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THE ETHNIC LANGUAGE OF PIETRO DI DONATO'S
CHRIST IN CONCRETE

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Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) stands as one of the best and most powerful accounts of the Italian immigrant experience in the New World. It is the story of a full-blooded Italian bricklayer, Geremio, whose love for his homeland is reflected in his love for his devoted wife Annunziata, their seven children and the eighth about to be born. Geremio is an honest, hard-working man whose enduring loyalty not so much to the nation but to the particular region of his birth is manifest in his preservation of the old habits and customs. He dies on Good Friday when the building he and his *paesani* are working on collapses, burying him alive under a flood of settling concrete (hence the title of the book). After his death, and the almost immediate crippling of Luigi, Annunziata's brother, in another construction accident, the responsibility of assisting the fatherless family falls on little Paul, the oldest of the sons, who at the age of twelve is compelled to learn bricklaying. The novel follows this young man in his gradual growth into forced adulthood: he experiences injustice, discovers sex, and most important, when his friend and godfather Nazone dies in a fall from a skyscraper, undergoes a deep religious crisis. The story ends with the death of Annunziata, apparently as a consequence of Paul's loss of faith in God. "Son," she says in a final prayer of hope for redemption, "everything in my world is for thee. For thee I desire the fullest gifts of Heaven—To thee must the good Dio bestow the world—and lasting health. He must bless thee with the flower of womankind and many—many children as yourself...and joy and peace with-
out measure—for me—thou art the most precious..."  

When almost half a century ago Pietro di Donato, a bricklayer by trade, published this first novel, many great critics praised the extraordinary talent with which he related his family's tragic story. Though quite young and burdened with the ethnic limitations of his immigrant status, di Donato somehow possessed a wide enough vision to see beyond the confines of his immediate experience and to approach his story with objectivity and an admirable control over the emotional forces that had moved him to write it. Perhaps even more than his deep commitment to his family, himself and his people, di Donato's obvious fascination with the rhythms and patterns of everyday language, with the incredible triumph of communication in the face of great adversity, gives this novel its special power. Clearly it is a celebration of the gift of speech: that very faculty which so limited the immigrants in their struggle to survive in an alien culture proved ironically to be their sustaining strength, and the language they pieced together from the idioms of their old-world heritage and the strange diction of the tongue they were compelled to learn, provides in these pages a metaphor of creativity as striking as that of the skyscrapers they were employed to build.

It would be a great mistake to oversimplify the context in which di Donato's characters played out their roles as urban pilgrims, for which reason a brief look at certain historical peculiarities will be useful. The situation at the turn of the century for the millions of people coming to America in search of work and bread was more complex than the simple giving and taking of two or more intermingling cultures. True, the Italian immigrants, upon reaching the American shore, felt that they had to turn to their national language in order to communicate their most immediate needs. But if we consider the high percentage of illiteracy in Italy at the beginning of the 20th century, and the fact that most of the immigrants to the New World were from the Southern regions and belonged to the working or agricultural classes, we realize that their language was far from unified, even though almost half a century had gone by since the political unification of the country. First, then, the poor immigrant had to struggle out of the linguistic limitations of the peculiar dialect of his own province, and often of his own village, before acquiring the standard speech which allowed him to communicate with his countrymen. This, of course, was not the only communicative difficulty he was faced with; the second, and surely the greater difficulty, confronted him in the marketplace or his daily work when he was forced to move into the linguistic realm of the host culture. What resulted from this intercourse was a kind of language which was neither Italian nor American—it was what could be called an American jargon, a form of hybrid speech, as different and varied as the many "Little Italies" that sprang up in the large cities, each rooted in the customs and dialects of their native regions.

The urban jungles of America thus compelled these illiterate peasants, so lacking in self-confidence, to cling together in order to recapture some of the warmth and intimate contact they had known in their villages back home. They were lonely, and as Oscar Handlin put it, "Their loneliness had more than one dimension." Everything was unfamiliar to them: people, streets, buildings, sounds. But, more than anything, their
loneliness was due to the fact that neither in the people, nor in nature, nor in the cities could they retrieve the identity they had within their families and communal life of the villages. Initially the feelings of helplessness and insecurity were partially overcome by the solidarity established among people from the same regions, provinces or towns. The process of assimilation into the larger society was painfully slow, partly because the purpose of these immigrants, at least at first, was to earn enough money so that they could go back to their villages to build a decent house, buy some land, live an easier life. For this reason they never really thought of learning the language or trying to become Americans in the social or cultural sense. Many in fact returned to their paese and many more would have liked to, except that they had started a family and decided to stay, without however undergoing a true process of acculturation.

