

5. Patricia Ondek Laurence also quotes this passage as an example of how "the boss' [could] destroy the relationship between a worker and his job," a relationship which she sees reflected in "the imagery of nature and the garden which is used to describe work and the rootedness and connectedness of work and the worker" (66, 58). What is most striking to me about Bell's portrayal of this relationship, however — and Laurence's quotations from the novel bear this out — is the absence of such imagery as applied to work in a steel mill. The "garden" operates in *Out of This Furnace* more as a metaphor for a necessary vision of an alternative to the actual barrenness of work — the dream of "a little farm back in the hills somewhere" which sustains a man like Joe Dubik whose work "gave him no time to live" (33, 56).

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A MELUS Interview: Pietro Di Donato

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Pietro Di Donato was twelve years old when his Italian immigrant father was killed in a construction accident on Good Friday in 1923. As the oldest boy, Di Donato took his father's trowel and began supporting his seven brothers and sisters. Not until he became unemployed and went on relief did he have the leisure to study, read, and write about his experiences. The resulting Christ in Concrete, published in 1939, became an instant success. In 1960 he wrote the introduction to that work, Three Circles of Light, followed by Immigrant Saint, a life of Mother Cabrini; and The Penitent, a life of the man who killed Saint Maria Goretti. Currently Di Donato is finishing a work entitled The Gospels. Christ in Concrete was reprinted by Macmillan in 1985, and Immigrant Saint is due to be republished soon.

The following interview is from a series of meetings with Di Donato and his wife Helen, which took place January 12, February 12, and June 8, 1985, at his home on Strong's Neck, Long Island.

Interviewer: What is your attitude to the body of your work? What trends do you see?

Di Donato: After *Christ in Concrete*, what constitutes the body is written with the consciousness that I am a professional, that it is conjured, that it is *tour de force*. For instance, if you touch any of the little stories and shoot it or burn it, I'll never feel it, but if you touch *Christ in Concrete* you are touching my mortality, my vital mean. I look at them, aside from *Christ in Concrete*, as I look at mortar and bricks and cement — it was bread and butter, it was a living. Instead of being a builder or a bricklayer, splitting stones and laying stones, it behooves me to write. But the only other thing that will be the counterbalance to *Christ in Concrete* is a work that I've been doing for the last few years. I wrote the first copy and I'm rewriting it. It is a modern version of the gospels in which every gospel has a different Christ. Now, this work, called *The Gospels*, is purely my revenge on society, my answer to all the nonsense of authority and of Church and so forth. As I said, I don't care if everything I've ever written after *Christ in Concrete* besides *The Gospels*, is thrown away. That goes for *The Immigrant Saint*, or *The Penitent*, although I was very sympathetic to the material. But I treasure *Christ in Concrete* and I treasure *The Gospels* because

they are my fate, my identity, my soul, my conscious evaluation of myself.

Interviewer: You don't mention *Three Circles of Light*?

Di Donato: Oh, I forgot. Well, *Three Circles of Light*, naturally, is the introduction to *Christ in Concrete*. I had forgotten because, you see, we can do without *Three Circles of Light*, but we can't do without *Christ in Concrete*. *The Gospels* I am writing because I was, as a young Catholic, a true believer, and I outgrew that and have to replace it with Gods of my own creation, so in *The Gospels*, every gospel has a different Christ — there are two males and two females, and each one is from a [different] race, a color. The first one is red, the second one is a Jew who is white, the third is a female Oriental that's yellow, and the fourth is death and Last Judgement, and that's a black woman, like a black hole in science. It all takes place in the theater on Main Street in Port Jefferson, Long Island, and every Christ is from Stony Brook University [the State University of New York, Stony Brook]. I had a hard time, a lot of problems, but no word can be mumbled if it does not lead to justice. It's entertainment, it's acrobatic, it's a routine, it's a soap opera. That's why I respect Dante. He has created hell, purgatory, paradise. He meets out justice — it goes for Popes — no respect for a person's title. Also, my fellow Italian, Michelangelo, his *Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel, if you've seen that, a furious Christ.

Di Donato: Why did you choose to cast a black woman as the judgement?

Di Donato: Because of darkness. Death is darkness. She fits better. The Orientals are sensuality, the Jews are conscience, and the Indian is the devil who is created over here. I reverse the roles of the creator. The devil is interesting, the devil is young, the devil is sensuous. He creates an impotent god. He creates an old man. He's young, and why does he create? He creates because he doesn't want to be bored. Life is stimulation, life is traffic with each other. One of the worst things in the world is isolated, solitary confinement, as I see it. You cannot offer people this sterile Paradise, this bliss with God. They don't have sex, they don't drink, they don't fight, there's no stimulation. So it behooves me, it pleases me to create the devil as God, and he has created the impotent old eunuch, the almighty Father. So it gives us something to speculate about.

Interviewer: Where do you feel you belong now, America or Italy?

Di Donato: Oh, I am very much Italian, although I have an empathy and a feeling, a sensual feeling for just about every race. I don't see any other people that could compare. I was aware of the superiority of my people

ever since my earliest consciousness. Of course, I was amazed and confused by the differences between the other nationalities in Hoboken there, which was called "The Dardanelles." It was no problem because we contained tribal worlds, and this went for most all the others, the Jews, the Armenians, the Syrians, the Turks, the Germans, and a handful of Hispanics and Negroes; it also went for the so-called Americans who were mostly Nordics. We disdained them. Specifically, our food was fresh; they didn't eat fresh food. Our diet was more varied and more imaginative, and then again, of course, we were the Catholics, and the Catholics are from Italy, and we're from the land that has the Vatican. What confused me was that Jesus was a Jew, and I thought that he was one of our *paesanos*. I never had an inferiority complex. In fact, it was just the other way around. So I saw the Babylonian [Babelonian?] nature of America. What interested me more than the festivals and the richness and the lyricism of our life and the richness of our language was the world of make-believe, of going to Palisades Amusement Park — that was reality. Reality in itself was so contradictory and so full of sham and lies. And then again I was in love with the movies — those were silent films in those days. I loved myth and I loved the land of make-believe, so I didn't really have any ethnic problem.

