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**Our Fathers' Living Legacies:  
Three Italian American Novels  
*Christ in Concrete, The  
Brotherhood of the Grape* and  
*The Godfather***

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Our Fathers' Living Legacies: Three Italian American Novels  
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**Table of Contents:**

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>I Introduction</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>II Pietro Di Donato and the Weight of Premature Fatherhood</b> .....	<b>8</b>
II.1. Paul's skull in hand.....	<b>8</b>
II.1.1. A wop with a trowel .....	<b>8</b>
II.1.2. The great but failed Joseph of the house .....	<b>13</b>
II.2. Regaining control through the mist of concrete and anger .....	<b>17</b>
II.2.1. Massimo Recalcati's "Inheritance" and "Desire".....	<b>18</b>
II.2.2. Claudio Risé's condition for Desire: the Wound .....	<b>20</b>
II.2.3. Robert Sapolsky's light in the darkness .....	<b>23</b>
II.3. The needle to suture the Italian American Wound .....	<b>26</b>
<b>III John Fante's Erosion of Characters: Nicola Molise as Light through the Darkness of Fluidity</b> .....	<b>30</b>
III.1. The poetics of the father in San Elmo .....	<b>30</b>
III.2. The deadly nectars of life: wine, coffee and concrete .....	<b>34</b>
III.2.1 Nick's lessons from his son's distorted perspective .....	<b>34</b>
III.2.2 The perspective from Nicola and the blind belief in Violence .....	<b>39</b>
III.3. The way to self-realization through the rocks .....	<b>45</b>
<b>IV Mario Puzo's Corleonian Society</b> .....	<b>51</b>
IV.1. The fictional father .....	<b>51</b>
IV.2. Time for disclosure .....	<b>59</b>
IV.3. Grief .....	<b>63</b>
IV.3.1. The son of Violence .....	<b>67</b>
IV.4. The new era .....	<b>68</b>

<b>V. Conclusions Three Black Souls, the annihilation of limits through Violence .....</b>	<b>74</b>
V.1 Silent concrete in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century .....	<b>76</b>
V.2 The Infamia of fratricide: “A descent into trying to hold on to everything and losing it” .....	<b>81</b>
<b>Works Cited .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Works Consulted .....</b>	<b>87</b>

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This paper marks the end of an era. I will be leaving "La Serenissima", soon home for six years, two degrees, four different apartments, and twenty roommates give or take, to go where? That is still not quite clear, but I know that this city, along with everyone I met here, has gifted me with some of the memories I will hold dear for the rest of my life.

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The reason I decided to work with Vito Corleone, Nicola Molise and Geremio, apart from the academic purposes described in the Introduction, is my father. Pietro Di Donato, John Fante and Mario Puzo have disclosed in their works the same family values I have met, lived and assimilated sitting next to Gianni Blinzoni at the dinner table. My dad was born in 1925 and was a sixty-four-year-old man when he first held me in his arms. He belonged to old times, four years older than my mother’s parents. He saw and was involved in World War Two and witnessed his mother’s death, Costanza, in the same years. He lived through the economic boom a grown man and business made him a harsh person but I only remember overwhelming love in my early childhood; my late childhood, not so much. We got into a lustrum of ever-lasting fights and reconciliations with its golden peak at lunch, on my thirteenth birthday, when he told me “Va a

cagare” three times in a row and I looked at him and yelled “Stronzo”<sup>1</sup>. That was the first time I had ever dared to answer back in his own coin and the day he started respecting me.

Paraphrasing Claire’s speech<sup>2</sup>, “We were inseparable. He was my nemesis, my protector, my best friend” until 2007. Marlon Brando physically looked like him while playing Don Corleone, with the hair combed in the same manner, the aura of respect and power he filled the room with, and his belly, but my father had a legit business. He did not drink but he mirrored Nick Molise in many aspects before meeting my mother, and a few after they were married. He died two months before my eighteenth birthday and like Di Donato’s Paul, I did not have enough time with him. Reading these novels felt as if I were living some of the lessons he raised me through. These are the instances in which literature teaches where the living lack words and indeed the similarities dad shared with the paternal figures of the novels left me more empty than shaken at first but this is just a demonstration of the power of these writers’ style and their impacts on the reader. It is in the nausea Di Donato pushes down your throat that I questioned years later for the first time whether he felt any pain while gasping for his last breaths. Nick Molise’s cries for his mother in Fante’s novel evoked sleepless nights and Puzo reminded me that tears were not allowed, even if I was a little girl. I was abroad with a high school studying exchange program at the time and had not seen him in almost ten months when the news reached me, but after seven years I can say I have found closure.

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<sup>1</sup> Italian is a very colorful language and I love it. I have never stopped to count how many ways there are to tell someone to go f\*\*\* himself, but “Va a cagare” is one of them. “Stronzo” translates as dick, asshole.

<sup>2</sup> *Modern Family*, “The Wedding- Part 2”

## Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze three different father figures in three distinctive stages of Italian American history. Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) represents the oldest roots and traditions and the dilemma of losing a father at an early age. John Fante takes us through the time of refusal, both in family relations and national identity with *The Brotherhood of the Grape* (1977) and Mario Puzo brings back the order in the Italian American legacy with *The Godfather* (1969). I will try to establish a literary, critical analysis enriched by a few basic notions of psychology, following Claudio Risé and Massimo Recalcati's most defining concepts during the personal development of the child's set of mind, and an article by Robert Sapolsky, which gives a scientific explanation for the chaos of adolescence.

The conclusions will follow a very specific thread: the movie *Anime Nere*, by Francesco Munzi, presented at the Venice Film Festival 2014. I was astounded after seeing the picture and the figure of Luciano, disputed protagonist of the story, came naturally to mind as recipient of the traumas analyzed throughout this work.



## II. Pietro Di Donato and the weight of premature fatherhood

### II.1. Paul's skull in hand

*Christ in Concrete* takes place during the New Jersey Roaring Twenties, right in the cradle of the future concrete jungle. While the characters of *The Godfather* and *The Brotherhood of the Grape* are allowed to roam the world and discover their identities in their own time, this novel beats the incessant rhythm of 'the sound of progress', driving Paul to a choice: God or Job. His father, Geremio, is killed on a Good Friday in an accident on a construction site, on the threshold of Paul's flourishing into Massimo Recalcati's time for developing his own "Desire". His forced absence imposes a premature fatherhood on Paul, the reasons for which will be developed in the second section of this chapter, reaching the final light in the conclusion following Claudio Risé's explanation of Icarus's myth adapted to the bloody world of Job combined with Robert Viscusi's importance of 'the Act of Remembering'. To understand the immense affliction Paul is burdened with, Geremio's figure, mindset and habitat must be contextualized first, both in the outside American world and the interior Italian warmth of home.

#### II.1.1. A wop with a trowel

Geremio is one of the many expert foremen working on a construction site downtown, setting the foundations for the future heaven-eating skyscrapers. His boss, Mr. Murdin, berates him every chance he is offered - that is every time Geremio tries to talk some sense into him - "Ashes-ass" (Di Donato, 4)<sup>3</sup>, "wopbastard" (D.D. 9), etcetera. The problem at the base of the prejudice is that a Dago is not supposed to know anything about the construction business, let alone something that an American plans to conceal. The building is purposefully being erected

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes from *Christ in Concrete* will be referred to as (D.D.) from now on.

upon faulty pillars to reduce costs, while endangering everyone's lives. Murdin lucratively operates his own version of Omertà upon his employees and Geremio and the rest of the workers follow with their heads bowed. It is clear from the very first pages that the American dream is denied to bricklayers on the East Coast. In the decade following World War One Nick Molise finds freedom of trowel on the soil of California, but Vito Corleone comes out of the railroad workforce only by becoming a murderer, and Geremio is buried alive in fresh concrete. On the American ground, inside the police station he will be remembered as "the wop [...] under the wrappin' paper out in the courtyard!" (D.D. 25). The strong racial discrimination these men encountered in this particular period can be further explored in Sal LaGumina's *Wop! A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States*. Everyone can picture a lynching mob, but the focus of this analysis is how Paul can survive inside the semi-fictional world of *Christ in Concrete* without his father there to guide him through. Geremio is the father of his soon-to-be eight siblings and the only workforce of the family, the only one who can earn food, heat and protection. He has been saving nickels for the past twenty years "And now he was to have a house of his own! What mattered that it was no more than a wooden shack? It was his own!" (D.D. 6). However, the struggles met outside the comforts of home transcend the material dimension. In America male immigrants come to adore through hating and fearing a new God, Job, far from the light of Jesus, a strange entity that absorbs souls, turning them as black as despair. As Geremio learns in brief time, the hours spent working on the scaffold are not lived. What he fails to acknowledge is that workers are in fact sacrificing themselves through worshipping as they see the only chance for their families' survival in the possibility of dying another day on different bricks. Men cannot allow themselves jokes or private thoughts when praying to Job. Their gestures are mechanic, stripped to the essential. The frenzy, however, must be paired with common sense as men have to keep a constant lookout for Job's possible tricks: a flying brick, a little push or a slip of the foot can kill you in half a heartbeat if you are lucky, or

put you in a wheelchair which reduces you to yet another mouth to feed. The condition of non-living, the removal of the sentimental portion of the human being is the sole way to breathe:

Trowel rang through brick and slashed mortar rivets were machine-gunned fast with angry grind Patsy number one check Patsy number two check the Lean three check Julio four steel bellowed back at hammer donkey engines coughed purple Ashes-ass Pietro fifteen chisel point intoned stone thin steel whirred and wailed through wood liquid stone flowed with dull rasp through iron veins and hoist screamed through space Rosario the Fat twenty-four and Giacomo Sangini check... (D.D. 8)

What Thomas J. Ferraro described as “a raw experimental poetry of translated dialect and protean narrative” (*Job* 52) felt as if experiencing the third point of the Futurist Manifest written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti which reads in its native language:

La letteratura esaltò fino ad oggi l'immobilità pensosa, l'estasi ed il sonno. Noi vogliamo esaltare il movimento aggressivo, l'insonnia febbrile, il passo di corsa, il salto mortale, lo schiaffo ed il pugno (Le Figaro, 20.09.1909)<sup>4</sup>

It proclaims the ‘wish to praise aggressive movement, frenzied insomnia, the act of running, the mortal leap, the slap and punch over the old sleep, ecstasy, rational stillness decanted in old literature’ and *Job* fits the description like a silken glove. The beat of jackhammers, mortar being mixed, boots and curses provide the rhythm of the day until 5 p.m. without leaving much time to ponder over life and loved ones. These are the difficulties that Geremio has encountered in the two decades he has spent across the ocean and they coincide with the reasons of his death. *Job*, racial bias and the lack of determination to make his voice heard all combine to cause his death equally. Where Geremio fails to speak up his concerns regarding the under-pillars, Mr. Murdin keeps on taking advantage of the situation until the building collapses, killing all the immigrants.

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<sup>4</sup> I found confirmation of my ideas in Viscusi, when he mentions the Futurist aspect of the narrative in his chapter “*The Semiology of Semen*”.

Geremio sees his end, but he is far from ready to go. The passage is worth quoting in full:

Geremio came to with a start...far from their [rescue men] efforts. His brain told him instantly what had happened and where he was. He shouted wildly. "Save me! Save me! I'm being buried alive!"

He paused exhausted. His genitals convulsed. The cold steel rod upon which they were impaled froze his spine. He shouted louder and louder. "Save me! I am hurt badly! I can be saved I can – save me before it's too late!" But the cries went no farther than his own ears. The icy wet concrete reached his chin. His heart appalled. "In a few seconds I will be entombed. If I can only breathe, they will reach me. Surely, they will!" His face was quickly covered, its flesh yielding to the solid sharp-cut stones. "Air! Air!" screamed his lungs as he was completely sealed. Savagely he bit into the wooden form pressed upon his mouth. An eighth of an inch of its surface splintered off. Oh, if he could only hold out long enough to bite even the smallest hole through to air! He must! There can be no other way! He must! There can be no other way! He is responsible for his family! He cannot leave them like this! He didn't want to die! This could not be the answer to life! He had bitten halfway through when his teeth snapped off to the gums in the uneven conflict (D.D. 15)

He proceeds then gnawing his "bone-bare jaw maniacally" into the setting concrete until "it splintered, cracked, and a jagged fleshless edge cut through the form, opening a small hole to air" (D.D. 16). Air, which Geremio cannot breathe because of the "wooden splinters, stumps of teeth, and blood" (D.D. 15) that fill the hole where his mouth was, a dinner Job ordered for him with sides of tears, empty pleas, wrath<sup>5</sup>, misery and acceptance. Geremio dies praying to Jesus with "his blue foamed tongue" while "Blood vessels burst like mashed flower stems" (D.D. 16). The first edition of the short story published by *Esquire* in 1937 spared the reader from the original last words of the manuscript: "[...] the concrete slowly contracted and squeezed his

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<sup>5</sup> As the original unexpurgated submission to *Esquire Magazine* goes, "You make me suffer, and what have I done? Come come – come you – you awful awful bastard! Sonuvabitch! If you are God, save me!!!" (*Esquire*, 40) It was cut before the first publication.

skull out of shape” (Di Donato, 41). The sorrow Pietro Di Donato held inside of himself for twelve years is now clear to the reader.<sup>6</sup>

“Next to this scene, even Macbeth reads like polite literature.” (Viscusi, 103)

Geremio lives only during shared situations, both family- and work-related as will be seen in the next section. The sole motive to endure the anger of Job is children, hopefully the ones who will not be forced to walk in their fathers’ mortar stained shoes but in truth probably condemned to the same destiny. Geremio is part of “these great child-hearted ones” (D.D. 5) who dream by day of future ‘builders’, not bricklayers, and the rest of the time of being late to work as Snoutnose does while wiping his eyes clear of Tomas’ blood. Job infiltrates the mind up to the point of distorting the true objective from sight. Geremio’s last final pleas are in reverence of the goodness and majesty of God, words that fall empty in the hands of his twelve-year-old son.

Images of the physical castration combined with a note of religious condescendence express the rage and the anger still clearly present inside the young writer’s being at the time.

The misunderstanding and questioning of God begins in these lines, as Geremio wonders where indeed this True God is, this Jesus who would not show his face. Job is a deity who answers prayers in his own manner because Job himself has devoted his essence to Death, the Father who supplies fresh worshippers almost daily. The eternal sleep sneaks up unannounced thanks to the cover that Job provides. Men are then made powerless in a struggle that not only takes place in the factual world on the East Coast, but also recalls the epic conflict of Good against Evil.

Working hours help Death get acquainted with human existence and He hears and answers workman’s prayers, taking them out of their misery by embracing them in girders, remains of scaffolds and a flood of Job’s power source, concrete.

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<sup>6</sup> As Viscusi mentions (99-100), the author wrote the short story in 1935, twelve years after his father’s death.

## II.1.2 The great but failed Joseph of the house

The only true times of solace earned in spite of Job, and unconsciously laughing behind his back<sup>7</sup>, are found in the short lunch breaks and the evenings of rest at home, moments when men can speak and actually hear their thoughts. The camaraderie among workers is born because of the knowledge of a possible mutual fate. The team Geremio is ahead of looks up at him just as Michael, Sonny and a good portion of the world population look up to Don Corleone's very human conduct inside the twisted ethic written in blood. The reverence for his role is found during the break among sandwiches with green peppers and silence, which witnesses his recounting of Paul's radio (see D.D. 10). Job does not leave much space for basic human contact but the men make the best of it with never-ending jokes, trying to squeeze a laugh out of every BANG. Home, instead, is where the worker can relax. Inside the walls of his shack, protected from the dangers of the environment, Geremio is the breathing example of the God-like paternal figure in his sons' eyes. His role within the household is the gentle, yet strong husband and resourceful father. As Claudio Risé explains through the second part of his study<sup>8</sup>, the child is drawn to identify his father with God if a religious background is provided. Apart from being married to Annunziata<sup>9</sup>, which marks him directly as a 20<sup>th</sup>-century carpenter, Geremio's size inside the little room is enormous. When he holds his children he sees flickering lights, eager little builders longing for his day's recounting. When he is alone with his bride he sings Caruso and they dance a Tarantella until "the tenant below tapped the ceiling" (D.D. 6) From the hints I picked up throughout the whole novel the kind of love Geremio shares with his wife reminded me of Sonny Corleone and Lucy Mancini, had they been born in other times. Nine little boys and girls are the fruit of love and Catholicism but also lust. Geremio is, or rather was the "strongly

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<sup>7</sup> The original submission describes accurately the crew urinating against the pillars of the building.

<sup>8</sup> "Il Padre e Dio", Father and God. I studied upon Recalcati and Risé's books in E-book format from Amazon.it. DOI numbers were not available so I provide the titles of the chapters.

<sup>9</sup> Annunziata in Italian means 'preannounced', 'the chosen one'. It is one of those names with a clear Catholic reference, in this case to the Annunciation.

shaped body that slept with Annunziata nights and was perfect in all the limitless physical quantities” (D.D. 15). Paul loses his ability to nurture respect for God the moment he comprehends his father’s mortality. However, until Good Friday takes away his own personal God from Earth, Paul is a diligent boy who goes to school and secretly hopes one day to become as great as Geremio, a Maestro with mortar and trowel. Even if there is no mention of the firstborn’s previous dreams I imagine them to have been of this nature. No matter what a parent tells you, if a child notices a strain of genius in the family he would be foolish not to give it a try and if this gift runs through the blood of the Father, now that he is dead Paul has nothing else to cling to. The hope of having had enough time to inherit the right genes but most of all the right instincts has become a matter of necessity now that he is alone. Paul has his life planned whether he likes it or not, but again, this will be developed later on.