Di Donato's Christ in Concrete, more than any other Italian-American novel, presents these problems, universally valid to all immigrants, in a vivid and believable account. The American-born son of an Italian immigrant construction worker, di Donato experienced first-hand the drama, the anxieties and the uncertainties of immigrant life, and succeeded in recapturing a strong sense of the protagonists' identity both as men and as workers striving for survival. The reader cannot help but feel the dreams and expectations of this gang of Abruzzesi immigrant masons, but above all he comes to a tragic awareness of the hopeless conditions of their lives. As a story of oppressed workers, strangers in a strange land who constantly face defeat from all sides, the book carries a highly significant historic and sociological message. God is against them, the "Job", too often extremely humanized, is against them, and even man himself in the person of unscrupulous people like Mr. Mardin, the building contractor who brings them to their final death or crippling, is against them; yet they endure all hardships and humiliations with unshaken pride and nobility. This is ultimately what Christ in Concrete is about, and the author, having shared the experience, knew that in order to make his story live he had to people it with common, flesh-and-blood characters, a real gang of bricklayers engaged in the earthly but monumental difficulties of constructing a building. Who better than a bunch of uprooted labourers could have expressed the fears and uncertainties connected with the hard realities of empire-building in the New World? Only such protagonists, in all their physical strength, their loyalty to their families and to each other, and most important for the purpose of our paper, their rich, vivid, colorful everyday language. As already suggested, it is ultimately through speech, through the characters' words—and when these do not suffice, through their gestures—that we are given to partake of their bitter saga.

Certainly the fact that the author grew up and spent part of his life with this group of vocal bricklayers helped him to enlarge his sense of the dramatic, to develop his awareness of emotional effects as well as the advantages of realistic narrative and direct statement. Although the writing betrays various stylistic inconsistencies, on the whole we can say that the young author succeeded in giving us a convincingly objective view of the protagonists' world as they themselves lived and viewed it. At the same time, however, he charged it with the meaningful tensions of his own youthful feelings, without quite falling into the sentimentality that one might expect from an untutored craftsman.
Ford Madox Ford once described Hemingway's words as being like "pebbles fetched fresh from a brook. They live and shine, each in its place. So one of his pages has the effect of a brook-bottom into which you look down through the flowing water." 5/ At least the first part of this metaphor could be taken easily to describe di Donato's language in Christ in Concrete. For more direct support, however, we quote from Dorothy Canfield's review of the book, in which she refers specifically to di Donato's coinage of words and more particularly perhaps to the lyrical effects of his inventive language: "Your ears are wonted to the new-minted freshness of their Italian-English metaphors and rhythms, so that to return to the correctness of our own stereotyped everyday talk is almost like leaving poetry to prose." 6/ This appreciation, while a bit excessive in its flattery, is instructive mainly because it sees that di Donato, in placing a peculiar colloquial emphasis upon the word, brought his prose to a high level of originality. It is well to bear in mind that in achieving this he was greatly aided by two very important factors: his good knowledge of the Abruzzese-Italian language he had spoken at home (from which he derived the idiom of the book), and his life-long acquaintance with the protagonists of the story whose spontaneous dialogues provided the sparkling pebbles that his pen turned into gems.

To imagine, however, that di Donato, in retelling the drama of his people and the tragedy that befell his family, was at the same time trying to set a new prose style in American literature, would be to misunderstand both his intention and his talent. While it is true that the narrative owes much of its strength to the peculiarity of his style and language, there is nothing in these pages that pretends to literary innovation. But it might be noted that not even the vernacular American-English discovered and exploited by authors of literary importance such as Twain, Hemingway, and Faulkner resulted in a truly innovative American prose style. In their ambitious and articulate works, new words and new rhythms revealed an original expressive beauty but never actually set an authoritative standard. Their most experimental works stand today as examples of different trends in their manner of narrating, representing a more or less limited period in their literary careers, but never a final turning point, never the ultimate stage of their writing achievement or a clear point of departure for the modern American novel.

