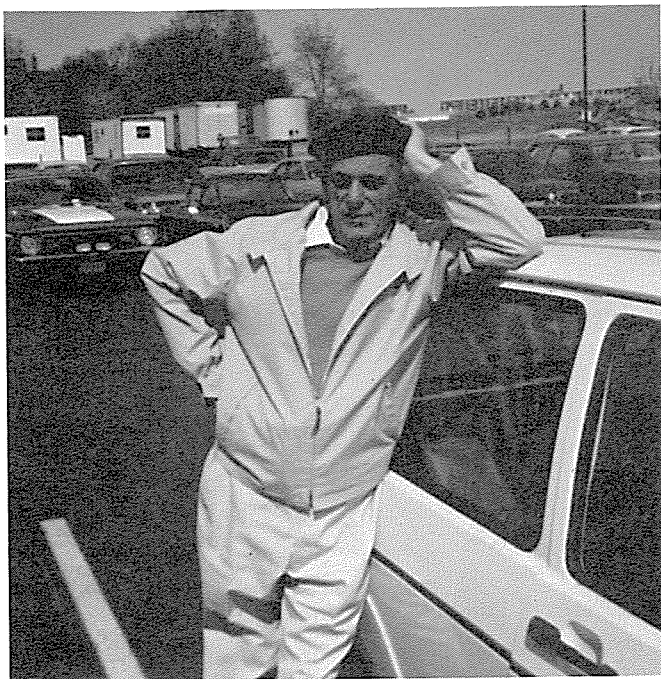


## Pietro di Donato Reevaluated

MICHAEL D. ESPOSITO

Although Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) was one of the earliest novels treating the life of America's Italian immigrants, both it and the rest of di Donato's fiction have attracted little critical attention by scholars and critics whose interest lies outside the sphere of ethnic and immigrant literature. Before discussing his neglect, I feel it is appropriate to refresh the reader's memory regarding the events surrounding di Donato's literary ascent.

An event that perhaps drastically changed Pietro di Donato's life and significantly shaped the radical attitudes inherent in *Christ in Concrete* occurred four days prior to his twelfth birthday. On Good Friday, March 30, 1923, di Donato's father, a thirty-six-year-old master mason and foreman, met a violent death while working on a construction job. Years later, di Donato swore that the contractor was directly responsible for the disaster, since he had insisted on using cheap materials on the project to cut down on expenses. Henceforth, di Donato gradually realized that his father, the *paesani*, and the laboring masses in general suffered irreparable injustices at the hands of America's wealthy classes. Di Donato emphasized these feelings in an interview forty years later when he argued that his father's death made him class-conscious and sympathetic with a dream of revolution and the uplifting of the working man.<sup>1</sup>



**Pietro di Donato**

*(Courtesy of the Author)*

His father's death not only served to heighten the young di Donato's political awareness but also forced him to quit school in the eighth grade to support his family of nine. Faithful to the tradition of his ancestors, who came from a generation of builders, di Donato became a bricklayer.

His maturing affinity for those whom he believed to be the tortured, honest working man led him to join the Communist Party on the night of the Sacco and Vanzetti executions, August 23, 1927. Like hundreds of other sympathizers crammed into Union Square that evening, di Donato admitted to being terribly emotionalized. The long-range effects of this experience on him undoubtedly aided in casting his fiction along radical lines, especially since this trauma served to further intensify his disenchantment with American politics. The Communist Party, however, was not destined to serve as his mouthpiece, because other than sympathizing with the cause, attending some Party demonstrations, contributing a few dollars, and

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going occasionally to the Party's summer camp in upstate Connecticut, he did not actively participate in the organization.

Di Donato's empathy for the working man characterized his first attempt at writing. In 1932, he wrote a long letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt, urging him to be the social messiah and save the laboring classes from the grip of the Depression. Di Donato recalled later that without knowing it he was writing a fantasy; so upon completing the letter he decided against sending it. Some months later he expanded the ideas of that letter and completed his testimony, which expressed how he truly felt about the plight of America's destitute masses. He entitled the piece *Souls*, a hybrid of poetry, prose, and drama. Though he lost the only copy he had, his writing experience, together with the positive response it elicited from close friends, compelled him to write *Christ in Concrete* shortly afterwards.