In Italy I feel at home. Here, to me, now, is an ethnic jungle. I cannot mix with so many other races. To me they're caricatures. I see the uglinesses, I see the crude loutish quality. Of course, if you go to those other countries, you see the aristocracy, you see the sophistication of their particular countries which you don't see here. What tradition have we got besides New England and the South, and they're Nordic? But there is such a thing as an ethnic magnetism. There are cultural, there are ethnic orbits. I am immediately sympathetic to *Aida* although my favorite is Wagner. So I am universal. But then again that means Catholic also. So, I'm in my way, although uneducated, an elitist — a conscious, definite, voluntary elitist.

Interviewer: For a while you were thinking of going into the theater, and you started a summer theater.

Di Donato: That was in Northport in 1935, when for the first time in my life there was no work, and we were on home relief. Then I got a job teaching theater and I had never seen a play! But I was so liberal, I thought that actors were as fine as the roles that they portrayed. So I opened up my own theater. Then I started to read books, and that was an avenue of expression which didn't depend on anybody, on any mechanism, any agency. Then my temple was my mind and imagination, and the rest was rather easy. All the reading I talk about took place after *Christ in Concrete* because I had never planned to be a writer. I'm a missionary, I'm a dreamer, I'm a visionary, a revolutionist, an idealist.

Interviewer: Another dichotomy in your life is that your grandfather was said to be an Italian nobleman, and yet you lived with the *paesanos* in Hoboken. How did that affect you?

Di Donato: Well, the real fact that both my father and my mother were illegitimate, that was commonplace. There still is quite an element of feudalism in Italy, and a lot of good blood was passed on that way. My grandmother came from the highest mountains in the Abruzzi, a woolen mill town called Taranta Pellinio where the Tarantella came from. As I said, in Italy I'm at home, even though I don't believe in churches and gods. I'm a sensualist, and I respond to the sensuality of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, its art, its music, its fragrances, its colors, its architecture, and so forth — which is purely Italian. We Italians are really essentially pagans and realists.

Interviewer: In *Christ in Concrete* you say "the casually opulent seemed not of Christ." Would you elaborate on that?

Di Donato: That's not mystifying. As I say, I'm liberal. If you read and accept the New Testament as it is without hypothesizing and adding, and gilding it, the main character Jesus and the disciples were all poor people, nothing mentioned about pockets or treasures or properties. There was no materialism there. This is what distinguishes the idealist from the poor pathetic creatures of Mammon. I delight in reading obituaries of the rich. That's one of my favorite pastimes. They pile up all that money, turning themselves inside out, lying, their sham, their crimes just for the money, and then they die and leave it behind, and they go out of the world with less than they came in. So any portrayal of Christianity must always portray the "have-nots," the workers, the poor who have nothing to lose but their honor and their lives.

Interviewer: How did you arrive at the style of *Christ in Concrete*?

Di Donato: Again, no mystery. By virtue of not having had an education, I can be direct and literal and translate literally. If my mother said a thing a certain way, that's the way I translated it, without any thought of grammar or this or that. It comes across, and there it is. That's why it looks so different and so original. Then the next thing, of course, the dramatic structure, well that's dictated by my nature, by my rhythms, by my volatility, that which I cannot change. So it just happens to be fortuitously good. I do feel that the arrangement of words should be sculptured or symphonic and not wasted. That's why I love the Greek drama.

Interviewer: The style in *Christ in Concrete* is different from the way you speak now.

Di Donato: Because the subject matter is different. If you were talking with my mother about the poor, war, and so forth, you would be amazed at the sophistication and the incisiveness. These women who couldn't write, they would go right to the heart of the matter. Even their alleged trivia is loaded with innuendoes, and when they were talking about women who were sodomized by their husbands, oral sex and so on, they knew all the answers. They sounded like people out of Greek dramas. So, I didn't depart very far. The only difference from the young man who wrote *Christ in Concrete* and the seventy-four year old man who is talking to you is that I've had the opportunity to read what has been written.

Interviewer: You said to your friend, "I could write you a novel like that — it's all in my head." Had you rehearsed the novel in your mind before you knew you were going to write it?

Di Donato: Oh yes. I am constantly rehearsing scenes of life, that which has taken place, and that which would have been otherwise. It's sort of like *Rashomon*. There but for chance this happened, and it could have happened otherwise — if my father had gotten sick that day or broke a leg, slipped down. This is Italian thinking. I heard my mother say so many times. You know we do imagine what might have been otherwise, fate.

Interviewer: Is "fate" from superstition, or is it just Italian?

Di Donato: It's Italian. The Italian recreates, the Italian is an empirical, visceral dramatist. Every Italian plays the role of God in some sense. That's what makes us unique, that's what makes them arrogant, you know. But, of course, the Jews do that to a great extent also.

Interviewer: In *Christ in Concrete*, Geremio is very enthusiastic about America, but there seems to be in *Three Circles of Light* the association of America with godlessness and evil.

