh stove, i love you. Fom now on i shall be faithful, pouring my love upon you every hour, oh stove hit me. hit me in the eye. Oh stove how beatiful is your hair. Let me pee in it, because i love you so madly, you honey, you immortal stove"²⁰⁵. These personifications are often related to a frustrated sexual desire, and to a difficult approach of womanhood, since women become Bandini ' s main point of focus after his getting rid of the fathers : "There was one crab, bright colored and full of life who reminded me of a woman : doubtless a princess among renegades"²⁰⁶. This succession of fantasies creates a kind of bestiary which surrounds the narrator, a collection of imaginary friends who fill in the empty space, personified animals and objects which reflect Bandini's frustration, loneliness, and deconstruction : "And the elm tree yonder was miss Hopkins"²⁰⁷. The division of the self and the personification process can even mix in one single move, which results in giving an independent life to a part of Bandini' s body,

²⁰⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p124

²⁰⁵ The Road to Los Angeles, p133

²⁰⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, p33

²⁰⁷ The Road to Los Angeles, p53

for instance ("The Arm resented it and was sore all the time"²⁰⁸), until the object on which the Anima is projected and the projecting self eventually fuse : "And there he lay in my hand, that cricket, and he was i, the cricket that was, he was i, Arturo bandini"²⁰⁹. Although the Road to Los Angeles, written in 1935, was not published until 1985, it is remarkable to notice that Fante identified his alter ego with the biblical symbol of destruction that is the cricket, symbol which will be used anew in the same decade by Nathaneal West in his Day of the locust, expressing thus a common disgust for their time and way of life. Once the superimposition of the object and the self is complete, Bandini becomes able to ease his frustration through living by proxy, experiencing the life of his new embodiments, and succeeding where his real nature had failed : "He was a dog, not a man (...) he was amifit and i was a misfit. I would fight and lose, and he would fight and win"²¹⁰. Even the missing relationships in Bandini' s life can be filled through the use of unconscious and sometimes unexpected proxies : " The smiling pig never took her eyes off me and i knew we were going to make fine (...) She was my mother all over again. Her snout crusted with dirt"²¹¹.

The highly fragmented self, which substitutes his uncertain identity by a multitude of reflective and heterogeneous pieces, also tries to build a new frame of meaning in a meaningless world, a personal frame relying on twisted memories of his religious education, in order to fight against the psychological entropy. The desperate absence of references resulting from his debunking of the symbolic authorities leads Bandini to a quest for meaningful signs, divine injunctions to be interpreted : "The sun struck the ocean in bars of heavenly light. A message from God. A sign"²¹². This mighty will to see

²⁰⁸ 1933 was a bad year, p28

²⁰⁹ The Road to Los Angeles, p53

²¹⁰ West of Rome, p43

²¹¹ West of Rome, p142

²¹² Dreams from Bunker Hill, p20

godly signs in the changing sky, to understand the unpredictable sequence of events as the unavoidable progress of fate express Bandini's fear to be at a loss, and his desire to be taken care of in spite of his need for independence. Therefore, the necessity of signs which makes the chaotic inner and outer worlds understandable anew, slowly shifts to a delirious attempt to reproduce a holy trinity on earth, to transpose a mystical and superior scheme in the earthly and inferior reality of his life. This vision of a down to earth trinity is first conveyed by Fante's way of putting things together, and linking the different personae to their celestial models in Bandini's speech : "...Ah, God, forgive my father and me !" ²¹³. Here the reader is given a precious indication on Bandini's embodied trinity, for in one sentence only, Fante depicts the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as members of his own family. Bandini's misconception then turns to mere hallucinations in which the deep-rooted desire to be led by supernatural forces transforms the members of his family into biblical characters : "She was not the Joyce of even an hour ago (...) an elevation of her to that state i felt for the virgin Mary as a boy" ²¹⁴. In the beginning, the transformation process is maintained to similes and metaphors ("She stood above Buck and me like a spear-bearing angel guarding the tomb of our Lord" ²¹⁵), but soon turns to a real superimposition in which it is impossible to disentangle the character and his sanctified model : "She walked about with the wounds of Christ in her hands and feet, a crown of thorns about her head" ²¹⁶. As the human characters slowly become their biblical doubles, the holy actors of the biblical drama descend from heaven following an inverted trend, and acquire human qualities, which enables Bandini to transcend his own reality and to establish a close relationship with the

²¹³ The Wine of youth, p149

²¹⁴ Full of life, p139

²¹⁵ West of Rome, p147

²¹⁶ 1933 was a bad year, p24

figures of the Christian pantheon. Nevertheless, this humanization of icons and settling of a personal relationship to divinity is not to be interpreted as a move toward protestantism and therefore Americaness, for the new relationship is rather blasphemous and often the expression of a sexual frustration due to the Catholic education : "Hail Mary full of grace (...) Because you were my girl, my queen"²¹⁷. Bandini' s perception of the world becomes a Jacob' s ladder, on which all the other characters are either going up or coming down, him being an awake Jacob observing the movements. Beside this new pattern, mere apparitions are still possible, giving a slight touch of Magic Realism to the fiction, but always referring to Christian iconography : "At the bedside stood a woman so near (...) Suddenly it came to me who she was (...) She was the Virgin Mary. She had to be"²¹⁸. Here, Bandini' s tone reflects very well the imperious character of holiness and the structural importance of a sanctified and benevolent presence in his life. Nevertheless, the mixing of reality and sacred mythology does not in the end offer a new frame of values in which the protagonist could exist and develop freely, but on the contrary increases his confusion, his frustrations and the unbearable uncertainty of his becoming by blurring all the tenuous frontiers which usually separate the coexistent worlds. The result of this mystical hotchpotch is the enlargement of the psychological divide, which eventually verges on madness and messianism : "My God, maybe he was a saint (...) I could feel the enormous weight of the cross he longed to carry, and it crushed me to the ground (...) tell her this day in Bethlehem a child is born (...) He might be the saviour of the world"²¹⁹. The attempt of personification eventually fails, but reveals other cracks of the ego, and contributes into shifting the perception of the world.

²¹⁷ The Wine of youth, p169

²¹⁸ 1933 was a bad year, pp37-38

²¹⁹ West of Rome, p95

SECTION 2 THE BEING TORN APART

The erosion of Bandini' s personality, the widening of his original dichotomy, due to painful circumstances and irrational responses, is emphasized by the christian contradiction between Body and soul. This dogmatic separation, facing the awakening of desire, transforms the guilty sexual impulse into fear, self-hatred and masochism. Bandini, living all alone in the metropolis, roaming into the darkness of Los Angeles finds a reflection of his own loneliness in the prostitutes and derelicts he meets during his night walks. His attraction toward prostitutes is one of a bitter young man whose Catholic education struggles against a violent impulse. The birth of sexual desire and the awakening of bodies to the call of flesh are always important issues in Fante' s fiction. Most of his young characters, including Bandini, have to deal with sex and its repression in the American society : "Perhaps she even screamed for joy and felt a mysterious stirring somewhere within her, the call of womanhood"²²⁰. Bandini' s mixed feelings about sexuality, which go from pure and irrepressible desire to complete disgust, through fear and curiosity, are very close to Holden Caulfield' s ones in Jerom D. Salinger' s the Catcher in the rye. The similitudes between these two characters are numerous. Even if Salinger probably never read Ask the Dust ,which had been published ten years before the release of Caufield' s adventures, the two novels are deeply linked by intertextuality. Both stories being told by a first person intra-diegetic narrator, a melancholic young male who wants to "get out and learn about life, walk the streets"²²¹, and eventually gets lost in the night of the metropolis. Caulfield and Bandini are both experiencing

²²⁰ The Road to Los Angeles, p52

²²¹ Ask the Dust, p18

loneliness, uneasiness and a violent rejection of their society, even if their common disgust comes from different circumstances. Bandini' s inward violence is due to the failure of the American Dream, and from his inability to build himself upon two antagonist cultures, when Caulfield' s bitterness is the expression of a teenage reaction against the dehumanized post-bellum affluence of the American society. Nevertheless, their initiatory journeys through Fitzgerald' s "valley of ashes"²²² follow an identical pattern. But more than a common experience and attitude, it is their approach of sex and desire which is strikingly similar. They share the same blend of fear and disgust, which eventually turns to rejection, the parallel increase of cowardice on the one hand, and of pretended virility, on the other hand. In Ask the Dust, Bandini, who desperately wants to be identified as a man, meets a prostitute in her gloomy room, but fails to fulfill his desire: "the girl lay back, her hands behind her neck, her legs over the bed (...) i'm a writer, see. I like you and all that. You're okay, i like you. But i want to talk to you, first (...) Money-ho. and i pulled it out, a small thick roll of dollar bills. Sure i got money, plenty of money, this is a drop in the bucket, money is no object, money means nothing to me"²²³. Likewise, in The Catcher in the rye, Caulfield, pretending to be older, welcomes a prostitute in his hotel room : "All she had on was this pink slip. It was really quite embarassing. It really was. (...) Don't you feel like talking for a while ? i asked her. It was a childish thing to say, but i was feeling so damn peculiar. Are you in a very big hurry ? (...) I said i'd pay you for coming and all. I really will. I have plenty of dough"²²⁴. In both cases, the protagonists create a situation in which the realisation of their initial impulse is possible, but then step back out of fear and repulsion for the unknown,

²²² FITZGERALD Francis S. The Great Gatsby. 1925; New York : Penguin Classics, 1994, p29

²²³ Ask the dust, p25

²²⁴ SALINGER Jerom D. The Catcher in the rye. 1945; New York : Penguin Books, 1994, p88

mysterious and at the same time dangerous femininity. It is also noticeable that money, which is supposed to be only a mean of transaction, quickly becomes the most important issue of these meetings, a substitute to the lack of virility which is pushed forward as a symbolic phallus, a way to enforce manhood without its usual and direct manifestation. On top of this, the aim of the transaction which is supposed to be sexual intercourse is transformed into a verbal ("don't you feel like talking for a while") exchange, in order to evacuate the desire and the fear of desire, thus linking sex and language, or rather sex and literature in both novels. Bandini like Caulfield is attracted toward sex, but most of the time their inability to fulfill this desire through sex, sublimates the bodily impulse into logorrhoea. In that, Bandini perfectly embodies a common feature of the American literature, the terror of the female sex, meaning the fear of femininity as much as the fright of the female genital organs. The sexual impulse being partly transcended by the flow of words, but still unsatiated, the dichotomy between desire and the fear of its fulfillment strengthens a deep frustration which eventually results in impotence : "I drew my hands over her belly and legs (...) searched foolishly for my passion (...) but there was none, there was none at all"²²⁵. As much as the raw fear for the unknown, it is the catholic education which is responsible for this psychological self-repression, by making Action impossible, and the crumbling of the self devastating.

