

ALMA MATER STUDIORUM - UNIVERSITÀ di BOLOGNA
SCUOLA DI LINGUE E LETTERATURE, TRADUZIONE E INTERPRETAZIONE
SEDE DI FORLÌ

CORSO di LAUREA IN
MEDIAZIONE LINGUISTICA INTERCULTURALE (Classe L-12)

ELABORATO FINALE

Inbetweenness

A reflection on Italian American cultural integration as depicted in the novel 'Ask the
Dust' by John Fante

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Anno Accademico 2015/2016

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Contents

Introduction

Chapter One

John Fante: author and protagonist

Chapter Two

Los Angeles: a city of cultural clashes

Chapter Three

Dago and Greaser: a world behind words

Chapter Four

Arturo Bandini: a life in between

Conclusion

Bibliography

Introduction

The first thing that generally comes to mind when thinking about the novel *Ask the Dust* by John Fante is the intriguing and often ambiguous persona of Arturo Bandini.

Arturo, who is nothing less than Fante's alter ego, offers us a vivid portrait of the city of Los Angeles during the Great Depression-era.

This uncommon depiction of the "city of angels" is presented to us through the description of the people who inhabit it and their relationship with the protagonist. Thus, everything we become to know is filtered through the eyes of this twenty something years old second generation Italian American writer from Colorado, and nothing seems to escape cultural confrontation, whether it results in racial and minorities discrimination or in a bitter glorification of the American culture he longs so much for.

Arturo, even though thinking of himself as a white American, is seen by the world he lives in as a non-true American, being both an Italian American born in America and a man from Colorado living in California.

So the question we are left with and the one we are trying to answer is: how can an Italian American become white?

What emerges from the pages of *Ask the Dust* is that it is not a matter of where we are born or which color our skin is, but it is something that goes deeper on how we behave, how we relate to others, and, most importantly of all, what do we think of ourselves and what the others think of us.

This is why the persona of Arturo Bandini is so important in the process of discovering what lies beneath becoming and being an American and also why John Fante managed to create all the premises for us to investigate this ambiguous phenomenon that we will refer to as "inbetweenness".

John Fante, author and protagonist

When speaking of John Fante it is easy to think of him and his fictional alter ego Arturo Bandini as the same person. They share the same profession, the same place of birth, the same city where they live, and even the same Italian origins from which they have inherited a proper Italian sounding surname.

This whole lot of similarities doesn't have to misguide us, though, into thinking that Fante's works are of an entirely biographical matter. His are novels of fiction, and *Ask the Dust* is not different, but even in this constructed world of his, we can find a few common points between writer and protagonist which are essential for our understanding of the true portrait of the Italian American writer condition that Fante offers us.

Escaped from Colorado in search for an adventurous life as a novelist, he transfers his longing for success to the character of Arturo who, just like him, does not get the recognition he thinks he deserves, often indirectly attributing his failures as a writer to his Italian origins from which he is trying so desperately to dissociate himself from.

Even though in the book we see a continuous process of self acceptance which reveals to be a key to become a great novelist, in the real world John Fante never became socially accepted as an Italian American writer of great talent until decades after his death.

The man who is now regarded as one of the best writers to have written about L.A. during the Great Depression-era has not been able to reach success during his time.

This tells us that maybe what we are told in *Ask the Dust*, which is that our ethnic belonging matters only if we do not accept it, is not true in reality, or for better saying, it was not true for an Italian American writer of the 20th century.

What is certain is that despite being now recognized as a great author, John Fante never fully became a successful American writer of his time, but managed to transfer to Arturo his strive for a cultural integration that failed him while gifting him the ability to write about the never ending struggle of an American man with

Italian origins who tries to assert himself into a racist and selective society.

Los Angeles: a city of cultural clashes

When we pick up *Ask the Dust* by John Fante, the first thing we encounter is an actual and vivid portrait of Los Angeles during the Great Depression-era. Fante, using the words of his fictional alter ego Arturo Bandini, tells us about the city of angels starting from the people who live there, as if they were both consolidated parts of the urban landscape and pumping heart of the Californian metropolis.

In a prologue to *Ask the Dust*, John Fante himself wrote that he would “paint a portrait of the ‘real’ Los Angeles”, depicting the lives of the people of a “different civilization”.

It is not by chance, then, that we are immediately faced with a melting pot of ethnicities and cultures. From the Mojave Desert to Temple Street passing through Downtown Los Angeles and The Alta Loma Hotel in Bunker Hill, the looks and souls of the various landscapes are reflected in the people who inhabits them.