“Il padre ci libera dal male dandoci l’ordine, separandoci dal caos” (Ris , Il padre che ferisce e il “complesso di evirazione”). ‘The father frees us from evil giving us order, distinguishing us from chaos.’ Geremio’s short time with his loved ones puts a restraint on the teachings he is supposed to pass on, but one paradox stands out clear: “you live for the ones you love, take care of them but if you want to live you better stay away from Job”. The fences of the construction site are the only weak link holding the chaos of destruction, limiting Job. The father’s parental mission, according to Ris , is to pass on the “Wound” instead of the teaching of Recalcati’s “Desire”. The two notions will be put one against the other in the next section, basing the conflict upon facts of Paul’s upbringing, but for now it is enough to know that for what Geremio represents he is more apt to the transmission of suffering than to the teachings of the beauty and wonders of the Universe. All his adult life, the twenty years he spent in New Jersey marking his arrival around Paul’s age, he has lived among misery and discrimination. His moment of initiation to manhood coincided with a shower of racial discrimination.

The psychological abuse he suffered led to his weak voice being bought off for a few bucks in the presence of real danger. His way of making it in America is surviving the foreign world and this is the teaching Paul understands: “Stay away from Job, make yourself big somewhere else, build, but not at the cost of your life”. The problem at the core remains however: children cannot feed off of ideals.

Robert Viscusi answers one of the ‘Why?’ of the narration, “Why have I abandoned you? I have forgotten you” (Viscusi, 102). Di Donato’s crusade for Remembering that the critic distinguishes in three stages finds fertile ground among Geremio’s ashes because Paul has nothing but memories of his father. People do not grow old working with Job; they grow tired of living. By dreaming of builders he does not see any of his blood mixing mortar or planting bricks. Geremio sees his children in the outside world where they “will dance...in the American style someday” (D.D. 6) as Annunziata, who has always seen only the consequences of Job, is not afraid to say. Her freedom of speech is dictated by ignorance on the subject. Geremio does not answer questions regarding the construction business because he knows he is in the right but also bears in mind that his tongue might put him back on the street once more. By wanting Paul to build something anew, he does so without mentioning anything regarding the Italian foundation such a construction should bear. He literally and physically does not have enough time to pass on the key to absorb his inheritance<sup>10</sup>: knowledge comes from remembering; learn from your own mistakes; look back to counsel future generations about the tricks to enjoy the little existence left outside the limits of the construction business. It would have been of course part of the future education, but the transmittance, with a successful acceptance, of traditional rural values can only happen after the son has reached a certain level of maturity on his own, or after he has been officially initiated and recognized as a man. Geremio is now part of the dead, a new world, almost as loud as the one occupied by Job in its silence. His sudden tragic departure

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of Recalcati’s ‘Inheritance’ is fully developed in Ch. II through Henry Molise who faces Paul’s opposite trouble: understanding the inheritance a father seems reluctant to let go of.



leaves Paul with his mother, a woman who says that God has a plan. In the mind of a twelve-year-old child whose highlight of the day is listening to his father's voice when it is already dark at night, what plan could God conceive that deprived him of light in life?

It is curious how Annunziata is the only person to have the courage to speak up out loud against Job, questioning Him where Geremio and later Paul doubt the presence of a Catholic God. She is a woman and her place is by the fireplace as the old customs dictate. She tends to the offspring and manages to keep the house clean when ten different sets of prints walk it daily. She used to prepare vinegary cloths for her husband's forehead at night and she will always, no matter what, hold Jesus's altar in perfect order. She is illiterate and cannot understand English, but when Geremio used to look upon her on the threshold of his shack she had the holy radiance of an angel of the hearth. Her blind and deaf trust in the Lord knows no boundaries, which is why it cannot be assimilated by Paul who cannot trust anything abstract right now. Second to her love for Jesus comes only her adoration for her husband, her Man. She knows it was Job to have taken him away, "A matter of business" Don Corleone would say. She knows it was not God that made her a widow but her belief comes from an unreasoned religiousness. Annunziata does not accept Death in His finality as Paul does. As Recalcati recalls many times throughout *Cosa Resta del Padre*, Lacan insists on the fact that in order to use the paternal figure for inspiration, such father must be alive (Introduction). The Scriptures this woman has learned through Catechism and other voices from her past do not say so. She is firmly convinced about the immortality of the soul. Her final conflict with Paul marks her only step towards Americanization: tolerance of religion for the greater good. Her figure is essential to the upbringing of Paul, much more than Mrs. Corleone might be for Mike or Maria for Henry Molise and she will come back in the pages to come.

“Why?” (D.D.) I will not add a specific page number to quote this question because the whole novel is pervaded by the frantic call. When it is not written on the page the reader will end up adding it to the current line of thoughts. Annunziata’s brother’s immediate injury leaves trails of ‘Oh. Oh, c’mon. Really? Why?’ and Nazone’s fall only adds up to the already packed choir. Paul is not only alone in the struggle he is also lost. After hearing about his wop father he wanders the streets in desperation until he reaches the last stage of hopelessness: he decides to give up his soul to Job. However, this noble sacrifice entails practical problems. He is smaller than Lucy’s “pingee” (D.D. 66) and has never held a trowel in his hands before. Nevertheless, there is a light that takes Paul through his particular journey of self-understanding, one that walks with him along the ridge between being a father to his family and the first successful son for his pride, even if he will end up in an unexpected field of art.

## **II.2. Regaining control through the mist of concrete and anger**

The unexpected and violent death of Geremio leaves Paul alone in the world in a crucial moment of developing: adolescence. We all venture it and we all come to a point where we hate our lives. Some of us are simply unlucky and we have to face the time of maturing missing half the support we should be receiving from our parents. Paul is forced to go through some of the most turbulent years of his experience while learning how to lay bricks. This section is dedicated to the growing young man and his point of view and it traces the outline of his premature fatherhood. The rationalization of his father’s death and the complete acceptance of his legacy, takes from the young protagonist years and tears in what I want to analyze following three main line of thoughts.

## II.2.1 Massimo Recalcati's "Inheritance" and "Desire"

Recalcati traces the life of the teenage boy following the rule of "Desire" and sees personal culmination in the comprehension of the father's "Inheritance", as pointed out in his Introduction. This process can end up eating decades away, as Henry Molise/John Fante will be proof of, but in Paul's situation time is short and set in fast motion. The only way to live someone's legacy, as I would rather put it, is "Fare seriamente il lutto del Padre" (Recalcati, Introduction). The boy must rationalize the loss and let grief in before dealing with the weight of his genes and experience. Recalcati follows Sartre's idea of self-realization by making the Other's gesture your own and narrows it down to the ultimate crusade relying both on father and son to end positively: the former needs to create and render accessible a set of values that his son will be able to understand once alone, without guidance in the journey, hopefully having already retrieved what is necessary to gain access to the wisdom of his ancestors (Introduction).

While in death the father turns into the essence of the answers to Paul and every lost son's "Why?", in life he is the keeper of the key to personal success through a positive indoctrination. I will not fully unravel the concept of Desire because of its central role in the analysis of Henry Molise, what must be noted is that Paul sees a vision of what his father meant by Desire inside the legacy he is burdened with, without actively doing anything: he just builds. Geremio does not have time to personally pass on a full portrait of Job, but his death serves his offspring as a masterpiece. The problem is that there is no caption written by the artist to explain his bleeding sculpture and here Paul comes in. His duty in life, as he now sees it, is to take care of the family and in order to do so he must try to put an end and an explanation to his father's few and cryptic statues. Talent helps him build up his first wall and Geremio's touch transpires from its corner before a truck "dumped his four thousand bricks there" (D.D. 70). The first real chance Nazone, Paul's adoptive Godfather, has to admire the swiftness of Paul's trowel he exclaims, "Father, Son and Holy Ghost, this child learned the art in good Geremio's seed! He is a terror! He will

build us out of brick with his eyes closed in a few years!” (D.D. 72), little did he know. His wonder is sincere, a kid as fragile as a leaf in his eyes has pulled up, by himself, a standing wall on his second try. Geremio’s genes reward Paul with an immediate peace of mind: he is now able to feed his little brothers and loving mother. The first part of the legacy is passed on in the most possible natural manner on earth: through blood. Geremio’s gift in the bricklaying art grants his son a place at the hands of the first Godfather of this dissertation, someone who shares Vito’s ground rule: business exists for the sake of family.

Vincenz Nazone is the ultimate victim/martyr of the narration. By migrating from his homeland alone, leaving his family behind, suffering the degradation, waiting to earn enough to afford to bring them all to “[...] America beautiful [which] will eat you and spit your bones into the earth’s hole!” (D.D. 3) Vincenz cannot but become someone’s Godfather. It is his only opportunity to pass on his own legacy to someone. We have seen how it must be the person who creates his legacy that passes on the key to understanding and Paul is the furthest Nazone can ever hope to reach. He knows he will never see the mountains or the rocky coasts of Abruzzo, or his sons again and he decides to elect Paul as putative son. He fulfills Tom Hagen’s recounting of an Italian joke including the definition of Godfather: “[...] the world is so hard a man must have two fathers to look after him” (Puzo, *The Godfather*, 67)<sup>11</sup>. Upon meeting Paul he is the first man to distinguish himself from the group because he treats him as an adult. He feels the little boy’s wound just as Elias Canetti narrates in a Bolshevik tale about a son who feels his father’s presence in the room through the sensorial memory of his injuries<sup>12</sup> (Ris  Ch.1). This brings us to the next section: the passing on of Desire seen as absorbance and acceptance of the

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<sup>11</sup> Quotes from *The Godfather* will be referred to as (P.-) from now on.

<sup>12</sup> “Un uomo disse ai propri bambini che stessero attenti per vedere se arrivava il nonno. “Guardatevi intorno, mi sembra che il nonno si avvicini. Vedo sul suo corpo i segni delle vecchie ferite”. I bambini stettero attenti, e videro un uomo in lontananza. Dissero allora al padre: “Un uomo sta venendo qui”. Il padre disse loro: “È il vostro nonno che viene qui. Sapevo che stava venendo. Mi sono accorto della sua venuta dai segni delle sue vecchie ferite. Volevo che voi stessi vedeste: egli viene davvero.” (Elias Canetti, *Massa e Potere*, as quoted in Ris )

Wound. Vincenz understands the young Di Donato where the rest of the crew treats him as a child; his innocence has already been lost but is still betrayed by his looks. It is the mutual benefits of their relationship of friendship and respect that proves its efficiency. Vincenz has acquired a son and Paul has learned how to make friends as he proves with Louis, his Jewish Russian next-door neighbor, and the rest of his little gang. The Godfather does not replace Geremio, even if he himself will die at the hands of Job; he is someone who decides to open his knowledge to someone who is not his blood. “Il padre è solo un uomo e gli uomini son tanti, scegli il migliore, seguilo e impara”<sup>13</sup> as one of my favorite Italian songs goes: the father is only one man and men are many, pick the best, follow him and learn. Vincenz turns the card on the table and picks what he considers the best recipient for the kind of knowledge he wants, as well as the only one he has, to transmit. Paul is the perfect receiver because his Wound left him empty.

### **II.2.2 Claudio Risé’s condition for Desire: “The Wound”.**

Where Recalcati traces the limits of Desire insisting on a choice of words that outline a positive outlook, Risé identifies the condition for such Desire to take place in the act of transmittance of the “Wound”. The aspiration to maturity can be born only out of “Il segno [...] della ferita. Il dolore, il colpo, prodotto dalla perdita.” (Ch.1) ‘The mark of the injury. The pain, the impact caused by loss’. The tone alone sets a different mood. His Chapter dealing with the “Mark of the Father” depicts strong emotions as the result of the acceptance of grief and loss. The father is key to Desire, but he is most importantly someone who has survived the old impact of his own Wound. The first occasion he has to act for the betterment of his son is when forcing the rupture of the Oedipal relationship with his mother, which coincides with the child’s first

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<sup>13</sup> Francesco Tricarico, *Io Sono Francesco*, Tricarico, Universal 2000.

look upon the outer world. Manhood has begun. The father slowly enters the child's life until the bond is strong enough to sustain the passing of legacy. He is the figure who creates order from chaos as previously stated. His representation of God entails a visible shade of cruelty, which is necessary, however, to the realization of his role. Maturity means personal development, both mental and physical, but when this event befalls Paul, Geremio is stripped off the earth and buried alive. The boy is twelve years old, he has had little if no time to get to know his father since the detachment from his mother, and all he can look up to is a shape mostly, some faint memories of old time past as Geremio dies right in the middle of the transmission of the Wound. Still following the same author's line of thoughts, retracing the roots of the authoritative role of the father's figure inside Christianity, as mentioned before, Paul witnesses God's death along with Geremio's, or rather it marks the end of Paul's idea of a sacrificial God. Geremio is a martyr that Paul sees as Jesus on the cross because of Annunziata's everlasting faith, but as Vincenz comes to the aid he starts understanding that his wop bastard of a father is a victim as well. Paul sees the duality because he is part of the construction business as well now. Job is the only entity ruling over the New World and He hits every boy entering puberty a few hours after school or one Sunday every other, slowly biting into the souls of future workmen who find solace only in the company of each other. Job floods into the life of the young man who wakes up in agonizing pain the morning following his first shift, while trying somehow to get up from his fakir's bed to get to Job.

His neck was split and yet connected. He braced his hand under him and pushed, and his wrist crackled with pain. He rolled over on his side, his lower back shooting fire all over him and screaming for a spine of broken cords connected by a thread that would sever any second. (D.D. 80)

Paul proves to be growing on his 'Fatherly' side in these times, because he is finally open to learn about life, but most of all he is ready to experience. He is the head of the family; he

brings home American dollars and food, which makes him in his brothers' eyes the new God of the hearth, in other words the new Father. The teachings he acquires with the sweat of his forehead and the blood of his fingers reward him with pieces of old rural tradition every now and then. When he comes to learn one of the oldest remedies Mother Nature has blessed man with, he shows doubts at first but soon sees the beneficent effects on his skin:

“First we will pee on your hands- ”

“Huh?”

“I mean that you will pee on your hands, and then I, Vincenz, shall tape your fingers and the bricks shall not ruin them so.”

“Do what first?”

“Pee-pee, urinate- ”

“Oh...”

“- pass out from the kidneys the water. It is really the best thing, little Master Paul; I am not joking; the pee contains nature's salt and heals quickly the bricklayer's fingers.” (D.D. 77)

The sharing of regional secrets from the old country coincides with the bestowing of the title of “Master Paul”. The boy is enduring major outside struggles while facing his Wound, which transcends the unconscious side and becomes visible on his little body. Di Donato inflicts the troubles of his life upon the young kid, ostracizing him from American Society, putting him at constant risk, hurting and shaming him, giving him the hell he ventured upon more than a decade before and Paul, like Di Donato himself, always gets back up. This kind of survival-trick serves as a trauma to open Paul's eyes to the dangers of praying to Job while infusing him with the traditions of the old land. He has started putting unconsciously together the foundations of his own future values but the task of creating a legacy does not enter the picture. He is not the father of the family; he occupies the position momentarily because he is the oldest boy and women do not know Job because they have never experienced it. He retains his role as son because he is not ready to create an inheritance of his own, he must first assimilate Vincenz's.

### II.2.3 Robert Sapolsky's light in the darkness

The article by Robert Sapolsky I am about to quote examines the development of the prefrontal cortex in the teenage years, giving a scientific explanation for the chaotic and excessively emphatic behavior that characterizes every adolescent who ever walked the Earth. I hope "Dude, Where's my Frontal Cortex?" (Sapolsky) will change the method of approach towards troublesome teenagers, but I have to admit, I was irritated by the fact that from now on my cousins may back up their terrifying manners with a scientific reason. As Sapolsky writes:

The frontal cortex is the most recently evolved part of the human brain. It's where the sensible mature stuff happens: long-term planning, executive function, impulse control, and emotional regulation. It's what makes you do the right thing when it's the harder thing to do. But its neurons are not fully wired up until your mid-20s. Why? It's a central tenet of genetics that the genome that we start off life with, back when we were just a fertilized egg, is passed on to every subsequent cell in the body. But if the frontal cortex is the last part of the brain to fully mature, it's the brain region least shaped by that genome and most sculpted by experience. Our success as primates, and as individuals, revolves around social intelligence and adapting to the subtleties and idiosyncrasies of the environment. This is the portfolio of the frontal cortex. So if it's going to develop the ability to do this right, it's going to have to be profoundly shaped and informed by every smidgen of experience along the way. (Sapolsky, "Dude, where's my frontal cortex?" 24.07.2014)

It is Paul's age that puts him in the worst possible position. The book ends in 1929, when the young man is nineteen. According to Sapolsky, Paul literally never stood a chance. The empathy he feels only serves to take him deeper in his already forming nihilistic view of the world. His cosmic pessimism that culminates in "That's a lie" (D.D. 219), when he refers to Annunziata's crucifix as "the plaster man and wooden cross" (D.D. 221), is the result of the misinterpreted trauma Di Donato suffered when too young. The violence in the details of Paul's imagination is out of proportion, a clear manifestation of the limitless adolescent chaos treated



both by science and psychology. Geremio's death happens by Di Donato's pen but inside his and Paul's mind. The anger reversed into the stomach-sickening words carries the weight of what critics refer to "Italianità". When the father arrives at home inside his coffin, the family is called to "Attend, the man of the house has come home!" (D.D. 26). Viscusi writes about this sentence, "The effect is to make the moment strange, to give it some of the effect that the coffin coming in at the door makes on the young boy who is telling the story. The word dramatizes the moment." (101). It becomes a typical example of the bursting of the empathic adolescent's mind. Paul's mission, his own fatherhood, his decision to dive into Job's ever-open arms also becomes an exaggerated reaction to the wrinkles of grief he has seen creeping along the sides of Annunziata's face. Paul wants to absorb everyone's sorrow inside of him to spare his loved ones from affliction for a utopian greater good. Since he feels damnation crawling under his skin thanks to Job, he might as well carry out the rest of his misery upon his person.