Without making any literary claims, either linguistically or stylistically, di Donato places special emphasis on the highly figurative language of his hard-working and humble characters. His vocabulary is not what we are accustomed to define as "literary:" rather it is colloquial—the words are specific and concrete, and the images seem to be shown rather than told. The story itself seems to have forced concreteness on its author, and since he is recreating a way of life completely unfamiliar to the reader, he chooses the expedient of being as realistic as possible, thus committing himself to pictorial exactness. Events and actions are carefully described, words and expressions referring to common local customs are faithfully used and explained, and whenever the protagonists' emotions come into play their physical manifestations are drawn with almost exaggerated detail.

Di Donato's importance as a novelist, however, rests upon his skill and inventiveness in creating and dealing with a peculiar language. Never-
theless, with extreme modesty, and on more than one occasion, he had this to say: "I was simply recording the language and the ways and the drama of my people and the tragedy of my family." 2/ But it was exactly this mere recording of his people's speech, and the ethos conveyed in their tragic story, that brought him acclaim as a young artist, including the praise of having written a "small classic" on the Italian immigrant experience.

Not later than a year ago di Donato once again explained his linguistic achievement in Christ in Concrete as follows: "I have always thought in Italian and I still do think in Italian, and then I express myself. My English words are recoinage from my Abruzzese-Vasto Italian, because I have never been influenced by the English language. I have always found it adequate and never, never comparable or as rewarding as the Italian language, the language of my people. It is the anacronym, the irony that these people who could neither read nor write, my mother, spoke infinitely richer language than today's college professors. And that is no exaggeration because I would translate it literally. They knew just what to say." 8/ No doubt there is truth in these words, which in part we accept, for we know that the only language he spoke as a child was the Abruzzese dialect of Vasto used at home by his parents and the rest of the paesani from the same village. It is also probable that his mother, though illiterate and having had no schooling whatever, was as intelligent and civilized as any American who had earned a college degree. But the narration in Christ in Concrete reveals much more than these fundamental influences. First, it shows a considerable mastery of "American-English," as the adopted language of this 25-year-old bricklayer is sometimes called

by second-generation Italian-Americans. Second, through various verbal patterns, it manages to convey a true ethnic identity to this group of masons by preserving unaltered a variety of their cultural traits. The novel, then, is not merely the retelling of the tragic experience of an Italian immigrant family in America, but it is also a historical record of a world view, a monocultural world view, 3/ narrated with conscientious fidelity from the point of view of the same protagonists who actually lived the experience.

Presumably this historical aspect is what Mr. di Donato has in mind when he says he was simply recording his people's idiom— at times in all its vulgarity, profanity and obscenity—but he forgets to say, perhaps deliberately, that no story, no matter how dramatic or tragic, can succeed on paper without the artist's rhetorical techniques and narrative discipline. Regardless of its stylistic inconsistencies (whether intentional or unintentional, but often pointed out by reviewers and critics as linguistic devices "to suggest the flavor of the foreign language spoken by the characters" 10/) this novel succeeds on at least two counts: besides giving to American literature a new and peculiar lyrical dimension, it convincingly documents the drama of the struggling immigrant in his failure to attain the "American Dream." Its characters, taken from the streets rather than the pages of history, leave the impression of being themselves at all times, whether in their excess of sorrow or their excess of joy, laughing or weeping, at work or in their exuberantly noisy feasts. Significantly, the only dimension that lacks expression is that of their inner moral world, which they seem to have forgotten, to have lost contact
with, taken up as they are by the awesome "Job," the intensity of which often dwarfs and paralyzes them in their impossible struggle.

Throughout the novel di Donato uses the lively speech of his characters to achieve dramatic and rhythmic effect. By translating "the spirit of the Italian lyric conversation and colloquialism into American speech, which strikes one as quite natural," 11 as Louis Adamic put it in his review of the book, he captures the range and intensity of feeling of his protagonists and vividly articulates their insights, passions and expressiveness. To properly celebrate Mr. di Donato, then, would be to praise the effectiveness of his sensitive ear and his genius for transferring his observations with a minimum of adulterations. On the simplest level he picks up not only the typical ethnic omission of articles but also the additional vowel sounds common to such speakers as Mike the "Barrel-mouth."