After taking a job on a construction project on Long Island in 1936, di Donato and the rest of the bricklayers went on strike when their foreman demanded a "kickback." Finally freed from the restricting confines of the scaffold and the trowel, di Donato found himself on relief and beginning to enjoy life — flirting with girls, reading, and writing. Having discovered the treasures stored in the Northport Public Library, di Donato raced through twelve volumes of Zola, Melville's *Moby Dick* and Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and found that he had a rapport with these writers, especially with Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky. Significantly, in developing as a class-conscious writer, di Donato began to correlate the hard labor and injustices suffered by him and his people with the corresponding predicaments of the working masses presented by the Russian authors. His admission that he "felt kin not only to those who expressed themselves but also to those who had no voice"<sup>2</sup> demonstrates his growing sense of camaraderie with those artists sharing his sentiments for the abused working class.

However, di Donato might never have written *Christ in Concrete* had not a "so-called writer" friend of his insisted that he read Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing*. Di Donato said that his reaction to the play was intuitive and instinctive. He told the writer:

You call him a genius? I'm not a writer, but I could do better if I simply told you, on paper, about my father who loved life, and who only wanted to live and work

for his family and was deprived of that. I'll call it "Christ in Concrete."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, with his newly acquired freedom from bricklaying and his insistence that he could fashion a better story than Odets's, di Donato wrote a short story entitled "Christ in Concrete" and sent it to *Esquire*.

When the story appeared in *Esquire* in March, 1937, di Donato was besieged by publishers to turn his story into a book. Having chosen Bobbs-Merrill, he let his original story stand as the first chapter and finished the novel in eight months.

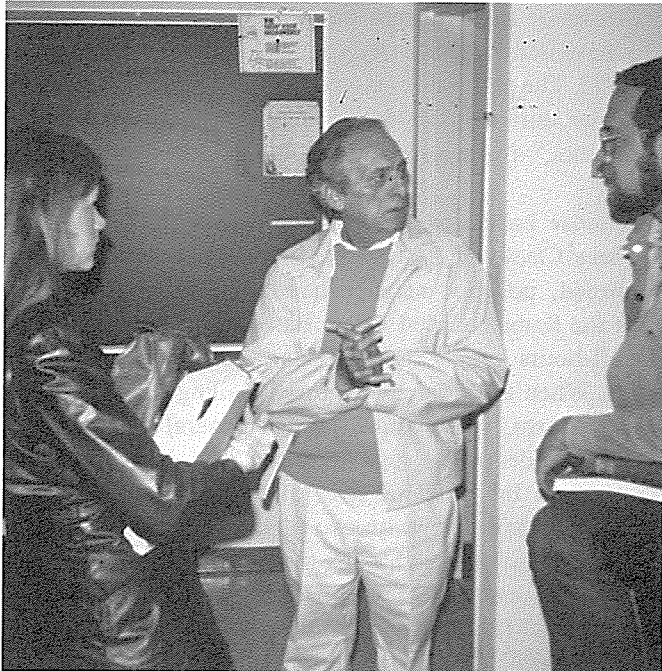
Yet with recent critical attention gradually turning to the nature and problems of immigrant life and literature, di Donato's fiction still remains neglected by many scholars not familiar with Italian-American studies. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. In the first place, much of his work examined the social and religious turmoil surrounding his life when studies of Italian-American literature were rarely undertaken. Only recently has Italian-American literature been regarded as a social genre in its own right. In the second place, di Donato was essentially a one-book novelist whose rapid lionization seriously hampered further scholarship. (His second novel, *This Woman* (1958), did not appear until almost twenty years after the publication of *Christ in Concrete*, and that work is, at best, simply a collection of di Donato's sexual exploits and fantasies.) In the third place, *Christ in Concrete* is not a complex analysis of America's social system but is, instead, written from an immigrant's standpoint. In the fourth place, most of the criticism of American proletarian literature has concentrated on those writers whose careers matured during the thirties and upon writers who overtly propagandized for factions of the left. Di Donato, however, was not a member of left-wing literary groups and did not offer his works for publication in such journals as *Partisan Review*, the *New Masses*, the *Anvil*, and *Masses and Mainstream*. Although he rarely strayed from his study of the exploitation of Italian immigrants in America and the conflicts they encountered, di Donato has not lent his works to left-wing causes. And, finally, the large but fragmented Italian community in this country, which should have been most interested in di Donato's fiction, failed to offer him any significant support. All these points help explain why the author of *Christ in*

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*Concrete* has been slighted for so long by many scholars in academic circles.