One of the characteristics of the fully developed frontal cortex coincides with the employment in social contexts of something the adolescent neurons-overcrowded cortex lacks: the "Theory of Mind - the ability to operate with the knowledge that someone else has different information than you do" as the American neuroendocrinologist writes, irony. Paul should not be able to see the irony of and in life according to the article but the novel proves otherwise. Let us start with the assumption that irony fits at its best familiar or non-formal situation. *Christ in Concrete's* bricklayers use irony as weapon against Job, stealing human moments from the killing-machine, the only way not to plunge into complete despair. Paul is thrown into this world without much of a warning but develops an ability to adapt that transcends his father's generation.

Paul was not Paul; he was Philippe, he was the diapered one, he was sill-high, he was the apprentice-boy, he was the first-born masculine of the deceased, he was the little master, he was the half-pint jerk-off, he was godson, he was the titty-drinker, he took

orders from everyone, and each time they joked or had their tempers out on him it was hours before he could forget – And always, he felt he had to keep up with the men and that that was what the corporation expected of him. (D.D. 90)

Paul may be too young to fully grasp the essence of irony in words but he does not just see it, he recognizes it clearly. It takes him hours to digest the once more missed chance to shine, not days or weeks. I find just it perfect how Di Donato “forgets” the slurs as a child, admitting a sign of immaturity in his future mantra of “Remember”. Paul perceives the irony of his colleagues without being able to enter it, yet, but he acknowledges and grasps the irony of his father’s life, and his own, when he sees Vincenz’s corpse laying in the street after falling for twenty storeys.

Both his feet were snapped off and the flesh-shriven left leg-bone’s whittled point had thrust itself into a plank, with the protruding kneebone aiming at the sky. His hips and torso was a distorted sprung hulk. His overflung arms were splintered, and glued in his crusade right hand was his trowel. (D.D. 209)

This time I will spare the reader from the sight of the Godfather Vincenz Nazone’s skull. The horror is palpable because it finds bounds within its crudity. When Paul witnesses the remains of the man who took him in and showed him the way through revealing his legacy, he is nineteen years old. He shares the adolescent cortex of Gloria, his neighbor who flirts indistinctly with everyone, but his neurons have learned how to act as a Father in the last seven years. The young man lives a paradox that finds disclosure in the horrific sight. Paul sees the irony with which Job killed Geremio in Nazone’s exploded head: the ones who plant the foundation of the New World are the ones who will go on unremembered, unheard of. The key to success, to fulfillment of personal Desire is finally at hand: learn from your ancestors but move on; do not dare to linger in Job’s reality because sooner or later you will be crushed by Him; there are no exceptions, you are just another mortar-stained young man.

### II.3 The needle to suture the Italian American “Wound”

“The old man embodied the ideal of a man whose actions the young man has recorded” (Viscusi, 109). In a way, Viscusi rephrases Recalcati’s concept of legacy. The shift of identity from wop-bastard-scum to human being happens through the acts of speaking and remembering. Di Donato could not be any clearer about it: “Remember, mama. I am talking to you. Remember.” (D.D. 211)

The vision of his godfather’s death brings a nightmare whose strongest lines reveal the irony of the American world: “Stand still, says the foreman, so that I can push you off. The other men stop working and watch, and the man at the edge of the scaffold is ashamed and says, oh please don’t push me, I’ll do it myself.” (D.D. 212) The final push coming from the foreman in Morpheus’ world does not change the clear message the suicide’s words let through: men are aware of their destinies. Paul has seen the mortality of God on Geremio’s headstone, but Nazone’s mess allows him a glimpse of his own. The skyscraper’s business is very different from the setting of foundation and Paul is “afraid to watch” (D.D. 170) when he first gets there. Now that he has seen how fast a human body can reach the ground from his own working station Paul hates the legacy he has inherited because of the added notion of irony. Because seven years have passed and the new foreman will not even give the afternoon off to acknowledge the death of a human being. Paul cannot be part of this world any longer. He understands his father’s wish for him to become a builder and he flourishes into a writer whose narrative was preferred over John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* as a main selection of the 1939 Book-of-the-Month Club.

Risé’s recounts the myth of Icarus to introduce the figure of the son who refuses his father’s teachings: “abbandona le tue aspirazioni di grandiosità, così come le tue tentazioni di bassezza, la “dismisura” sempre legata alle fantasie onnipotenti dell’adolescenza, e questo ti salverà la vita” (Risè, Icaro, suo padre e la regina di Creta). Paul needs to find a balance that

does not take him too close to the Sun and presumption but at the same time that does not plunder in Job's concrete. Icarus dies because of his refusal to let go of his childhood. Paul has been a child but he has skipped straight ahead to manhood in his duties. He knows he will never get close to the benevolent aura of the Sun represented by Annunziata's light of Christ as much as he knows he cannot allow himself to be eaten by the society that forced him to urinate upon his hands. It becomes a matter of personal pride as well: I will survive where my father, and everyone around me, has died. Annunziata's final line of the novel, "Children wonderful... love... love love... love ever our Paul... Follow him" (D.D. 226) only adds more weight on Paul's shoulders. Geremio has been wiped out of the picture. She has replaced her Man with her Son but the reverence does not change. A good Christian loves the Holy Trinity as a whole and Annunziata replaces the recipient of her love, not her feeling. By doing so however she condemns her son to a further struggle. The only balance Paul can find implies him walking away from Job and finding another manner to sustain his blood but this cannot be done now; instead he finds solace and understanding in the act of remembering. The generation that succeeds him, the one he could have been part of, will ripen in the time of the refusal of tradition, something Di Donato finds unacceptable and Fante fights all his life. Remembering becomes the act that allows the future writer to be prolific in his work while being the key to survive Job.

What I found particularly interesting about this novel are the different covers it bore over the years. The edition I studied<sup>14</sup> sees a design featuring an image of steelworkers standing on a girder: their faces are obscured but they seem to be looking at the reader from their silhouettes instead of gazing at the metropolitan environment behind them. Above it all two hands are crossed in penitence. With its persistent sand color I find this one to be the less appealing

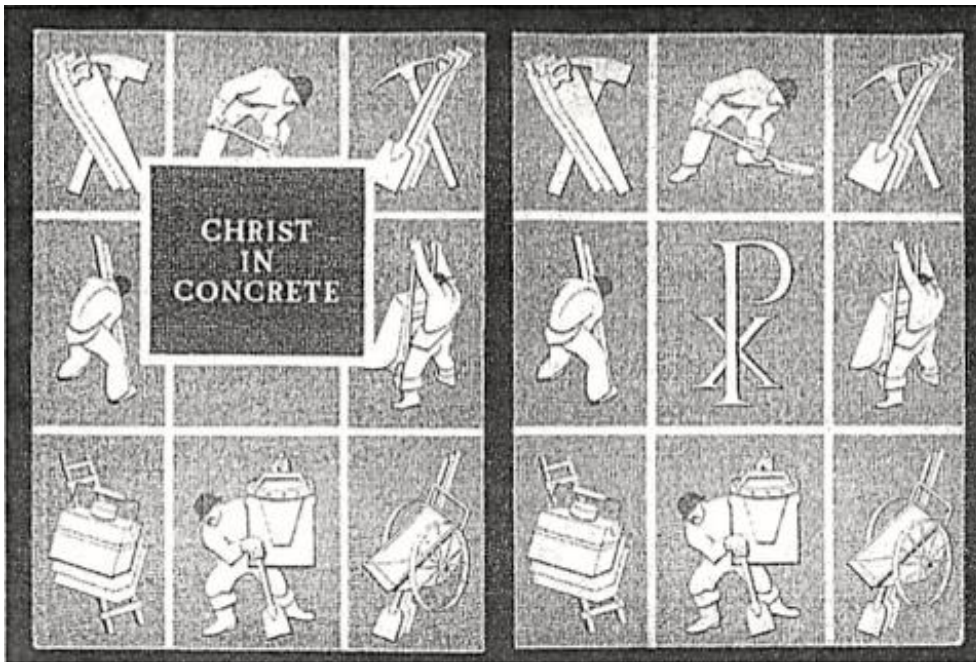
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<sup>14</sup> Design Antonio Ramondo, cover image of steelworkers, Horace Abrahams/Getty Images, cover image of hands by Gary Powell/Photonica. *Christ in Concrete*.

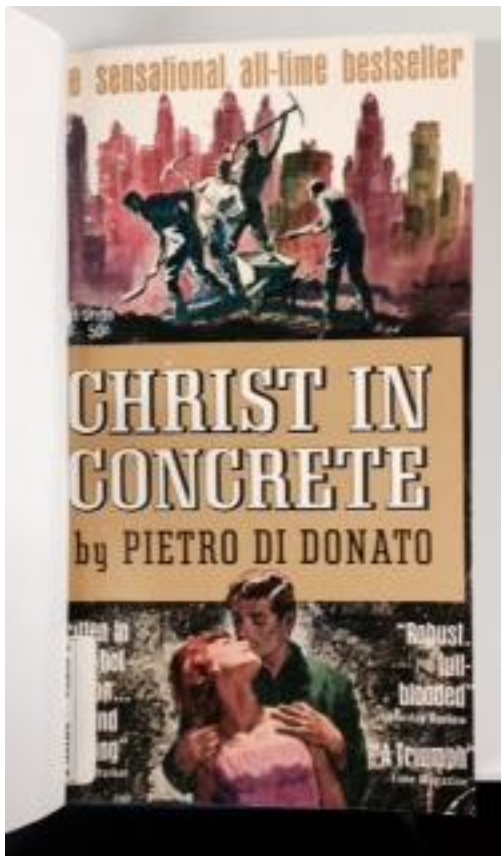
between the ones I would like to mention. The first edition of *Christ in Concrete* to come out was in *Esquire*, which in 1937 published a specially bound edition of the short story, with a design by Arnold W. Ryan. It pictures a drawing divided in nine parts, each representing an aspect of the construction business: saws and a hammer, shovels and a pickaxe, wheelbarrows and cement mixers, lunchboxes and a ladder interchanged by four men breaking their back under Job. In the middle, simple in the Chi Rho, Christ is visualized. The graphic impact of this cover is what makes it my favorite and I agree with Ferraro on every word: "I can't help but think that di Donato felt something like an artisan's pleasure/pride in the quiet beauty and relative heft of this small book" (*Job* 71). To conclude the set of American covers the last one I want to remember is the one found on the 1962 Popular Library edition, which features a double scene: on the upper half four men with pickaxes vigorously work the stone on the horizon of a red city while underneath the title the drawing loses intensity by picturing a man embracing his woman. The workers are clearly cut out from the picture as a strong beam of light strikes their figures. Geremio's morale shines through this light that invests them. By pulling them out of their half but not finding them another place on the drawing the workers are left in a crimson landscape but outside its entrance. The lovers on the bottom take away intensity from the struggle happening right above them, diminishing the presence of Job, making the whole picture a lot less haunting than the first Italian cover.

The one worth mentioning was published by Bompiani back in 1941, and up to this day the only one to see a blue sky. This cotton candy-cloud-spotted heaven hangs above a brick-red manifest bearing the title of the novel, all suspended above men acting out Job's commands. The oxymoron really cuts through the image. The six workers dispersed on a modern-day Golgotha are six black figures, made human only by the familiarity of their movements and their shapes. The most distressing element in the picture is indeed the blue sky as it seems to shout out in defiance of men's struggles.

Esquire, 1937



Popular Library, 1962



Bompiani, 1941



### **III Fante's erosion of characters: Nicola Molise as light through the darkness of fluidity.**

#### **III.1 The poetics of the father in San Elmo**

John Fante is one of those Italian American second-generation writers who rely in a considerable manner on autobiographical facts in their works of fiction. Born to a stonemason and a housewife, Fante, always encouraged to write, relives his life through many of his novels. As Fred Gardaphé explains,

[m]ost of Fante's works concern the development of the social and the aesthetic consciousness of a child of Italian immigrants and the contribution of that consciousness to the child's fantasy of assimilation into mainstream American culture. The subject of much of his writing is the relationship between the individual and his family and the community, and the subsequent development of a single protagonist's American identity that requires both an understanding and a rejection of the immigrant past that the parents represent. ("John Fante's American Fantasia", *Italian Signs*, Section two)

The psychological ethnic realization any Italian American must go through involves this same process and Nick Molise's role inside the unholy trinity of Fathers is perhaps the most disturbing one. He is the genius who fails in passing on his art and the embodiment of every possible sin. The deleterious aspects of the person supposed to actively guide his sons towards self-realization transpire through his firstborn's thoughts and words on an even excessive number of occasions. The examples Nick makes his life of, however, must be filtered through a duality that takes place only inside his character. At 76, the head of the Molise family has to deal with a fiasco, which metastasizes in both the aspects that make a human being a man within the Italian American set of mind. At last his body is giving in to years of excesses, which affects his ability to carry out his genius and the facing of his incapacity to communicate through positive

indoctrinations establishes his collapse as a father but his triumph as a guide through the meanders of perdition. He is the man who personally met and got acquainted with each and every one of the seven deadly sins by making them his own: the number of lovers he has had behind and in front of his wife seems countless; his thirst for Angelo Musso's wine takes him to a fatal diabetic coma; his greed towards his family both in affection and money knows no limits; he is indolent towards his well-being and his appearance; his fury sees no problem in fracturing his 45-year-old son's nose in front of the police station<sup>15</sup>; he envies his sons' young age and most of all he sins in pride, considering his art the only one worth studying.

In "John Fante. *Selected Letters: 1932-1981*", Seamus Cooley reports words that Fante wrote to the editors of Little, Brown & Co in 1954. The pen narrates the actual events that will inspire John Fante's novel *The Brotherhood of the Grape*, but the text overflows with judgments and reproaches. Nick Fante died in 1950 but his son feels it still too close to write it out with ease. John will wait twenty-seven years to put an end to Nick on paper.<sup>16</sup> The ghost of the father haunts the son because of his lack of dialectic in the phase of the latter's phase of "Egolessness" (Recalcati, Introduction). In the sections dedicated to Henry's and Nick's points of view of the latter's teachings I will develop an analysis of the characters following Recalcati's line of thinking. The section devoted to Henry will analyze the problems involved in the acts of acceptance of the living Inheritance and Desire, while the section devoted to Nick will entail a reconstruction of the character according to Recalcati's elaboration of the concepts of Violence and Conflict through Henry's final embrace of manhood. It is because of his father's reputation as an irascible Bacchus that Henry's position within the unholy trinity of Italian American sons is possibly the worst one. He has married his way into the Wasp society as Michael Corleone but

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<sup>15</sup> Nick's offspring consists of: Henry (50), Virgil (47), Mario (45) and Stella.

<sup>16</sup> I learned about the letters through the short introduction Emanuele Trevi wrote for the Italian edition of *The Brotherhood of the Grape*. XV-XXI.



with a very different attitude in mind towards the forced fusion. The urge to escape San Elmo is so vital he overlooks his past and roots upon his change of scenery and maturity. Di Donato's Paul cannot foresee the imminent Americanization of the Fifties because he is more part of Vito Corleone's generation than of Henry's, as we have seen. He does not have time for golf. At twelve he is too old, tired and disillusioned by *Job and Life* to want to find a definite place in a society that feeds off his own blood. His mission in life sustains a condition that neither Mike Corleone nor Henry Molise experience. His existence may be over by his next breath and he may not know it. The sudden absence of his father's presence makes Di Donato the carrier of the weight of the House of Geremio in 1923. The level of maturity reached by Paul cannot be met elsewhere because he is the one who experiences his father's death while still a child, as Chapter II follows Paul's dictated paternity forged onto malnourished twelve-year-old bones.