John Fante who had read Joris Karl Huysmans, "the pope of French decadent literature", deliberately put his alter-ego under the influence of Des Esseintes, Huysmans' s main character whose behaviour and state of mind embody in the novel A rebours the "fin de siecle" spirit. Although the link between the two characters and therefore the direct influence of Huysmans on Fante have never been commented, the similarities and connections are

²²⁵ Ask the dust, p68

numerous, so that Bandini comes naturally to be compared to the French Writer : "You better get smart, he said. you fifth rate Huysmans"²²⁶. Fante probably found in Huysmans a reflection of his own personal universe and experience, a distant echo, and therefore attempted to rewrite A rebours in the 1930' s Los Angeles, thus turning his own work into a palimpsest. First of all, Des Esseintes' s father who has always been absent, dies early, thus leaving the solitary son in a frameless world, very much comparable to Bandini' s one : "Son père qui demeurait d'ordinaire à Paris, il le connaissait à peine"²²⁷. On top of this, Des Esseintes and Bandini share a common sexual desire contradicted by a Catholic repressive education, and therefore a tormented and sharp sense of sin : "Les uns, élevés avec lui dans les pensions religieuses avaient gardé de cette éducation une marque spéciale. Ils suivaient les offices, communiaient à Paques, hantaient les cercles catholiques et ils se cachaient ainsi que d'un crime des assauts qu'ils livraient aux filles, en baissant les yeux"²²⁸. Huysmans' s approach to literature was a reaction against the Naturalism of Zola, with whom he had previously worked, and his emphasis on the decadence of his own time, that he called the "entre deux" period corresponded to his best literary production. In the same manner, Fante turned his back on Dreiser and Lewis, who had inspired him in his youth, to focus on the psychological depravity of his historical context, thus evacuating the deterministic trend from his work. Let us now check the validity of this comparison by observing Arturo Bandini as a "decadent" character. Bandini is afraid of women, but even more of womanhood. This fear is the irrepressible attraction-repulsion toward the female sexual organs, as much as the fear of death. The Vagina is unconsciously perceived as an intricate

²²⁶ The Wine of youth, p166

²²⁷ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p78

²²⁸ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p82

mixture of Eros and Thanatos, an attracting flower which can suddenly turn into a carnivorous plant. Moreover, this panic and compulsive fright is socially expressed by the more reasonable fear of syphilis : "yeah, but what of that left eye ? It looked discolored. Careful, Arturo Bandini : don't strain your eyesight, remember what happened to Tarkington, remember what happened to James Joyce"²²⁹. The lethal disease comes to be purely identified with the figure of Woman, vector of death, and her body appears as the epitome of danger and decay. Even if the female sex is never literally described, metaphoric allusions reveal its association with corruption and disgust : "I turned around and she was nude, except for hose and shoes, and then i saw the wounds. it was at the loins; it was a birthmark or something, a burn, a seared place, a pitiful, dry, vacant place where flesh was gone, where the thighs suddenly became small and shriveled and the flesh seemed dead (...) I kept my eyes on her face, felt the floating nausea of my stomach"²³⁰. Nevertheless, like always in Fante' s, putrefaction is consubstantial to the sublime, and the twisted glamour of sordidness linked by a mystical bond to holiness : "You woman of that night - I see you in the sanctity of some dirty harbor bedroom flop-joint (...) your lips slutty, yet soft blue lips of beauty calling me to come come come to that miserable room and feast myself upon the decaying rapture of your form"²³¹. Here, the antagonism of desire and repulsion is strongly expressed through this fascination for rottenness. In the same manner, Huysmans expressed an identical fascination for the lethal body of women, the "vegetal and rotting black hole" of their sex ready to engulf male's life : "Cette figure ambiguë, sans sexe, était verte et elle ouvrait dans des paupières violettes, des yeux d'un bleu clair et froid, terribles; des boutons entouraient sa bouche; des bras extraordinairement maigres, des

²²⁹ Ask the dust, p19

²³⁰ Ask the dust, p88

²³¹ The Road to Los Angeles, p156

bras de squelette, nus jusqu'aux coudes, sortaient de manches en haillons, tremblaient de fièvre, et les cuisses décharnées grelottaient dans des bottes à chaudron, trop larges. L'affreux regard s'attachait à Des Esseintes, le pénétrait, le glaçait jusqu'aux moelles; plus affolée encore, la femme bouledogue se serra contre lui et hurla à la mort, la tête renversée sur son cou roide. Et aussitôt, il comprit le sens de l'épouvantable vision. Il avait devant les yeux l'image de la Grande Vérole. (...) Il s'affaissa renonçant à la lutte, à la fuite; il ferma les yeux pour ne pas apercevoir l'affreux regard de la Syphilis qui pesait sur lui (...) Il n'eut pas le temps de répondre car déjà la femme changeait; des couleurs flamboyantes passaient dans ses prunelles; ses lèvres se teignaient du rouge furieux des Anthuriums; les boutons de ses seins éclataient, vernis tels que deux gousses de piment rouge. (...) Il fit un effort surhumain pour se dégager de ses étreintes, mais d'un geste irrésistible, elle le retint, le saisit et, hagard, il vit s'épanouir sous les cuisses à l'air, le farouche Nidularium qui baillait, en saignant, dans des lames de sabre. Il frôlait avec son corps la hideuse blessure de cette plante; il se sentit mourir²³². Following this decadent pattern, Bandini has great difficulty to picture women in a reasonable and objective way. In his opinion, they belong to extremes, either monstrous syphilitic whores, or unreachable saints. This attitude is part of a strategy of elimination which consists in reducing or increasing the mental image of women. Desire is therefore considered as the legitimate and uncontrollable result of women's devilish attempt to destroy men. In this respect, Bandini's experience of a live show ("Then Lola Linton came on, slithering like a satin snake amid the tumult of whistling and pounding feet, Lola linton, lascivious, slithering and looting my body, and when she was through, my teeth ached from clamped jaws and i

²³² HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, pp195-199

hated the dirty longbrow swine around me, shouting their share of sick joy that belonged to me"²³³), is very similar to Des Esseintes' s description of Salome' s dancing : "elle n'était plus seulement la baladine qui arrache à un vieillard, par une torsion des reins, un cri de désir et de rut; qui rompt l'énergie, fond la volonté d'un roi, par des remous des seins, des secousses de ventre, des frissons de cuisses; elle devenait, en quelque sorte, la déité symbolique de l'indestructible luxure, la déesse de l'immortelle hystérie, la beauté maudite, élue entre toutes par la catalepsie qui lui raidit les chairs et lui durcit les muscles; la bête monstrueuse, indifférente, irresponsable, insensible, empoisonnant, de même que l' hélène antique, tout ce qui l'approche, tout ce qui la voit, tout ce qu'elle touche"²³⁴. In both cases, the Woman is presented, like Salome, as a desirable creature, but also as an allegory of castration, whose representation itself deserves to be annihilated : "yes, it's the fault of the women, they have enslaved my mind (...) tonight the women die (...) my destiny is clear before me. It is death, death, death for the women tonight"²³⁵. For Bandini and Des Esseintes, women are definitely reduced to threatening, but empty, shells whose only valuable weapon is their ability to raise desire : "But what is it ? You wouldn't know, you're a woman"²³⁶. The dialogue between Huysmans and Fante is so complete, that Des Esseintes' abstract descriptions sometimes come to life in Bandini's peripeteia. In Ask the dust for instance, Bandini' s tumultuous love affair with a waitress named Camilla, really seems to be the literal incarnation of Des Esseintes' s lucid and bitter monologue : "La cour faite à une fille de brasserie, ménageait toutes les susceptibilités de l'amour, toutes les délicatesses du sentiment. Celle là, on se la disputait, et ceux auxquels elle consentait à

²³³ Ask the dust, p21

²³⁴ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, pp144-145

²³⁵ The Road to Los Angeles, p73

²³⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, p50

octroyer, moyennant de copieux salaires, un rendez-vous, s'imaginaient, de bonne foi, l'avoir emporté sur un rival, être l'objet d'une distinction honorifique, d'une faveur rare"²³⁷. The inability to cope with this sophisticated but terrifying stereotype provokes a natural feeling of fear, which prevents the birth of an emotional link, and therefore locks the vicious circle of loneliness around the character : "Se sentant devenir de plus en plus indécis près de cette maitresse, il recourut à l'adjuvant le plus efficace des vieux et inconstants prurits, à la peur"²³⁸. So that Bandini seems to experience a complete and vivid transposition of the decadent theories and perception of life.

The frustrated sexual impulse and the fear of being devoured by women, lead Bandini to a rejection of the outside world which eventually results in a self-closure process. The shabby and modern *thébaïde* being a rental room on Bunker hill, Los Angeles, and not a sophisticated home in Fontenay-aux-roses. Nevertheless, Bandini' s choice seems to be once more influenced by Des Esseintes' s taste for mysterious and forgotten neighborhoods : "ces quartiers morts, enfermés et enfouis dans le coin d'une active et vivante ville"²³⁹. As a matter of fact, Fante' s description of Bandini' s direct environment, which had been photographed at the time by Robert Franck, and published in his collection The Americans, could easily fit the obscure and unhealthy attraction of the French decadent : "i walked down Olive Street past a dirty yellow apartment house that was still wet like a blotter from last night' s fog (...) then i went down the hill on Olive Street, past the horrible frame houses reeking with murder stories"²⁴⁰. Bandini starts to live himself "a rebours", living at night, deconstructing reality to replace it by an

²³⁷ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, pp289-290

²³⁸ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p211

²³⁹ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p98

²⁴⁰ Ask the dust, pp11,12

imaginary and gratifying world : "Il ne vivait guere que la nuit, pensant qu'on était mieux chez soi, plus seul, et que l'esprit ne s'excitait réellement qu'au contact voisin de l'ombre"²⁴¹. The perverse effect of seclusion, linked to the disgust of sex, does not liberate Bandini from his natural and irrepressible impulses, so that loneliness leads him to a greater disintegration of the self which ends in narcissism. The trend which consisted in turning women into monstrous figures is paralleled by a feminization of the masculine body, and the narcissistic tendencies ("I loved my face (...) with lips redder than a woman's"²⁴²), due to the sublimation of sexual desire through loneliness, eventually leads to auto-eroticism : "The pictures of Artists and Models were honeys (...) she pushed me aside and walked into the closet, inside was the odor of burning wax and brief passions spent on the floor. She knew what the darkness held. Then she ran out"²⁴³. Nevertheless, masturbation is not the only form of pleasure reached by Bandini in the comforting absence of women. The necessity to express physical as much as psychological disorders, the inability to react which leads to complete passivity, and eventually the growth of an inward violence, result in the discovery of masochism , thus liberating frustration through self-inflicted pain : "I was so miserable that i deliberately sank my fingernails into the flesh of my arm until a spot of blood appeared. It gave me great satisfaction"²⁴⁴. Pain is here perceived as an outlet of anger and violence, a twisted way to find a physical relief in the oblivion of desire, but also to reach a psychological relief through the sanctity of punishment. Pain actually comes to wash Bandini's consciousness from the stains of sin, revealing Fante's belief in the need for a christian ordeal, but also his admiration for Dostoyevsky's, in which the

²⁴¹ HUYSMANS Joris K. *A rebours*. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p91

²⁴² *The Road to Los Angeles*, p111

²⁴³ *The Road to Los Angeles*, pp18,19

²⁴⁴ *Ask the dust*, p28

double necessity to commit a crime and then to undergo its consequences is always present, and epitomized in Crime and punishment : " I felt like hitting myself in the nose, knocking myself unconscious, i wanted to cut myself, to feel my bones cracking (...) and got a razor blade (...) i slit my arm below the elbow (...) i sucked the slit but there was still no pain, so i got some salt and rubbed it in and felt it bite my flesh, hurting me and making me come out of it and feel alive again"²⁴⁵. Nevertheless, this distorted interpretation of the christian suffering is rather a psychological trick to hide a new and real form of pleasure, than a mystical device to redeem oneself. Furthermore, this fashion to express the inner violence is already present in the eerie universe of Des Esseintes : "Enervé, mal à l'aise, indigné par l'insignifiance des idées échangées et reçues, il devenait comme ces gens dont a parlé Nicole, qui sont douloureux partout; il en arrivait à s'écorcher constamment l'épiderme"²⁴⁶. Eventually, the self-infliction of corporal punishment reveals its failure, and its inability to sublimate all the contradictory impulses. Moreover, loneliness comes to appear as a necessity against the violence of life, as much as the geatest pain of all, that nothing is able to cope with : "I bit my thumb and tasted blood (...) the pain in my thumb was nothing. It was loneliness that really ached"²⁴⁷.