Di Donato: For my father, and of course the *paesanos* also, there was that freedom here which transcended boundaries and traditions which they couldn't resist. They enjoyed America, whether it was seducing American women or putting horns on American men, the opportunities which were denied them in Italy. In Italy if you were the son of a laborer, you had to remain a laborer. If you were the son of a bricklayer, you had to remain a bricklayer. In America there were no holds barred. Overnight a laborer would become a contractor if he had the audacity and the lust for gain. My father was a romantic. He bought a piano, he played the piano, he had many women, he had an affair with the wife of the Chief of Police and made her my godmother; but then he settled down about six months before he was killed. Then his mistress was a house. He wanted his own

house, and he bought the house the night before he was killed. That was his new love. But he was very healthy, very handsome, very young.

Interviewer: At the end of *Christ in Concrete* Paul says "We want justice here, life here." To what extent do you feel you have achieved that?

Di Donato: I haven't. In a small way, what *Christ in Concrete* has meant to many, many people, — maybe that is the nearest that I have come to that. I see so many different things that I didn't see when I wrote *Christ in Concrete*. I just looked at the world through eyes of purity, but I realized that the enemy, the traitors, are right amongst the working class. They are directly and indirectly responsible. They go to war, they pay for the wars, they elect meretricious politicians, they support dictators. Not in my time will there be justice.

Interviewer: In other words the people of the working class have betrayed themselves?

Di Donato: Absolutely. Brother has betrayed brother. If there was the rapport there, the communication, the communion between the common men, wars would not be possible. Unemployment, suffering, crime — none of these things would be possible. It does seem that the world was created more by the devil than by a benign God. In my time, the first World War, the second World War, and the dozens and dozens of little wars, the wars going on now, the invasions, the covert or openly. The brunt is born almost one hundred percent by the common man. So, the common man, it turns out, is responsible for all our tragedy.

Interviewer: Rather than the casually opulent?

Di Donato: The opulent have a motive. They get something out of it. What does the common man get out of war? What does he get out of elevating a clown or a ham actor, a liar, into positions of power? It says one thing in the final analysis, that the shoddy creatures that he has elevated into dictatorship or presidency, and so forth, epitomize all his qualities as I see it. Otherwise the evil people in power could never prevail.

Interviewer: It seems there was a change in your feelings about the reason for your father's death. In the later version, in *Three Circles of Light*, there was the suggestion that he was killed as God's punishment for his infidelity rather than by the ruthless selfishness of the builders.

Di Donato: Well, I even said to Helen this morning that I twisted my ankle last night because I'm being punished for my stupidity and other things that I've done wrong, and now I'm suffering. But, the Italian mind — some of the *paesanos* said my father was punished for his whoredoms and so forth. But people can say anything they like, and out of boredom

or out of envy or what have you, people will say anything. People will imagine things, and sometimes they will be right.

Interviewer: Later on in your visit with Godmother Delia you described in *Naked Author*, Delia says your father died on that day because it was in the cards.

Di Donato: Well, the *paesanos*, and my mother included, didn't read. They conjured worlds of their own, and this was primitive, age-old. You find that in the studies of all ancient civilizations: the speculations, the superstitions. It's just part of the social life, part of the culture, part of the game of life.

Interviewer: The city officials also make Annunziata and Paolino feel guilty — guilty of being poor.

Di Donato: Absolutely. Most of the poor feel they have offended God or fates, somehow or other. The fierce winds of economic terrorism are ceaseless, you know, final notice and everything else. The poor live in terror, and it's an insidious form of terror. It isn't something they could command with their hands. Then of course there's the law to back up this terror, the sheriff, and so forth.

Interviewer: It's a very popular concept that if something goes wrong in a person's life they must have done something wrong.

Di Donato: Religion tells us that too. If there's a catastrophe, and twenty people are crushed or burned, those who are saved are jubilant and smiling and thanking God. Why did God pick them instead of the other guys? Even in boxing matches or sports, you know, "God was with me," and they make the sign of the cross before they go in to bash each other.

You see, the aristocracy don't do this, the intelligentsia. They're in a different world. They have manners. They know they're better. They know how to live, how to dress, how to make money, how to protect their money. They don't come mixing with the common people. You never penetrate the world of the rich and the super-rich. It's a closed world. I lived amongst that on 5th Avenue, on Park Avenue, in Havana, Rome — the super-rich, because I was an oddity, I was an author. A young man, a stud. (laugh)

Interviewer: I felt there was a shift in your perception in that in *Christ in Concrete* your father was portrayed more as the innocent victim of social injustice, whereas in *Three Circles of Light* there was more of a feeling of his guilt. Am I just imagining that?

Di Donato: *Christ in Concrete* begins a day or so before his death, and preying on his mind was the danger of this work. In fact, I wanted to go to the job

with him, and he said, "no, it's too dangerous." That overrode any other consideration about fidelity and infidelity, and he had changed. His love then was a home. Then again in *Christ in Concrete* you just meet him, and you get a taste of his dying rebellion in the concrete, but throughout all of the *Three Circles of Light* you see him as a romantic, as a sensualist. Disassociation makes you feel that this man has violated the Seventh Commandment: "thou shalt not commit adultery" and so forth; "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's ass or wife." But these diverse ingredients are absolutely essential for a convincing, successful work. There's no doubt that the day he was killed there was laughter and joking about vaginas and what have you on the job before they were killed. This is typical of construction workers, typical of the realistic peasants.

Interviewer: Is there any ethnic group in the U.S. that you feel closest to now?

Di Donato: Oh yes, the Jews, always. The Jew is still the longest civilized immigrant, the one who brought books with him, the one who thinks. He does not believe in violence. He believes in peace, he believes in dialogue. The others are really violent people, including my own Italians here. But the Jews are the only race who have perpetuated their identity and their belief in their philosophy and ethics, their Jewishness. When they lose that, they lose their identity. Then you don't know who they are.

Interviewer: You have a Jew in *Christ in Concrete*. He's still alive, you still converse with him?