Arturo’s Los Angeles, and California as an extension, is basically divided in two different parts of a whole: the rich part of town, with its even richer inhabitants, and the rest, built by the poor for the poor.

In a society which looks and evaluate people on the basis of their ethnicity, the rich part of town identified with Temple Street and beautiful high heels-wearing women can be considered as a symbol, an hypothetical utopia where access is granted only to successful white American men and women.

The rest of Los Angeles instead is crowded with immigrants, low class workers, and obviously writers in search of fortune. This represents the harsh reality in which Arturo is confined but is so

desperately trying to leave behind. What he doesn't realize up until the end of the novel is that he cannot become one of the great American writers until he leaves all of his pre-concepts about ethnicity behind and accepts the fact that he is a second generation Italian American.

In the end, the Los Angeles pictured by Fante in *Ask the Dust* is brutally realistic and down-to-earth, showing a city made up of a melting pot of people from different part of the U.S.A. and the world, all striving for acceptance in a society which only elevates the "Smiths, the Parkers, and the Joneses".

The "American dream", in fact, quickly turned into a sad story about working countless hours just to survive, as in California, the prejudice against people of colour remained surprisingly high up until modern times. For instance, not being white would mean significantly lower wages.

From the research conducted by Kevin Starr in his "Endangered Dreams" it turns out that "white workers performing the same tasks received from fifty cents to a dollar more per day strictly for being white". (Starr, 1996).

Struggling to make a living out of an honest job was something of utterly ordinary, as the hopes of millions of migrants vanished among the sun and the dust of a land dominated by such a huge disparity between the rich and the poor, the white and "the other".

To put it as Fante himself wrote in the original introduction to *Ask the Dust*, "it's a dust from which nothing grows, a rootless culture, a chaotic search for shelter, the blind anger of a lost population without hope". (*Ask the Dust*, 1939)

Dago and greaser: a world behind the words

Discrimination during the Great Depression-era did not only come from the white upper and middle class towards first and

second generation immigrants, but it was rather a phenomenon that took even place among the same social classes and which showed a recognized disparity between different kind of ethnic groups and immigrants.

Arturo, who throughout the whole novel tries to convince himself and the world around him that he is an American, feels somehow empowered in front of Camilla and constantly grants himself the right to call her a “greaser”.

In this case, his superiority is supported by the fact that her skin tone is noticeably darker than his and that her clothes reveal her Mexican origins as well as her surname.

What happens, though, whenever he is brought to reflect about his own name, is that he remembers his youth and how his “whiter” neighbors used to call him. “When I was a kid back home in Colorado it was Smith and Parker and Jones who hurt me with their hideous names, called me Wop and Dago and Greaser, and their children hurt me...” Arturo says, but then goes on by adding “...just as I hurt you tonight” referring to Camilla.

As a consequence, the Mexican girl overcomes these widely accepted “racial steps” and gets back to the Italian American man calling him a “dago”.

The lack of a strong reaction to her words, implies then that the young Italian American is actually conscious of his ethnic origins and of the fact that people around him can notice them.

These are not the only lines in the book where the two of them shout to one another insulting each other with racial slurs, but they offer us a decent picture of how deeply the discrimination based upon ethnicity was rooted in that day and age society.

The term “greaser”, for example, is used to refer to both an Italian American and a Mexican. This tells us that once the insult comes from a person belonging to a non-white-considered ethnic group to another one, there is little to no differentiation between the both of them. Everyone who is not an American instantly becomes “the other”, as it appears that there is no need for ethnic identification, left alone pride.

But why “greaser”, and why “dago”?

The word “greaser” was “originally a class and occupational term (which) named those who greased sheep in preindustrial England and those who lubricated ships and railroad machinery in the nineteenth century” (Roediger, 2005).

Only later on this word gained the racial meaning for which it was used before, after, and during the Great Depression-era in America. In fact, “it acquired its ongoing status as what dictionaries have called a ‘real Americanism’ in referring to Mexicans who came to be within U.S. borders (...) Many stories of its racialized origins preserve association with dirty, manual work.” (Roediger, 2005).

Evidently, in the eye of a “white American”, every first, second, and sometimes even third generation immigrant looked different and “darker”, and therefore gained the infamous privilege to be called a “greaser”.

This thesis is even backed by the Dictionary of American Regional English which “gives a ‘Mexican or Mexican American’ as greaser’s primary meaning and ‘a person of Mediterranean background’ as a second meaning” (Roediger, 2005), but adds a twist for the term *greaseball*, for which “Mediterranean origins are in the first meaning, with Mexican below” (Roediger, 2005). On a different side, the term “dago” never had the same broad use as the latter. In fact, this word was once utilized to describe only Negro workers; it later on transferred to the Italian immigrants (as well as further generations of Italian American), and specifically to Italians coming from the South of Italy. They were in fact considered “less white” than their northern brothers and, most important of all, they did not refuse to take on hard manual labor.