Bandini' s world has collapsed. he remains in a valueless and dangerous environment which is unable to offer either satisfaction or peace. His voluntary isolation separates him from the violent and female aspects of life, but at the same time prevents him from achieving any kind of recognition or fulfilment. This decay of the self into crumbles of thoughts appears as the logical evolution of Bandini' s character. More than just a response to an

²⁴⁵ The Road to Los Angeles, p27

²⁴⁶ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p84

²⁴⁷ The Road to Los angeles, p109

unbearable violence, this collapse was already at work during childhood, and therefore reveals its structural nature. As a matter of fact, the landscape itself appears as a revealing breakdown, which parallels Bandini's inner decay. Eventually, one could say that the Colorado snow flakes have turned into Californian clouds of dust. Des Esseintes' s neurosis, epitome of the crumbling ego in a meaningless and disappointing world, has slowly contaminated Bandini's psyche, and the destructive process which results from the omnipresent emptiness is clearly exposed in Fante's narration, even as far as secondary characters are concerned : "for a year she was sick and nervous (...) my mother cried and cried night and day"²⁴⁸, which eventually ends on the verge of a complete and personal deconstruction : "She almost had a nervous breakdown"²⁴⁹. This crisis, born from an original divide and toward which Des Esseintes constantly goes, keeps on increasing with the time : "les tensions exagérées de son cerveau, avaient singulièrement aggravé sa névrose originelle"²⁵⁰. The enclosed *thébaïde*, material embodiment of the seclusive mind, eventually comes to be perceived as a destructive mental and physical structure, which crumbles and gnaws the integrity of the self, rather than restoring values after the fall of the father, and that for Fante : "She was down in an inferno of her own creation"²⁵¹, as much as for Huysmans : "Est-ce qu'il ne s'était pas mis lui-même au ban de la société ?"²⁵². The discovery of one's participation in the development and progression of uneasiness and despair through the device of reclusion, emphasizes the initial bitterness and feeling of aimlessness, leaving Bandini, as much as Des Esseintes, alone, in the darkness of a metaphysical

²⁴⁸ *The Wine of youth*, p181

²⁴⁹ *The Wine of youth*, p183

²⁵⁰ HUYSMANS Joris K. *A rebours*. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p181

²⁵¹ *Ask the dust*, p56

²⁵² HUYSMANS Joris K. *A rebours*. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p340

boredom which slowly ruins everything, following a pattern of entropy. In Fante, the erosion of the mind can be perceived in the erosion of language itself, which destroys complex grammatical structures, to leave only parataxis, like pieces of a deconstructed puzzle, or fallen stones lying on the ground side by side without any particular order : "The sticky ennui, the dust over the earth, the hot blasts from the Mojave"²⁵³. This mental weariness is but an American echo of Huysmans' s exploration of inactivity, and hopelessness : "Quoiqu'il tentât, un immense ennui l'opprimait"²⁵⁴. The lethal ennui and its subsequent introspection thus reveals the darkness which rules Human fate, the blackness lying hidden in Man' s heart, impenetrable to thoughts, but still active. Bandini comes to realize the hopelessness of his nature, the curse weighing on his shoulders since the original sin : "Oh i was no angel; my soul had a few twists and bends all its own (...) and my heart is full of black ink"²⁵⁵. The emptiness of the outside world seems to match a newly discovered inner emptiness, which results in a cynical, and desperate pessimism, inherited from Schopenhauer and transmitted by Huysmans. Bandini' s tortured mind seems therefore closer to Kierkegaard's mere anguish than to Zola's neurosis, marking thus the substitution of pessimistic philosophies, either German or Scandinavian, to literary naturalism : "They turned a black slab in my heart, an open place, a grave, a hole, a sore, out of which marched in a torturing procession their dead leading other dead after them, parading the bitter suffering of their lives through my heart"²⁵⁶. Bandini eventually debunks the critical aspect of human thought itself, denying to reflection and language, the parts they usually assume in civilization, so that human intelligence is reduced to animality, and human language to bestial rumblings.

²⁵³ Ask the dust, p148

²⁵⁴ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p85

²⁵⁵ Ask the dust, p86

²⁵⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, pp89,90

Freedom is a lie and the mind a deficient machine : "My mind had quit functioning altogether. I could not think of another item, not even a word, not even my own name"²⁵⁷. Silence and loneliness which are consubstantial to the self-consciousness of Man' s life turn Bandini' s existence into a near-death experience : "Nobody spoke. I felt alone indeed. I felt like a corpse"²⁵⁸. And this discovery ends in a morbid fascination for death, which appears rather as a deliverance than as a punishment. Life being just a poor rehearsal of death ("We were not alive at all. We approached living, but never achieved it"²⁵⁹), suicide eventually appears to him as the only real action possible in a motionless world, though he is perfectly conscious that : "there wasn' t any such thing as heaven; there might be a hell"²⁶⁰. The immutability of death becomes the only everlasting and universal value in a world which has been deprived from its former meaning, and therefore offers a possibility to appease Bandini' s mental chaos, to end the narrator' s logorrhoea and eventually to put a stop to Fante's fiction : "The last word of the last page was exactly what i wished. It was Death"²⁶¹. Nevertheless, as much as in front of women, Bandini reveals himself unable to act, and finds shelter in a transcendent unconsciousness, rather than in complete oblivion : "By then i was ready to commit suicide, and thinking so i fell asleep"²⁶².

Bandini' s understanding of his inability to react against the hopelessness of life gives birth to an anger directed toward the remaining father, after the debunking of his symbolic tutors, the christian god, the unreachable and therefore unstained god of his childhood : "Come down out of the skies, you god, come on down and i'll hammer your face all over the

²⁵⁷ The Road to Los Angeles, p71

²⁵⁸ The Road to Los Angeles, p70

²⁵⁹ Ask the dust, p96

²⁶⁰ The Road to Los Angeles, p109

²⁶¹ The Road to Los Angeles, p139

²⁶² The Road to Los Angeles, p25

city of Los Angeles, you miserable prankster"²⁶³. But the fight turns to the advantage of God, and Bandini' s revolt is overwhelmed by the fear of being left behind : "All the gods have deserted me, and like Huysmans i stand alone, my fists clenched, tears in my eyes"²⁶⁴. And this reaction stands very close once more to Des Esseintes' s one in the same kind of situation : "Une fois de plus, cette solitude si ardemment enviée et enfin acquise, avait abouti à une détresse affreuse; ce silence qui lui était autrefois apparu comme une compensation des sottises écoutées pendant des ans, lui pesait maintenant d'un poids insoutenable. Un matin il s'était réveillé agité, ainsi qu'un prisonnier mis en cellule; ses lèvres énervées remuaient pour articuler des sons, des larmes lui montaient aux yeux, il étouffait de même qu'un homme qui aurait sangloté pendant des heures"²⁶⁵. So that Huysmans and Fante really seem to dialogue and answer each-other through time and space, thus showing the "decadent" aspect of Bandini' s character, though Huysmans is revolted by the mecanization and the growth of a middle class in his conservative society, and Bandini because he does not succeed in becoming a part of it.

Then slowly, anger and panic shift to mere denial, and Bandini' s violence becomes an answer to his fragmented identity. If God refuses to recognize him and to let him recognize himself as a complete and independent human being, well therefore, Bandini will refuse to recognize God' s existence in order to become his own god.

²⁶³ Ask the dust, p89

²⁶⁴ Ask the dust, p27

²⁶⁵ HUYSMANS Joris K. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, pp233, 234

CHAPTER 3

THE NIETZSCHEAN VISION

John Fante's discovery of Nietzsche's philosophy had a tremendous influence on his fiction writing, especially on the evolution of Bandini's personality. Nietzsche was introduced in the United-States by Henry Louis Mencken, whose opinions and charisma contributed into building the intellectual frame of American literature, during the first half of the twentieth century. His direct influence as a critic and a writer on young and would-be authors, such as John Fante, has been previously described, but his work also allowed those American writers to discover the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Although the work of the German philosopher came to be well-known in the United States only after the end of the nineteenth Century, it had been deeply inspired by the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, so that the American discovery of Nietzsche can be considered as a return of American ideas, enlightened and sophisticated by a "fin de siècle" European thinker. Following a trend of germanophilia, which spread among American intellectuals before the First World War, Mencken dedicated several years of his life to commenting Nietzsche's work. This American attempt at decyphering Nietzsche's complex vision had first a great influence on naturalist writers, such as Dreiser, Lewis, and even Anderson, so that Fante already had contact with the Nietzschean philosophy, even before he actually read Nietzsche's books. The American writers he used to appreciate in his youth, his later mentor, and even Huysmans, formed an intricate literary web built up in concentric circles around the reading of Nietzsche. Therefore, the various influences which seemed to modify, one after the other, Fante's literary career, actually came from the same source. Through indirect readings,

Mencken's comments, and eventually Nietzsche's own books, Fante began to introduce elements of Nietzsche's philosophy in his fiction. Nevertheless, Fante's approach of Nietzsche's is rather a personal interpretation, than a deep philosophical analysis, and therefore relies on a characterization of abstract and basic concepts which emerge from Nietzsche's undertakings, to echo Bandini's natural and unspoken rebellion. It seems clear that Fante extracted from Nietzsche's paradoxical and complex universe several meaningful ideas which already existed in Bandini's personality, without being structured enough to be expressed. Actually, Nietzsche seems to give voice to Bandini's silent uneasiness, and this desire to appoint the German philosopher as a spokesman is probably related to biographical similarities. As a matter of fact, Nietzsche really felt an almost religious veneration for his father, who died very early, and then grew up under the influence of an extremely pious mother. Later on, he will develop his theories upon the absurdity of life, thanks to a complete rupture with the christian church, its institutions, and its dogma. The parallel between Nietzsche's real life and Bandini's partly fictive biography is striking, and reveals Fante's use of his readings, and memories in order to build up fiction. Nietzsche's influence on Bandini's thought process is mainly based on the revelation of a godless world on the one hand, and on the identification to the Superman, within the American context, on the other.

SECTION 1 GOD IS DEAD

Bandini's resistance to the decadence of both his personal sphere and the outside world, finds in Nietzsche's a way to overcome the morbid impulse which leads to decay and suicide. The existence of a philosophy which has already described the crumbling of the self eventually appears as a

stimulus against self-pity, which motivates a reaction by transcending the inward violence : "What if Nietzsche could see you now ? And Schopenhauer, what would he think ? And Spengler !" ²⁶⁶. Bandini' s refusal of meaninglessness in a world ruled by superior forces, brings him to "the conviction that God did not rule the world after all" ²⁶⁷, and that the absence of meaning is simply due to an absence of God, which paradoxically is a comforting revelation. As a matter of fact, despair seems to be more acceptable when resulting of logic. The final debunking eventually restores, not a meaning to life, but a meaning to meaninglessness, and therefore gives birth to a new era, in which Mankind should elaborate his own fate, without fearing a divine repression. The decadent is bound to his painful memories, and victim of his own weariness, looks for oblivion in artificial excitement. He is a man motivated by his desire of revenge over the world. This taming of Mankind is mainly due to religious dogmas, which locks the consciousness into the circle of sin and punishment, and therefore crushes individualistic freedom under the burden of obedience toward God. Nietzsche' s most important legacy to Bandini is nihilism. In order to build a new world, it is necessary to destroy the old and corrupted one, to reveal the fake values of religion, the illusion of an almighty god, and eventually to expose the central place of Man. The pessimistic and passive decadence must shift toward real and active nihilism. The death of God should be transcended, as much as mere idealism, in order to avoid a religious mourning on the one hand, and naive optimism on the other hand. Bandini' s reading of Nietzsche ("I have read the antichrist, and i regard it as a capital piece of work. I believe in the transvaluation of values" ²⁶⁸), goes along with a desire, which is both didactic and provocative. He wants to communicate his discovery of God' s death to

²⁶⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, p24

²⁶⁷ The Brotherhood of the grape, p81

²⁶⁸ Ask the dust, p22

everyone, in order to apply on a larger scale Nietzsche's theories, but also to provoke his pious family and America itself. His personal criticism of the Catholic church, and beyond, of God himself is frequently conveyed by humour and irony : "Oh holy ghost, oh holy inflated triple ego, get us out of the depression. elect Roosevelt. Keep us on the gold standard. Take France off, but for christ' sake keep us on ! (...) Oh Jehova, in your infinite mutability see if you can't scrape up some coin for the Bandini family. My mother said : shame, Arturo, shame"²⁶⁹. Bandini feels aimed to destroy the christian beliefs, but his ideological values are often overshadowed by a rather personal and bitter feeling toward both his family and the society which has rejected him. His weapon of philosophical destruction is a sharp sense of derision, which allows him to debunk and to ridicule : "I said, how's Jehova tonight ? What does he think of the quantum theory ?"²⁷⁰. Nevertheless, Bandini's crusade against God and the church is not a pretext to fight hypocritical devotion and false piety, but a sincere challenge, motivated by the emptiness of faith, the silence of the temple : "Above the altar sputtered the blood-red eternal light, illuminating in crimson shadow the quiet of almost two thousand years. It was like death"²⁷¹. Therefore, Bandini's humour should not hide the genuine nihilism inherited from Nietzsche : "But that, i will remember from Nietzsche, is hope the first sign of defeat"²⁷². This central nihilism, which transcends the initial pessimism, linked to a taste for provocation, turns Bandini into an iconoclast, whose personal vision does not oppose good and evil anymore, but rationality and superstitions : "My own sister reduced to the superstition of prayer ! my own flesh and blood. A nun,

²⁶⁹ The Road to Los Angeles, p23

²⁷⁰ The Road to Los Angeles, p22

²⁷¹ Ask the dust, p22

²⁷² The Wine of youth, p155

a god-lover ! What barbarism"²⁷³. According to Bandini, only reason will be able to build up the Nietzschean post-world, and this superiority of reason on religious beliefs is emphasized by sciences : "They can't touch us. No they can't ! We have put the church to rout. Dante, Copernicus, Galileo, and now me - Arturo bandini, son of a humble carpenter. We go on and on. We are above them. We even transcend their ridiculous heaven"²⁷⁴. Thanks to Nietzsche, Bandini goes beyond the rules of metaphysics, which usually divide and separate. The metaphysical approach of life is based on moral dualism, that is to say a clear cut opposition between good and evil, but also between body and soul, thus denying the existence of an essential mixture, which is for Nietzsche inextricable. Therefore, Bandini' s reading of Nietzsche allows him to reunite the separated parts of his own ego, which had been torn apart by his christian education, and to observe the complementing of values instead of their antinomy. Newness is always perceived as evil, since it comes to overrule the old order, and that is what Fante expresses when he links Man to evil. Mankind' s aim is to renew itself, and not to fall in the abyss of custom and superstition : "I reject the hypothesis of God ! Down with the decadence of fraudulent christianity ! (...) All that we are or ever hope to be owe to the devil and his bootleg apples"²⁷⁵. Man is evil, because he is the active hand of change, compared to a static and inflexible world of corrupted goodness.