Regardless of his neglect, or perhaps because of it, this seems to be an opportune time, given the amount of literature devoted to the question of ethnicity, to rediscover and re-read what I would like to think of as Pietro di Donato's "lost" or "forgotten" works. Also, I want to suggest that, although we may infer a radical message from *Christ in Concrete*, we should examine it, and most of his fiction, as reflective of the Italian-American milieu.

Upon reevaluating di Donato's place in American letters, one recognizes that his finest and most important fiction springs from his reliance on his own Italian-American experience. The primary significance of his more sophisticated fiction lies in his capturing the very spirit or essence of his life and, by extension, that of many Italian immigrants during the early years of the twentieth century. Two autobiographical works dealing with the Italian-American milieu besides *Christ in Concrete* — *Three Circles of Light* (1960) and a collection of



**Mr. D. speaking to a couple of students after lecturing in my Freshman Comp. Class.**

*(Courtesy of the Author)*

short stories and excerpts from his larger works entitled *Naked Author* (1970)<sup>4</sup> — provide the reader with well-written accounts of New York and New Jersey's Italian population in the early 1900s. Such works serve as historical records or, rather, as vehicles for understanding the lives of America's Italian immigrants. These works will probably become increasingly important in the future simply because the first and second generations are slowly disappearing, and their story will need to be told.

A closer look at *Three Circles of Light* and *Naked Author* demonstrates the cultural and historical accuracy and significance of di Donato's autobiographical works. In *Three Circles of Light*, di Donato revisits the scene of his first novel — the Italian colony of West Hoboken, New Jersey — and creates, as one critic for *Time* noted, "a piece of immigrant Americana."<sup>5</sup> Like his first novel, di Donato's third book is concerned with the son of Geremio, an Italian bricklayer and master mason. Both begin with Geremio's death in a construction accident. Whereas *Christ in Concrete* continues by telling the story of his son Paul's struggle to support his large family, *Three Circles of Light* flashes back to the years before Geremio's death to the childhood and early youth of Paolino di Alba, from about 1916 to 1923. The entire story is told from the point of view of Paolino, a precocious thirteen-year-old to whom poverty is spelled "Atlas" and "Hercules," the words on the cement bags his mother uses for diapers.

A loose collection of incidents rather than a sustained narrative, *Three Circles of Light* recreates Paolino's tenement childhood in a crowded, polyglot neighborhood. In one episode, di Donato describes the flame-bearded Uncle Barbarossa, a dynamiter by trade who in off-hours spouts revolutionary speeches at his aged beagle, Garibaldi. When the time comes for the ailing dog to be destroyed, Uncle Barbarossa is determined that "General Garibaldi shall not die a bourgeois death. He shall leave this exploited world like a fearless warrior on the glorious field of battle in an explosive blast" (p. 82).<sup>6</sup> He corsets the dog with two sticks of dynamite, buries him in a snowbank, and tearfully lights the fuses. But faithful Garibaldi lopes after his master, and half of West Hoboken seems to scramble frantically for shelter. The animal disappears in a loud explosion, but unfortunately so does a neighbor's entire house front.

The author's recollections, however, are not restricted only to the primitive and comical paesanos among the Italian immigrants.