Di Donato: He calls me. He's retired in Florida. He's a retired agricultural economist, Louie. He's the one who had all the education, the valedictorian in high school, the valedictorian in college. I never went to high school. He came to visit me when we moved to Bath Beach in Brooklyn in order to be nearer to the jobs, in order to get away from the authorities that wanted me to go to school. They wouldn't support me, and they wouldn't let me go to work.

My people were storytellers. The men used to go to the whorehouses and brag about it, and of course the rule was you didn't violate anyone's right. Then you got yourself killed by another *paesano*. You didn't violate that rule. You could do it to Irish, Jews, and everybody else, and they would laugh. Many of them bragged that they were such beasts, such brutes until they got old. And when they got old, then the women took over, then the women were cruel. It was wonderful.

Interviewer: It seems to me you started writing *The Penitent* as the story of Maria Goretti, but it ended up being the story of her murderer.

Di Donato: Yes, yes, because after all, she dies early and she didn't live long enough to become a woman. Alessandro is twenty years old, and she is twelve years old, and his life was ruined, and her life was destroyed. In his little cubicle in the Franciscan *convento* in Macerata he had books, and he had my book in Italian, but the book that he read and reread and [which] was worn and frayed was *Crime and Punishment*. We communicated. He had read *Christ in Concrete* backwards and forwards. He was so sympathetic. He said, "You're the boy that did that and went to work." He wept.

Interviewer: I see a similarity between you and Serenelli in that both of you had suffered tremendous deprivation in your early youth.

Di Donato: Well, you see, his father demanded that he leave the sea, and he loved the sea; he loved roaming from port to port. He had gone to school for six months, and he learned to read, and this is what ruined him and saved him. He loved reading the yellow stuff, the pornographic stuff, violence, crimes of passion. This is the quality of stuff that he read. He could have been saved from prison had he cooperated with these psychologists that came from France, "alienists" they were called then. He could have gotten off if he pretended that he was crazy. This was quite the fad. In Italy, you get a life sentence, that's it, no pardon. When the judge asked Assunta, Maria Goretti's mother, "What have you to say about the verdict," she said, "I forgive him." So you see, when I heard all this I said, "Oh, I've got to write this." They were like one family, those two sharecroppers. Assunta kept in touch with him in prison. I got the contract to write the book and went to Italy. I was in love with the characters and their belief belonged to them and I respected it because I understood.

Interviewer: But you could have turned to writing Communist literature. There are a lot of choices you could have made. Maybe you were trying to make your peace with the church?

Di Donato: Oh no. Not with the church but with the essence of Christianity, yes. Now Verdi would never go inside a church. But who could instill in you the essence of the sacred better than Verdi? [Similarly] da Vinci and Michelangelo. But the base, the musk of that perfume is pagan. Do you see how we brought pagan into it? We write Bibles, we create gods, we theatricalize our wishful thinking. We say openly, "where is this God, where is justice, why this torture, why does he have to send his son to be born in Bethlehem, why must infants be massacred?"

See, the genius of the Italian was that to begin with it was an Italian, the Roman, who took a Jewish story and made it a universal power. Every-

thing about Christianity is Jewish, there's no two ways about it. The greatest asset, I think, the greatest enduring element was the magnification of atonement which is called "confession;" they called it "atonement." They had a Day of Atonement, but with us you could kill someone, rape your mother, and go to the priest that same day and be absolved, as long as you did not leave the Catholic religion, because we are imperfect. So you see there was redemption available at all times, or purgation — whatever you want to call it. This is a magical power because you could always change your life from one hour to another or one day to another. You could reform the way Augustine did and many illustrious fathers of the Church.

Interviewer: At the end of *Christ in Concrete* Paolino is clearly disenchanted with the Church, but then in your subsequent biographies, *Immigrant Saint* and *The Penitent*, the protagonists are very much involved with the faith.

Di Donato: I was interpreting their life, not my life. I had to remain faithful to their lives.

Interviewer: When did you begin to doubt religion?

Di Donato: I can answer that very easily. I was at the Conscientious Objectors' camp because I saw how this war was manufactured by international capitalism. They built Hitler up, the Vatican wanted him to destroy the Soviet Union. There was one nemesis that came into the world, the Russian Revolution. The French Revolution failed, all the other revolutions failed. Here's the first Communist revolution that persisted, that prevailed. The Russian Revolution wasn't crushed. A new religion came into the world, the religion that Christ, this poor little radical Jew — he was tried and killed as a radical, as a heretic, telling the rich Jews to divide with the poor and all that stuff. That's rank Communism. Marx was a Jew; his father had become a Protestant. You don't have to be a genius to see that uncurbed financial buccaneering can only make for great disparities of a slave class and a master class. A new religion came into being which was a religion of brotherhood against a religion of the supremacy of property. So, they built up Hitler, and they used the Spanish republic as a proving ground. Hitler and Mussolini, backed up by America and the Vatican, invaded Spain. I almost went with the Brigade. I wrote letters to Hitler and everybody else calling them cocksuckers, bastards and everything. I called them everything. I said, "you should be destroyed." Finally, when the war did come, it was inevitable, all planned. The Germans had gone insane, no doubt about it. It was like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The whole backing up of Hitler was for destroying the Jews and the Russians. Then they'd have living room,

the vast territory there, and I would not lend myself to it. Furthermore, I had raised four brothers, and they were all of age.