As stated by “Dziennik Zwiazkowy in Chicago in 1911 ‘the American in the South will not engage in agricultural, manual labor; rather he leaves it to the negroes. Seeing that the Italians will do this work, naturally he concludes that Italians lack dignity” (Roediger, 2005), and thus they have the same “racial status” of negroes. From here is easy to understand how the term *dago* started to be applied to Italian immigrants and later on to Italian Americans.

The use of these words, seen as everyday routine for “the Smiths, Parkers, and Joneses” in Fante’s novel, just proves the thinking of Zwiaskowy, who again remarks that “Americanism... is systematically trying to pour all races, all nationalities, into one mass” (Roediger, 2005).

What Fante, and as a reflection Arturo and Camilla are trying to do, is to escape from this “mass”, and to be assimilated into the American “whiteness”. Sadly, they don’t realize, as Fante did instead, that their life can only become meaningful if they accept their origins, and that the actual ‘mass’ is the one made of millions of Americans who can’t see past their different skin and names.

Arturo Bandini: a life in between

Through the pages of *Ask the Dust*, Arturo describes himself as an American. He is aware of his Italian origins, and certainly does not hesitate to mention the fact that he is indeed an Italian American when the situation requires it (e.g. when he needs to emphasize his talents as a Latin lover), but nonetheless he constantly tries to convince himself and everybody else that he really is an American.

The whole novel, in fact, could be summarized as the struggle of a young man who desperately wants to be seen as an American, but due to its Italian origins is often stripped of his nationality. This exclusion from “his own people” slowly takes him to a path of acceptance of his true self as an outsider.

In the first part of the book, Arturo strongly tries to affirm himself as a white American.

He has moved from Colorado to California, and whereas in the small town of Boulder he was seen by his neighbors as different, he is sure he can blend among the white people in Los

Angeles, a city so filled with various ethnicities that it would be nearly impossible for anyone to become aware of his Italian roots.

But then he arrives at the Alta Loma hotel, and the first thing he is asked is whether or not he is an immigrant. “Although Arturo has come from Boulder, Colorado, to Los Angeles rather than from Italy to the United States, the description of his attempt to gain access to the Alta Loma hotel evokes that primal moment of arrival on American shores.” (Elliott, 2010).

He is portrayed like an immigrant and immediately has to come to terms with his identity. This becomes particularly true when Mrs. Hargraves, the hotel manager, questions him about his birthplace. Arturo, in fact, not only has to prove that he is not a Mexican nor a Jew, but he also has to cancel the name of his own town from the hotel register and change it to satisfy Mrs. Hargraves’ imposition.

By crossing out the name of the place he actually comes from, Arturo not only is stripped of his dignity as an intelligent human being, but is also figuratively deprived of something as personal and individual as his place of birth.

What in the eyes of the hotel manager passes as ordinary routine, for Arturo is the beginning of what will be his process of assimilation into the American culture.

Guilty of having Italian roots and the physical traits to show it, he quickly learns that “whiteness” is something you have to achieve, and not only something you are born with.

Starting from changing the name of his own town on the hotel register, he then proceeds on his “assimilation” by buying new clothes. As in the best of metaphors, he replaces his old clothes, responsible to make him look like a “greaser”, with fresh new ones which should make him look like the perfect American gentleman, or at least an American writer of success. Symbolically, he also asks a man at the shop to throw the old clothes away. What happens then, is that the new pants, jacket, and hat don’t fit, just like he doesn’t seem to fit among the “true white” people. As a subtle confirmation of that, he has his old clothes sent back to him spontaneously by the shop keeper, making him feel even more discarded.

At this point, Arturo plays a card that later on will turn on him:

in order to acquire his status as a “first class” American, he reverses the racial hatred he has been treated with on to Camilla. Since he has always been discriminated for being different, “the other”, the Italian American, it now seems only logical that he calls Camilla the same way he has been too. He ferociously addresses her as a “greaser”, a “filthy Mexican”, and he mocks her for her dirty Mexican shoes just to feel superior.

His need to establish his higher status in the hierarchy of racial identity transforms him into something he is so apparently not; this translates in him living in a constant limbo between anger and guilt.

His anger towards Camilla is in fact triggered not by her being a Mexican, but by the fact that he sees himself reflected in the girl’s longing for acceptance.

The difference in their approach to cultural integration is particularly visible in two separate moments during the storyline.