Nevertheless, Fante' s characterization of Nietzsche' s theories through Bandini' s behaviour, reaches its limits, and turns to a rather personal interpretation. As a matter of fact, Fante links his social concerns to his debunking of the christian church, thus revealing his belonging to the working class : "The church must go, it is the haven of booboisie, of boobs, and

²⁷³ The Road to Los Angeles, p17

²⁷⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p142

²⁷⁵ The Road to Los Angeles, p23

bounders, and all brummagen mountebanks"²⁷⁶. Here, the church is not only presented as the religious institution which has conditioned the masses to the christian moral dualism, and enforced the worship of an absentee God, but also as a tool of social oppression directed against the poor : "There is no afterlife, i said. The celestial hypothesis is sheer propaganda formulated by the haves to delude the have-nots (...) no, i reject God ! (...) I accept the universe godless. i am a monist"²⁷⁷. Thus, Fante' s concerns start to diverge from Nietzsche' s philosophy, which was definitely aristocratic, to embrace a personal trend, only inspired by Nietzsche.

Bandini' s destructive process obviously does not eradicate the religious beliefs, or the overwhelming importance of churches in America. Nevertheless, his nietzschean desire to reveal God' s absence has a tremendous influence on both his own psychology, and the relationship with his family and cultural background. As a matter of fact, the rupture initiated by his traveling west, and then by his debunking of the father, is definitely consumed by his rejection of God and the church : "I will say to my mother : thank whatever gods there be for you. Listen to the atheist, my sister said !"²⁷⁸. Bandini' s provocation triggers off a separation process in which he appears as the American atheist corrupted son, and the members of his family as the uneducated superstitious Italians : "When i looked at the book, i saw it was the Antichrist. now i will be home soon, and my mother will ask if i read books against God"²⁷⁹. The Catholic Church being Italian, God himself appearing as an Italian to his emigrated worshipers, Bandini achieves the rejection of his Italian Background by rejecting the Church : "Thus i begin to loathe my heritage. I avoid Italian boys and girls who try to be friendly"²⁸⁰.

²⁷⁶ Ask the dust, p22

²⁷⁷ The Road to Los Angeles, pp38,39

²⁷⁸ The Wine of youth, p155

²⁷⁹ The Wine of youth, p153

²⁸⁰ The Wine of youth, p137

Therefore, the Americanization process, which had failed in his conquest of the American territory, and then in his veneration of American god-fathers, eventually tries to succeed in the achievement of a three-fold rejection. The successive debunkings of the biological father, the literary mentors, and eventually the Holy Father - God of the Church, allow the reconstruction of a new self, an attempt to create the American embodiment of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: "The Catholic mind again! The Pope of Rome waves his lewd banner (...) aye verily I say unto you that unless ye become yea-sayers ye shall become one of the damned! Thus spake Zarathustra"²⁸¹.

SECTION 2 THE AMERICAN SUPERMAN

Few cultures have put such an emphasis on the cult of the hero, which explains why the United States can be considered as a field of experiment for Nietzsche's *Wille zur macht*. At least, America is the only country in the world which has turned the caricatured concept of superman into a pop icon. This singular link between Nietzsche's philosophy and modern America can be understood, knowing that Nietzsche admired very much the Greek civilisation, and its genuine sense of competition, and that the United States have always considered themselves as the natural heirs of the Greek culture. According to Nietzsche, the body is not the corruptible vehicle of the eternal soul, but the center of the Self, from which reason and thoughts emerge, motivated by the will of power. Therefore, a particular development of the body, liberated from the guilt of sin, and free to express its instincts, would be necessary to reach the state of superman. Although the American interpretation of Nietzsche's *uebermensch*, is rather limited to a blend of

²⁸¹ The Road to Los Angeles, p147

physical strength and christian values, the superman, as much as its comic strip embodiment, have come to epitomize the whole American culture.

It is not surprising thus, that Bandini' s encounter with Nietzsche' s concept ("She rang the bell at nine. I hurried to philosophy and grabbed anything. it was another Nietzsche : Man and superman"²⁸²), seems to bring a new and adequate answer to his problem of identity. As a matter of fact Bandini' s perception of the superman is linked to his fantasized notion of a both mystical and mythical Americaness. to believe in the ability of becoming a superior being is above all to believe in the possibility of becoming someone else, and this physical shift, here enforced by philosophy, perfectly symbolizes Bandini' s inner struggle. The nietzschean viewpoint which considers as a necessity the transcendence of the self, or *selbstüberwindung*, echoes in Bandini' s desire to overcome his feeling of inadequacy, in order to restore the integrity of his crumbled psyche. Therefore, Bandini' s belief in his possible, and even probable transformation into the nietzschean superman allows him to nourish a new and unexpected self-confidence. Under the influence of Nietzsche, the self undergoes an exaltation which eventually leads to a necessary rebirth. The apparently simple scheme of the superman, identified as a model of Americaness, enables Bandini to neutralize his former pessimism, and to eradicate the voluptuous masochism of the now obsolete decadence, thus following Zarathustra's advice : " Geist ist auch wollust - So sagten sie. Da zerbrachen ihrem geiste die flügel. Nun krecht er herum und beschmutzt im nagen. Einst dachten sie helden zu werden : lüstlinge sind es jetzt. Ein gram und ein graven ist ihnen der held. Aber bei meiner liebe und hoffnung beschwöre ich dich : wirf den helden in deiner seele nicht weg ! halte heilig deine höchste hoffnung !" ²⁸³. That

²⁸² The Road to Los Angeles, p13

²⁸³ NIETZSCHE Friedrich. Also sprach Zarathustra. 1883; Munchen : De Gruyter, 1967, 1988, p54

exaltation of a transcended self, enforced by physical strength, elevates bandini' s perception of himself, and allows him to become his own god in a godless world : "Good for you, Bandini ! Wonderful work, potent. A veritable god, a mighty superman, a master of life and letters"²⁸⁴. Nevertheless, the fear of falling apart into oblivion remains, and the sublimation of the self into a theoretical superman is constantly questioned by inner doubts ("I am not a sheep. Read Nietzsche. be a superman. thus spake Zarathustra. oh that Nietzsche ! Don't be a sheep, Bandini. preserve the sanctity of your mind"²⁸⁵), as much as by outside aggression : "I was a hero, and my deed was not to be sneered at"²⁸⁶. On top of this, Bandini' s adoption of the superman figure as a mould in which a reinterpretation of life becomes possible, eventually verges on a mere identification to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, which instead of resolving his problem of a multi-fragmented identity, creates a new psychological dichotomy : "Laugh, i said; Go ahead, for amen i say unto you, he that laugheth last laugheth best, and ye must say aye again and again, thus spake Zarathustra"²⁸⁷. As a matter of fact, this apparently well-structured and psychologically acceptable way of thinking, which could be substituted to the decaying world and mind, revealed itself even more difficult for Bandini to experiment than for Nietzsche to elaborate.

Furthermore, Fante distils a great deal of irony in his presentation of Bandini' s thirst for Nietzschean ideas, thus proving his ability to look at his alter ego with a certain distance, contrarily to what some shallow critics said²⁸⁸. First of all, the mighty superman which is supposed to emerge from Bandini's transformation, remains but a small and frustrated runt, whose "will of

²⁸⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p155

²⁸⁵ The Road to Los Angeles, p46

²⁸⁶ The Road to Los Angeles, p83

²⁸⁷ The Road to Los Angeles, p143

²⁸⁸ HARRISON Russel. Essays on Charles Bukowsky. Santa Rosa : Black Sparrow, 1994, p220

power", and instinctive desire of domination are used to tear pictures to pieces and to terrorize shellfish : "The souls of the dead women would talk to the souls of the dead crabs, and they would talk only of me. My fame would increase. Crabs and women would arrive at one inevitable conclusion : that i was a terror, the black killer of the Pacific coast, yet a terror respected by all, the crabs and the women alike, a cruel hero, but a hero nevertheless"²⁸⁹. Here, Bandini' s pitiable cruelty is emphasized by his incredible megalomania, thus showing both a terribly inflated ego, and the ridiculous application made out of Nietzschean theories. Bandini' s eagerness for fame and power is clearly exposed in all its derision, and conveyed by a satirical situation strikingly contrasting with the protagonist' s serious tone : "Those crabs wouldn' t forget me for a long time to come. If they wrote history, i would get a lot of space in their records"²⁹⁰. On top of this, Fante really seems to have fun, showing the Nietzschean "transformation" on his conceited and pathetic character. Bandini whose failure has been almost complete until then, belongs to the American myth of the "Loser", and therefore accomplishes a twisted and silly metamorphosis, instead of a metaphysical transcendence. Eventually, through humour, Fante remains detached from his admiration for Nietzsche, thus avoiding the hagiography, and from his literary *doppelganger*, whose failings allow a sharp and funny caricature of frustration and impotence : "These goddamned crabs had actually questioned the might of superman Bandini !"²⁹¹.

Although sometimes caricatural and satirical, Nietzsche' s influence on Bandini' s personal development is rather benevolent. His conception of a godless world, centered around a transcended man enables Fante' s character to achieve his rejection of the multiple paternal links, and therefore to

²⁸⁹ The Road to Los Angeles, p77

²⁹⁰ The Road to Los Angeles, p36

²⁹¹ The Road to Los Angeles, p33

picture himself as a potential creator. The shift from the veneration of the father to the recognition of one's creative power, through despair and then rejection of god, has enabled Bandini to discover himself. The different layers of his quest form altogether a self-discovery process. being at last his own god, his own father, he understands that fulfillment relies in the possibility to transform the world in order to make life tolerable. Fatherhood and the creation process eventually melt, and reveal Bandini to himself as an artist : "Oh Zarathustra, endow thy men with plenty of strength (...) maybe my genius lay in art"²⁹². Eventually, the discovery of writing will transform the oppressive enclosure of the *thébaïde* into a voluntary exposure of the mind.

²⁹² The Road to Los Angeles, p30

III

A WRITER IN THE MAKING

The writing process enables a reconstruction of the self, as much as an exposure to the open world, and therefore provokes a sudden acceptance of the past which establishes a new equilibrium between unconscious impulses and conscious necessities. The need to create becomes a positive outlet for the self-destructive energy which used to verge on madness and death. Bandini' s personal reading of Nietzsche therefore occurred at the breaking point, and allowed a restoration of inner peace. The psychological modifications which take place after this unexpected anagnorisis, are to be observed in a superimposition of the artistic process and the reconstruction of a family life.