Henry bites off Harriet's tights more than he can chew. At fifty years old he has risen to being referred to as factor of "shitty novels" (Fante, 28)<sup>17</sup>. He is too impatient to leave the already dying San Elmo even to see his Italian parents' heartfelt advice. Henry comes back as an adult seeking answers and closure more than thirty years later and the sight of his old work clothes is enough to set his mind wandering through taxies, crabs, Filipinos and Mexicans hoisting "100-pound sacks of rock salt with ease" (F. 75). The knighthood that takes him away from Redondo Beach is of common metal sheet. Nothing in the world can make an Italian Catholic woman divorce her husband. Not even evidence as bright as lipsticks' stains on candid underpants can move a stubborn old lady who found in religion the conversation and affection she could not get out of her marriage. Henry allows his body and spirit to be sucked back into San Elmo and then sins of sloth and gluttony in his drifting towards the desolated slopes of Monte Casino. The final catharsis happens because of the conscious extraction of positive emotions through the most horrible tragedy a human heart can bear. Realizing that one's father is

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<sup>17</sup> Quotes from *The Brotherhood of the Grape* will be referred to as (F. -) from now on.

the example to avoid to be able to amount to anything in social relations and life seems worse than being stripped of the person as a whole. A raging alcoholic who has starved his offspring's natural talent cannot hope to look for forgiveness in the remaining weeks of his life and Nick is conscious of this fact. He too knows along with his first-born that Monte Casino is his last hope to teach something. Henry has survived a very much breathing monster in life but only through escaping it. He has lived for decades in complete refusal of traditions and Monte Casino is the last chance he is granted to come to terms with his identity as well. Nick dies because of the weight of his crushed pride, but he is the one to get the last laugh out of everyone's life. His open defiance of God for the worship of Angelo Musso's nectar has rendered the man incapable of communication because of his innate rejection of any kind of art that does not entail mortar, scalpel and rock. Where Henry lives his existence alongside the answer of his problems, Nick cannot even acknowledge the troubles in his own because he is blind to the limits he had set for himself and his offspring. Writing, passing on wisdom, the oldest of human traditions uncloses the paradox of Nick's faith. Angelo Musso can only hope to reach the next person through gestures and notes written on pieces of flying paper. The insistence of the mockery of Henry's literary, visceral art precludes the basic condition for human contact, until such contact is forced upon the two tenacious Abruzzi mountains descendants. Until Henry sorely realizes that "[a] peculiar thing happened":

My father died. We were working away, swirling mortar and stone, and all of a sudden I sensed that he had left the world. I sought his face and it was written there. His eyes were open, his hands moved, he splashed mortar, but he was dead, and in death he had nothing to say. Sometimes he drifted off like a specter into the trees to take a piss. How could he be dead, I wondered, and still walk off and pee? A ghost he was, a goner, a stiff. I wanted to ask him if he was well, if by any chance he was still alive, but I was too tired and too busy dying myself, and too tired of making phrases. I could see the question on paper, typewritten, with quotations marks, but it

was too heavy to verbalize. Besides, what difference did it make? We all had to die someday. (F.119)

## **III.2 The deadly nectars of life: wine, coffee and concrete**

### **III.2.1. Nick's lessons from his son's distorted perspective**

Henry arrives in an “isolated, its lifeline cut”, “dying” (F. 30) San Elmo, home to an “irascible, stubborn old man”, “[...] pitiful, wretched, embarrassing, revolting, shameless, stupid, gross, ugly and drunk-the worst father a man ever had” (F. 44). The first human contact Henry has with Nick after decades happens on enemy territory, inside Café Roma. Years of loathing arise in less than half an hour after having set eyes for the new first time upon Mr. Molise. Henry has found his father changed in figure, but not in character. Nick's moustache may be white now but his tongue is as sharp as ever as he advised Henry to let his seventy-four-year-old mother fall on the ground soon before. Coming back where he learned to walk, talk, accept and most of all write, is a shock because of his renewed present refusal. He is looking at his father once more through the eyes of his initiation to manhood. The ghost of Nick's past still haunts Henry's grown body and mind, blocking his view upon the essence of his being. But can he really blame his son for the armor he has grown? Nick Molise is the father who had threatened to kill “by God” (F.106) his own blood at the age of twelve because Henry had caught him a second time (the first one he was ten) being unfaithful to his wife. Seeking refuge in his mother the young boy was answered, “Go play with the other kids, you're bothering me” (F.106). Henry had no one to turn to.

Nick's selfishness of sentiments has put up a wall during his sons' adolescences, the time of empathy, the reasons behind this decision will be thoroughly explored in the following sections, and Henry finds himself drawing up a wall as well. By actively refusing to create an

environment suited to the developing of personal Desire Nick has failed in his role as Father. The natural stubbornness of mind, the obsession of knowing better because of his genius and the complete lack of Americanism render Nick inaccessible to his son's set of mind. Henry is trying to find a balance between his American birth and therefore sense of belonging to the new country and the Italian culture that has surrounded him ever since he could remember. He is receiving his father's living inheritance, which coincides with the ability of transmission of Desire, the drive for life. He is undergoing what Recalcati defines as, "[...] un movimento singolare tra identificazione e disidentificazione. Non è né identificazione, né disidentificazione. È una disidentificazione che suppone un'identificazione avvenuta e un'identificazione che esige una disidentificazione" (Introduction). Italian speakers cannot but admire the rock-solid structure of this notion. Let us start from the beginning. The concept is not limited to Italian Americans, but it speaks about the general process each son and daughter has to go through once in their lifespan. Accepting the inheritance means incorporating our parents' values through a process of initial refusal, which renews and updates them so that they fit into our more recent environment, making them our own new version. Just as second and third generation descendants have to accept sooner or later the roots of their parents and grandparents respectively. The act of becoming aware of the reasons of his childhood deprivations is what haunts Fante and the personal trauma is depicted in a different light in Arturo Bandini, in the nameless protagonist of his 1933 *Odyssey of a Wop* and many decades later in Henry Molise who does not find the strength to even change his father's first name.

The condition of being able to see through old traditions<sup>18</sup> implies a first identification to take place: achieving Desire, which translated in Nick's mind means reaching manhood by beginning the apprenticeship to become a stonemason while in Henry's it coincides with fulfilling his destiny, the one he has found in the fathers of the Classics because his own father

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<sup>18</sup> I found one of the best readings of the tradition of Italians' hysterical obsessiveness with the Catholic faith in Pietro Di Donato's "La Smorfia", explained in the conclusions.

refused to pass on his Wound. This misinterpretation of the thought at the base of the bond between father and son resembles Ramponi's smokehouse. On top of the failing foundation, the other necessary step to reach manhood is to realize the need to leave such traditions, to grow out of them. It is up to the new generation to modernize old teachings and such a process cannot happen if an initial refusal did not take place. Now Henry is pushed by the need to speak, the want of an ear who might listen and a mouth that might talk a familiar language. He realizes his status as human being by wanting to use and improve his dialectic to find personal fulfillment: he has always wanted to become a writer. Since Nick is nowhere to be found he looks for a father figure, as Lacan theorized that anything could fulfill the paternal function, and finds more than one in "Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Silone, Hamsun and Steinbeck" (F. 60). By the time he reaches those who "knew more of fathers and sons than any man in the world and of brothers and sisters, priests and rogues, guilt and innocence" (F. 62) his Desire has been boiling inside and the sudden recovery of guidance opens his eyes to the world around him. This is the moment Henry starts enacting his father's living legacy. Dostoyevsky's words have a precise side effect as well. Henry comes to realize his love for his parents, both his mother and father who is no longer an ugly wretched drunk but a "poor, suffering, haunted wretch" (F. 62) The processing of love, stronger than Nick's profound hatred, happens in accordance with the sight of his necessity to become a man. San Elmo represents his father's limits against the realization of his Desire. Henry knows he needs to find a new environment for his dreams, which he developed almost single-handedly, to grow wild and experiences his short but intense "Wandering" phase (Recalcati's "Erranza", *Il legame familiare nell'epoca dell'evaporazione del padre*) through the West Coast, one mistreatment after the other. L.A. teaches him his own limits for decent living conditions; exactly how much a man can take advantage of his neighbor and that there are no listening ears among policemen for a young Wop. San Bernardino shows him the face of indifference and Wilmington tests and shatters Henry's old L.A. limits while confirming his

loneliness as an Italian descendant among American doctors, cops and crabs. Where his father laid with his bride's best friend Henry can only check the scars left by crabs' claws. The initial refusal of his tradition followed by the American rejection has such an impact that the first Molise bird to leave the nest is forced back home. He falls physically ill after his first real conflict. However this event leaves the door open for the only logical development inside Henry's mind: he is coming home with a different set of values, American ones.

Henry finds himself in San Elmo once more. He has survived his first experience in the outside world and now he can look straight into Nick's eyes and say, "I got a job. I did something with my life. I am a man but now I know what kind of man I want to be. I have sweated and pounded, dug and worked and now I am going to build, in my way"<sup>19</sup> Henry has seen his life upon paper, something for which Nick always reserved only contempt. In his eyes his son has come back a loser. He has bent the knee and chosen to waste his existence after words. On his part Henry has achieved a major result on his own. He did not give up when he realized that Mexicans and Filipinos were better at Job; instead he elected an idea as Desire: the writing profession. He will reach full manhood through the disclosure of his own voice and the means of only his words on paper. His art has less chance of success than Nick's or Maria's because it lacks the tactile perspective. The majesty and the grandeur of the Methodist Church, the Public Library, the High School, the City Hall, the Bank of California, the theatre and the Fire Department tie only with the divine flavors of Maria's baked eggplant with ricotta and bread crumbs, buttered milk gnocchi, mozzarella croquettes, trippa and fritto misto with prawn and *cavolfiore*.<sup>20</sup> His parents share a common denominator: their audience. Their art is for the people to enjoy and Henry fits right into the category. Fante's strength of pen lies in the his power of making you feel at home, right next to him as Henry regains his forces sipping his mother's "hot soup" (F. 76). His decision to be a writer has also conferred upon him the hardest task. Whereas

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<sup>19</sup> I rephrased Nick's words of scorn (F. 61).

<sup>20</sup> "Cauliflower" in Italian.

Maria can cook out of “hot water and a bone and dandelions” (F. 41) and Nick can get a hold of any of the materials he requires on short notice, Henry has to create art out of thin air, drawing on his subconscious.

However, inside the Molise family the rule is “showing”. Maria’s scenes and continuous fainting are a mirror to Nick’s drunken serenades and bar fights. Henry has yet to develop a language of his own, something that can be understood by Americans and Italians alike. The first step towards manhood had been taken. Henry has gone out and come back changed, but also willing to continue in his personal growth. What is needed next is a final push out of his mother’s suffocating arms. Nick has never broken the relationship between his sons and Maria, he has never carried out the “Wound” and his children have not learned it someplace else. What Henry, Mario and Virgil are living is in fact a never-interrupted childhood. The first-born is in his early twenties after having seen L.A. and the Coast and, like it or not, he is physically becoming an adult. Henry rejects his father’s figure and decides to elect a higher one: the collective entity of America. By marrying Harriet he also determines a new beginning of Wandering, this time too far from his roots. The extinction of limits in this phase can only lead to self-annihilation, as Recalcati’s notion implies, and Henry unconsciously drifts back to the Molise’s shore when we learn about “the waitress in Paris” and “the three Naples hookers” (F. 123), proving once more that once inheritance starts being assimilated it becomes part of our subconscious and Henry is the only son to resemble his father physically.

In his adult version Nicola’s wine, Musso’s red ambrosia, is replaced with a strong caffeine addiction by ten cups a day. His present day writer’s block is none other than a limit to the Wandering that Fante’s hands put on his alter ego, forcing him to put an end to self-obliteration. The sight of home brings back old, still unanswered questions, but most of all one: Can I really be this man’s son? Can he really be my father? Why has he always been so much against me? Will I ever get rid of his haunting looks of drunken judgment? Am I subject to his same curse?

And last, am I a good father? To be able to try and answers these questions the Devil himself must be taken into consideration in his way of reasoning: Nicola Molise, in his eyes a tormented soul in the claws of his wife, in everyone else's an alcoholic delusional old madman and in his bride's the light and curse of her life.

### **III.2.2 The perspective from Nicola and the blind belief in his own better judgment**

Nick Molise is a man who has survived thirteen siblings and both his parents. His history takes place in the years of Vito Corleone, one coast for each. Having arrived in the U.S. alone he has never even felt the need of undergoing the process of Americanization because the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were characterized by the "Colonial mindset" that Viscusi refers to in his Introduction (*Buried Caesars* 1-24) after offering a fascinating sociological and historical background for this line of thinking. Nick feels no particular gratitude towards the men who refer to him as Wop and Dago and Guinea and who do not recognize the complexity, the balance in strength of his work. As he grows old his mind sets on one obsession: passing on the tradition. Not having any limits put by his paternal figure he has lost himself in his own Wandering. We have seen how the first true moment of rupture between father and son happens in the latter's years as a child. Following Recalcati's discussion of the developing of one's conscious Desire from a situation of rejection, what is required at the foundation is a father open to create a condition for such a desire to arise. The immigrant father in this case has to be open to share his inheritance but Nick shut his doors the moment he threatened to murder his son when he was twelve. On the threshold of puberty Henry is rejected by his father through an act of Violence and not of Conflict. I will get back to these notions shortly.

To annihilate the condition for human growth Nick Molise has none to thank but himself and his faith. The patriarch has devoted his whole life to the worship of Angelo Musso's nectar



of the gods. As read in the 1954 letter, Nick Fante bought gallons for 50 cents apiece from his old friend Joe Muto and “muto” is indeed the Italian adjective to describe someone without any voice at all: mute. The head of the Molise family devotes his time, faith and money to teachings he cannot understand because part of a world in-between his and his son’s. The rejection of Henry’s art, or any that does not imply stone and seduction, makes the Italian pearls of written wisdom incomprehensible. Nick, who had lost his parents a lifetime before in the Abruzzi Mountains, elects Angelo Musso as present God and father figure. Lacan insisted on the fact that one can choose a father among anyone and Nick elects the character he deems worthy because of his stature and mysteriousness. Having proved to be prone to violence and blind to his son’s Wandering, it is only logical for him to seek answers where he received the best half-lessons of his life. The problem in Nick’s way of teaching dwells in the approach he elects to hold against his sons. The main difference between an act of Violence and Conflict resides in the outcome: where the former brings destruction of character and shutdown of dialectics, the latter acts as source of personal growth. Conflict is the only condition for an education to take place as Recalcati insists in the last section of the first part of his study. Violence entails the deleterious practice of the typical paternal answer: No. The finality of such a limit paradoxically set by the destruction of language and therefore of thought can only find an answer within the true notion of Conflict, which tries to elaborate Violence through speech. When Henry looks for Nick, the Abruzzian stonemason hears the wrong questions. As Henry failed to understand the true benefactors of his father’s works when taken for “the Grand Tour, the complete works of Nick Molise” (F. 20) by attributing his sweat to himself, Nick is offended but most of all perplexed by this reasoning. The quarter is in fact a way to pay his son away from him. Nick finds fulfillment working for people and when Henry hints that he might have been doing it for himself he is dazzled.

Where had he taken the wrong road? The man who carried the tradition on until now is destined to see it die with him. Nick's rejection of any kind of dialectics that does not include wine as a basis for conversation has also blocked his reasoning. By not opening to his sons he cannot actively teach them what is worthwhile in life or not. However mean and manipulative he may be, Nicola Molise is a genius in his field. No one builds as swiftly and carefully as he does and the secret of his mortar is something that he will carry to his grave. Nick feels his failure as a father in Henry's writing profession but also in Virgil and his numbers. An office job for the lazy son who proves to have no self-control whatsoever, his soon-to-be five breathing daughters prove his uncontrolled lust. Last, there is Mario, the son whose nose was repeatedly smashed against Nick's shut door over the years. He is the one who had it worst, the last male of the Molise family. With him, Nick reaches levels of absurdity in denial as Henry recalls in a memory:

I sat with the old man in a crucial game between San Elmo and Yuba City. In the last of the ninth, with the score tied, Mario hit a home run to win the league championship. As he rounded third base to the cheers of the locals, my enraged father rushed from the grandstand and tackled the grinning Mario as he rounded third base. The police dragged him off the field and Mario got up and trotted home with the winning run. (F. 27)

The last son is treated poorly indeed and is signed off with the worst fate: Mario's inheritance is Nick's violence. Nick and his last son have found a way to communicate, sort of, through punching and kicking. Recalcati however rightly believes that there can be no benefit from anything deriving from violence, let alone this particular dialectics of brutality. The fake dialogue only achieves the final disintegration of Nick's authority. Mario's obsession with baseball is the result of his extinction in his Wandering. Robert Kennedy said at the Cleveland City Club on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1968, "[...] this much is clear; violence breeds violence [...]". The possibility for this kind of psychological ferocity to be part of the baggage of inheritance exists.

Mario's dialectics is so non-existent he cannot honestly remember anything that does not concern baseball and he postpones the few "other" things that get through. Nick's fixation with the absence of cracks from his erections is parallel to the morbid overall interest on Mario's part towards baseball. He is the son who waits for the inning to be over to attend the few minutes left of his father's funeral. Once he gets there, there is a sincere moment of commotion, which proves he belongs to the human world and not his final monstrosity, but through this act he makes himself living proof of the effects of complete denial of dialogue, jeopardizing the transmission of legacy. Nick suffers because of the walls he built around his sons but just like Mario he cannot express his pain properly. When in Café Roma he takes Henry away from Zarlingo's swearing mouth, he treats his first-born as if he were "still fourteen" (F. 40). When driving the road to Monte Casino he wonders about Henry's comfort inside Zarlingo's property. His speech is blocked by his fixed mindset.

