Christ in Concrete: a Farewell to Catholicism

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Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* is a powerful narrative of the cultural struggle of New York's Italian laborers in the early twentieth century. The novel, published in 1939, stands as one of the best literary accounts of the Italian immigrants' experience in the so called *New World*. As Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale state in their historical work *La Storia:* "Never before or since has the aggravation of the Italian immigrant been more bluntly expressed by a novelist"[1]. One of the main components of this "aggravation" is the struggle, for both the author and his protagonist Little Paul, to reconcile the moral and spiritual guidance of traditional Catholicism with the failure of that very religion to inspire any tangible improvement in the lives of its faithful. In a reality filled with deprivation, humiliation and exploitation, the Catholic institutions lose influence and effectiveness as capitalistic entities, represented by the allegorical *Job* and *Boss*, take their place.

Di Donato's achievements is his characterization, through Little Paul, of the heroic journey taken by so many immigrants, through loss of connections to the customs and values of a culture left behind, to a bitter recognition of themselves as the *other*, the outsider in a society that only pretends to accept them, to a final existencial awakening.

The novel opens with the introduction of Paul's father Geremio and his mother Annunziata. Geremio is an honest, hard-working man whose enduring loyalty and faith is reflected in his preservation of the old habits and customs and in the constant appeal to God for guidance:

> It is not possible to breathe God's air without fear dominating the pall of unemployment? And the terror of production for Boss, Boss and Job? To rebel is to lose all of the very little. To be obedient is to choke. O dear Lord, guide my path (p.13).

These words express Geremio's preoccupation with the wrongs and abuses inflicted by *Job* and *Boss*, those two constants that rule and oppress his earthly life. He is aware of the ever-present dangers he and the other workers have to

face, of the unnecessary changes they are forced to take and of the awesome consequences. However, these pressures do not crush his faith.

Geremio dies on Good Friday, after asking in vain for his Lord's help. As he is about to go home to celebrate the holiday with his family, the building he and his *paesani* are working on collapses, burying him alive under a flood of settling concrete. As wet cement pours over him, he implores Jesus:

> Show yourself now, Jesu! Now is the time! Save me! Why don't you come! Are you there! I cannot stand it-ohhh, why do you let it happen-where are you? Hurry hurry hurry! (18).

Geremio's cries for help - his last desperate attempt to free himself from the fury of *Job*, so that he can go home and take care of his wife and children - go unanswered:

> ....not even the Death can free us, for we are .... Christ in Concrete... (226).

Job is omnipotent and inexorable; it encompasses their lives and their souls, leaving no escape.

Though deeply grieved by the loss of her husband, and uncertain how the family will survive, Annunziata keeps her faith and continues imploring God for help. The only help that comes, however, is that which her oldest boy Little Paul can provide.

Just twelve, he is compelled to abandon the world of childhood and seek provision for his family. He turns first to his local Church. The priest is in the middle of supper when he arrives, and refuses to see him. Paul tries desperately to connect with the "old-old face who appears through the half-opened door" (56) explaining that his father has died: "We are eight and mother. We need help. We will suffer…" (57). The priest is indignant, replying: "This is a Church" (80).

Only after the insistence of Donna Katarina, an "old gypsy woman" who offers Paul "a round loaf of bread" is he allowed to speak to the priest, Father John, who is sitting at:

> a long table reaching away beautifully lit with slim candles throwing warm glow on shiny porcelain plates containing baked potatoes and cuts of brown dripping lamb and fresh peas and platters of hot food cool food hard food soft food… (58).

He refuses Paul any kind of help, pointing out that he has "nothing to do with Charities. There is a board of trustees who confer and pass on every expenditure" (59). He suggests to Paul, however that he sells his "nice little overcoat" (59).

In this scene the Church as an institution is depicted as old, weak and, more importantly, devoid of compassion. As Mangione and Morreale comment: "The initial failure of the American Catholic Church to reach out to the Italian immigrants gave rise to the general impression that this Church was even more indifferent to their needs than the Church in Italy had been"[2]. The authors suggest that the traditional practice of the Catholic Church was to work in compliance with the wealthy and politically powerful. This was discouraging enough in Italy; in America, however, the all-but-homeless immigrants had to deal with the added pressures of a strange language and culture. Their need for spiritual sustenance was therefore greater, and so they clung to their religion, which, instead of bolstering them in their fight against the odds, counseled them to persevere and wait patiently for their reward in the afterlife.

Fred L. Gardaphe', in his introduction to *Christ in Concrete*, observes that Di Donato points to "American Catholicism as a force that controls and subdues the immigrants' reaction to the injustices of the capitalist system that exploits as it maims and kills the Italian immigrants"[3].

Thus we follow Little Paul in his progression into atheism. In the end his rejection of the Church is paralleled by his disdain for the basic structure of American society, an attitude that is foreshadowed in the remarks of his godfather, Nazone, when Paul first goes to him for work:

> Nazone said to Paul in under-voice:
> 'Would you wish to become a master-builder of walls like the good spirit of your father?'
> 'I...have this trowel with me..'
> 'Bless God,' said Nazone to the men, 'and why shouldn't the son of a bricklayer learn the art and bring food to his family? Is the school going to satisfy their needs? The Police? The Army? Or Navy? The Church? Or the City Hall stinking with thieves? (67).

It should be noted that Nazone's appeal to the other bricklayers is delivered in the name of social justice rather then sentiment or religion. "It is not a fact of heart" said Nazone. "It is the right of a bricklayer's family to live. It is the right of a bricklayer's son to follow the art of his father" (67). Nazone's belief, in such

justice in a bricklayer's right to support his family, convinces the others to accept Little Paul, and at lunch each of them offers him some food. The irony is heavy in this symbolic representation of the breaking of the bread at the Last Supper.