This goddamn society let me go to work at twelve and didn't send me to high school or college, so I said, "Fuck you" at the draft board. They begged me not to be a C.O. They said, "We'll set up a little war business for you and give you contracts." My draft board said that. They didn't want me to lend my name to the Conscientious Objectors. I declared myself a pacifist. I lectured openly. I broke with all the famous people I knew. I did what I felt my conscience told me to do. A couple of days later I met my wife Helen while I was in a Conscientious Objectors' camp in Cooperstown. I tried to get away, I left. I didn't want to get married, so I joined a group as an attendant to a mental institution. One of us would take care of four hundred patients. I went through every ward, the incontinent, the violent. I saw everything.

You invoked the past, the genesis of your question. Of course, my mother was my inspiration, she was the strong one. She was my tower. We both loved my father. We both believed that God or Christ had His reason for taking him, and of course our goddamn world on earth was miserable — cold, dirty, full of insects, and of want and all that. Of course, we became aliens in a sense, the poor. We became problems. Therefore, the next world was the beautiful world. He's there and we're communicating with him through Mrs. Miller, and he makes me walk on the water and move mountains. A twelve year old boy that weighs 72 pounds begins to compete with men whose fingers are thicker than his wrists. But I did it because of this incredible faith, this absolutely unilateral faith. There was no speck of cloud in that horizon. Therefore, we prayed every night and all night long, and we prayed all day for my father and then awaited his ghost that night. Of course Mrs. Miller did intimate that he's liable to appear. She covered her tracks good though. This is what we wanted. If you cannot touch his body, but at least to hear his voice; just like we now talk to our children in California on the telephone. So this went on, and on and on.

Then when I saw my godfather killed before my eyes when he fell off [a] building, which is now the Potamkin Motor Company over on West 57th Street (I told a lie in my book. I told it was twenty stories high when it was really seven or eight, maybe ten. The floors were very high. In an industrial building the floors have to be very high, so I doubled it and made twenty stories. From that height it looks like a chasm down there) when I saw him transformed before my eyes into a corpse, into waste, I knew then — then my father's death hit me. The absolute and complete frustration that a living person being killed before your eyes establishes in you cannot be overcome by anything. That's the reality, that's the truth.

So, when I came home and told my mother that I wouldn't . . . I took

the crucifix, and I was *shocked*, shocked, shocked, and she bashed my face. This again destroyed her, destroyed me. Then I became conscious of other lies, of economic lies, of class differences, and I gravitated to Communism. Naturally. For my sanity. So I went from one ideal to another ideal. I couldn't live without an ideal.

Interviewer: So really until your godfather was killed, your faith was unshaken.

Di Donato: That established that my prayers were in vain, that the dead are destroyed forever, and that the whole thing was theatrical. The ceremonies, lies. And I became the enemy of lies. Not any amount of success is going to convince me otherwise. They say "Oh, God was with me." No, no, God may have been with me but not with the child next door who gets burned, or the innocent killed in an accident. I mean, were they punished or what? This nonsense. Who's telling me about God? Writers like myself, and I know the power I have when I write, how I can lie, if I want to.

No, not even the small people stick up for the small people. They have been inoculated with these germs of — "you too can be a millionaire, you too could be rich," "You have a divine right to prosperity." That's nicely put, right? So, it's no longer, "we shall live for each other as brothers and sisters" or the Christian family, "the bretheren." That's what the Jewish disciples called each other. They called each other "brother and sister," "the bretheren." It began with the Jews with this small sect, the Essenes, began with this Communist, the radical Christ. They were all illiterates. The next great influence was the Christianizing of the Slavs, and that pan-Christianity that they fostered and developed eventuated in the *Communist Manifesto*, in the Russian Revolution. It just spilled. I read in a Catholic dictionary the definition of Communism — "a Catholic heresy."

Interviewer: In *Time* magazine, when they interviewed you in 1958, they said that you were going through a religious conversion.

Di Donato: From Catholicism to Communism perhaps? *(laugh)*

Interviewer: You see yourself as a missionary bringing what religion to the world?

Di Donato: The truth, the truth. If we all sat and told the truth, it would supplant all ideologies. Is it true that the homeless are hungry and sick? It's true. Let's do something about it. If you put Catholicism in the crucible, and remove all the dross, you'd come right down again to some of the beautiful parts of the Jewish philosophy, the Day of Atonement. You have to read the law of Moses. There's a lot of stuff that is great for social relationships, for justice, so we protect each other, help each other,

live together. That is our purpose, to love and have sex. What other purpose is there? In the next world — ? that's a waste of time and so misleading.

Now confession is purgative. It's good for you. Then you could change your act. So, what has started as a religion then becomes a social philosophy, becomes something practical. If a religion does not transfigure itself into a social philosophy that functions every day in human relationships, there's no goddamn good at all, if it's just reserved for Sunday nonsense and funerals and ceremonies and so on. Living is an every day, 24-hour process.

Interviewer: How did your old friends react to your success with *Christ in Concrete*?

Di Donato: Well, everyone was astounded. I didn't tell people I was writing a book. It was a summer colony of intellectuals. Most of them became wealthy and turned around. Mammon was their god. I didn't tell them that I was involved creatively with my project, and they were stunned. If they had discernment they could have realized from my speech that I was uniquely a missionary. I was never an in-between person. I was either all the way or nothing at all. I could never equivocate. I have no patience for that. So, overnight, from being their inferior I became their superior. Overnight. *(laugh)*

Interviewer: How did they like that?