The mountain is the right place for disclosure because it testifies to the closest moment between father and son. In a state of drunken unconsciousness Nick is able for the first time to articulate a few words that Henry understands perfectly: "Mama mia, mama mia" (F. 107). This sudden openness, even if involuntary on Nick's part opens Henry's eyes: he can now understand what mortality is. He receives the Wound as he thinks:

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, I shall die from your grief, I cannot endure your pain for I have enough of my own. I shall have more too, but I shall never cry before others, I shall be strong and face my last days without tears, old man. I need your life and not your death, your joy and not your dismay. Then I was crying too, on my feet, crossing to him (F.107)

As I remember my father calling out for his “mamma” at night, the sight of the immense figure as a simple man with human, social needs shocks his grown-up son in a “culmination of love and respect” (334) to use Samuel Pitti’s words. Twenty-five years later here we have it: acceptance. The portrait of Nick Molise is blasphemous, hard on everyone and on himself in particular. His essence seems so twisted that it becomes hard to like him. His stout figure forever reeking of alcohol and his manners considered rude even among animals disappear as the old man calls out for his mother, “dead for over sixty years” (F. 107). This last desperate cry towards his maternal parent raises a natural question: where is Nick’s father? And indeed, where is Nick’s father inside his being? His ghost lies in Nick’s blessed curse: his genius. All the men of the Molise family are pervaded by a strain of gifted madness and Nick probably follows in his ancestors’ footsteps. He had probably begun his apprenticeship not after high school, but rather as soon as he could steadily hold a trowel. The crying for his mother is the only act of pure love he is capable of. The first night spent together in the hills of Monte Casino brings a development in Henry’s mind, as he wonders about Nick’s well-being with sincere worry during the first day of work:

I stood sucking my blister and examining to pile of stones. They were chunks of rough-hewn granite, gray and misshapen. I bent down to heft one of the smaller stones. Not that it was heavy, it was preposterously, unbelievably heavy, at least a hundred pounds, and no bigger than a basketball. The others were like it or heavier. I could help him lift the smaller stones to the wall, but it was going to be a killer job for a man of seventy-six with soft hands and soft muscles who had done no physical labor in five years. He could sprain his back, or pop a hernia, or break a blood vessel. I had observed the flaming veins of his eyes. The wine had been thorough and the damage had been done. It was madness to challenge the danger, but my old man was mad, the burden of his uselessness was madness, and the sense of his entire life coming to an end in a struggle with stones was the maddest part of all.

Why was he doing this job? A smokehouse for the curing of deer meat! Chances were that twenty years ago he would have turned the job down as too remote from his home, too insignificant for his pride.

He could of course go another route in his final days, getting smashed daily at the Café Roma. Or slouched in the parlor watching television, enduring the cackle of his wife hovering over him with plates of pasta as she speculated on the joys and sorrows of widowhood. Or he could sit on the front porch overlooking Pleasant Street, watching the exciting spectacle of an occasional dog or human being passing by. Or cultivate tomatoes and green peppers in the backyard. Not Nick Molise. He wanted a wall to build – that was it. He didn't care what wall it was, but let it be a wall that brought respect from his friends who knew he was abroad in the world, a workingman, a builder. (F. 113-114)

Henry is thinking for the first time: “Yes, it might be. This man could be my father.” Finally, consciously putting an end to his Wandering through his absorbance of the Wound, he has reached maturity through one of the most primordial words, a simple sound that he desperately searched for all his life. Nick's dialectics is ultimately coming through but it takes quite a toll on him. To be able to give one child's access to one's legacy one must agree to let go of his inheritance. Nick is getting along with his first-born on the workplace, a setting he has been wishing to see filled for more than thirty-two years but this cost Nick his life. Henry has not gotten any better at work with time, or any quicker. His hands form blisters right away and a general sense of tiredness pervades the grown man but this time Nick feels it too. This time Nick experiences first-hand the kind of violence he perpetuated throughout his life. The smokehouse is a murder house in complete truth and along with deer, rabbits and roes Nick's genius and Henry's childhood die on the damned ground. Nick is rushed to the hospital with a bad case of diabetes, the disease of his demise.

Before leaving his now almost conscious son, Nick takes us to his shrine. We are standing on holy ground, guest of Angelo Musso's courtesies. The food is rustic, manly, a lot different from Maria's "thin slices of veal" (F. 50) last washed down by the same juice. Nick is "drooping majestically", "wistfully drunk" among "jugs of chianti and trays of food [...] salami, sausages, prosciutto, bread an anise cakes" (F. 158). Here in the sanctuary, Henry can reach the final step of his speed-of-light reaffirmation and conclusion of manliness and it is indeed thanks to his father's last decision to die among friends rather than doctors.

It is in this last feast, where Nick feels at ease that he decides to disclose his most important lesson, the only one that transcends his own limits. His triumph is to be found in his last failure. Ramponi's smokehouse mirrors Nick's true masterpiece: his limits. The obsession of finding a stonemason in between his sons crumbles to its foundation like his last work, finally letting through the key to unravel his legacy. Nick has but minutes of consciousness left, but he does manage to fulfill one aspect of his role, as we will see shortly. Doors are opening and closing for the Molise men. Nick is closing his earthly chapter to open the gates of the afterworld to allow Henry to embrace manhood in turn. Henry was forced to wait until this moment to be able to see his legacy and the frustration culminates in a carefully planned tears-attack, the most unsettling vision in a man's eyes. Angelo's pieces of papers, that have guided his father during the last decades of his life, are written in a foreign tongue, the one Nicola used to curse all his life in, and now he should learn from such an odd idiom? Henry feels cheated by his father, betrayed by his gift and a lost child once more, but once Nick's final words reach his mind, he can find peace.

### **III.3 The way to self-realization through the rocks**

Samuel Pitti writes, "*The Brotherhood of the Grape* continues the story of the immigrant father and his son, but in this case it is not the initiation of the son's manhood but rather the

father's imminent death that brings the two together" (Pitti, 333). As much as I agree with this thought I believe a few clarifications might add up to the discussion, for instance completely ruling out Henry's act of manliness from the process clashes with with Recalcati's line of thinking that I have been following up until now and with which I agree. The shadow of Death does indeed create the right circumstances for a final try at fatherhood, which succeeds this time, but it is only Henry's mental elaboration of the last thirty years in less than ten days that makes the events possible at all. Nick's passing coincides with Henry's survival of his trip down Memory lane but it goes even beyond that. Henry is confident of his role now, so confident he weeps: "compassion for myself. How good I was. What a loyal, beautiful son! See me trying to save my father's life. How proud I was of myself. What a decent human being I was!" (F. 160) He then proceeds using the Molise's ace-up-the-sleeve: tears. However, the cockiness of this last thought, the impudence of thinking such final judgments for himself pushes Nick to insult him in a way he has never dared before: he tells his son to "Go home, kid. See what your mother wants" (F.160).

Henry takes these last words as a mockery, when Nicola is admitting to two of the biggest truths he had ever dared to utter. Nick tells his son that it is time for the children to take care of their mother because he cannot obviously do it any longer. Affairs were punished with religious silence by the "persistent, tiresome angel (No wonder my papa booted her in the ass)" (F. 49) but no matter what Nick Molise did he always found his way to the house on Pleasant Street, home to Maria. Nick is passing on the true meaning of his inheritance: take care of the family because I could not. Henry needs to assimilate all the necessary information in due time to be able to create a new set of rules that will finally benefit the following generation. Nick's final words ring with Vito Corleone's reason for murdering Fanucci and with Geremio's last anguished fictional thoughts. The most important lesson is saved for last because it needs to be met by a mind

prepared to stick around. Nick has waited to his very last minutes to truly reach out for his son because through this act he is able to conclude the journey of a lifetime. He dies in peace, knowing his son will prove his worth as a man in the future, because now he is fully grown. The second interpretation I give to this thought involves an act of love. Sparing his son the sight of his death is a kind gesture in such a moment, when Henry is already crying and tearing his hair out. Remember the mutual death on the workplace? Nick has already seen the shock his death would bring in his first-born's eyes. His demise marks young Henry's death, allowing him to be reborn a grown man. The sight of a dead body is something that not everyone can digest with ease. The Abruzzian mountain goat was born probably not far in space and time from Geremio the martyr of his generation, however implicated in the collapse. Nick has known real poverty and has seen eleven of his siblings die before his mother followed them once he was in the United States and now he has lived long enough to have witnessed his fall as an artist.

Not being able to pull up a smokehouse, the easiest of tasks, four walls, no windows, one hole for the door, is the life's embarrassment that takes Nick out of this earthly life. "Go home to your mother" becomes "go home and live" and last it can be seen as manly advice as well: there is no room for phony tears of this kind among friends. The Brotherhood takes on life as it comes, facing one day at the time. Angelo has been mute for years but it does not stop him from smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Zarlingo and Cavallaro are still miraculously alive for some reason. Henry's tears have an effect on Zarlingo's behavior alone, while the others pay their highest regards to Nicola's good health: by mocking his longevity they all hope to prolong his days.

This is a novel about reaching and holding dear one point in life and for Henry it coincides with his father's death, but could things have gone otherwise? Nick Molise is the man who has threatened his life ever since he could remember. Henry's achievement cannot take place without



his father stepping down. Accepting defeat at the very last stage implies a degree of acceptance of low standards never encountered in person by the Abruzzian. The crumbling smokehouse is an epiphany for the Molises. The barriers are finally shattered, to the advantage in different ways and degrees to both son and father. Death does bring the couple closer while defining their terms as separate identities. Finally free from one another, Nick is allowed to die because he is not capable of proving his manliness through his art anymore and Henry is finally set free from San Elmo to reach his father's teachings. The intimacy created in the last week allows detachment, for without this last-formed bond Nick's demise would have been considered a blessing by the first-born.

Henry has but one thing left to do: fulfill the inheritance. Miss Quinlan was Nick's nurse during his last days at the hospital and a woman who grants final wishes. As she explains soon before Henry retrieves his father from Musso's vineyard, "Last winter I had a patient on a kidney machine, a fine old gentleman, ninety-two years old. The dear man died in my arms, with his hand in my panties. You know what I mean, Mr. Molise?" (F. 156) She does not waste time on niceties and Henry has not had sex in God knows how long, his libido hissing ever since he heard those words (see F. 156). The sexuality and seduction themes are vital to the rendering of the main father figure, and essential in the line of legacy, as the way the rock bends and cries under Nick's scalpel can only be compared to his callous touch of a silken woman's body. The reversal in becoming the rock of a different situation only helps Nick to identify himself even more in the inanimate object, marking his identity on the road to perdition. A father not willing to learn anything besides the things of his world for the better lives of his children is hard to accept as a figure of guidance. Combine that with gallons of wine in and out on a daily basis and a taste for the dramatic and you have the recipe for a perfect natural disaster. Henry uses these tracts in his short negotiation before taking the nurse to the Supermarket and impressing her by

“buying her a bottle of Scotch and a coconut cake and thick lamb chops” (F. 163), just as Nick would shower his current lover with his earnings, but Henry ultimately fails this first test. Had Nick been his age he would have never made the mistake of ending up in the same bed with someone who is sixty-five at the least. The moment Henry thought about his father pinching Miss Quinlan’s *derrière* he should have done it because Nick surely did so during his last hospital stay, maybe not long before walking right past through the main doors to get away from the stink of disinfectant and reach his companions of sweat, money and women for one last time. Nicola Molise has been warned about his drinking killing him off but has never even given a thought regarding cutting down or, the horror, quitting for good. He had set his values in his late Thirties when lacking any satisfaction from existence, seeing his father position already empty. Which one of his sons will prove worthy of his precious time? Time he would have to take away from Job, drinks or his women, a nuisance already. Nick finds more fulfillment in his life where in truth there is none thanks to the sense of camaraderie he shares with his buddies more than the bonds with his sons. A writer, a banker, a railroad worker and a daughter, a stonemason could not hope for worse. He learned every way to get drunk and high on cards and to share collective recollections among his buddies but too few on how to share his knowledge with his sons. The unhealthy relationship of rivalry that has determined the excessively negative bond between Henry and Nick reaches a second climax right after Henry reaches his with Miss Quinlan: “a cold, sterile place, but with a terrible beauty of loneliness and two strangers sharing an intimacy, the beauty one felt but did not see. Unforgettable.” (F. 166) Henry finally sees his father’s pattern in his own; the beauty that eluded him for so long may have found repose in Nick’s inherited chronic cheating. The marriage with Harriet is an unhappy one, based on rusty golf clubs and gloves full of urine. By urinating inside his mother-in-law garden gloves Henry reveals a certain openness of mind towards new experiences, already before leaving to go to Monte Casino. Henry’s final salvation however cannot be determined by the outcome of the novel alone

as the biggest task is uncovering its veils the day before his father's funeral, when he realizes that his American kids have empathy for their grandpa but look at him, their real father, "in that cynical, aloof way of theirs" (F. 167). Henry is looking in the eyes of the modern version of himself at their age. This is the new conflict Henry has to take part in, the importance of remembering the past. What Paul from Di Donato's novel holds so dear is that personal realization can only come through history, through keeping traditions close to the mind. Henry's final reaction to his half-orphan newly found status is a feeling of needing to get out of San Elmo, for "without my father the town had vaporized into a wasteland of so many places like it." (F. 170)

As Recalcati reports from Lacan, we live in the era of the "Vaporization" of the paternal figure in his essence as authoritative judge. Henry chooses to let go of Nick in the end, having already grasped the need to carry on and decides to go back to Fyodor Mikhailovich once more, he who had reached immortality through his same dialectic struggles. He has finally left behind Nick's shadow from his past.

## IV. Mario Puzo's Corleonian society

I saved Vito Corleone for last because he is a one-off, monumental character, inviting and at the same time resisting psychological interpretation. *The Godfather* has been the hardest narrative to work with because of the massive number of details and events that take place over a period of over sixty years. In the next pages, the plot and specific incidents will take precedence and Recalcati and Risé's notions (Desire, Inheritance, Wandering, Violence, Conflict and Wound) will be considered assimilated and only mentioned in the line of events.

The second reason Don Corleone appears last is to set the right tone before reaching the final conclusions, which will see the new movie *Anime Nere*, directed by Francesco Munzi, as central theme connecting Paul of *Christ in Concrete*, Henry Molise of the *Brotherhood* and Michael Corleone in the Calabrian landscape of the 'Ndrangheta. The teachings taught in the Mafioso environment differ sensibly in outcome from the ones received by Paul and Henry but the origins of these "values" can be traced back to where Nazone, Geremio and even Nick found their own.

### IV.1. The fictional father

It is impossible not to be fascinated by Don Vito Corleone or by Marlon Brando playing him gloriously in Coppola's movie. One of the reasons for my attraction is offered by Gardaphé once again, "the central conflict of *the Godfather* is how to keep the family together and "Sicilian" for its own good in a land that has lost its dependence on the family unit for survival" (Gardaphé, *From Wise Guys to Wise Men* 37)

I, too, have always kept my Family at the center of my life and that includes the five friends who have become as important as blood in the last twenty-five years. When Vito Corleone himself comes up on the page his praises has been sung with such benevolence that we feel almost blessed with one of the most rare and literary feelings: the Gatsby smile<sup>21</sup>. His only daughter Constanzia's wedding is a glorious feast that coincides with the celebrations for the end of the War and yet "by tradition no Sicilian can refuse a request on his daughter's wedding day. And no Sicilian ever lets a chance like that go by" (P. 24). Don Corleone is around fifty now and a man with a belly. A strategist who planned his baby girl's festivities before dark times destined to come.

Vito is the only father to be completely fictional. In fact his origins go back to Puzo's mother and her alter ego Lucia Annunziata, undisputed protagonist of *The Fortunate Pilgrim*. Don Corleone possesses a tremendous amount of knowledge about real, crude life and has recognized the beginning of a new era in the figure of the Turk, who is following in the footsteps of the Italians who smuggled whiskey from Canada in the Early Twenties. Narcotics will fill someone's pockets for good once and for all bringing the peace of New York to a new standstill and jeopardizing the safe position of the Family. Don Corleone follows the philosophy of 'A man should be able to reason at any given time' and anything that comes in between a person and his better judgment, whether that be women, drugs, greed or bad temper, must be avoided. The times have changed sensibly. 1940's judges and police officers, as much as they approved of bootlegging, are strict on narcotics. On the other hand Vito has already reached a blessed age. He has survived bullets, betrayals, poverty and hunger and still he stands. Italian Americans are in a

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<sup>21</sup> "[...] It faced--or seemed to face--the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just so far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey." *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald. A Project Gutenberg of Australia Free Books, pdf, 27.

precarious situation and even if business is dealt among paisans, ties have to be made with the Americans who have fought the Italian army until a few weeks before. It is the beginning of a new era because a new way of living is taking ground, inch by inch, but Vito is part of the old generation, who cannot let go of old traditions, while the new current of thought for the next decade implies a push towards Americanization.<sup>22</sup>

When we meet him, Vito Corleone is a “hero” who has helped more people than the eye can see. He is a man whose word you can and should count upon. A person who offers his friendship first and without reserve, someone to share the road with and from time to time the one who reminds you that friendship is a two-sided relationship, usually after having made your fortune. All roads lead to Vito Corleone who has established a new “better” nation inside foreign borders. And yet he is facing the difficult crossroads every father has to face once in his lifetime: ‘Would I be proud if my son wanted to follow into my footsteps or would I be disappointed?’ Which coincides with another internal dilemma: ‘Do I want my kids to live the life I struggled through? Or do I want what is best for them; let go of any egoism and help them to break out of this neighborhood?’ The time to pass on his legacy could not be worse as his position is a dramatic one. He knows it is time to retire because he cannot keep up with business anymore, not as head of the family. The complete rejection of anything concerning narcotics recalls Nick Molise’s choice of investing in nothing but stonemasonry. On the other hand narcotics represent chaos and Vito’s mission as a father is to bring order. He has already given enough to the 1937 Pacification of New York and no one wants an all-out war, as it is bad for business in general. It is clear that a deal sooner or later will have to be made. Vito has to choose the right recipient for his knowledge and time is running out: none of his sons is ready to fill in his position, to consciously take care of the Family and live with their actions, not in the immediate future at

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<sup>22</sup> The years that followed World War Two were peculiar for the rejection of Italian values among Italian Americans.

least. Training is necessary but time is stripped away by Sonny's big mouth, on whom Vito "turn[s] cold, malevolent eyes", the only time such eyes meet a member of his family, and excuses this fatal lack of better judgment with "Young people are greedy, and today they have no manners. They interrupt their elders. They meddle. But I have a sentimental weakness for my children and I have spoiled them. As you see", as Sollozzo smiles, knowing to have found the "chink in the Fortress" (P. 86), the one son certain not to inherit the spirit of the business but next in line to the throne.