He is equally concerned, as Rose Green observed, "with reconciling the attitude, not uncommon among Italians, that the mother of a family had to remain loyal to a faithless husband."<sup>7</sup> The main plot of *Three Circles of Light* deals with Geremio di Alba, who takes a blonde, green-eyed "American" mistress named Delia Dunn, with whom he wins dance contests at the local vaudeville palace. A crisis arises from Geremio's affair when he finds it inconceivable either to give up his wife and family or to have them condemn him. Eventually, his wife, Annunziata, breaks up his affair when Delia has a child by him. But her triumph is brief; a few weeks later, Geremio is killed in a construction accident. When he writes of Geremio's death, di Donato is not simply reiterating the theme of the immigrant laborer frustrated by overwhelming odds. Instead, he is, as Rose Green argues, "crystallizing the moment when the immigrant realizes that he is confronting the challenge of the new world."<sup>8</sup> For example, he describes Geremio's wake, which was held in the front room of his tenement flat. Speaking through Paolino — now burdened with the responsibilities of supporting his mother and seven brothers and sisters — the narrator reflects that "it was not the American Dream [which] championed the family of the dead Geremio. Present were the parish of San Rocco, the fathers and mothers of my people" (p. 229). Paolino realizes that whatever his family's plan might have been in pursuing the elusive "American Dream," it remains for the paesanos, and by implication, all immigrants, to do it themselves.

Paolino's subsequent rejection of his father's attempt to Americanize himself and his family while ridiculing the primitive ways of the paesanos is complete as the boy embraces not only the religion of his people but also the true sense of belonging and identifying with them. The author further illuminates the need for ethnic solidarity in America when, at Geremio's wake, Annunziata's sister-in-law "literally grabs Paolino's hands, symbolically snatching him back into the racial group,"<sup>9</sup> shouting:

Watchlet on wrist, ring on finger, saucy cravat and oiled hair. You were prepared to tilt your fine nose and repeat your father? To look down upon our uncouth paesano fruits with your father's slutting pretty eyes? . . . Wouldst Americanize yourself like "Jerry Philips"? Who lies in the box of the dead, here, "Jerry Philips" or the Vastese Geremio di Alba? . . . Are the "Americans"

here to lament, to claim with blood and soul Annunziata's tragedy as their own tragedy? Are the "Americans" here to pay for Geremio's funeral? Will the "Americans" mingle tears and soil upon Geremio and cry, . . . No! No! No! As true as the wounds of the Savior, to the "Americans" Geremio is a useless and dead "wop"! (2. 231)

Unlike the conclusion of *Christ in Concrete*, in which Paul discards the religious myths and superstitions of his mother, *Three Circles of Light* concludes with Paolino's reconciling himself to the traditional beliefs of his people.

Following the publication of *Three Circles of Light* in 1960, di Donato devoted most of his creative moments to the writing of short stories. From 1964 to 1971, he published over twenty stories in such magazines as *Knight*, *Playboy*, *Ramparts*, *Holiday*, *Penthouse*, and *Nugget*. Most of these stories rise from the author's experiences — from his impressions of the Italian-American milieu of his childhood, from knowledge and understanding of men's deepest passions, and from his empathy with all who live life to its fullest. In 1969, to help an old friend whose publishing house was on the brink of bankruptcy, di Donato agreed to let Phaedra Inc. of New York compile an anthology of these stories. As a result, *Naked Author* was published in April, 1970.

As mentioned earlier, di Donato's artistic strength comes from his perceptive rendering of his Italian-American past. This is especially clear when one considers some of the themes originating in *Christ in Concrete* that recur later in di Donato's other fiction. One such theme is the disintegration of a previously harmonious family under the blows of capitalism. Not only does di Donato treat this theme effectively in his later works, but he also infuses them with the power to elicit a sympathetic response.

In recreating his own story in *Christ in Concrete*, di Donato succeeds in dramatizing the condition of the exploited Italian-immigrant worker and his family in twentieth-century America. With deliberate intensity, he relates the problems of the family to the brutal pressures of the construction worker's world. For instance, in *Christ in Concrete*, di Donato portrays the situation of Annunziata, who is refused financial aid at the municipal social-service agency after her husband's death. Because of this denial, she must rely on the generosity and sympathy of her brother and of the *paesani* to support her family.