Di Donato: I had access to strata of society that they didn't have. They couldn't sit with Dorothy Thompson, the big columnist, or famous people. But famous people were looking me up. They wanted to see this laborer, this bricklayer, to see what picked his brain. I picked *their* brain. It was interesting. Naturally, I was escalated to another plane in every respect. That gave me the opportunity to see the other half, who ruled society, the rich. It was a closed world. There were no laborers there, no sweatshop workers invited to their homes, their parties. They intermarried, they were systematically adulterous, but what meant was their money. That, to them, was the only thing of value, true value. This opened my eyes and made me despise the slaves who provided all this for them, the common man, the poor man. The poor man occupied himself with alcohol, with baseball, with nonsense, with trivia, with situation comedies, vulgarisms. He kept himself enslaved, and then he, becoming policemen and military and so forth, was the Praetorian Guard for the wealthy. Here's the difference — the wealthy knew what they wanted and went after it and got it. The poor masses didn't and still don't know what they want and are incapable of uniting to get what they need. So these are the truths. Do you think the politician is going to say that? Do

you think the priest will say that? Do you think the school teacher will say that? "Slobs, you goddam robots . . ." No, no.

When Christ was brought before Kaiphas and said, "You claim to be King of the Jews, Son of God, perform a miracle," he didn't because he couldn't. Then he was brought before Herod, who was the King of the Jews by the grace of the Romans, the same thing: "You are accused of blasphemy, you are the Son of God, perform a miracle." He gave him double talk, "the Kingdom of Heaven is in the heart," and all that. Then Pilate, who didn't give a [damn] for the Jews, said that the man was a dreamer, a super-Essene.

He never rose from the dead. The men next to my father were terribly injured but lived. When the building started to rumble and move down on them, the last thing my father said was, "Brothers what have we done? *Ah, figlia mia*, "ah, my children." If he could have come back in any way, shape, or form, even as a microbe, he would have. You don't abandon young children, your family. I want no part of that fucking god, whoever it is, that petulant old Jew god who has to be sacrificed to. So, we're getting right down to families again. I'd give my life for my sons. A real father, a real mother does that. I'm not putting on an act. It's true because I went out every day and endangered my life on the skyscrapers for my brothers and sisters and my mother. How many times my mouth was in my throat — terrified in the cold and the wind — especially when we got to the top of the skyscraper. One slip, you're dead.

How many mothers and fathers have really, with one life preserver, unthinking, saved their child? I want a goddamn God of that type. Of course, Jesus the shepherd did go and rescue the one stray lamb, but what's the shepherd's purpose? To raise the lamb to be sheared and butchered. I don't want a shepherd, I don't want to be a sheep. I want a father like I had who went out and risked his life, who knew the job was dangerous, who wouldn't let me come with him to the job.

Interviewer: And that's when you quit, when your godfather died?

Di Donato: Yes, that's when I quit. Oh, oh, *I am next*. My grandfather, the man that adopted my father, was killed with the collapse of a tunnel that he was building the shell in. So, you see, all this went through my mind, and here I was, a little boy, nothing about himself, I'm not dramatizing or glorifying myself. This is the truth. That's how it was for years. It was easy to do because I loved my mother, and I was taking my father's place. How many times I risked my life.

Interviewer: Then when you moved to Long Island, you did do construction work, but it was two-story private homes — not as dangerous?

Di Donato: No, no. In fact, on the Hotel Lexington (I wrote that story, it was called "The Broken Scaffold," it was published) I-beams collapsed when the beam was hoisted above. I had jumped off the scaffold to take a leak because you couldn't do it off the scaffold, you know, there were buildings around, girls in offices. So, when I went in, the steel hit the scaffold, broke the scaffold, and about ten men were killed, and I was terrified. This was after my godfather. In fact, later I ran home, I left my tools. I knew they had a job out in Spotswood, New Jersey, a big factory one story high, about 25–30 feet off the ground with a scaffold that was built up from the ground with holes and all that.

That was the first time I was away from home. I was about fifteen or sixteen. It was quite a story, a real story. I wrote it, and it was published. But then I finally couldn't stay away from my mother, so I would come home weekends, many reasons — the food, strange characters, and everything else. I said to myself "I'm not going to be afraid." Then I went back, and the foreman — I was sort of his pet because I had a brain and he had a brain — he says, "I knew you'd be back." Back at the big buildings. Then flirting with death became exciting, almost like sensual. I never wrote that. Years like that screwed the hell out of me.

My father was adopted. He was left at foundling homes. They didn't know his mother. This bricklayer, Pietro Ventura, his wife adopted my father, so he put my father to work as a bricklayer when he was seven. By the time my father was twelve or fourteen, his father was working on one of the many tunnels that they built in Italy in the mountains. The shell caved in, and he was crushed, he was killed. My father is crushed. Then when you get that in your head . . .

Interviewer: Is that what you meant when you said, "We are Christ in concrete," we are going to be buried alive, all of us?

Di Donato: Sure, sure. You know, this [pre-]Jordanment gets you, fate gets you, see. Then my art is like the only opening where I can breathe, the opening where I see light. It's my only reprisal, it's my only defense. That's why I have no respect for slick writers. "Oh, we wrote about a divorce or love affair." That's not related to transfiguring humanity into a brotherhood, into a paradise. As far as I'm concerned — as long as I have my health and my sensuality, because living is a sensual process, sex is very important. I hated it because I was a Catholic; now I love what I hated.

Interviewer: But your father was sensual.

Di Donato: Yes he was, of course. But this was, you see, this was accepted by the tribe.

Interviewer: In one of the stories of your life history it says that after you published *Christ in Concrete*, about six months later, you had a writing paralysis.

Di Donato: Well, that's natural, that follows. I never dreamed of being a writer. I always wondered what it was like to be somebody else. Not the successful people, but the people that have been hurt. How bad is that hurt? How deep is it? Is it bearable? My empathy, my nature, because I often wondered at the mystery of life — why am I white and that fellow is black? I wondered what it was like — now, did he choose to be that? No. One does not choose to be black, or Semitic, or what. Then I saw everything as an amusement park or a church or a mass. I was always impressed by the mass. Even to this day, I enjoy the mass. Why tenement, why all the crowding, why must everybody smell each other's filth and be stuck with each other?