Before plunging into the War of 1946 and the consequences it brings, where has Vito learnt how to live without a father or a mother alone in a country that spoke a foreign language? How has he created his legacy?

He arrived on the East Coast in 1899 and moved in with the Abbandandos, who became the new model for guidance. From them the young boy learns the basis of practical living by working for the family's grocery store as driving delivery boy. At eighteen he marries and in two years' time the young couple is blessed with Santino<sup>23</sup>. Vito Corleone is a quiet young man who does not meddle with business that does not concern him directly. He may have escaped the original Cosa Nostra but he remembers what Omertà means and when he recognizes Fanucci as the phony padrone that he is, Vito's image of the American paradise is shattered. How can a man who collects money for phantom protection from elderly couples without male offspring and local business store be allowed to put further weight on the shoulders of Italians struggling in a foreign continent? He is not the only one pondering upon such question, as he witnesses one day:

Vito saw Fanucci fleeing from his punishers, the circular slash flowing red. What he never forgot was Fanucci holding the cream-colored fedora under his chin to catch

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<sup>23</sup> Sonny's birth remains a mystery within the novel. In 1945 he is introduced as a 36-year old man, being one year older than Hagen, collocating his birth in 1909. However if Vito were sixty at the 1947 Peace Conference then his birth would have taken place in 1887. He is twenty when he holds his firstborn in his arms, marking Sonny's birth in 1907.

the dripping blood as he ran. As if he did not want his suit soiled or did not want to leave a shameful trail of carmine. (P. 242).

Puzo implies another reason why the wounded man would press his fedora to his chin: people who passed by him would see a man standing tall and declaring: you can literally open my throat from ear to ear but I will stand here. Vito has learned an important lesson. With the little power his hands are blessed with, his options are either entering the Mob as a debtor or a creditor. When Fanucci proves to be so little as to allow his vendetta to be bought off Vito knows he can be made to disappear but he wait years for the right opportunity. In the meantime Fredo is born and Fanucci's nephew takes over the young father's place in the Abbandando shop one morning. Vito knows Fanucci would be an easy prey and yet the Corleone father waits. He is twenty-five and has to feed a family of four. What is most important is the health of his blood and so he takes up a job at the railroad for a few days' pay a month. Here he lives yet another reality: the world of Irish and American foremen. The cruel and abusive "mad-dogs" (P. 277) show the face of the ones with whom there is no possible reasoning, for they only reason through Violence. He gets out of this business before Di Donato's Good Friday and realizes that he has escaped a country where the cancerous Mafia was the ruling force only to come to a neighborhood that was dangerously pending towards the same destiny. The people who were suffering the most from this situation were fellow Italians along with his family. Vito Corleone's essence as cultural hero, as traced in Gardaphé's already quoted essay, makes him the kind of man who can change the destiny of a community only by embracing his own and since when it rains, it pours, Vito is blessed with two lifetime companions: Peter Clemenza and Sal Tessio. The murder of Fanucci goes smoothly and precautions prove to be unnecessary<sup>24</sup>. Vito "si fa le ossa", that is, gains experience. This rise to power is the logical consequence for having freed his

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<sup>24</sup> The Police do not investigate Fanucci's murder thoroughly; in fact they were "delighted" (P. 258).



paisans from a phony ruling figure. Genco Abbandando becomes Consigliere and *Genco Pura* is founded. Vito understands American capitalism and:

When Prohibition came to pass and alcohol forbidden to be sold, Vito Corleone made the final step from a quite ordinary, somewhat ruthless businessman to a great Don in the world of criminal enterprise. It did not happen in a day, it did not happen in a year, but by the end of the Prohibition period and the start of the Great Depression Vito Corleone had become the Godfather, the Don, Don Corleone (P. 266).

Vito Corleone is the young man who, like Di Donato's Paul, accepts someone else's legacy as his own. The difference between the two lies in the kind of legacy they seek. Where Paul needs Nazione's knowledge to breathe, Vito's talent lies in discovering a certain kind of legacy inside his source of profit: people. As much as I love this character, Don Corleone feeds off of men's weaknesses. The genius he has sharpened in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century serves the same purpose as Paul's: finding a way not to be noticed by Job. Vito's solving of this dilemma sees him electing Business as his God and guidance in place of Geremio's trowel. While the genius identifies the future field of business, the talent brings Vito's touch to his organization: he hits where it hurts the most and he knows where that place is because his soul is in fact as black as Rocco's, Luigi's and Luciano's, the three protagonists of *Anime Nere* who will bring forward the conflict between human decency and the brutality of the 'Ndrangheta. Vito Corleone succeeds in putting "the organization into organized crime" (Ferraro, *Crime* 110) by setting up a strict hierarchy inside the business consisting of: Boss, (Underboss), Caporegimes, Soldiers and Buttonmen. Only the ears of Genco, Clemenza and Tessio hear Vito's orders and the Godfather puts layers of insulation between himself and any operational acts. Now that prosperity and reputation have been established Vito embarks on a personal crusade for the Pacification of New York City. Like a contemporary Giuliani, in a matter of three years he frees the metropolis from petty, unorganized and therefore uncontrolled criminals at the cost of a

bullet in the chest. With the coming of the Second World War the Five Families hold a conference, stipulating a business agreement to last as long as the duration of the conflict, to equally share the profits the Black Market would bring. The Corleone family provides food stamps and travel permits, it has a hand in the drafts and above all it provides work.

The construction business and the unions acquired from Maranzano allow Vito to provide the first necessity of the Italian American man: job. Don Corleone is a people's person, someone who visits the wives and children of the men who are forced to spend a couple of months in jail for business' sake, and he knows what it is that makes a human being a man: Business and Reason. To his fellows he is more important and more influential than the President of the United States because he is the President of the United Italian Americans. Vito Corleone is a man who has it all, but now that Sollozzo has left his studio he feels as if he had it all.

Remember the crossroads<sup>25</sup>? Vito wants to pass on his legacy but he realizes now that his knowledge will provide one of his sons with his same curse. Sollozzo is not the end of his reign; he is the beginning of a new one. Whose?

Tom Hagen is the man of German-Irish descent who acts as the Consigliere to the Corleones. Because of this, the Five Families nickname the Corleone gang as "The Irish Gang" (P. 356). His position is seen as blasphemy considering that his being an outsider makes him ignorant of the Sicilian kind of warfare, moreover he is very young. He has lived through Wound and Desire and has just started processing Vito's life into his own. Sonny is praised mainly for two aspects of his persona: his brilliant strategic mind for modern warfare and his being "so generously endowed by nature that his martyred wife feared the marriage bed as once unbelievers feared the rack" (P. 10). His main problem lies within his dialectics of violence, which makes him deaf to certain aspects of the legacy, which will kill him at the Jones Beach

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<sup>25</sup> On page 53.

tollbooth. Fredo is a thirty-year-old bachelor who lives with his parents. Shy and subdued to every other male figure, he shows no personal strife for leadership or want for knowledge. Michael is the black sheep of the Family. After having openly defied his father's commands about not joining in the war he has come to the wedding with an American girl on his arm. Vito is in stalemate with his life but Sonny's slip during the Sollozzo meeting makes it evident to everybody forcing an heir to come forth. The Turk will later prove not to know anything about the Corleone nature, but right now he knows enough to exploit it.

Sonny becomes the instigator of the shooting which takes place three months after having spoken with Sollozzo. The attack that puts the Godfather in a hospital bed is a vile one, carefully planned but poorly carried out. If you want to take out a man who has successfully lived through thirty years of Cosa Nostra not only should you hire the best possible men for the job, but you should consider as well the reaction of the 'victim'. Don Corleone was already shot in the open by an Irish gang in 1937 and the chances of him letting it happen again are scarce. Vito is a man who has learnt how to live by observing the surroundings, by listening to men's words and by learning from everyone's mistakes, obviously including his own. He is damned to hell because in the end he makes his fortune upon the misfortunes of other, just as Fanucci and Maranzano did themselves. The hit men have to run after the Godfather after having already shot their first bullets, but still cannot bring themselves to the fatal headshot once Vito is already lying in a pool of blood as the gathered crowd would be horrified at such a pitiless act. This is the turning point of the novel and the time of trial for a new hero to become aware of his strength and come forth, to accept his father's legacy, let it embrace him, refuse it, make it his own and carry it on. Michael is the perfect host because of his young age, his civilian position that makes him as invisible as a woman inside Cosa Nostra while marking his advantage over his enemies, and his talent in disobeying anyone's heartfelt advice.

## IV.2 Time for disclosure

Fredo freezes at the sight of his father's blood on the sidewalk and needs to be put under sedation. Hagen cries when informed about the false death by Sollozzo. Sonny's mind is blurred by vendetta plans as he recognizes the Turk's voice over the phone. Michael is the only one to spend a good ten minutes facing the unknown to defend his father's half dead body on the step of the hospital.

Mike is the only son to have alienated himself from the family on purpose, not only by risking his life for a foreign country, but also by going to Dartmouth as well as having lowered his expectations in his parents' eyes by wanting to become a math professor. His Wandering comes to a natural end when he sees along with Tom the shooting for what it actually is: a business deal gone wrong. When he arrives at the mall Sonny is already planning the deaths of Sollozzo, Phillip and Bruno Tattaglia, Paulie Gatto and three other men.

Someone who sees beyond the rage of love and the thirst for blood would not plan for seven men to lose their lives to set things equal. Sonny has planned the curfew beautifully, respecting his father's rules. After having eaten a sloppy sandwich with green peppers straight out of the pan he patiently sits by the phone, while his mother and the women of the house get ready to pay their respects to the man fallen ill so far from home. He makes the right calls by contacting only Tessio and Clemenza and tries to get hold of the right people in Hagen and Brasi: however, as soon as he is alone the plans for the bloodshed take shape inside his mind and outside in black ink on white paper. "Sollozzo is dead meat. I don't care what it costs. I don't care if we have to fight all the Five Families in New York. The Tattaglia Family is going to be wiped out. I don't care if we all go down together" (P. 112). "I don't give a fuck what they [Five Families] want. They better not mess in this fight" (P. 139). This is how Santino truly reasons, for in this case he is not Sonny for sure. He is ready to cancel thirty years of Corleone history to get to one man alone, a man who has not committed an *infamia*. Sollozzo is no pedophile, he

does not deal with the exploitation of children and he has not touched a single Family member who was not already in the business.<sup>26</sup> Fredo is left alive and unharmed to send a message, not out of generosity. Killing him would have automatically meant war, but by focusing only on the main target the matter becomes business. Santino's temper is constantly being tested because he has not learned to control it in almost forty years. His occasional blind wrath is the result of the shocking experience he underwent in his childhood: he saw his father exceeding human limits. By witnessing Fanucci's murder he identifies Vito Corleone as a tough God who literally kills 'the bad guys'. His mission is then to imitate such figure, which explains his ever-deepening cruel nature, his desire to be able to say one day "I, too have gotten rid of the Evil of this world". It has been almost ten years since he could command the empire and he has learnt the routine of the temporary Roman dictator; however, this time circumstances are different. Sonny takes it indeed on the personal level because he has to deal for the first time with guilt.

The night after the shooting, the stars witness Mike's blossoming into his role. Sollozzo has been laying low for almost twenty-four hours, not out of fear as Tom and Sonny first thought. As Michael was the only one to loudly predict, the Turk has been planning his way out of the losing side by setting up another murder attempt but this time the police has a role in the event. The figure of McCluskey is ambivalent: on the one hand he is a loving father of four, a good husband and a generous brother but on the other he is a rogue cop who accepts the dirtiest kind of money. The Corleone family has been providing Christmas presents for a good part of the law enforcers, including the Irish man. Sollozzo must have presented himself with a fortune in dollars and promises and the police Captain's thoughts went to four college tuitions to be paid, medical bills to get set straight and a household to keep up. The issue with the bribe lies in the

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<sup>26</sup> In the novel, the only actions regarded as '*infamita*' (infamia in current Italian) are the ones that take a toll on the innocents: children and women. The only characters that carry on these blasphemies in the novel are Jack Woltz, the mother of the little girl Woltz abuses, Luca Brasi and Fabrizio.

fact that the Turk is not offering a ‘clean graft’ as the rest of the Families usually do<sup>27</sup>.

This money reeks of blood as it centers its business on destroying human beings. McCluskey allows his being to be overwhelmed by a Dago, a Guinea hood (using his own words) because of greed, the same greed that took Paulie Gatto, the one that blurs better judgement. Mike is once again fortunately late because of Kay; however, this loss of control proves an advantage as the future heir walks through the hospital doors two hours later than prefixed, preventing the worst from happening. The reaction to the empty posts is natural. Mike defies his older brother’s advice to stay put inside the room, thus declaring he is ready to fulfill Vito Corleone’s legacy. He walks down the front steps of the building bravely. In order for Mike to grow into Michael a lightning needs to strike, because up to this point his position is firmly outside of the business among the civilians. Or is it? When he first learned about his father’s shooting from the papers, “Michael Corleone felt his body turning to ice. There was no grief, no fear, just cold rage.” (P. 91) And upon hearing Sonny’s words on the phone, “he felt a furious anger rising in him, a cold hatred for his father’s enemies.” (P. 149). Michael lives the Godfather’s ‘cold anger’ and yet he remains calm, moves his father’s bed to another room with the help of a nurse and goes downstairs. When Mike’s character is tested he passes with full grades and the reward is a punch that shatters his cheekbone into his gums and it comes straight from his old God: America. His Wandering was devoted to the freedom of U.S. society, but now he is looking straight at McCluskey through Corleone eyes. It takes an act of physical and psychological Violence against him for Michael to reject the illusion he has been following. He knows he will find peace in his traditions because only Corleonian Wisdom can satiate his thirst for blood. For twenty-three years Vito tried to teach his son to go outside, to be great in the New Continent, to bring the Family name to places he could not reach, but such an act of disrespect cannot be tolerated. Michael would not be a man had he not let himself be pulled back down to the foundation of

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<sup>27</sup> A clean graft comes from gambling, nightclubs, the black market and prostitution.

Cosa Nostra. He admits having slipped and fallen instead of denouncing the police Captain (when there were at least twenty men to witness the power abuse perpetrated) as a true Sicilian would and following his new doctrine he gets ready to murder for the betterment of society. Michael sees in McCluskey and Sollozzo the degradation Vito saw in Fanucci. He realizes he has been worshipping a God that allowed such mischief to take place without proper action. For the first time Michael is willing to honest commitment for a common cause. He takes side with his community, with the Italian Americans who counted on his father's words and deeds. He comes to feel Vito's future words "*Sonna cosa nostra*" (P. 368). Michael also has to be ready for action because he is the only one who can approach Sollozzo. His strength lies in the fact that he had kept his powers hidden away, just as his father did at the beginning of the century. The civilian shield has protected him for his whole existence and now it is the ace of the plan set up to make things even. While Santino steps closer to his own execution by killing Bruno Tattaglia, Michael has already thought the killings of Sollozzo and McCluskey through, but he has as much experience with Cosa Nostra as a newborn child. Killing Japs on Peleliu does not count as "initiatory training" and Michael, while his mind is now working brilliantly, is still ignorant of Cosa Nostra's modus operandi. As it happened to Sonny in his late teenage years, Clemenza is the designated man for Michael's first Mob lesson: 'Murder 101'. Pete is the second most ferocious man in the novel, only behind Brasi's bestiality. His talent for killing has been known for as long as he could remember, but his favorite weapon, the garrote, is now only part of his generation. The Forties are about guns and noise and Mike receives the perfect weapon to do the job on Sollozzo and McCluskey: a small, loud and one hundred per cent untraceable revolver (see P. 172-3).

Michael's "initiation rite" goes smoothly but only because once more he trusts his instincts over Sicilian advice. After having retrieved the safe gun from the old style toilet the young

Corleone decides to sit down again, to relieve Sollozzo from his doubts regarding the restroom break. We are not given to know what would have happened if Mike had decided to follow Clemenza's words to the letter, but we can easily imagine. The car that takes the young murderer away from his "masterpiece" is driven by Tessio himself and it had been saved a long time for an important business matter and nothing is more vital than this. Michael has killed his very own Fanucci and now he cannot turn back: he has officially entered manhood. He seeks refuge in the old country, where the first Mafiosi took control of the rural, virginal Sicilian land. In the meantime, Sonny proves not to be up to the challenge, Hagen grows out of his character, Fredo loses his sense of decency in Vegas and the Godfather is forced to rise for his offspring's sake once more.

### **IV.3. Grief**

During the ensuing three years a few characters meet their end at their own hands, as it were, all because they are incapable of following Vito's philosophy. Sonny's massacre takes place because the victim has let his temper break through once more and with it his major flaw: carelessness. Sonny proves not to have learned from his mistakes when he publicly beats up his brother-in-law, giving Barzini the opportunity to slither in. The attack at the Jones Beach tollbooth is the enemy's masterpiece, a carefully planned operation that also murders Hagen's Irish blood and sees him reborn as a Sicilian, providing him with the last bit of information which turns him from German-Irish to Italian-American. Vito Corleone cannot allow the situation to degenerate any further and has to accept defeat in a twisted way. By allowing his son Michael to fully grow into his character he has to allow him to walk his path and this is the only nightmare the *Padrino* has ever feared. He knew what kind of damnation he was entering when he did what he thought best for his loved ones and his only wish from life was that he could spare his children's souls, knowing he had given up his own a long time before.