As soon as Paul enters the adult world as a worker, he sees it is rife with corruption and exploitation. In effect, "the way the world is" (95) as Mr. Rinaldi puts it when Paul objects that his pay is not proportionate to his immense effort. But he faces the challenge and tries to support his family by working as much as his youth and physical strength allow. His frail form gives out under the weight of *Job*, however, and he is forced to stop working. Hunger and despair become real for Annunziata and the children. They realized more and more that *Job* can give life and happiness but can also take them away, no less than God himself.

Here the parallel between the secular *god Job* and the spiritual Catholic deity come together as a force united in indifference to the plight of the immigrant. The novel becomes an indictment of both the body and spirit of the capitalist Christian world. But what also begins to emerge is the theme of disenchantment, a universal theme transcending the story of an immigrant boy in a struggle against a heartless class structure and an empty religion. Little Paul could be any emerging adolescent anywhere, and the harsh lessons he learns are mere evidence of "the way the world is".

His realization, late in the novel, that he has "been cheated" much in the same way as his father before him, is the strongest statement of his pathetic disillusionment. It is an echo, however, of an earlier realization after the death of his father, when he says to his mother: "Dear mother, is not all this a wrong story?" (32).

An important influence on Paul in his unhappy progression into atheism is Louis Molov, the Jewish boy who lives in the same tenement. Louis has witnessed terrible suffering and has come away from it with a quiet firmness that rejects faith and fatalism and demands retribution here and now rather than in some imagined afterlife. His calm declaration to Paul concludes an early conversation:

> 'You have seen your father'.
> 'What do you mean?'
> 'You knew your father?'
> 'Yes..'
> 'And your mother?'
> 'Of course.'
> 'And you love them.'

> 'Why, yes.'
> 'Have you seen God?'
> Paul felt something weakening him.
> 'Louis-haven't you-don't you believe in God?'
> The gray eyes turned full on him.
> 'There is no God.' (140).

Paul now goes through a period in which, as God begins to slip away, *Job* becomes stronger. He goes back to work, brings food to the table and improves the conditions of his family. For a time, at least, while God has fled, *Job* is real, immediate and tangible, as is the community of workers he finds himself in:

> Paul recognized some of the faces...faces he had seen at the great street feasts of Saint Joseph, faces that had visited the house and drunk muscatel and alicante wine, faces he had seen at baptisms and weddings, faces he had seen at the Liberty Loan benefit in the Bricklayers' Local the time of the War with the Huns, the time they had beer and sandwiches and prize fights and when his father put him high on his shoulder and told him to sing *America I Raised a Boy for You* and *The Sunshine of Your Smile* and they threw pennies to him that glorious time he would never forget....They were faces that stood by and attended his father in coffin with severe eyes and lowered chins (64).

Paul realizes more than ever, nonetheless, that no one is looking out for him except his compatriots: "The scaffolds are not safe, for the rich must ever profit more" (228). A new consciousness settles over him when his godfather Nazone dies, having fallen from a scaffold jarred by a tub thrown at him by a foreman. At this moment Paul considers the awful possibility that "not to die" on the job is the exception: "Today he did not die. Perhaps somewhere tomorrow. And he left Job grimly with level and tool bag" (229). Not only has religion and its priest proved empty, but the secular *god Job* and its clergy, in the form of bosses and foreman, have proved treacherous. The American Dream has become a nightmare, the land of the future has become, in Nazone's words, "a soil that has contradicted itself" (211).

For Paul and the Italian community of this period, America turns from a symbol of hope to one of despair. In Nazone's words:

> ...what is going on today in this America is not a thing of temperament, it is something we cannot understand, it is the beginning, and all shall be shut to the hands that labor. It is like the

> war that brings itself and for us only suffering awaits...Discovered by an Italian-named from Italian - But oh, that I may leave this land of disillusion! (212).

Nazone's severe judgement of America is a climatic lesson in Paul's process of disenchantement-atheism-enlightment. No longer able to believe in the existence of God or in the promise of capitalism and the American social system, he is thrown back on himself, and, like Louis, he understands he must be master of his own destiny. This existential awakening gives him a new resolve; after Nazone's funeral he his unable for the first time in his life to abide Sunday mass. In this moment he breaks from a cultural tradition steeped in ritual:

> As he approached Saint Prisca, he felt a dread. In church his head began to ache. He became acutely alive to the strangeness of ceremony, the candles and press of Christian faces, the faces and wings of the statues, the temple of architecture, the convolutions of mass, the torment of incantations, the ultimate decision of Father John, and the nausea assaulted his bowels, breast and brain (227).

At the end of the novel he feels disgust and rage as he observes his mother engaged in her daily prayers:

> 'Mama what are you praying for!'
> In votive lamp's lume she turned.
> `.....Paul.....?'
> He pointed to the crucifix.
> `That's a lie.'
> His words strangled her.
> `-Our Dio?'
> `What Dio and Dio!'(229).

Paul is at last a somewhat young man and ironically has begun his process of Americanization. Having replaced Catholicism with capitalism, and having pretty much seen through both, he is now a pioneer in a land with few abstract boundaries and an aboundance of religions and ideologies to choose from. But Di Donato is no anarchist, and his atheism is grounded in a moral courage that is European in origin and existentialist in concept.

As F. Gardaphe' concludes in his introduction to the novel: "To Di Donato, salvation for the world lies in man's ability to become his own God, to take

responsibility and control of the world he has created and to act for the Good of all"[4].

Notes

[1] Mangione e Morreale, *La Storia*.: 368.
[2] Ibidem: 327.
[3] Gardaphe', F., 1993, introduction to *Christ in Concrete*, p. Di Donato, Signet Classic, New York: xvi.
[4] Ibidem: xviii.

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