Similarly, in *Three Circles of Light*, di Donato documents the Italian immigrant's realization that he is confronting the insurmountable challenge of the new world. During Geremio's wake, the *paesani* understand instinctively that it is *la via vecchia*, the old way, which champions Geremio's family — not the American Dream. Di Donato's message is clear: "Remember seriously, when darkness strikes one of our homes, it is the paesano who brings the order of strength, and the sacred taper of care and love" (p. 191). In these autobiographical novels, the author maintains that the success of the Italian immigrants' efforts in America depends on their embracing of old-world values in the face of new-world antagonisms.

Another theme originating in *Christ in Concrete* and subsequently appearing in *Three Circles of Light* and in a short story in *Naked Author*, entitled "La Smorfia," focuses on the Italian immigrants' respect for and belief in superstitions and myths. For instance, in *Christ in Concrete*, Annunziata and Paul visit an American fortune teller called "the Cripple" to learn if Geremio is happy and if he suffered when he was killed. After contacting Geremio in the spirit world, the Cripple assures them that Geremio is well, that his death was painless, and that the family would be provided for. Relieved and overjoyed, Annunziata and Paul return home comforted by the psychic's news.

In "La Smorfia" and in *Three Circles of Light*, di Donato reveals that many Italian immigrants have retained their beliefs in faith healers, especially when they must counteract the Evil Eye, a curse placed on unsuspecting victims by their enemies. For example, di Donato describes the powers of La Smorfia: "She was the high priestess of healing and the awesome Fattura, that shadowy region of the cabala from whence emanated the evil eye, portents, prophecy, the influencing of love and hate, and occult communion with the departed" (p. 5). In the neighborhood, the *paesani* insist that the old woman's power is equal to a saint's. Inevitably, when superstition mingles with faith, the *paesani* make no distinction between the two.

Similarly, di Donato describes the Italian immigrants' faith in sorcery when he relates the tale of the "Miracle of Eighteen" in *Three Circles of Light* and in the short story "La Smorfia." In these he explains how La Smorfia's sorcery saved the *paesani* of Vasto living in West Hoboken from the scourage of the Spanish flu. Despite efforts from the town's physician, when the high priestess offers her primitive Mass to break the summer heat in 1918, the *paesani* accept

the ensuing bolt of lightning as a real effect from a direct cause. Clearly, di Donato's people maintain respect for the bewitching powers of sorcery, while the advice and remedies practiced by medical doctors prove ineffectual. Thus, in depicting the Italians' reverence for the mystical powers of witchcraft and their scorn and distrust of science, di Donato preserves the traditional beliefs and superstitions that were not completely abandoned after the Italians emigrated to the United States.

The prevalence of these themes in di Donato's fiction illustrates the extent to which the family, community, and superstitions affected the author. These themes indicate the solidifying influence such customs and rituals imposed on the Italian immigrants. Besides emphasizing the influence that di Donato's Italian heritage had on his writing, these themes also demonstrate the author's expertise in incorporating Italian customs within an autobiographical framework to portray the Italian immigrant as one who cherishes and depends on traditional beliefs while coping with the demands of American life in the early twentieth century.

Of course one might argue that the characters in di Donato's autobiographical works do not resemble authentic Italians living in the United States but are, instead, stereotyped creations. Nevertheless, di Donato, though varying slightly from his original design for dramatic emphasis, sketched his characters exactly as he remembered them, while introducing a minimum amount of fabrication.

Di Donato's portrayal of America's Italian immigrants can be helpful to historians because these portraits fill in the gaps that historical documents do not provide. I do not mean to suggest that his fiction be read as a substitute for historical documentation but rather that it accompany such studies to supply the atmosphere and spirit of ethnic life pervading the twenties and thirties. In short, there remains a certain kind of intimate human experience that the historian simply cannot record, and this is certainly di Donato's area of expertise.<sup>10</sup>

Yet probably the main reason di Donato's fiction is rarely read and his place in American letters overlooked by historians and literary critics not studying ethnic literature is that most of his work suffered a qualitative drop after the overwhelming success of *Christ in Concrete* in 1939. Even such provocative works as *Three Circles of Light* and *Naked Author* surely lack the power and intensity characterizing his first autobiographical novel. As for the remainder of

di Donato's writings — *This Woman* (1958), *Immigrant Saint: The Life of Mother Cabrini* (1960), and *The Penitent* (1962) — none seems to qualify as serious literature deserving a place among America's classic works of fiction.