For first, Camilla is willing to change her name into something more “American sounding”, while Arturo is not. He even pretends to like his name when asked by her.

Secondly, she actually tries to adapt to American culture by taking part in things that make her look like an American, such as firing guns at the firing range and driving her own car.

This is where Arturo fails and shows his true self. He is not capable of firing a gun, nor driving. He lacks the skills to become white, and with them the actual willingness to change. To add insult to injury, it is not only that he cannot act like the white man he wants to be, but he also looks like a fool in front of a Mexican woman.

The great Arturo Bandini is once again confronted with his inadequacy at “being white”.

In an impromptu change of direction, after an earthquake which caused the death of his lover Vera, Arturo turns to embrace his Italian origins.

As in the most obvious of clichés, he does that by renewing his faith in God and attending Mass, and not only for the

occasional encounter with beautiful girls, as he had previously stated.

In this period, which we are told by Arturo himself will last for only a couple of weeks, we see our young author finally writing about the poorer social classes and the “real” people of Los Angeles. What he doesn’t realize is that he is not completely one of them either. He is an outcast, and as such, he does not fit among the rich as well as the poor. He can write about them, and sympathize with them, but he will never be one of them.

On a more positive note, he comes back as a more fulfilled person and writer, perhaps knowing that he will never be fully accepted as a white American.

Still, he tries to save Camilla from her madness. What were once words filled with numbed racial hatred, are now replaced with caring and loving manners. Arturo’s self acceptance is what really separates him from his “Mayan princess”, and that is what now gives him real superiority over her.

Once he stopped worrying about being accepted into the white American part of society, he automatically detached himself from the multitude of “non-whites” struggling to become part of it. Also, if we take the dying barman Sammy as a metaphor for the American society which grants itself the right to discriminate and mistreat immigrants on the basis of its self proclaimed superiority, we can see how in the end of the novel Arturo beats him in an hypothetical moral battle over the life of Camilla.

Arturo Bandini, the young author who presented himself to the world as a racist misogynist, grows up to become an honest man. He is not white nor black and he does not belong to the white middle class as well as the ethnic minorities. He is just an Italian American who lives his life in between.

Conclusion

With *Ask the Dust*, John Fante offers us a real portrait of what life for a young Italian American seeking success in Los Angeles during the Great Depression-era could have been like.

His depiction of Arturo Bandini as a young author struggling to find his way as a respected novelist and most of all as a human being is poignant and truthful.

This truthfulness in Fante's writings allows us, then, to elaborate about cultural integration during the Great Depression-era in California and more specifically on the concept of "inbetweenness".

What the character of Arturo shows us throughout the novel is a constant growth, both moral and in terms of self realization.

On another level, though, we can see how he never actually integrates into society as a white American. He can never become accepted as "one of them" for basically three important reasons.

First of all, his name is Arturo Bandini, which is arguably one of the most Italian sounding names of all times, and along with that, his looks are obviously Mediterranean.

Secondly, he is not always willing to change himself to become "more white", and he constantly proves it (e.g. when he refuses to shoot with a gun or to drive a car). For more, he doesn't even seem to like the things that make a man "white" (e.g. he always orders coffee and refuses beer).

Lastly, he could never let his Italian roots go. He thrives on them, and he brings them up whenever the opportunity comes up. Moreover, as soon as he realizes that they are an actual part of him that he doesn't need to hide, he becomes a better writer.

What happens in the end, is that Arturo reaches a kind of moral superiority over Camilla (e.g. the immigrants and the minorities) and over Sammy too (e.g. the totally racist white people), but also subconsciously understands that he will never become white. Thus, what Fante subtly reveals us, is Arturo's "development of a white consciousness; in the end his outpouring of affection for those on the margins serves as a form of self-

deception, protecting him from the knowledge that he has indeed become ‘one of them’.” (Elliott, 2010).

In the introduction we asked ourselves how can an Italian American become white. Now that we have observed in the details the work of John Fante, we can honestly say that the answer is that “he can not”.

Just like Arturo, it is possible to develop a “white consciousness”, but that is as far as one can go.

Being white is not just a matter of skin tone, right surname, and cultural background. It is a matter of how we see ourselves and how we are perceived by others.

So one can adapt, strip himself of any ethnical trait, cultural dignity, and even change his name, but a racist society will always recognize him for who he is, and he will always live his life in-between.

To most, this may seem a merciless fate, even a disgrace, but what we have to keep in mind is the beauty that comes with diversity.

Learning from Arturo, and Fante himself, it is when we accept ourselves for who we are that we truly unlock the potential to live our lives with freedom.

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