Interviewer: You say you really didn't plan to be a writer. What were your dreams for yourself just before you started writing *Christ in Concrete*?

Di Donato: Oh, I dreamed of being a leader of the masses, a teacher, a guide, an inspiration, because if we acknowledge the truth in unison, everything is easy. I had a taste of it during the WPA days. I lived in a small town, Northport, and I brought Thornton Wilder there after I was a success, spent the day there, it was idyllic — by the sea, 1939, 1940.

During the depression there, we people on home relief got to know each other, and it was such a mixed bag of personalities, young and old. Men who had been successful in advertising were flat broke and in debt. We used to hold poverty parties, and there was one old kook. He had the job at the WPA teaching languages, and he was teaching himself the languages by the Berlitz method on records. With his own hands, having no experience in construction, he built this big stone house with this huge room, and everybody helping mixing the mortar; it was like the early days building the church. Then, when the roof was on, we had candle light and kerosene lamps. Everybody bought a can of beans, or I brought clams that I dug, and we had parties and we danced. Then we sang "*Aupres de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon, fait bon, fait bon.*" We were all learning French, you see. (*laugh*) This was the Garden of Eden, see? But we were all truthful with each other. We had nothing to lose, nothing to hide. Then little romances began, little sex things. It was all very human, very human. This is the world you would like to lead. . . .

This was '36, '37, '38, before I wrote. I was approaching my late twenties. Then when I wrote the short story and *Esquire* bought it and made a tremendous publicity thing of it. Then, when I had told our director of the WPA program, and we used to meet once a week or once every

two weeks and give pep talks. There were about 50 or 100 people there, scattered throughout all of Long Island. We used to meet in Huntington, Long Island, and he said, "Friends, I've got some news. One of our teachers here has sold a big story to *Esquire*," and everybody said, "Who the hell is it?" (*laugh*)

I'll tell you, the best time to get a lot of money is in your old age because in youth you do not need much money. You could shack up anywhere. But there's something to be said about a home. It is, indeed, the next thing to a womb; it's a womb with glass and doors and plumbing and everything else. Your home, it's more than a castle. It's your wife, it's your mistress, it's your sanctuary. It is where you can dream dreams and see visions, especially if it has trees around and bushes. And many a woman will go to bed with her husband and go to bed with her lover, but she won't give up her home. Before I married, I met a very handsome German woman up in Maine. She had a lovely teenage daughter. The woman seduced me, and then she said "I can't see you tomorrow." She had the daughter in the room. They lived in the city, in an apartment building, and she said "my husband's coming, I'd appreciate it if you don't come 'raus'." I said, "How could you go to bed with me, and then go with your husband?" She said "You don't understand. My husband is my home. I love my husband." Just like that. (*laugh*) The education of little Pietro. (*laugh*)

Interviewer: Now, after you finished *Christ in Concrete*, did you want to write more?

Di Donato: No, no. I wanted to live. I was Faust. My eyes were opening up, my enemy was the public. My enemy was the working classes, my enemy was the common man. Oh, the rich are such charming people; they're honest. If the wife is laying somebody, they talk about it, they laugh. The common man is an animal, they kill, they're jealous, they can't afford to be graceful about adultery. They cannot afford to gracefully commit sins. They are weak, they are sheep, they're termites, they're slaves. I'm sympathetic with those who put their lives on the line to liberate themselves, like those in Salvador and Nicaragua who stand up, and to me, Castro is a saint.

Interviewer: What about Che Guevara?

Di Donato: He is a true heroic man, a fearless man completely saturated and occupied with his idealism. Castro was a rich man and so was Che Guevara. They were not poor slobs. They didn't have to do that. It's like my friends in the Red Brigade. The few that I know are wealthy men, scientists, accomplished men who fought the Nazis, who fought the

Fascists, who sheltered Jews and radicals. You know your life wasn't worth *this* if the Nazis got you there. They killed you. Sometimes they'd torture you, but your life was over fast. Down in the street, in many parts of Rome, "Here Angelo D'Angelis was shot down on a certain day," then an artificial light, maybe an artificial candle or something. My heart and soul are with those who are in the hills fighting the Green Berets, fighting the covert, overt invasion by America. My heart and soul to those who died in the Spanish War, those who were murdered in Nicaragua, who are being terrorized and oppressed right now in South Korea.

Interviewer: What about Guevara's thinking fascinates you?

Di Donato: Guevara was an absolutist. There was no compromise. He was the perpetual, the wandering dreamer-idealist. He got to the top of the mountain there in Havana, and he left Castro to the pedestrian hard work of transfiguring the masses. He went to Bolivia with a handful. He fought against odds that were incredible, but he said that in trying to enlist the aid of those he was trying to help liberate, he said, "They're rocks, I'm talking to rocks. I'm proselytizing rocks." You have to transfigure humanity. Habits are very visible strands.

Interviewer: What kind of society did Guevara try to create?

Di Donato: A society of brotherhood, but of course, that meant re-education, that meant re-culturating, that meant removing these values that are attendant upon lotteries and so forth. You can examine our society and find so many perverted seductions that impeded the natural flow of the goodness, that generated envy, hatred, jealousy, frustration.

Then his death — do you think that some of our politicians would die the way he did? They slaughtered his companions in the adjoining cell, and then they opened the door and one of them came in, white in the face. He was going to kill the famous Che Guevara. Wounded, deadly wounded, Che stood up and said, "Don't be afraid to kill me, go ahead. I'll show you how a real man dies." That's how he died, standing up and bleeding.