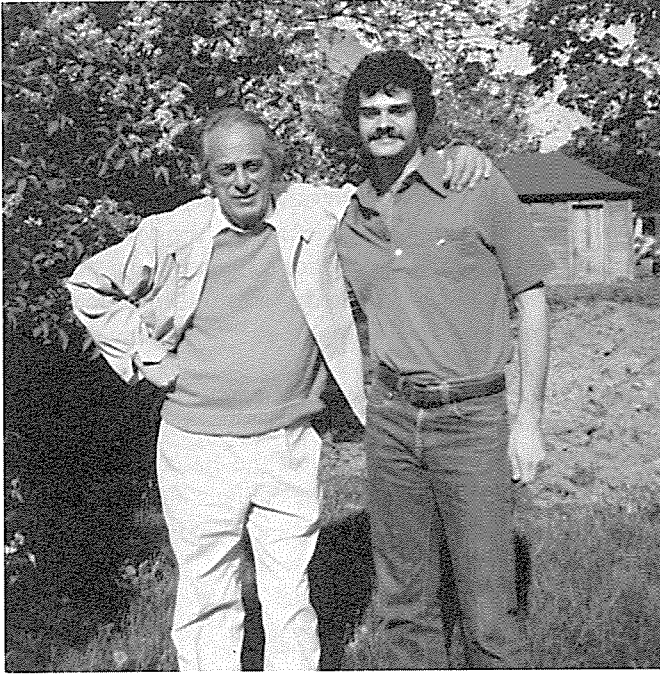
In spite of the relatively poor quality of much of di Donato's fiction, one might suppose that this country's Italians would have shown an interest in his more relevant works, since many of these treated the Italian-immigrant experience. On the contrary, his works have been ignored by most of America's Italian population. Why did the Italian community in the United States fail to support him? For the answer I turned to Mr. di Donato, and he explained that

the tradition of reading was foreign to young Italo-Americans. It is only recently that they have come into the book world, . . . it was not the Italians who were responsible for my success. The Italians are discovering me now, but I knew it would take a lot of time. They had to get away from the pick and the shovel, from the trowel and the hammer, from the mines and the quarries, and from the railroad gangs; and now the Italian is anxious to emulate the Jew.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of the Italian-American's gradual rise into academic circles, as well as America's pronounced new awareness of ethnicity, it is only fitting that di Donato's work and place in American letters be reevaluated.

Ironically, now that di Donato is beginning to be appreciated, his response to the future of America, American literature, and Italian-American writers has significantly changed. When "Christ in Concrete" was first released in March, 1937, for example, he believed passionately in the blamelessness and goodness of all people. However, in an interview forty years later, he said that "this great, big, crude creature, the modern public" (Italian Americans included) and the writers who pander to it, have "no courage, no revolutionary spirit, no idealistic enthusiasm."<sup>12</sup>

His bitterness is paradoxical in view of his own seemingly valueless life following the success of *Christ in Concrete*. He was a young writer, overwhelmed with the pressing concerns of his past, who wrote a powerful first novel and for years found himself fatally attracted to the worst blandishments of the capitalistic enterprise he



**Pietro di Donato and Author Michael Esposito.**

*(Courtesy of the Author)*

despised. In fact, the burden of his past is so great that he can never completely free himself from the Italian-American milieu of his early years or from the autobiographical incidents coloring much of fiction. In reality, it seems di Donato has lived what may be called the Hollywood paradigm: acquiescing to the perils of money and fame, di Donato was robbed of his higher ideals and artistic touch.

Although one may accuse di Donato of being blind to his own decadent conduct, or worse, of being a hypocrite, his predicament may also be a result of his inability to escape the restrictions of his past. He knows he is uneducated and unsophisticated, yet regardless of such formidable constraints he always aspired to higher ideals and values foreign to his own upbringing. Such an unresolved conflict has served to constantly frustrate him, and I believe it is this frustration that characterizes the real tragedy of di Donato's life.