"I don't know myself, but somebody's gonna biga buncha keeps and he alla times talka from somebody elsa!" (p.12) The originality of his style, however, lies in his ability to catch such common language in its most expressive and transparent moments. The images he creates are grounded in simplicity and concreteness, but they never lack poignancy.

"Sign nothing!" advised Katarina.

"Yes," said the Regina, "your cross made on a thin paper will bring ruin to you and your children."

"When you present yourself there, demand bread for your children!" said Katarina.

Grazia sighed: "Ah, but how can a widow without the American tongue tell her needs to men whose guts do not know which way first to burst forth?"

"Listen not to these peasants and potato-diggers, Annunziata," said Katarina. "Cant your eight hungry little children to this official post. You need not speak, for if they belong to our Christ, these men will know their duty when they look upon the faces of Geremic's children."

"Yes, but I, this stupid Grazia who counts with fingers on nose, tell you that the full gut sees not the hungry face,"

"Nor sees God nor Christ nor Saints and company beautiful," affirmed the Regina.

Cola raised her eyes and said: "Yes, but the wheel goes round."

"And we 'neath it," muttered Katarina. (p.143)

Such imagery, as the story unfolds, becomes increasingly more colorful and idiosyncratic, highlighting not only the fictional incidents in themselves but also the particular qualities that set them off as historically unique. Indeed the author's frequent recourse to photographic descriptions, partly taken from his own experience, gives vitality and immediacy to the protagonists' struggles. But more than his emphasis on precise physical detail, his impulse to catch the rhythms and the music of ordinary speech explains the graphic idiom he creates in the book. Lacking both a complex syntactical structure and a vast vocabulary, the language of the protagonists depends on gesture as well as a variety of cadences and intonations to impart provocative meanings to basic words:

"Tention, pesantis!" then he quickly drank a glass of wine, wiped at his mustache and continued: "Before all the world I declare this pure love, but what a love! for the naked little angel who lies in roasted beauty under these very eyes."

"How? How?" cried Katarina.

"Because she is good enough to eat!"

"Buffoon! Buffoon!" called the Regina.

"Forward with your romance, Master Fausta!" encouraged Mike.

"May I be split six ways if I tell not the truth; I say that I love this she-suckling with all the sincerity of my golden heart!" and thus he amorously kissed the suckling's mouth.

"Why?" shrieked the women.

Fausta screwed his sharp little black eyes evilly and wagged his pointed ears as the gaslight danced over his pompadour, and he hissed: "Bee-cause...love wishes to devour!"

"Eeeeeeee!" answered the women.

"Love is a hunger!" sang Nazone operatically, "Encore! Fausta encore!"

"You men are terr-i-ble!"ittered the Lucy's fat wife.

Luigi with long knife cut into the sucking and revealed the luscious meat beneath crisp candied-like brown surface. The ohs and ahs were ecstatic, and Fausta only warming to his theory of "love" plucked a fig from the sucking's eyes and before eating
it held it up and said: "Perhaps I am taken up as fool or
lying one, but tell me veritably, has that creature of my
wife such a rig that I may eat?" (pp. 233-54)

At times, this language becomes intensely poetic and expressive, and
the reader sees and feels, almost without the sense of having read, certain
events and situations. Di Donato's is a language of action and movement
rather than one of reflection, and because of this his story is most
meaningful when experienced as a process. Whether or not this process
offers the reward of a true catharsis is perhaps debatable, for it must
be said that the author fails to present a tragedy in the traditional
sense of the word: his book never fully characterizes a recognizable hero.

His achievement, as suggested earlier, lies elsewhere, and if his charac-
ters fail to convince us as classic types (perhaps because their individual
psychologies remain unexamined), they nevertheless speak with an authenti-
city that gives them at least a temporary, fragmented reality—and perhaps
this is all that di Donato saw fit to reveal.

On the narrative level, the mood set at the beginning of the story
through sweeping, somewhat literary imagery, is not sustained:

March whistled stinging snow against the brick walls and up
the gaunt girders. Geremia, the foreman, swung his arms
about, and gave the men on. (p. 11)

Such flowing, descriptive prose is soon neglected, possibly because the
young writer was carried away by his eagerness to get on with his story,
or possibly because he himself fell under the incantation of the power-
ful, all-too-human language of his protagonists' speech. In any case,
mainly because of the dialogues, which are usually brief, lively, and as
direct and uncomplicated as the protagonists themselves, the narrative

never fails to engage us. Its apparent simplicity is at times deceptive.
however, for much of the intensity of its action is artfully derived
from the protagonists' feelings of homesickness which have never been
resolved.