At the same time Vito knows that Michael will be able to complete the vision he had of a better world for his people. The path of grandeur is often naturally laid for those whose ambition reaches the stars and Vito knows his sons' children will become true Italian Americans, proud of their heritage while having a fixed position in American society. The demise of his firstborn son triggers the events that lead to Michael obtaining the added value of experience his cortex needs. However Mike is still in Sicily and he has to be brought back. It is during the Peace Conference of 1947 that Don Corleone reestablishes his position at the Families' table, by expressing his own version of superstition:

But I have a selfish interest. My youngest son had to flee, accused of Sollozzo's murder and that of a police captain. I must now make arrangements so that he can come home with safety, cleared of all those false charges. That is my affair and I will make those arrangements. I must find the real culprits perhaps, or perhaps I must convince the authorities of his innocence, perhaps the witnesses and informants will recant their lies. But again I say that this is my affair and I believe I will be able to bring my son home.

But let me say this. I am a superstitious man, a ridiculous failing but I must confess it here. And so if some unlucky accident should befall my youngest son, if some police officer should accidentally shoot him, if he should hang himself in his cell, if new witnesses appear to testify to his guilt, my superstition will make me feel that it was the result of the ill will still borne me by some people here. Let me go further. If my son is struck by a bolt of lightning I will blame some of the people here. If his plane should fall into the sea or his ship sink beneath the waves of the ocean, if he should catch a mortal fever, if his automobile should be struck by a train, such is my superstition that I would blame the ill will felt by people here. Gentlemen, that ill will, that bad luck, I could never forgive. But aside from that let me swear by the souls of my grandchildren that I will never break the peace we have made. After all, are we or are we not better men than those *pezzonovanti* [sic.] who have killed countless millions of men in our lifetimes? (P. 369-370)

After having made clear who is still in command, Vito starts planning the passing over of his legacy while Michael is training to become able to fully receive it. When Apollonia and his unborn son are wiped out from his life he “wishes to be his father’s son” (see P. 448) because only now does he comprehend his true chance for success: he is a Corleone. He has influence in politics and courts, where true power sleeps and he knows well that they count as ten regimes as his father would say. Michael would have never come to this point in only three years, had it not been for his stay in Sicily. His direct experience with the dirt of the homeland accelerates the process of becoming a Corleone. Mike sees the poverty and the degradation the Mafia currently dwells upon, putting taxes on any business alike, whether big or small. A cancerous capitalism has taken over. Sicilian Families and Padroni have merged into a factual entity far more powerful and dangerous than the Italian Government itself. Here “Merit meant nothing. Talent meant nothing. Work meant nothing. The Mafia Godfather gave you your profession as a gift.” (P. 413) as Taza presents himself as the only doctor in the village, while admitting quite shamelessly that he cannot understand half the medical books laid on his shelves. Michael sees the dangers resulting from a complete ownership of the land and understands that his father cannot have fought all his life to see such an empty end. His youngest son, who can clearly see that something must be done in order to finally achieve a secure world for the Corleone descendants, now shares Vito’s vision. Michael goes back to the U.S. a changed man because he has mastered both his and Vito’s Wounds. I love Gardaphé’s comparison of Sicily with Krypton to explain its purifying powers:

[...] a legendary place of origin, the experience of which elevates him [Don Corleone] to the status of a hero. This is exemplified best through the character of Michael Corleone, the one son who is closest to total American assimilation. Michael is sent to Sicily [...] to unlearn the American behavior that is incompatible with his family’s life. (*Wise Guys* 36)

Indeed Mike comes out Michael, who is more mature than to let Kay, an outsider not only a woman, in. The future Don Michael is compelled to exclude his wife from business matters because he considers it her only way to survive Cosa Nostra.

Preserving the Godfather's work while elevating it at the same time in places unknown before, can only point towards one direction in the future: legitimacy. Vito's work has been pointing to that safe island his whole life without realizing it. A true, good leader fights for the betterment of society and the Godfather is the kind of man who would give his life to the service for his own population, his sons in the new continent. Following Gardaphé's notion of the Italian-American cultural hero, he is the one who "should show Italian immigrants how to use the best of Italian culture to survive in the new world" (*Wise Guys* 22). Michael is fully aware of the kind of commitment this engagement requires and is ready to follow Death when He deems the time as right. Being a Mafioso is not for everyone. It requires a set of Andromeda-sized Sicilian 'balls' and a profound respect for Death, for He may come at any time in life, often without any warning. By deciding to willingly become his father's son, Michael fulfills his path of grandeur and destiny while embracing the totality of his genes' legacy, but the rest is now up to him. As additional reward he will satisfy his old thirst for blood. Fabrizio has committed an *infamia* by letting Apollonia take her husband's marked seat and the only way to get to the bastard is through the Corleone world.

The first thing to set straight then is a set of rules and lessons that will help Mike along the way and the most important one must come straight from Luca Brasi, the demonical "*Pezzonovanta*" (sic)<sup>28</sup> of the narration.

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<sup>28</sup> The correct expression is "*Pezzo da Novanta*".

### IV.3.1 The son of Violence

Luca is the only man who can unsettle the Godfather. Through a woman's catatonic-like recounting Michael comes to learn the story that shakes the souls of every Sicilian who comes by it. Brasi is a monster. He fears nothing and no one and is one of those men who are constantly looking for Death. He has his newborn son thrown alive into a blazing furnace after having brutally raped the young mother because despite his poor education he is conscious of his condition. The ferocity that keeps him breathing is nothing but a disease he feels he has inherited from his own genes. In the cruelest and most indelible act of slaughter Brasi shows that he is acting according to his logic through madness: 'By killing my own sons I will wipe my disease off society' (see P. 437-442). He is worse than the Devil himself and he needs indeed to be stopped. Such a man, who carries his life from one abomination to another may prove to be the most loyal soldier a Boss might have. Vito Corleone is aware of the fact that he is taking under his protection an unexploded device whose fuel consists of hatred and depravity, but by doing so he is also taking Brasi off the streets. He is doing humankind a favor by accepting him and having him feel at home after the man tried to kill himself in prison. Brasi leads an immoral life in the complete rejection of reason and is bound to burn for eternity and this is why Luca is punished with the knowledge of failure while exhaling his last breath. He dies conscious of having disappointed his Godfather, Vito Corleone. Michael sees through Luca's own personal history of violence and understands the importance of blind trust. Vito Corleone is the kind of man who remembers where he comes from and he uses it to his own advantage to channel a feeling of complete understanding and manly affection towards any living person on earth. It is in fact pure exploitation of a lunatic with a talent for cruelty, but for the 'better good'. Michael has to learn to live with this kind of human conduct as well and luck rewards him with Al Neri, a man who is loyal as Brasi, but who is gifted with Reason.

#### IV.4. A new era

Michael's Family already looks a lot different from the Corleones who danced at the wedding back in August 1945. Kay and the Fifties have brought along a wave of Americanization of characters. The mall looks different with its "On Sale" Damocles' swords hanging over the property. Inside, business matters have shifted as well, as Tom Hagen is no longer the designed Consigliere, his position being filled in by the Godfather himself. Hagen is to become the right hand in the Vegas move.<sup>29</sup> The Nevada desert is the Oasis Michael has been looking for, to start a new life. Unlike his father, the soon-to-be Godfather has a faint chance at redemption and Vito wants him to have it, at one last price. Vito does not want to be responsible for Carlo Rizzi's death, because he would become accountable for his only daughter's sufferings. Michael represents his chance to dodge this bullet as well because he has learnt that traitors never go unpunished and age, sex and positions never matter. Michael's training lasts two full years before fate takes its natural course, taking back what Vito gave up in order to save his Family and fellow paisans.

The Godfather, Don Corleone has reached a mysterious stage by now: retirement. Vito Andolini has spent his last years taking care of the little things, enjoying a few glasses of wine more often while tending to the tomatoes and bell peppers in his garden. The problem is that men whose ambition reaches the stars cannot adapt to the rural lifestyle for long. Mike's training into Don Michael takes the strength of life out of Vito, after allowing him a few years to enjoy a few glasses of Chianti in the peace of his own Sicilian patch on American soil. The traditions we learn from our parents ring with wisdom. Rest is rightfully on the way for those who have earned it with the sweat of their brows or blood on their hands for the sake of the

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<sup>29</sup> Hagen has outgrown his own character by learning how to reason like an Italian. He proves to be worthy of respect and glory with his law firm business. The Godfather himself thinks of him as a "good son." (P. 343)

offspring. Vito is granted to die after having fulfilled his duties as a father, passing on his legacy. The Eternal Rest is a natural companion of life, one that the young son of Andolini had learnt to live with a long time ago. Vito has lived through enough Death to understand His pattern. He sees Him coming and dies surrounded by the men he lived his life for. The love for his flesh and blood is what made him great, what fulfilled his desire from life, but he dies knowing he has damned his son to the same sort of damnation that awaits him. The same man who dies on this sunny Sunday morning is the one who worked the railroad for a few bucks a month to be able to feed his family and was the kind of person who only ate once his children had everything they needed. When we see Marlon Brando collapsing with his mouth half full of oranges we can hardly believe our eyes. When we read about “The sledgehammer blow inside his chest ma[kes] him choke for air” and we picture Don Vito “pitched forward into the earth” (P. 520) our hearts cannot but crack a little. The glory he dies in comes straight from his deep love for Santino, Federico, Michele and Costanza: were it not for them he would have never taken Clemenza’s bundle of guns and he would have never laid hand on Fanucci. Vito whispers his last words<sup>30</sup> and is finally free to reach those stars he longed for throughout his life because at last someone has understood his vision and it is the only person who could help with the final business coup. Mike has grown into the sort of man whose word you could can upon. However, what he has to face within is one of the hardest feelings the human heart can physically abide, as he has to come to terms with the truth that the hand he is strongly holding is now nothing but decaying flesh. His father’s, The Godfather’s eloquent eyes are suddenly covered by a silky opaqueness and his mouth is open in eternal silence. The sound of his voice will go unheard among the living who desperately need it and the reassuring, warm and affectionate touch of his hand is now replaced by chilling flesh. Michael has to comprehend the deceptive vision. He has to break through the new Wound and face the matter as if it were a business deal leading to a promotion. Michael is

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<sup>30</sup> “Life is so beautiful” (Puzo, 521).

neither seized by anger nor overwhelmed by grief because he has had time to understand and live by his father's advice and he is now embodying his lessons. He knows it is better not to utter threats out loud. He has his temper under control under any circumstances. He has devoted himself to the God of Reason, the God of Blood in order to put an end to the unrealistic dream his genes carry. He is not devastated at the sight of Death because he has come to understand his father's mortality years before and he is now ready to help him through the last journey.

Such an amount of unexpected grief clouds the mind and the nearest light to regain control is to remember what keeps you alive. What is the reason that makes you wake up in the morning and guides you dutifully through the planning of mass murders? Now that Vito is gone the weight of the House of Corleone has fallen on Michael's shoulders alone and the forced detachment lets out a glimpse of reality, or rather, allows a moment of lucidity inside the half-orphan's mind: 'What I am touching is only flesh, blood and bones and he is not here anymore.' His siblings, the whole family, Long Beach and New York City, join in Michael's grief.

Due to *force majeure* Michael has to move up by four months the masterpiece Vito Corleone had been picturing and working on since back in the late Thirties, when he understood that the Pacification of New York would not be complete until everyone reasoned like him, which excluded the Five Families, too big to be touched at the time. Sonny shared the vision as well back in 1947 and Michael has the means to perpetrate it now in the late Fifties. Debts need to be paid and bad blood washed away to start anew.

Barzini is shot in the middle of the street by an Al Neri in his old cop uniform for having organized the attack on Apollonia and being behind the whole 1946-7 War, financing the Tattaglias and probably the other Families as well. Phillip Tattaglia is riddled with bullets through his intestines in a motel after having done the job on one of his girls. Rocco Lampone sets matter straight for Sollozzo once and for all. Carlo Rizzi pays the debt he owes the Corleone

Family for having sold Sonny when relieving his bowels inside Clemenza's trap. Tessio bravely faces the mistakes of his own better judgement for having tried to get a bargain out of Mike's life, asking man to man a favor from a regretful Hagen. Fabrizzio's headshot by a Corleone buttonman rings with Michael's regards as the Don's thirst to justly avenge the *infamia* is satisfied. The sweet taste of complete victory is broken by Constanzia's outburst of a selfish nature, when she inquires "[...] about me. You never gave a damn about me. What am I going to do now? What am I going to do" (P. 555) which opens Kay's eyes on her husband once and for all. Kay Adams Corleone is no Mrs. Mama Corleone and she takes Michael's two sons away to New Hampshire to her parents. When I first read about Michael's calmness transpiring through Hagen's words I was surprised as in my mind I could clearly picture Al Pacino closing the kitchen's back door on an appalled Diane Keaton. The features of the woman scared of her husband and the coolness of Pacino's movements clash with the new Don Corleone's understanding of Kay's position and his wish for her to live a long and happy life, as long as she could take good American care of the kids. The Godfather is the novel that stills brings back the pride of being Italian American, or Italian, up to this day, even if by enhancing the worst side of its culture. Coppola's movie only pours Oscars over Khartoum's severed head. Kay is horrified at the realization of her husband's cruelty because she represents common ethics and morality. The world Michael spent years building, promising her full legitimacy every once in a while, is finally completed and it is built on bloody concrete and she is right in the middle of it. As a mother would, she fears for her children and takes them where she deems most safe, her native town. Going back is synonymous with protection and tender haven and so is returning to Michael once more. Kay has to admit that her options in fact would not be better anywhere else but with her husband. Moving away certainly helps. The desert comes to be pleasant scenery as she later appreciates. Michael grows old in another land, a new territory that he conquered by himself and he has finally found peace because he has learned his Father's final lesson: respect



for yourself. A man can always and only reach real self-realization through acceptance of his character. Michael could never find the glory he deserves out on the Long Beach mall, because the size of his father's 'shadow' would not leave him enough space to breathe. Conscious of this fact, Vito had given the permission and allowances to let Michael build for himself his future world on the Strip in Las Vegas, the gamblers' paradise. After all Michael has a true chance at becoming the American his pop wanted him to be. He starts to get involved in politics without organizing ballots and gladly gets involved for the betterment of the community, approving only of illegal necessities like allowing Dr. Jules Segal to keep his work up<sup>31</sup>. Michael has found the balance his father had left for him located in his teachings. He has outsmarted and outlived all his brothers and is finally sitting comfortably in his armchair. We close the book wishing Kay's "[...] prayers for the soul of Michal Corleone" (P. 568) do reach the Heavens and that they might live happily ever after.

This is what Puzo does to the reader. By mixing different kinds of romances and narratives, as Ferraro pointed out (*Crime* 109), the reader cannot but be hypnotized by the words written on papers. Just as we cheer for Gino and Vinnie to be able to brew root beer<sup>32</sup> we are delighted as we read through justice being served, but we must realize that we are in truth cheering for an organization that lays its foundation on threats and murders. Puzo uses the pen brilliantly to push us to face the problem, by showing us that there are troubles on the inside as well. Michael's possible redemption would have never taken place had he not gone 'legit'. Even the Corleone heir sees that his father's organization, as brilliantly as it might function, is based on the wrong principles, on reproachable reasons. He follows the line of thought of burying Italian American traditions on the outside that characterized the three decades following World War Two (see Viscusi Introduction). By showing and acting out his Americanization, Michael

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<sup>31</sup> The abortionist now married to Lucy Mancini, Sonny's old flame.

<sup>32</sup> Characters in the novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, 1965, by Mario Puzo.

can achieve cultural and social success as well as preventing his father's dream from imploding, as he witnessed in Sicily.

Michael embodies the pride of the Italian American on American soil, who would rather be seen as an American than an Italian. He is the only son of the trio to fully manage to embrace the foreign as his own and therefore grows out of his own character, expanding his horizon just as Vito Corleone did before him. Part of his father's legacy are the funds to buy four casinos, sure, but Michael has achieved a greater result than the other Italian American Sons: he has peace of mind. It also has to do with the fact that this protagonist lives in a very different world where money counts almost as much as the amount of respect earned. At the same time, however, acceptance of one's role is rare and characters that were not up to the challenge were brutally ripped off the pages. Fredo has lost his conscious mind in Vegas, letting sex be his curse while endangering young girls, even two at a time. Sonny has let himself go because of his eagerness to show the world the roaring lion coming out to face the world alone. By distancing the men of his regime he foolishly plummeted straight into his death. Connie has already filled her bed after not even waiting a full year of mourning and Kay has forced herself to turn Catholic in order for her to be able to help her husband, at least from above. Her going to church each morning with Mama Corleone determines her official entrance to Family and perhaps this will mean that a few questions in the future will be answered. Honestly, I doubt Kay would ever want another of her questions to be answered. When she came back she knew what she was getting back into. She had the golden ticket right in her hand but she refused to use it so now it is on her conscience to decide how much she wants to know about the nature of her husband's fortune. In time she may grow into a Sicilian as Tom did in thirty years, but she will always kneel to receive the holy bread to clear her conscience.