You see, life has to be bigger than death, when we no longer fear death, because we are involved consciously in the torrent of life. How many roofs do you need over your head, how many cars do you need to drive? We are a perverted, sick, distorted society, a society of distorted mirrors. This is the society we want: We have to be careful who we bring into the world. We need planned pregnancies, prenatal care, good schools. Always pre-thought, careful. Happiness has to be a collusion, a conspiracy. We must turn our backs on the past. The past is bad, most of it — maybe that's what they mean by turning back and being turned into

a pillar of salt. We can dump the Bible. We can create our *own* rules and ethics between ourselves, but we have to discuss it. There must be no generation gap. Like in Italy today, the children, the old people. They don't put them in nursing homes. The old people are right in the houses. They are gods and goddesses. They work until they drop dead.

You see, the enemy in America, that which is anathema in America is the radical, the dissenter, the socialist, because he wants to change the religion, the social religion. That means that the rich can't gouge as much. Capitalism on a small scale, on a practical, pragmatic scale, is filtering back into the Communist monolith of China and even in Russia and the other countries. They're permitting that. You're permitted to make enough money to buy a car, which makes sense, but not to the point where you own a million acres, or where you have 10,000 times more than you need — which should actually be distributed. For instance, in education, they are taking the money away from the students. They are going to prevent millions of students making a contribution to this country — the future is in the hands of our educated people — because of a ham actor's ego, an old dying man — who hid in Warner Brother's studios walking around with his uniform as second lieutenant.

Interviewer: What about the Red Brigade?

Di Donato: Oh, the Red Brigade are absolutists. They are people like the early Christians who are willing to die as martyrs. Like this one said to me: "The Red Brigade is my Love." So I said "Why do you throw your life away?" Direct. He said "Because I know what man's potential is." Now he's talking about potential. He's not talking about the next world. A man can, by degrees, be transfigured. The Red Brigade is counter-terrorist.

One brigadist is worth a hundred reactionaries. He dedicates his life to his cause. Call him a zealot, call him what you wish. There's a purity there. You can't buy it. These are people who arrive at a social religion. Many of them are good Catholics. Many of them feel that they are ordained to transform society into a brotherhood. This is exciting. For instance, for every peasant that is killed by a contra and by the machinations of these foolish Pentagon people who are destroying the world's faith in democracy; for every peasant that is slaughtered, ten Communists are born. Read about the massacres and the counter-massacres.

So the *Brigate Rosse* are super-idealists without any illusions of the risk they are taking. And you know the reason that they prevail? Why they are not all caught? Because the people in the street protect them. I've spoken to people in the street, and no one was looking, and one of them whispered, "It's needed." And I spoke to people in the upper class, a big official. I won't name names. He didn't say, "They are beasts." He said, "Italy is in transition."

Interviewer: After you finished *Christ in Concrete*, what was your interest in writing then?

Di Donato: Truthfully, I felt that I had — I knew that I had a gift, and I was quite amazed by it, and how to live with it. Then it became a responsibility. The goose had laid a golden egg. The goose had to lay more golden eggs.

Interviewer: You were challenged by your discovery of your own talent.

Di Donato: Of course. Then, you look for the right cause. I was disenchanted with the masses, I saw them for what they were, treacherous, weak, fragmentary. They're not whole people. That's what the word *saint* means, it means "whole."

Now the whole person does not run away from the truth. Without truth, there cannot be justice, there cannot be love without truth. The truth is the sperm and ovum of it all. And then you seek purity. Diamonds are made from great pressure. The greater the pressure, the more superfluous elements are pressed out of them till they are pure. That is so rare in literature. Christ did not want to take care of his mother; he wanted to take care of the whole world. You choose your own pressure.

Interviewer: You said that a man with ideals could face death.

Di Donato: Yes, of course. An idealist, a man with an ideology.

Interviewer: What are your ideals now?

Di Donato: Truth, truth, truth, truth.

Diane di Prima: Extending *La Famiglia*

Blossom S. Kirschenbaum

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In her scandalous little book *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969), Diane di Prima tells how one afternoon someone handed her a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956); she kept thinking the phrase "breaking ground," and she felt she was about to meet her brothers.¹ In fact, a year later she did meet Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Another year later Lawrence Ferlinghetti, introducing her book *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward* (1958), wrote: "Here's a sound not heard before. The voice is gritty. The eye turns. The heart is in it." Di Prima was meeting brothers — members of the Beat confraternity. Reacting to postwar consumerism, conformity and boredom, they were in spiritual crisis. They reacted with wild expenditures of energy: fast cars, wild parties, jazz, sex, drugs and kicks. This is the confraternity of John Clellon Holmes' novel *Go* (1952), generally credited as the first and most vivid literary account of early Beat life. Characters can be recognized as Ginsberg and Kerouac, with portraits too of Herbert Huncke, Neal Cassady, and William S. Burroughs. Kerouac's *On the Road* came out in 1957. The media promptly promoted the movement. By 1958, when Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* appeared, *Esquire* also published "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation." In 1959, when Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* was issued, so was di Prima's *13 Nightmares*. Mainstream and counterculture seemed in competition to perpetrate the outrageous and the perverse — and in competition to define basic values. As a difficult daughter flouting parental standards, di Prima affirmed familial relationships; in both work and personal life she was seeking out a family of affinity.

"Family" has multiple meanings and, as *The New York Times* has reported (September 2, 1988), family law is even now the battleground of social revolution. Biologically, the term is genetic and implies descent from a common ancestry. It also includes relationships recognized by law, such as marriage and adoption. Sometimes it refers to members of a household who function together as a family. The dispersed extended family of "blood" relatives and in-laws may include attached and honorary members. Most broadly, and especially in a religious spirit, one may