CHAPTER 1

THE FATHERHOOD OF THE SON

The birth of the vocation and the subsequent commitment to writing induce a shift of status, which enlightens the act of creation, and reveals an inversion of the parts assumed by father and son.

SECTION 1 THE ACT OF CREATION

Creation soon appears as a way to challenge nature, and to release frustration and anguish through the elaboration of a personal world. The desire to create remains an expression of inadequacy and uneasiness toward the outside and women, but which is focused in a positive way, instead of being directed inward. Writing becomes for Bandini the opportunity of recreating himself according to his own picture, to become his own ungendered progenitor : "To change myself into somebody else, to write, to fuck and to write"²⁹³. If the choice of writing, as a substitute and a remedy to emptiness, did not seem obvious in the first place ("Then i got tired of the whole thing. I decided maybe i wasn't a writer but a painter (...) Then i got the idea i wasn't an artist or a writer, but an architect"²⁹⁴), Bandini' s decision to build a completely new self corresponds much more to the writer's ability, whose imagination transcends reality and restore an order from the ambient chaos : "Out of that chaos of jumbled anecdotes, something had to emerge"²⁹⁵.

²⁹³ The Brotherhood of the grape, p81

²⁹⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p30

²⁹⁵ Full of life, p96

Furthermore, writing reveals its capacity of fulfilling the frustrated sexual impulses, through replacing the actual intercourse by a literary logorrhoea, which is the writer's ejaculation. If not a complete substitute, the necessary energy which flows into the writer's prose is linked to sexual instinct, and the possible exchange of forces between the two coexistent spheres of sex and writing, appear to Bandini as a revelation on the nature of both activities : "Love wasn't everything. Women weren't everything. A writer had to conserve his energies"²⁹⁶. The sexual impotence due to a compulsive fear of women, as much as the frustration caused by this inability can be appeased by the act of creation, which is both a way to transcend basic impulses, and a possibility to reinvent history, to modify memories, and to feast oneself upon the literary forms of imaginary female characters. Writing can be an act of possession, an affirmation of the mistrusted virility, and eventually an almost political act of emancipation toward the pains of reality : "I carried the book a hundred yards into the desolation, toward the southeast, with all my might i threw it far out in the direction she had gone"²⁹⁷. Bandini's discovery of writing uncovers the complex links which unite passions to the outlet of creation. Literature feeds itself on the decaying self, and then produces a new one, extracting the quick from the dead. Assimilated to sex, the writing process, if animated by passion ("to write, one must love"²⁹⁸), aims to give life, and this pattern eventually links altogether Bandini's relationship to fatherhood, Nietzsche's perception of life and even the christian God. The writer is the hero, the superman, the almighty demiurge and of course the expecting father. Man's inability to carry life, which has been at the basis of inadequacy and misunderstandings between Bandini and his father, is now replaced by the only possible way for men to give birth, to create ! The psychological

²⁹⁶ Ask the dust, p68

²⁹⁷ Ask the dust, p165

²⁹⁸ West of Rome, p109

balance restored by the will to create, enables Bandini to become a father, and his fatherhood is of course twofold, the child on the one hand, and the novel on the other, as if woman's pregnancy was counterbalanced by Man' s artistic childbirth : "It takes a long time to make a son"²⁹⁹. Working on his manuscript becomes an implicit comparison with the female' s expectancy for the child to be born, a personal achievement which allows fulfilment as much as a duplication, a transmission of oneself into the future : "The good days, the fat days, page upon page of my manuscript (...) ah such sweet days, to see it grow, to worry for it, myself, my book, my words, maybe important, maybe timeless, but mine nevertheless"³⁰⁰. The superimposition of the two sides of creation is complete, and literature eventually appears as a mean of preservation and communication between the past and the future, a bridge over time, as the coming child himself, whose life is suspended between the generations : "Dear child to be born : tonight your grandpa told me the story of his uncle Mingo and the bandits (...) i write this tale because your grandpa wishes it preserved"³⁰¹. Suddenly, the "creative" birth reveals itself as the aim of literature, the painful release of the novel, the slow maturation process which leads to the delivery of a new self, as much as the eventual ability to assume biological fatherhood. Bandini' s understanding of the female aspect of creation, which leads back to "the vast comfort of God' s womb"³⁰², allows him to accept his feminine side, thus appeasing his fear of women, and enables him to write at last, to procreate.

Nevertheless, this shift is opposed by the unconscious desire to remain a son, and paralleled by a modification of his father' s attitude.

²⁹⁹ Full of life, p134

³⁰⁰ Ask the dust, p129

³⁰¹ Full of life, p96

³⁰² Full of life, p135

SECTION 2 THE INVERTED PARTS

The new responsibility of the creator, who has become both father and writer, suddenly raises a conservative fear, at work against any possible shift from the comforting status of passivity to the frightening unknown of action, from being an oppressed son to achieving oppression as a father. The instinctive desire to remain in the shadow of a literary god-father, as much as under the influence of a patriarchal figure expresses a natural feeling of anguish toward the future, and the ability of writing : "To hell with fatherhood. I was never born to it. i was born to be a son"³⁰³. The fantasized fear of fatherhood symbolizes the responsibility of the artist regarding his work, his mixed feelings related to the achievement of introspection , but also the refusal of taking his father' s part within a new family structure : "Marriage brutalizes a man, so does being a father"³⁰⁴.

Nevertheless, the eventual recognition of his father' s point of view, due to the occurrence of fatherhood in his own life, leads Bandini to repeat his father' s behaviour, to embody anew the stereotyped attitude of a fantasized and caricatured fatherhood. Therefore, the emergence of creation turns the victimized son into a repressive father, a demiurgic creator, whose accomplishment must be controlled, and perfectly defined. Bandini' s superimposition of his literary work, fruit of a personal and manly pregnancy, and of his own son, induces a confusion in objects and relationships. First of all, the memories of his father' s misbehaviour are projected by Arturo Bandini on his own son : "That couldn't be my son Denny. it had to be the marijuana, just as it had been the wine with my father when i was twenty"³⁰⁵. The frontiers between father and son start to be blurred, increasing the

³⁰³ The Brotherhood of the grape, p173

³⁰⁴ West of Rome, p22

³⁰⁵ West of Rome, p70

confusion due to the transmission of fatherhood : "I walked to where he stood by the gate and grabbed the lapels of his coat. Now you listen, i said. you may be my son, you may even be my father (...)"³⁰⁶. From this transient and confused moment, in which the relationships are still undefined, Bandini eventually evolves to an inverted situation. The charismatic father, epitome of the Mediterranean patriarchy, becomes his own son, and Bandini, deprived of his usual part, is cornered into becoming his own father, through a chiasmatic exchange of values. The unconscious and symmetrical shift is first perceived in dreams, revealing the changing nature of the father : "A pool of stagnant water, mossy and cool (...) and there were creatures just below the surface of the water, pooping their heads out (...) they were Papa and Joe Muto (...) the white stringy things they dragged after them were umbilical cords"³⁰⁷. Here, Bandini attends the rebirth of his father, come anew to crush his desires. As a matter of fact, once reborn, the father comes to be perceived as a better son and husband than Bandini himself : "Joyce began to sob (...) his arm tightened around her shoulder. After the baby, you come and live with Mama and me, he soothed, get away from this fellow, he brings nothing but trouble"³⁰⁸. This "New Son" tries to evict Bandini, and to replace him completely, even by his wife' s side. This attempt of eviction almost succeeds, since from an outside point of view, Bandini' s father eventually comes to be regarded as a much more realistic Arturo than the real one : "But i'm her husband. -I thought the old man was her husband"³⁰⁹. On top of this, the settling of the father in his son' s life is emphasized by Arturo' s feeling of guilt and helplessness : "I'm a rotten husband, a lousy father, a bad

³⁰⁶ West of Rome, p62

³⁰⁷ Full of life, p84

³⁰⁸ Full of life, p129

³⁰⁹ Full of life, p130

provider, a total failure"³¹⁰. The nest of the son, being vacant, the father naturally comes to occupy it. Therefore, Bandini' s perception of his father shifts from the biblical figure of Abraham to the more prosaic embodiment of a cuckoo. Nevertheless, this new struggle does not take place without Bandini' s response, and the inversion is completed by a bilateral move, which brings Bandini to play his father' s part : "My father and i were very drunk (...) and we were like two animals, and i knocked my father to the floor, and he fell with a thud and lying on the floor, began to cry like a little child"³¹¹. Moreover, The mutual feelings of jealousy and bitterness which initiated this trend were mainly due to a common denial. Refusal of the father to accept the fatherhood of his son, paralleled by the refusal of the son to look like his father : "I am younger than my father : my hopes scream to the skies, his have dwindled to despair. I know my father sees me at fifty-two, and i, at fifty-two, am my father"³¹². The inverted pattern enabled the father to challenge the son, but also allowed the son to regularize the situation by playing his father' s rules. The process of inversion, almost like a psychoanalytic therapy, provokes a crisis which is solved through violence, and eventually leads to a sort of catharsis for the struggling characters, who are purged of their feelings of guilt and anguish by an outburst of passion.

Bandini eventually emerges from this tension, relieved and able to assume his new responsibilities as a writer and a father. Nevertheless, the fatherhood process, carried along by the inversion of pattern, has deeply modified Bandini' s perception. As a matter of fact, playing the role of the father, has brought him closer to his father' s origins, and provoked an inversion of Dreams. The American West, which used to epitomize the land of plenty, has faded in Bandini' s mind to be replaced by an artificial nostalgia

³¹⁰ West of Rome, p51

³¹¹ The Wine of youth, p148

³¹² The Wine of youth, p153

for his father' s Italy. This never-ending dissatisfaction, at the origin of writing, starts to contaminate Bandini' s speech through metonymies : "The fog was thin in the East, the West was black and grey"³¹³. Following Thoreau' s understanding of motionless travels, Bandini redefines his imaginary geography, and progressively gives up his past ambitions to enlighten his desire of creation with an eastern glory : "We go eastward to realise history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; We go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure"³¹⁴. Los Angeles revealed itself disappointing and dim, therefore Bandini turns to a fantasized cliché of a city way back east. At the end of the continent, he starts to dream about Rome, as a terrestrial heaven, which could fulfill his unsatisfied dreams, and overshadow the American metropolis : "the wind in my face brought back the only reality and i choked over an ever-returning memory of Rome, a cup of cappucino at a little table on the piazza Navonne"³¹⁵. The cruel and sad America remains West of Rome, that is to say West of Eden, thus revealing a complete inversion of pattern, compared to the initial dream. Therefore, the generations seem to be at a loss, successively criss-crossing oceans and continents, looking for peace and prosperity, but actually fleeing from the psychological burden of family itself, looking for a fatherless land, a godless eden in which it would be possible to become a man : "Grabbing an Al Italia for Rome with seventy-thousand dollars in my jeans and a new life on the Piazza Navonne"³¹⁶. This fictitious place is unreachable, but in writing, and therefore stimulates the writer' s reflection on his own work, in order to appease dissatisfaction and frustration which are inherent to the post-lapsarian world.

³¹³ The Road to Los Angeles, p25

³¹⁴ THOREAU H.D. Walking, or the wild. 1862; New York : Old Saybrook Applewood Books, 1990

³¹⁵ West of Rome, p34

³¹⁶ West of Rome, p35

CHAPTER 2

THE ORIGIN IS THE END

The reflective aspect of John Fante's writing, due to the fact that the narrator wants to become a writer, offers a comment, which can be either implicit or explicit, upon fiction writing itself through the use of metafiction. On top of this, the writing process enables Bandini to look back at the past, and to eventually write about it, thus trying to find peace in completing a full circle.