## V. Conclusions

### Three Black Souls – The annihilation of limits through Violence

*Anime Nere*, directed by Francesco Munzi and starring Marco Leonardi, Peppino Mazzotta, Fabrizio Ferracane and Giovanni Fumo, was presented at the Venice Film Festival on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The movie follows three Calabrian brothers in their last week of life, from the urban environment of Milan to the rural, raw mountains of Aspromonte. Luigi is a drug trafficker affiliated with the ‘Ndrangheta<sup>33</sup> and the first one to come on screen, sealing a deal in Holland with a Spanish colleague. He is the youngest, in his forties, and still apt to juvenile acts like the theft of two sheep carried out soon after having landed back home. The Boss of the family has moved his business “up in the north” in Milan, adoptive home to Rocco as well, who has entered the city’s nightclub scene. He is the most sophisticated out of the three, always impeccable in his appearance and speech. He lives in an overly furnished apartment with Valeria, of Slavic heritage, but his success comes directly from his younger brother’s recycled coke money. He shows a certain degree of sensitivity, not as much as his older brother but a lot more than Luigi, and treats everyone with respect. Luciano is the oldest, well into his fifties and the only one still living on the slopes of Aspromonte. He tends to his goats, his land and his Saints with affectionate care, but fails in reaching out to his son, Leo. The young boy’s impudence causes Luigi and Rocco to return down south after having had a taste of the urban lifestyle of Milan. Luigi is soon assassinated after waiting too long to reply to his long “forgotten” parents in business. Still today, the ‘Ndrangheta’s strength and power lies in blood and familiar relations, or rather, violence and brutality, and inaccessibility of the land, known only by locals. The murder

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<sup>33</sup> Calabrian organized crime is referred to as ‘Ndrangheta; Cosa Nostra and Mafia refer to Sicily and Camorra to Campania.

sets Leo on the hunt and guides him toward his own demise.

For the purpose of the study, the final twist will be unraveled in the next paragraph.

The main theme sees organized crime as the destructive force of the family unit from within. The uniqueness of the film lies in the figure of the perpetrator of such destruction. Luciano, the one who has made the firm stand of staying out of the family business, a man stuck in the past who still drinks “la polvere dei santi”<sup>34</sup>, shoots the remaining men of the household, ending the masculine bloodline. While attending Luigi’s funeral he comes to know about his only son’s murder, a death that could have been avoided as will be seen. His decision to murder Rocco, Nicola and a few undistinguished men of the regime, to end the feud that began when at twelve years old he witnessed his father’s homicide, is the last proof of his failure at communicating, the result of decades lived in despair and refusal. The initial insult that paved the ways for Luigi’s and Rocco’s lives, set fatal restraints on Luciano’s dialectics, which is one of the causes of Leo’s demise. The young boy has fallen under the fascination of the underground world. Luigi and his tailored clothes, the big brand new Audi and the overall air of strong, masculine confidence are far from his father’s ragged pants stained by human and animal perspiration alike, the old Fiat Panda from the Nineties and his passive, but wise, attitude. The voice that command the house is that of his mother who scrapes off Luciano’s authority just as he chips off concrete dust from the feet of the statues of Saints. When Leo shoots the window of a pub protected by the family’s rivals, he pulls the trigger of the pistol placed against his head a few days later. Luciano is the result of decades of psychological oppression. The act of violence he carries out embodies aspects of Coppola’s Michael and Kay Corleone, Nick and Henry Molise and Geremio’s Paul. The following two sections will identify first Luciano’s transmitted and imposed limits through Nick Molise’s failed dialectic and Paul’s success in his role as a father, and then outline the reasons behind the *Infamia* of killing a brother.

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<sup>34</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.ilquotidianodellacalabria.it/news/societa-cultura/729077/Al-Festival-di-Venezia-gli-applausi.html>

## V.1 Silent Concrete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Both Luciano and Paul witness their fathers' death at the beginning of manhood but perceive it in two opposite manners. Geremio is eaten alive by the chaos of the city and Paul can only imagine what he felt in his last moments, while the Calabrian father dies in the mountains of Aspromonte right in front of his son, and "come un cane" as Leo confides to his best friend a few minutes into the movie, which entails two meanings: "alone as a dog" as Gardaphé writes to describe Coppola's Michael's death (*Wise Guys* 41) or in a shameful, disrespectful manner in the eyes of the whole world. Geremio perishes the victim of the limits American Capitalism had imposed on him but Luciano's father dies because of an unknown insult made towards the local Mafia chief and he is executed on purpose in front of his son to diminish his value as a man. He dies "come un cane" also because up to the present day no one has dared to avenge his death. Jokes made later in the film allude to a lost past when Luciano was in jail because he was involved in matters he now considers inhumane, as Paul took Geremio's trowel in his hand and laid bricks for the sake of survival. Both have met and left Job at some point, always looking back and taking care not to step into it again, conscious that it would only lead to violent madness.<sup>35</sup> However, whereas Paul takes care of his siblings as a father, Luciano fails to do so.

The Calabrian's life takes a different turn when he identifies God as Salvation where Paul eventually sees it as the author of Job. "La polvere dei Santi" literally translates as "Saints' dust". The complete devotion to the dead, the martyrs of the Catholic Faith has the believer mixing the concrete powder with half a glass of water as a rite of sacrifice. The focus of the camera is fixed upon the rough wooden table and the spectator can only see Luciano's callous hand lift the glass and hear the swallowing sound before the holy chalice is put back where it was. The ritual recalls the battles that ended with the winner eating his adversary's heart to gain

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<sup>35</sup> I do not stop at the final line of *Christ in Concrete*. Paul is Pietro Di Donato, who found his way as a writer and not as a bricklayer in the end.

the latter's courage and spirit. Luciano adds a few homeopathic<sup>36</sup> drops, careful to see them all fall inside the cocktail, before gulping it down, proving these to be customary habits. Olivia Musini, one of the movie's producers, has kindly answered my questions confirming my ideas regarding this ritual, including an explanation by film director Francesco Munzi:

È una credenza tramandata dalla tradizione orale della montagna aspromontana. A me l'hanno semplicemente raccontata alcuni pastori durante un sopralluogo in Aspromonte. Ingerire la polvere di santo, cioè la polvere che si accumula vicino alle icone sacre, può far guarire, se ingerita, dai malanni dello spirito. La pratica è anche ripresa nel film di Michelangelo Frammartino, *Le quattro volte*.

This kind of blind trust reminds me of the vow taken by the mothers of Di Donato's "La Smorfia"<sup>37</sup> when they swear neither to touch nor kiss their children if God saw their survival through the epidemic of Spanish Flu. Luciano's childhood and adolescence remain an unresolved mystery, the movie does not indulge in flashbacks and what we see on screen is someone who has no authority whatsoever over his son just as he has almost none over his brothers because he embodies Nick Molise's failed communication and violence as a grown up. From his point of view, Nick made a true effort to try and reach out to his kids using, however, the means of Violence through mockery and physical beatings. When talked harshly back to, "His face dropped in embarrassment" (F. 32) as an act of such nature can only unleash a strong reaction of similar sort, which proves incomprehensible in turn. Luciano's turn into manhood happens under an act of violence, like Paul's, but not the one Risé would expect.

The Wound that defines both Luciano and Paul is not the breaking of the bond between mother and son but rather the problem of embracing their fathers' legacies. Both Geremio and the unknown martyr die before taking Oedipus away from the hands of Jocasta and both Paul

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<sup>36</sup> As Olivia Musini pointed out.

<sup>37</sup> Included in Francesco Durante's *Figli Di Due Mondi. Fante, Di Donato & c.*

and Luciano find themselves stuck in their own version of the complex. Paul has to father his younger siblings and Annunziata approves as her final lines prove. This premature fatherhood is successful because of his mother's blind trust in him. By allowing him to fill Geremio's seat she sets a living example in front of the kids: this is the man to follow. Luciano on the other hand lives the complex inside his own family, as he is the product of the Vaporization of the father figure in the hypermodern society defined by Recalcati. Paul and Annunziata re-establish the roles for a normal education without falling into the Oedipus complex because Paul has already faced another Wound when Job took him away from his mother. By setting two distinct leading figures at the head of the family and two distinct identities inside Geremio's temporary replacement, Paul has time to raise the next generation while building a future for himself. Luciano and Antonia are the modern parents who show acts of love though seeking approval in their child-God.<sup>38</sup> Their failure is of catastrophic proportions because Luciano sees Luigi's past behavior in his son Leo's conduct. After his father was murdered, he never filled his position towards his brothers, which resulted in their joining the same Business he escaped, giving the impression of not having been able to learn much from his father, but a few secrets. Luciano does not seem to carry the Wound on his person. The three sons keep Rosa, the only head of the family, in referential awe but she seems distant from them while they are alive. The honest reaction to Luigi's present, a diamond collier, is "I don't need it", brutal in its simplicity. On the contrary, she becomes the protagonist of his wake. When Rocco embraces her after he has driven all the way from Milan, her first words are "Did you leave him alone?" talking about the corpse of her last-born child at the hospital morgue. When she mourns there are no screams or ripped locks of hair, but a devastating acceptance and silent tears in her features as if the day she became a widow she also accepted her sons' fate next to their father's. The bond between the brothers up to the present has degenerated and it is the results of decades of bad blood. Luigi had

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<sup>38</sup> Recalcati covers the notion in the section "Il legame familiare nell'epoca dell'evaporazione del padre" in *Cosa Resta del Padre*.

not heard from his oldest brother in the last six months and the only reason Luciano picked the phone up was for his son's sake, not his own.

The reason for Luciano's failure in Paul's shoes is because he enacts Nick's dialectics of Violence. Physically he rejects it when he sees his father's corpse, which sets a limit on his psychological sphere while growing up. His final act of brutal Blasphemy is the expression of the limits of his dialectics. Going back to Oedipus, Luciano lives the complex like King Laius. Every single advice he discloses to his blood meets an opposite reaction.

Leo has reached the beginning of his Wandering. He needs to get out of a country where goats seem to outnumber Calabrians two to one. Years of resentment against his weak father, the hopeless land and the narrowness of mind (of which he is a victim like everyone else) explode with the pub's window. The act of violence he perpetrates comes from the certainty of having Luigi, as an uncle, as well as knowing that a strong parent within the household will always be there to back him up and win the battles for him: his mother. Henry Molise's mother, Maria, suffocates her children just as Antonia lets everything go by. Fante's fictional mother does not have to worry about another lonely dinner for the rest of her life, not that she ever did. The bond she forged with her sons through food is what takes Nick's funeral off their minds. The last line of the *Brotherhood of the Grape* has Maria as complete protagonist of the scene, "I bought a leg of lamb, she said. We'll have a nice dinner. The whole family. With new potatoes." (F. 178) Maria exaggerates in her role just as much as Antonia/Jocasta, who cannot see her mistakes and therefore grants Leo too much freedom, seeing it as another way of loving her Oedipus.

Inside this situation Luciano tries to act where his partner does not show any sign of presence. His message is a clear one: "Do not enter the 'Ndrangheta", but it does not get through because of the degenerate bond between Antonia and Leo. Luciano carries on his person the qualities of Maria and Annunziata, his religious fanaticism only surpassed by Rosa's zeal in counting prayer beads while reciting never ending rosaries for the lost souls of the family; when



the table runs out of wine he gets up to fill the bottle; he checks Leo's bed in the morning as Maria peeks from the living room into her bedroom, occupied by Nick Molise. By not breaking the morbid bond Luciano sees himself alone in his role as a parent. The mother is the figure who has the power to agree or disagree with the father's teachings and therefore she alone holds the key to the annihilation of the paternal authority by denying his access to the offspring. If the father is not strong enough to break a genetic, natural bond, the relationship will only degenerate into the kind of connection that exists between Leo and his mother. Luciano becomes the representation of the Calabrian limits in his son's view but from the outside he is not overprotective, he speaks the truth. No one can want his son to be affiliated to any kind of organized crime. The message however cannot get through because of the lack of dialectics between every family member. Antonia is blind to the menace as well, having married her husband probably after past troubles and enacting the stereotypical morbid attachment to the only male son by letting him free to do anything he wants and giving him reasons to carry on with his behavior. Women never enter Business or Job and only see later effects. Luciano has been affected by Crime but is denied the chance to speak by his wife who takes part in Leo's murder by excluding the father figure from the growth, just as Luciano is guilty of not stating his position strongly enough.

Paul remembers from the past, learns from it and dwells in it but he lives in the present. Luciano lives in contemporary days but carries out rituals that seem to come straight out of the Counter-Reformation. Geremio's sacrifice mirrors Leo's and in this image Luciano gives up on hope by giving up his dialectic mutilated by Violence to embrace the latter as a means of conduct. Forged by a murder, grown in blood, he ends his life slaughtering. Before burning his soul, he sets fire to what seem to be the only pictures of his father relegated inside a glass frame, as if saying, "It all ends today". The chaos that defines the act of Violence per se is fully depicted in the film, when Luciano's fate is left unknown to be replaced by the recurring image of a tribe

of goats. I left the room bewildered, and unable to forget Luciano's tearful eyes. The only other fratricide I had ever witnessed in a similar setting was carried out by orders of Coppola's Michael Corleone, whose eyes I remember dry. *The Godfather Trilogy* changed the way movies were conceived which is why it deserves proper attention for this last part.

## **V.2 The Infamia of fratricide, “A descent into trying to hold on to everything and losing it”**

In the early 1970's, Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola created two of the most influential films in American motion picture history, recipient of nine academy Awards, including two for best picture. Nearly twenty years later, Puzo, Coppola, and many of their original collaborators assembled to make *THE GODFATHER PART III*. Here are their memories spanning from 1970 to the present. (The Godfather – A Look Inside, Paramount Pictures)

The special edition DVD box set of the Trilogy filled my days with joy. I had seen the movies before approaching the novel, I have to admit this, and was therefore surprised to read of a much kinder Michael, someone who does not keep shutting doors in Kay's face. *A Look Inside*, directed by Jeff Werner, sees Coppola and Puzo on screen, the minds who have decided to turn Michael's life towards the only act left to complete his damnation: fratricide. The setting is perfect; the director wanders back through memory while having lunch with the whole crew. It was George Lucas' wife, Marcia, who advised him to “Cast Al Pacino, because he undresses you with his eyes” and better words had never been spoken about the great actor. Coppola describes Michael's character as “a master manipulator. Michael has intellectual sides, so he does have an inkling about his tragedy.” What I want to put a focus on is the second chapter of the trilogy,

which ends in the same years as the novel but with the opposite ending as regards Michael's soul, "A descent into trying to hold on to everything and losing it", as Al Pacino puts it.

As we have just seen, Luciano enables aspects of Maria Molise and Annunziata, but he reminds of the Wasp wife Kay Adams the most. Michael's promises of a new start in Nevada and the outcome of empty words have brought her to the point of aborting her third child because she felt it was male. What Kay shares with Luciano, are the reasons behind his final act, meant only to put a definite end to the Bloodline by taking out of the picture the next possible future heir to the business. Rocco had indeed already started planning out a Vendetta retaliation to answer for Luigi's murder, an operation in which Leo showed an interest in taking part. Being denied the chance by his father once more he decides to fly solo, putting his trust into the wrong hands and walking into a trap. However this time Luciano's frustration finds a target in his middle brother because the admonition ignored by the adolescent was perfectly heard by Rocco, who in truth could not have done anything to stop it. Leo's frontal cortex is finally letting go of the neurons it does not need to carry on, but without finding any limits against which to clash: he is already lost in the chaos of degeneration. Luciano plans the murder in his mind, he knows where to retrieve a gun and how to shoot and kill three men in under a minute under the eyes of the wives of the house. He succeeds in taking out a Boss because he is aware of being on a suicide mission and because he does not disclose his plans to anyone. No matter the outcome, Luciano is destined to be miserable for the rest of his days. He lost everything he ever cared for and his mortal body has become an empty shell: his soul died when looking at his wife, who at last sees the effect of violence and Violence, in the full psychological meaning of the word, of the 'Ndrangheta only because he is directly involved in the events. Luciano is Kay Adams but he is Michael as well.

The purpose, the role failed in Luciano is that of the father as teacher of pain as established in the first section. The death of Fredo and Rocco are carried out paradoxically for the survival of the Family. The two middle brothers represent a threat to the close family unit. Luciano blames his blood for not being able to succeed where he failed, once he had specifically asked to look after Leo. Rocco on his part could have done nothing to stop a spoiled young man with a precise goal in mind and free access to weapons. Michael kills Fredo because of the attempt he put up against his life, yes, but most of all against his wife's, still pregnant at the time. *The Godfather* as a movie follows the principles of the novel: an infamia is an action carried out at the, possible, expense of innocents. Luciano's Aspromonte reflects the kind of tight bond between blood and relatives. The geographical intricacy typical of the region has been historically one of the strengths of the 'Ndrangheta, providing perfect hideouts and preserving secrets from strangers. The easiest thing to do in this region is get lost. Family exists also to provide guidance in this particular natural environment, which proves hostile even after centuries of religious pleadings. Michael knows the moment his brother stops breathing and this murder is the reason why there is a *Godfather Part III*. Coppola reserved the damnation, the doubts, the tears and the silent screams for the last act of what he made his "tragedy of America" as he refers to the trilogy. A whole movie was made after an eighteen-years break to bring to light Michael's last sentiments of repentance, but the spectator is only granted less than twenty seconds to scrutinize Luciano's eyes in *Anime Nere* and to understand what he has just done. His fate is the one shared by Michael, alone "come un cane" as Gardaphé writes and as I insist. I picture Luciano dying of old age, surrounded by nobody, abandoned even by the women of his life, left alone in his world of mysticism. The reason supporting my opinion however has roots in the law of Omertà. Women refused to speak out loud the name responsible for the deaths of Luigi and Leo, and Luciano's father, to the authorities. Following this logic I believe Luciano's

punishment will be to witness the end of his surname, just as he wished, but at the cost of his ultimate salvation.

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