Whereas a frustrated di Donato blamed the American people for their loss of values, he also condemned contemporary American

literature and its writers for catering to what he referred to as this "terrible herd of the masses."<sup>13</sup> He argued that American literature was at its peak in the 1930s, when creative artists were writing with a strong social purpose. Since the thirties, the role of the American writer has diminished. Di Donato attributed this decline to this country's debasement of values and ideals and promotion of materialism and superficiality.

In addition to di Donato's disenchantment with himself, the American people, and American literature, he also dislikes such popular Italian-American authors as Mario Puzo and Gay Talese for writing books that he believes portray Italian Americans in an unfavorable light. In other words, di Donato does not condone Italian-American writers' publishing books that exploit their own ethnicity.

I can argue that Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* is written in the radical tradition of the 1930s proletarian writers, and that therefore its author deserves a place in American letters reserved for such working-class artists as Michael Gold and Jack Conroy. However, to do so is to divert attention from the real nature of di Donato's radicalism, a radicalism, for the most part, devoid of any firm political and ideological allegiances. Unlike many of his revolutionary contemporaries, di Donato's rebelliousness is intuitive and has little in common with those doctrines advocated by warring politicians. His Old World instincts inevitably forced him to abandon rigid, unyielding political structures and to replace them with his own personal, humanitarian philosophy that calls for the equal distribution of wealth for all men of all races. In this respect, di Donato is indeed a radical author in the fundamental sense of the word, whose purpose or mission in writing was, quite simply, to illuminate the conflicts his people encountered in accepting the American ethos. As a result, di Donato merits recognition as being a pioneer among Italian-American writers whose works stirred the American public to fully recognize the condition of this country's Italian immigrants and, by implication, the condition of all immigrants of all nationalities. Finally, di Donato's works offer us the first distinctive voice of the Italian-American community, and for that accomplishment alone he deserves our most serious consideration.

## Italian Americana

### NOTES

1. Personal interview with Pietro di Donato, March 21, 1977.
2. "A Terrific Fuss Over A Story," *Esquire*, March, 1937, p. 32.
3. Personal interview, op. cit.
4. While the book was being printed, Phaedra Inc. went bankrupt and *Naked Author* was haphazardly finished. The first and only edition was marred with hundreds of typographical errors. In an attempt to salvage the collection, di Donato sold it to Pinnacle Books of New York in the middle of 1970. His new publishers added five short stories and deleted sixteen from the original text and released *Naked, As An Author* in paperback in December, 1971.
5. "Paesano with a Trowel," *Time*, June 6, 1960, p. 101.
6. Page numbers in parenthesis after quotations refer to the 1939 edition of *Christ in Concrete* (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis and New York), the 1960 edition of *Three Circles of Light* (Julian Messner, New York), and the 1970 edition of *Naked Author* (Phaedra Inc., New York).
7. Rose Green, *The Italian-American Novel* (Rutherford, N. J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1974), p. 156.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
10. Jerre Mangione illustrates this point in *The Italian American Novel*, ed. John Cammett (New York: The American Italian Historical Association, 1969), pp. 25-26. He argues that there are certain qualitative life-styles of the first generation that are impossible to convey outside of fiction. "For example," Mangione notes, "I can't show as Mario Puzo put it in *The Godfather* that to the Italian family, 'blood was blood and nothing else was its equal.' I can't portray those beloved Italian family characters like the aged grandmother insisting "mangia." I can't do that. You know when Puzo or another novelist does it; you know the historian can't do it. He doesn't have the humor . . . I can't show you the image of the proud Italian father whose wife has just born his first son. I can't show you the emotional significance of the immigrant family purchasing their first home in this country. I can't portray the perennial feuds among and between Italian kin groups. And, I can't portray the equally perennial reconciliations between them."
11. Personal interview, op. cit.
12. *Ibid.*
13. F. Anthony D'Allesandro, "Pietro di Donato: A Profile," *The Italo-American Times*, January 24, 1977, p. 12.