SECTION 1 THE USE OF METAFICTION

Bandini's odyssey mainly deals with a spiritual crossing of the Atlantic ocean, a late psychological evolution which answers the physical journey accomplished by his father. Nevertheless, Bandini's eventual recognition of his creative impulse reveals a second layer of meaning, Fante's comment upon his own literary work, through the character of Bandini. If the peripeteia of his protagonist often corresponds to a major distortion of reality, the creation of fiction within the fiction is here directly linked to Fante's own perception of literature, and therefore reflects his doubts, enthusiasm, and disappointment concerning not Bandini's writing of short stories, but his own creation of Bandini as a valuable fictitious character. Even the choice of the protagonist's name, using onomastics, seems to be a pun about Fante's desire to write and to achieve recognition for his work, since *bandire*, in Italian, means : to publish. The most autobiographical part of Fante's work therefore relies on the use of metafiction, and teaches the careful reader about the birth of the vocation : "He said, you read a lot. Did you ever try writing a book ? That did it. From then

on, i wanted to be a writer"³¹⁷. Implicit narrative elements also contribute to this description of fiction writing. Bandini' s perception of life as a theatrical stage sometimes creates a meta-setting within the novel, as if the fictitious characters were real, and observing purely imaginary characters, in a kind of mise en abyme process : "Patiently, we waited for them to reappear, like an audience expecting the return of the players to the stage"³¹⁸. this second level of fiction enforces the vividness and realism of the first level protagonists, whose assimilation to an audience relates them to the readers : "And so i was a spectator. life is a stage. here is drama"³¹⁹. Bandini, as a spectator of life, appears therefore more familiar to the readers, who are of course spectators of this imitation of life that is a novel, and Fante, aware of Aristotle' s Mimesis, reveals by the way his desire to use dramatic elements of life in order to create literary drama. Most of Fante' s fiction actually deals with the act of writing, either implicitly or explicitly through the vocation of Bandini, vivid embodiment of Fante' s dedication to writing. Even Bandini' s difficulties with women are pretexts for Fante to deal with the lack of inspiration : "I could sit beside her, my own lips dry for lack of words, i the phrasemaker, and the pages of my soul were blank and unlettered"³²⁰. Here, it is not only the pains of creation which are expressed through metaphors, but also Bandini' s discovery of his demiurgic power as a fiction maker, thus revealing the self-consciousness of the narrator, as much as Fante' s speech in Bandini's mouth.

Writing eventually appears as an attempt to fill the emptiness of universe, the direct expression of Eros against Thanatos, noises over silence, as much as an American way to invest language, to contaminate nature and

³¹⁷ The Road to Los Angeles, p28

³¹⁸ The Wine of youth, p192

³¹⁹ The Road to Los Angeles, p44

³²⁰ Full of life, p136

the world by the power of words. Fante himself appears as an author, whose work is caught between silence and screaming, thus heralding the paradoxical tendencies at work within American literature. From Fante's manipulation of Bandini emerges this primary and vital sounding energy, very close to Whitman's "barbaric yawp"³²¹ : "I felt like squealing, making queer noises, new noises in my throat"³²². The will to write is also the materialization of this inner and genuine fire which exists independently of the past, neglects the gigantic sum of all literatures, to reinvent on a daring Tabula Rasa, a new language, a new Novel, a new literature. Therefore the scream of newness has to struggle, not against the past, but against the emptiness of death, the unavoidable onward progression of entropy : "I sat before my typewriter and the great awful void descended, and i beat my head with my fists, put a pillow under my aching buttocks and made little noises of agony"³²³. As a matter of fact, the vocalization of pain, which for the writer appears under the form of written sentences, is both a way to transcend pain and to fill in the gaps of Human life. This song, made out of new and strange sounds, which emerges from Bandini's desire to write induces a real exaltation of language, an enjoyment of words for themselves : "Oh hand land band stand grand land. yes i wrote it"³²⁴. This almost childish jubilation at the discovery of writing, which sometimes verges on nursery rhymes, comments itself on Fante's idiosyncrasies : "Up the river and over the sea, this is you and this is me, big fat words, little fat words, big thin words, whee, whee, whee"³²⁵. Writing enables a rediscovery of language, as much as a desire to go back to its own origins, to find back the genuine children's *babil* in which all languages

³²¹ WHITMAN Walt. Leaves of grass. 1855; Paris : Aubier, 1972; 1989, p176

³²² The Road to Los Angeles, p120

³²³ Ask the dust, p78

³²⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p133

³²⁵ Ask the dust, p106

are contained, an extatic glossolalia related to the lost universality and unity of the ante-Babel world. These plays upon sounds therefore reveal the psychoanalytic work undertaken through writing, to step back into infancy, and even into the initial womb in quest of the lost meaning. Moreover, through Bandini' s almost plastic descriptions of his own writing techniques, Fante adds to his fiction a critical commentary, explaining his personal vision of literature and style : "But it was not thinking, not cogitation, it simply moved of its own accord, spurted out like blood"³²⁶. Fante reveals himself as an instinctive, and impulsive writer, using his guts and heart rather than his brain in order to convey emotions, but his claiming, through Bandini, of a raw and rough type of literature, which has been highly criticized since then by academics, should not overshadow the reality of his literary scholarship. The writing process enabling Bandini to become his own God and father also unravels a new quality of perception, an ethereal quality of being which is half way between heaven and earth : " six weeks, a few sweet hours every day, three, four, sometimes five delicious hours, with the pages piling up and all other desires asleep. i felt like a ghost walking the earth, a lover of man and beast alike"³²⁷. Although, liberated by artistic creation of mystical and devilish apparitions, the biblical parabol of the Jacob' s ladder is once more relevant to describe Bandini' s state of mind while writing : "I was dying and the dead and the ever-living. I was the sky and not the sky. There was too much to say and no way to say it"³²⁸. Pointing on the difficulty to canalize the energy, in order to produce a coherent piece of fiction and not a blurred picture, Fante emphasized the ghost-like impression of the writer at work, half way between two opposed worlds. The writer is therefore perceived as a mediator, who is able to relate the antagonistic parts of the world, to reunite what has been

³²⁶ Ask the dust, p106

³²⁷ Ask the dust, p113

³²⁸ The Road to Los Angeles, p132

divided : "It was like nothing on earth, that feeling. I was a ghost. I floated and soared and giggled and floated. This was too much. Who would have dreamed of it, that i could be able to write like this. My God ! Amazing"³²⁹. Fante, through Bandini' s progressive discovery of fiction writing, expresses his sacred perception of creation. According to him, writing is an ordeal, a painful but holy activity which supposes a certain purity to be undertaken : "It was as if a purge had burst away all that troubled me-the poisons of the body, the abominations of the soul. In the morning i felt clean and pure. I set up a bridge table by the window and started to write"³³⁰. As much as a spiritual sanctity, a bodily purity is also necessary, a renouncement of the self, expressed by nakedness, which announces the orgasmic floating of a being regenerated through writing : "there were papers and pencils in the drawer (...) sitting naked i started to write"³³¹. On top of this, Fante' s use of Bandini for his own personal confessions as a writer reveals an abolition of time and space while writing, as if the process of creation was an abstraction, able to transcend not only the laws of physics, but also the influence of matter on the spirit. Fante ' s mise en abyme describes rather an act of faith, which elevates the soul over the contingency of earthly reality and therefore sublimates the sordidness of life : "That morning i sneaked from work to the lavatory. I wrote in there. The flies were numberless. They hovered over me, crawled on my hands and on the paper (...) at noon i wrote in the cafe. It was crowded, smelling of grease and strong soup. I hardly noticed it. When the whistle blew i saw my plate before me. It hadn' t been touched"³³².

The use of metafiction enables Fante to express his satisfaction or disappointment about his own writing, and therefore to speak freely of his

³²⁹ The Road to Los Angeles, p132

³³⁰ The Brotherhood of the grape, p77

³³¹ The Road to Los Angeles, p129

³³² The Road to Los Angeles, p135

work without fearing criticism. The manipulation of Arturo Bandini as a proxy creates a screen which protects the author, while letting very personal feelings show through. Nevertheless, Bandini's constant bragging about his writing ability should not be interpreted as the direct expression of Fante's self-confidence, but rather as a deliberately exaggerated and humorous comment on his fear of failure : "I would lead her to to her bookshelf, where my own books were to be seen among a few indispensable others, such as the bible and the dictionary, and i would draw out my book Colossus of destiny, the book for which i had been given the nobel award"³³³. As a matter of fact, this pretended show off is a reaction against a complex of inferiority, due to social and cultural rejection, and a way to resist the uncertainty of the literary vocation. Persuading himself of a reassuring success, Fante increased in Bandini what he lacked the most, thus trying to balance his natural tendency to self-deprecation : "I shall continue my literary efforts. i'm a writer you know (...) the writing instinct has always lay dormant in me"³³⁴. As a matter of fact, Fante 's own difficulties in publishing his first novel also show through in Bandini's confident speech : "I was twenty then. What the hell i used to say, take your time, Bandini. You got ten years to write a book, so take it easy"³³⁵. Nevertheless, Bandini also expresses doubts and fears which are directly formulated, signs of self-hatred which reveal Fante's struggle to write and to be read in a world which did not really pay attention to him. Once more, the harshness of society contributed to crush down ambitions and aspirations of fulfilment, by stimulating the development of crisis in the creation process. Bandini therefore appears as Fante's literal double in failure and creative impotence, reflecting his fear of rejection and his subsequent desire for self-censorship : "But you haven't any talent, your talent is dubious, your talent is

³³³ The Road to Los Angeles, pp92, 93

³³⁴ The Road to Los Angeles, p38

³³⁵ Ask the dust, p18

pitiful, you haven't any talent, and stop lying to yourself because you know *the little dog laughed* is no good, and it will always be no good"³³⁶. The repression from which Bandini's effort suffers is mainly due to the opposition of forces at work in Fante's. The necessary humming and squeaking of new sounds try to contaminate the silence of entropy and despair, but the rejection of this will to live by a repressive society leads to renouncement and emptiness : "He had plucked out my heart. Hogwash ! All those nuances, that superb dialogue, that brilliant lyricism - and he had called it hogwash. Better to close my ears and go away to some far off place where no word were spoken"³³⁷. Fante's struggle, is not only a fight against society and himself, but a real fight against the hopelessness of life, and the lies which are at the basis of civilization. Since the so called happiness, promised by Thomas Jefferson, is unreachable, and that unsatisfaction can be overruled only by an attempt of creation, writing becomes a political act of rebellion against the American standard, a way to express one's rejection of a false dream, which cannot be grabbed either by conforming to normality or by refusing it : "Come on ! Who wants to fight me, i'll fight every damned fool in this room. I can lick the whole world"³³⁸.

Moreover, Bandini is not the only character who reflects Fante's desire to express himself on the subject of writing. Secondary characters also want to write, and their work is often used as a pretext to rehabilitate Bandini's creation, which is of course the fictitious reflection of Fante's real work : "I sat down and read his stories. I made notes on every line and sentence and paragraph of it. The writing was pretty terrible, a first effort, clumsy stuff, vague, jerky, absurd"³³⁹. This implicit comparison serves Bandini's attempt

³³⁶ Ask the dust, p20

³³⁷ Ask the dust, p74

³³⁸ The Road to Los Angeles, p132

³³⁹ Ask the dust, p118

to regain self-confidence, but the simple act of looking for transcendence through creation turns the writing process into a holy sacrament, which in itself is larger than the reunion of form and content : In my hand i held an effort of his, an expression of his struggle against the implacable silence toward which he was being hurled. Murderer or bartender or writer, it didn' t matter"³⁴⁰. Fante' s ultimate respect for this impulse toward writing sublimates the stylistic failure, and in this respect bypasses the usual standards of literature, to replace the creation process in a central place, thus dominating rhetorical criticism by its tremendous individualistic courage : "When you undertook a novel, the responsibility was awesome. not only were you the writer, but the star and all the characters, as well as director, producer and cameraman (...) If your novel bombed, you suffered alone"³⁴¹.

Fante' s fiction often focuses on the revelation of the self which eventually leads to the sudden emergence of writing. Nevertheless, this reaction usually does not take place until the very end of the novel, thus ending the story-telling by a description of its birth. Fante ' s typical novel therefore looks like a never-ending circle, which ends with the narrator beginning to write : "There was a ten minute wait for midnight train for Los Angeles, i sat down and began to think about the new novel"³⁴². here, the "new novel" is of course the one that the reader is just finishing, in a rather proustian paradox. As a matter of fact, the work which is completed eventually appears as yet undone, and the potential fear in front of what had to be made, remains : "I had seventeen dollars and the fear of writing. I sat erect before the typewriter and blew on my fingers, please God, please Knut Hamsun, don' t desert me now. I started to write and i wrote"³⁴³. The

³⁴⁰ Ask the dust, p120

³⁴¹ West of Rome, p55

³⁴² The Road to Los Angeles, p164

³⁴³ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p147

writing process never ends, because the modification of the self that it initiates is ever-lasting. According to Fante, writing is a building up process which takes place in the inside as much as in the outside, and his own comment upon this modification, through the use of metafiction, reveals the necessity and the dramatic irrevocability of this change : "Once in Denver there was another night like this, only i was not an author in Denver"³⁴⁴. The novelist Bandini, now aware of his nature and fate becomes able to use his own story to create, and therefore turns anew to his past, and family.