The dialogues themselves, which are invariably fast-moving and dis-
tinctively cultural and personal, occasionally seem to show the author's
artistic limitations. It might be argued, however, that the seemingly too
typical or too picturesque expressions of some of the dialogues, which
depend on a mechanical, simplified diction, are in fact keys to the pro-
tagonists' culture and serve to preserve their old world identity, through
which their redeeming dignity is maintained. Even the frequent repetitions
(which have often been regarded as a mere binding device) function as
reminders of their lack of sophistication, as do the various gestures and
motions accompanying their apparently artless conversations.

By general agreement, the linguistic patterns in the novel constitute
the chief characteristic of di Donato's prose. As Giovanni Sinicropi
points out, they "form in their diversity one of the richest linguistic
textures to be found in the twentieth century novel." 12 This richness
no doubt draws heavily on the abundance of Italianized expressions which
somehow give the narrative both casualness and realism.

Geremia cautioned the men. "On your toes, boys. If he writes
out slips, someone won't have big eels on the Easter table."
The lean cursed that the padrone could take the job and all
the Saints for that matter and shove it...!
Curly-headed Lazarene, the roguish, pigeon-toed scaffold-
man, spat a cloud of tobacco juice and hummed to his own
music..."Yes, certainly yes to your face, master padrone... and behind. This to you and all your kind!" (p. 14)

In passages like this the author expresses himself in a colloquial street
language, filled with cultural references. He is at his best when he keeps
his dialogues terse, sprinkling them with homely metaphors, epithets and
innuendoes. When the book came out di Donato was praised for the cheer-
fulness and gaiety of his almost effortless, genuine and perfect conver-
sational style. The way he has used the English language is entirely original,
whether because he thought in Italian and translated into English,
as he himself claimed, or because he allowed his characters to remain as
natural as if we had met them at a construction site or a wedding feast
or in their squalid tenements. What distinguishes his prose, then, is
its simplicity, its descriptive concreteness and its fidelity to the
idioms of speech, which place him justly in the "role of untutored sensual
artist," 13/ in Fred T. Marsh's words.

In the linear account of the story we encounter no troubling contra-
dictions or ambiguities, probably because di Donato remained true to the
simple but profound task he had set for himself: to disclose the essence
of the drama of the poor immigrant in a hostile land. His occasional exces-
ses, particularly in regard to character development, are not entirely
without their positive effects. The protagonists are conceived as superior
beings, but we get the feeling that their superiority derives from the
inhuman struggle they have to face day after day in a world where preju-
dice plays the major role; it is their oppression that allows them to grow
dramatically and to rise in our imagination above the level of ordinary
men. At times, too, the intensity of emotion brings the narration close
to the nature of dramatic presentation, partly because the protagonists
seem so conspicuously aware of their personal drama and partly because,
through dialogue, they make their situation clear to us in the way we would

normally expect from a stage play.

A final comment in regard to the political tenor of the novel: while
there is no evidence, at least explicitly, that di Donato was making an
ideological attack on American capitalism, there is certainly open criti-
cism of institutions and, more specifically, condemnation of unscrupulous
entrepreneurs who, blinded by easy profits and deaf to their own conscienc-
es, brought many honest immigrants and their families to ruin. Clearly di
Donato was well aware that the story itself would indirectly disclose the
various injustices of capitalistic society. Christ in Concrete, like other
novels of the immigrant experience, expresses the sobering message that
the American Dream has always been reserved for those with the 'right'
credentials. The theme of disenchantment is made vivid by Nazone, one of
the novel's tragic characters, when in desperation he asks his teenage
godson to help him find work, "work that I may go to my wife and children
in Abruzzi. The career of builder in this land is done. This land has
become a soil that has contradicted itself..." And to make the betrayal
sound even more personal and ethnic, he adds: "Discovered by an Italian--
named from an Italian--But oh, that I may leave this land of disillusion."  
(pp.278-79)
NOTES