SECTION 2 LOOKING BACK IN PEACE

The past, which had been completely occulted since then by the quest of a new self, is restored through the achievement of writing and the indirect self-analysis allowed by meta-fiction. The metamorphosis initiated by the fulfilment of creation therefore stimulates a new interest for childhood' s memories, which eventually appear as symbols of a lost eden. Compared to the relative fall of adulthood, the struggle due to the crisis of identity, and its consequent loneliness, childhood, whose pain and traumas have been expurgated by the prism of fiction writing, suddenly reveals itself as the paradise lost, the pre-lapsarian world, in which the unity of the self was real. More than a simple restoration, the writing process induces an enlightenment of the past. The novelist inside the novel starts to rediscover what he had left behind, and eventually to use it as a basis for writing : "Dear Mr Hackmuth, i wrote, describing the glorious past, dear Mr Hackmuth, page upon page"³⁴⁵. The past, which had been abandoned as a testimony of bastardy, comes to be transcended by the catharsis of writing as much as by the power of

³⁴⁴ Ask the dust, p19

³⁴⁵ Ask the dust, p28

imagination which modifies and sublimates the roughness into glory. The elaboration of a novel inside the novel appears as a machine capable of transmuting the anger into irony, hatred and self-disgust into bitter-sweetness, thus enlarging the positive distance between author and narrator, narrator and his past . On top of this, to the natural tendency of looking back with a twisted and embellished perception, is added a deliberate care in transforming the substance of the past in order to produce a genuine piece of literature : "The finest short story in American literature (...) maybe that business about the blessed sacrament wasn' t exactly true; maybe it did not really happen. but my God, what psychological values"³⁴⁶. The past, sublimated, transformed and accepted, then becomes the core of Bandini' s literary work. The childhood and family, from which Bandini had so vigorously fled, is suddenly brought back from the periphery of his life to the center of his creation : "My sister will say : Why do you write about your family all the time ?"³⁴⁷. Bandini's understanding of his own writing is therefore twofold. It is an undertaking of reconstruction after the neurotic seclusion inspired by Huysmans, and a psychoanalytic process aimed at inducing a rehabilitation of the rejected past. Writing about the past eventually enables Bandini to accept this part of himself which was jeopardizing his psychological equilibrium, and this acceptance creates the necessary conditions for a restoration of inner peace : "I am singing now, for soon i shall be home (...) my mother will spread a great table piled high with the delicacy of my boyhood"³⁴⁸.

Once the psychological frontier between past and present is abolished, any details from everyday life allows a recollection of memories, which contributes to the elaboration of fiction : "I liked that dog (...) he was

³⁴⁶ Ask the dust, p74

³⁴⁷ The Wine of youth, p153

³⁴⁸ The Wine of youth, p147

childhood again"³⁴⁹. Therefore, the writing process is at the same what initiates the acceptance of the past and the final fruit of this acceptance, purpose and means altogether, thus creating a virtuous circle which links the ability to create with the ability to reunite the antagonistic parts of one' s self. The present which used to be perceived as a prison cell, isolated from a disgusting past and a frightening future, symbolized by the enclosed *thébaïde*, becomes a gate which opens on the past ("and i will look at the face of my mother, and i will remember a night when we lived in the south"³⁵⁰), thus enabling creation. The unifying tendency of writing turns the former enclosure into exposure, and therefore reveals the illusion of rejection. As a matter of fact, the past remained a burden as long as it was kept aside, and the relief due to its rediscovery shows Bandini that freedom lies in acceptance and understanding rather than in refusal.

Not only the distant and painful past becomes a material for fiction writing, but also more recent events, which enlightened by specific circumstances, reveal themselves valuable. Moreover, the substance of writing seems to spurt out from the apprehension of time itself : "She threw her arms around him. I watched them a moment. Then everything cleared in my mind. All those weeks, the things i had to say, the things i wanted to write, i could write them now, the feelings in my blood; they would mix with ink and stretch themselves across fields of white paper"³⁵¹. The recent past also enables the sublimation of pain through the catharsis of creation, and therefore, transforms traumatic experiences into fiction, in order to relieve the reconstructing psyche : "In two days it was done : a short story about the Toyo fish Company, the boys and girls who worked there, and of a love

³⁴⁹ West of Rome, p54

³⁵⁰ The Wine of youth, p153

³⁵¹ The Wine of youth, p250

affair between my boss Jose and a mexican girl"³⁵². Eventually, this peaceful return to the past, forecasts a shift in attitude which will bring Bandini' s odyssey back from the Californian Cyclades to his native Ithaque : "I seem to have come home, and i am surprised that this return, which i have somehow always expected, should come so quietly, without trumpets and thunder"³⁵³. The ability to look back, due to the catharsis of writing, has induced a desire to go back to the origins, in order to reunite the split parts of the ego. This return is not only material, but also spiritual, and reveals the ever-lasting presence of a metaphysical belief under the transient nihilism.

³⁵² The Brotherhood of the grape, p77

³⁵³ The Wine of youth, p146

CHAPTER 3

THE GOD OF OUR FATHERS

The birth of the vocation , inducing a global vision of life and time, initiates a return to the past which eventually brings Bandini back to the certitudes of his childhood, the reassuring presence of a God above. Furthermore, the restoration of a paternal order after the crisis of doubts and its subsequent debunkings creates a need for an integration of the creation process within this pattern of filiation.

SECTION 1 A SOFT REBELLION

The collapse of values and its consequent revolt against institutions, such as Church and Family, eventually appears as a soft rebellion. After embracing various philosophies, Bandini turns his back on the isolation of Huysmans as much as on the nihilism of Nietzsche, and therefore completes the circle to end where he started. Bandini's journey through life is one of doubt, destruction and reconstruction. Nevertheless, though engaged at a time in a deep and subversive process of debunking, his reconstruction of a livable world looks very much like the one he had so despised in the first place. Therefore, this last volet of a psychological and narrative triptych can appear as surprising, when considering the character of Arturo Bandini as a rebel with a cause. His struggle against America was motivated by his inability to become an ordinary part it, because of a cultural inadequacy inherent to his origins, and not yet by a refusal of the brain-washing affluence, like it will be after the Second World War. As a matter of fact, Bandini should be seen as a young parishioner lost in a no man' s land between two

different continents and centuries, refusing to be saved out of bitterness and pessimism, until he finds a way out through writing, rather than as a mere revolutionary. Since his rebellion is not due to political or ideological factors, Bandini will often be considered by critics³⁵⁴ as a disappointing traitor, who sold his dreams to the main stream American way of life, and therefore as a disappointing literary creation. Nevertheless, this politically oriented approach is not only completely outdated, but also ridiculous, since the lack of political consciousness has very few to do with literature. Therefore, Bandini' s return to God, is not the betrayal of a supposed atheist and social ideal, which has been projected upon him by shallow readers, but the eventual emergence of a regenerated self after a deep psychological crisis, which is in keeping with the general pattern of the father-son relationship. It is not our duty to judge this evolution on a moral, or even political basis, but to choose the right angle of study in order to decypher the whole scheme. Consequently, the grid of filial relationships enables us to understand what can be taken for a sudden change in direction, but which is only the logical continuity of Bandini' s psychological evolution.

Bandini' s anger was not fake, but the honest expression of uneasiness toward the harshness of a world in crisis, epitomized by his father's combination of absence and violence. Nevertheless, his struggle against the establishment, which made him verge on marginality was not fundamentally opposed to a desire for certitude and order. Therefore, the need for a strong and benevolent father remained alive, though dormant, during his psychological ordeal : "For somewhere in my heart, there had always been a conviction that the church was my ace in the hole"³⁵⁵.

³⁵⁴ HARRISON Russel. Essays on Charles Bukowsky. Santa Rosa : Black Sparrow Press, 1994, p223

³⁵⁵ Dreams from Bunker Hill, p71

Bandini' s return to the comforting certitude of an almighty God, is for Fante the symbolic action which ends the evolution cycle, and eventually takes Bandini out of Dante' s circles of hell. As a matter of fact, Bandini ' s final step epitomizes a reconciliation with himself, which follows the initial rupture and the subsequent rejection. Once more, Bandini walks in Des Esseintes ' s footsteps, who after advocating seclusion, and self-hatred, eventually goes back to Paris, with no other possibility than living in the fear of a revived God : "Dans deux jours je serais à Paris; allons, fit-il, tout est bien fini (...) Seigneur, prenez pitié du chrétien qui doute"³⁵⁶. Huysmans himself, embraced Catholicism a few years after the publication of his most famous and provocative novel, thus becoming a very pious christian, and showing therefore that the darkest pessimism can actually hide the seeds of faith. Bandini followed an identical pattern, though resisting for a while to the temptation of a dogmatic grace : "That' s what i can't understand. if you're coming back to Church some day, why not now ?"³⁵⁷. Fante describes this late conversion as a proof of self-maturation, with its hesitations, doubts, inner conflicts, and eventual renouncement : "He meant was i ready to go to confession ? I wanted to say : no father. I said : yes, father"³⁵⁸. As a matter of fact, the resistance of the son was nothing but the unconscious replica of the father' s attitude toward spirituality. Bandini' s father has always been anti-clerical, and a guiltless sinner, which would explain Bandini' s behaviour by a hidden desire to reproduce the father' s scheme : "Father Ambrose had tried to bring my father back to the church. "The glorious return to divine grace", father Ambrose had called it the prodigal son falling into the arms of his

³⁵⁶ HUYSMANS Joris Karl. A rebours. 1884; Paris : Gallimard-Folio, 1977, p349

³⁵⁷ Full of life, p142

³⁵⁸ Full of life, p139

heavenly father"³⁵⁹. It is interesting to notice once more, the confusion of terms induced by the religious rhetoric. Nevertheless, as far as a lay conception of the family is concerned, Bandini is the prodigal son, reproducing the prodigal father' s atheist attitude. Therefore, the diverging conclusion of these two parallel evolutions can be explained by an eventual separation from the father, impelled by the appeasement due to the creation process : "Ever since i was a kid who served at mass i had wanted a sinful woman, someone to lure me like a siren. now i was tiring of it. The feeling of sinfulness was all right for a while, but in the end it was tiresome. i felt like a need for confession again, for holy communion"³⁶⁰. This separation is no more a sterile debunking, but the affirmation of a new and distinct identity : "The world was dust, and dust it would become. I began going to mass in the mornings. I went to confession. I received the holy communion (...) Here i prayed. The new Bandini"³⁶¹. Of course, the growing old of Bandini should be taken into account in this religious orientation. Getting older, Fante' s protagonist loses his arrogance, and starts looking for a psychological comfort, which can be peceived as a little pathetic : "O lord, give me a break, give me peace. i am wiser, i have learned my lesson. There shall be no more transgressions. I shall return to the church, for i am old now, too fucking old"³⁶². Nevertheless, the urgency and apparent sincerity of this appeal cannot be doubted, and therefore reveal a conjunction between spiritual renewal, psychological appeasement, and writing, which are not contaminated by the sudden fear of death : "Through the mist i saw the outline of a gothic door. it was the hospital chapel, suddenly; inexplicably, i began to vry, for there was the thing i sought, the end of the desert, my house upon the earth. Eagerly i ran to the

³⁵⁹ The Wine of youth, p185

³⁶⁰ The Wine of youth, p160

³⁶¹ Ask the dust, p104

³⁶² The Brotherhood of the grape, p123

chapel"³⁶³. Linking, in a false and twisted vision, the pretended purity of childhood and christianity, Bandini associates his new interest for the past with a need for meaning : "Bringing back the pages of my catechism. Who is God ? God is the creator of heaven and earth, and of all things. Is God everywhere ? God is everywhere. Does God see us ? God sees us and watches over us. Why did God make us ? God made us to know him and to love him in this world and be happy with him in the next"³⁶⁴.

This return to the Catholic Church, induces an other return to the Italian origins, which had been rejected as the symbol of an unacceptable cultural bastardy. The inadequacy of the foreign stock has now slowly faded, and the catharsis of writing has transcended what seemed a stain on the American flag into a cultural wealth, inalienable part of Bandini' s psyche. The source of shame within the family, and of conflicts with the father, at the origin of Bandini's departure to the West, eventually becomes pride, in a final embrace of recognition and understanding, produced by the creation process : "How do you mean, he' s ashamed ? How do you mean ? - Ashamed of being an Italian, Rocco said (...) -If i were you, i'd get rid of him, i said to Rocco (...) i'd like to paste him. But that won't do any good. there's no sense in hammering your own corpse"³⁶⁵. Here, Bandini even denounces in others, the attitude he used to have when he was younger, and disgusted by his ethnic belonging. Eventually, childhood, Italianess, and christianity merge into a common and renewed feeling of pride and devotion, which enables self-respect and love : "The pope speaks Italian, my father said, the cardinals, they speak Italian, the saints speak Italian, even God speaks Italian"³⁶⁶. Since America has always been perceived as a new promised land, a possible

³⁶³ Full of life, p159

³⁶⁴ West of Rome, p54

³⁶⁵ The Wine of youth, pp145,146

³⁶⁶ The Wine of youth, p197

restoration of the earthly paradise, and that the native tongue of the lord is definitely Italian, Bandini himself comes to epitomize this now holy mixture of the two different cultures. According to Fante, God himself, as Arturo Bandini, is an Italian-American, half way between the Church of Saint Peter and the base-ball bats from Saint Louis, divided and homeless, but one in the end, a creator, a writer. This mystical transformation, which had always been dormant in him, eventually takes place, and reveals a sense of strength and equilibrium, based on the power of creation, which embraces time and space in one single glance : "I have to smile, for the salt of the sea is in my blood, and there may be ten thousand roads over the land, but they shall never confuse me, for my heart' s blood will ever return to its beautiful source"³⁶⁷. Once the heritage digested, and the past eventually mastered, Fante turned Bandini' s look toward the future, thus attempting to transmit his legacy, and to incorporate his work in the flow of time.

SECTION 2 A FAMILY TREE

Fante' s achieved psychological restoration, which has brought Arturo Bandini from a cultural and social rupture to a final reconciliation with himself, is eventually symbolized by a desire to be in keeping with the general pattern of American literature, and therefore to revindicate a literary filiation. Bandini' s acceptation of his role as a go-between, who links the different cultures and generations, becomes the epitomy of Fante' s wish to replace his own work within the frame of American literature, with its influences from the past, and its possible consequences on the future, like a book stored on a shelf in alphabetical order, a constituent piece of literature in the making : "A day and another day and the day before, and the library with the big boys in the

³⁶⁷ Ask the dust, p97

shelves, old Dreiser, old Mencken, all the boys down there, and i went to see them, hya Dreiser, hya Mencken, hya, hya : there' s a place for me too, and it begins with a b, in the B shelf, Arturo Bandini, make way for Arturo Bandini, his slot for his book, and i sat at the table and just looked at the place where my book would be, right there close to Arnold Bennett, not much that Arnold Bennett, but i'd be there to sort of bolster up the B' s"³⁶⁸. Bandini' s eventual recognition of his condition as an Italian-American, whose fulfillment cannot be reached outside of the family pattern, leads Fante to constitute a literary family tree, an imaginary genealogy of writing, in which his own work of fiction would be imbedded. Bandini' s achievement of inner peace by the establishment of a new and twofold status in which he is at the same time a father and a son, is therefore paralleled by Fante' s attempt to anchor his literary efforts within a filial relationship. As a matter of fact, Fante perceived himself as the heir of a literary tradition, which explains why Bandini eventually renounces to rupture and rejection in order to embrace respect and submission to fate, without verging on conservatism. Fante' s purpose therefore appears as the drawing of a median line between rupture and continuity, an attempt to transmit an heritage, and to renew it at the same time. Arturo Bandini is consequently not only the son of Nicholas, the bricklayer from Abruzzi, but also and above all the natural son of Des Esseintes and George Willard³⁶⁹, or of Zarathustra and Clyde Griffiths³⁷⁰. Furthermore, and in response to Fante' s wish, he is also the father of other and later fictitious characters, either through intertextuality as previously described, or through a direct reading of his work.

³⁶⁸ *Ask the dust*, p13

³⁶⁹ ANDERSON Sherwood. *Winesburg Ohio*. 1919; New York : Oxford Classics, 1997

³⁷⁰ DREISER Theodore. *An American tragedy*. 1925; New York : Penguin Classics, 1994

Actually, the reissue of Fante's novels by Black Sparrow Press during the 1980's is partly due to the interest of Charles Bukowsky for the peripeteias of Arturo Bandini. As a matter of fact, Bukowsky's fictitious alter-ego, Henry Chinasky owes a lot to Fante's creation. Like Bandini, Chinasky is the son of Roman Catholic immigrants, who struggles against unemployment, women, and money in a decayed urban environment. Although Bukowsky also treats other issues, and develops his fiction on different basis, his debt toward Fante is clearly expressed by the will-be writer Chinasky in several novels, exactly like Fante used to do through the use of metafiction in his own work. Both Fante and Bukowsky portray protagonists who want to become writers and who undergo a period of suffering for their art. On top of this, Bukowsky's attraction toward Fante's novels lay both in the form and the content. The first person narrative as much as the depiction of a solitary young man, alone in his room and making a frank and unusual depiction of sex, were the marks of a writer breaking new ground in American literature. The ambivalent feelings developed by Bandini toward women also appealed to Bukowsky and his alter-ego, who found in writing an outlet for sexuality, which was both desired and feared. Although Bukowsky's refusal to "compromise" with the American society prevented Chinasky from achieving any kind of appeasement, his dynamic was similar to Fante's, depicting the male protagonist's social and sexual anxieties, and its self-destructive consequences. Moreover, while the idea of the cycle has always been present in Fante's, enabling his persona to reach a certain psychological harmony in the end, the self-hatred impulse inherent to the character of Chinasky never reaches sublimation, prevents him from going anywhere, and eventually results in a pattern which seems uncompleted. Although Chinasky succeeds in overcoming his sexual anxiety better than Bandini, Bukowsky seems to lack Fante's perception of a master plan, giving coherence to his

work as a global entity, as much as the true desire to redeem himself through writing.

Nevertheless, Bukowsky' s tribute to Fante is to be taken as the continuity of a legacy, desired and expected by Bandini himself : "Yes, Fante had a mighty effect upon me, not long after reading these books, i began living with a woman. She was a worse drunk than i was, and we had some violent arguments, and often i would scream at her : don't call me son of a bitch ! I am Bandini, Arturo Bandini"³⁷¹. Bandini has become the father of Chinasky, as much as Fante, the God of Bukowsky, linking once more through terminology, fatherhood, divinity, and fiction writing. As a matter of fact, Bukowsky comes to speak about Fante ("Fante was my God, and i knew the gods should be left alone"³⁷²), in the same terms than Fante himself did about Mencken ("Man needs a God, and you are still mine"³⁷³), showing thus, the perpetuation of a devotional and filial link, from one writer of the family tree to the other.

The recent publication of John Fante' s son' s first novel is also in keeping with the general pattern of this literary genealogy, and therefore belongs to the legacy of Arturo Bandini. The voluntary transmission of this patrimony is the endless repetition of a palimpsest. As a matter of fact, Dan Fante' s protagonist, accompanied by the ghost of his father embodied by a dog, suddenly breaks up with his hum-drum life, and decides to hit the road, thus starting again with the cycle of rupture and reconciliation which defines both the fictitious evolution of Arturo Bandini and the quest of identity in a multi-cultural, fragmented society. The legacy goes on...

³⁷¹ BUKOWSKY Charles. Preface to Ask the dust. Santa Rosa : Black Sparrow Press, 1939, 1980, p6

³⁷² BUKOWSKY Charles. Preface to Ask the dust. Santa Rosa : Black Sparrow Press, 1939, 1980, p6

³⁷³ FANTE-MENCKEN : A personal correspondence. Santa Rosa : Black Sparrow Press, 1989, p8

CONCLUSION

John Fante's work definitely conveys a sense of energy and verve, as much as a desire for success mingled with frustration, which often leads to a disheartening creative struggle. The urgency of feelings expressed by a literary tension reveals Bandini's naïvety and contradictions, but also his substantial nobility and spiritual appeal. Throughout the successive steps which put rhythm into Fante's literary career, the character of Arturo Bandini evolves from the impotent voyeur, witnessing the tragic fate and slow wreckage of himself and the world into the abyss of auto-destruction, to the fighter who uses his vocation against madness and emptiness, in order to restore personal harmony and peace. Nevertheless, Bandini's desire for his father's affection and approval, which is a symbol for a larger acceptance by society, clearly reveals the paradoxical situation at the core of Fante's work : how to express one's particular identity within the frame of a blind and conservative society. Fante's mixture of raw realism and lyricism expresses this tension between rebellion and submission, which underlies Bandini's quest for his true nature, through a twofold axis, the apprehension of the American territory on the one hand, and the discovery of writing on the other. The meeting point of these two tendencies being thus an attempt of rewriting the American landscape, of leaving new and personal scriptures on the sweeps of the continent, in order to turn America itself into a palimpsest.

Fante's desire to add a new layer of meaning to the amount of interpretations which gives birth to American literature went through the depiction of the Italian community during the first half of the twentieth century. The saga of Arturo Bandini therefore can be seen as a symbolic evolution,

dealing with the problems of all second-generation immigrants in America, as much as a personal struggle to find meaning in a meaningless world, and to sublimate frustration and anger by the development of a creative process. Bandini's westward flight was in keeping with the general pattern of his father's life, and though expressed as the epitome of freedom and rebellion, remained a symbol of unconscious continuity rather than rupture. His struggle over language, which turned English into an issue of social and cultural integration was marked by an attempt to introduce foreign voices within the main stream, but also by an excess of zeal in practice. His experience of marginality, either within the enclosed world of family and community, or in the exposure to the city, eventually led him to disappointment and loneliness. The absence of the father in a frameless and hostile environment therefore appears as a push factor in the choice of imaginary and literary protectors, whose influence should cope with a deficit of identity. Nevertheless, this dramatic absence of a paternal authority, feared and desired at the same time, induces a shift in spiritual values which turns the initial rupture into a rejection of the former ideals and idols, including the paternal trinity, composed of the father, the mentor and God. The erosion of the self, due to this sudden collapse, increases through the discovery of the decadent universe, and then is reduced by the powerful influence of German philosophy, which leads Bandini to the reconstruction of a new self through the act of creation. Eventually the rejection process is transcended by the emergence of the vocation, and the pursuit of writing enables reconciliation with oneself and the world.

Fante's creation is heralded by bipolarity and ambivalence, for Bandini always appears in a sort of psychological struggle, due to an opposition of forces within him : "It was so sweet to think about that it hurt"³⁷⁴.

³⁷⁴ The Wine of youth, p214

As a matter of fact, Fante ' s literary attempt was probably to offer a synthesis of contrasts, by describing the paradoxical tendencies at work within Man' s psyche. This pattern of attraction and repulsion toward women, society, God, and eventually all the subjects and objects which Man has to face during his lifetime, is also to be found in Fante' s own conception of writing : "Pride and duty. It does not seem possible i shall write anything enduring with those pressures forcing it. Yet it could happen. The best stuff is turned out under freakish circumstances. This i take it is a freakish circumstance"³⁷⁵. Fante' s profound understanding of the consubstantiality of pain and life, eventually allowed him to produce a rich and melancholic portion of American literature, which emphasizes the universal bitter-sweetness of life, without falling into sentimentality, and eventually reveals to the reader : "The loneliness of man and the sweetness of all men and the aching haunting beauty of the living"³⁷⁶.

³⁷⁵ John FANTE' s Diary (January 3rd, 1940), in Selected letters, (1932-1981), p315

³⁷⁶ Full of life, p160

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³⁷⁷ Taken from Prologue to Ask the dust.

