



Enthymema XXV 2020

Stephen Cooper, Clorinda Donato, Eds.,
*John Fante's 'Ask the Dust'. A Joining of
Voices and Views*

Cinzia Scarpino

Università degli Studi di Torino

Abstract – Review of Stephen Cooper, Clorinda Donato, Eds., *John Fante's 'Ask the Dust'. A Joining of Voices and Views*. Fordham UP, New York, 2020.

Keywords – John Fante; *Ask the Dust*; Los Angeles; Contemporary U.S. Literature.

Scarpino, Cinzia “Stephen Cooper, Clorinda Donato, Eds., *John Fante's 'Ask the Dust'. A Joining of Voices and Views*”. *Enthymema*, n. XXV, 2020, pp. 696-98.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/13869>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported License
ISSN 2037-2426

Stephen Cooper, Clorinda Donato, Eds., *John Fante's
'Ask the Dust'. A Joining of Voices and Views*

Cinzia Scarpino

Università degli Studi di Torino

When Arturo Bandini walks the shelves of the Los Angeles library and gives a nod to Dreiser and Mencken, he fantasizes that his own books will join those ranks one day. In *Ask the Dust* (1939), Bandini, John Fante's now legendary alter ego, dreams of becoming an accomplished writer with a respectable monetary income, literary fame, and socio-cultural recognition. Yet many decades of critical as well as commercial neglect had to go by, until, with the help of Charles Bukowski's praising foreword to *Ask the Dust*, republished by Black Sparrow Press in 1980, Fante and his Bandini were finally granted a (second) chance. Fante himself died in 1983, but his literary resurrection via Bukowski marked the beginning of his "second life" in Italy, as well as in France and Germany, where minor and major publishers put out a new wave of (re)translations of his – previously published or unpublished – fiction, leading to a veritable "Fantology" (Martino Marazzi, quoted in Mazzucchelli, 130).

And along with editorial visibility came academic scholarship: during the 1990's, a thorough and comprehensive (re)assessment of his work set in. Spawned by Stephen Cooper's 2000 groundbreaking biography – *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante* – and Richard Collins's literary biography (2000), recent articles on Fante's Los Angeles (e.g. by Hector Tobar), on diaspora-race-class (e.g. by Suzanne Roszak), or on whiteness (Matthew Elliott) have attempted to move this Italian American writer from the shadows of critical neglect into the limelight of artistic and academic recognition.

Following David Fine and Cooper and their edited "critical gathering" (1999), Cooper and Clorinda Donato provide now, twenty years later, a fresh look at Fante and his *oeuvre* with a veritable treasure trove of approaches and perspectives, that is unique in its gathering of enthusiastic academic, artistic, and personal voices, from literary scholars, writers, biographers and directors, friends and fans.

At the center this time is just one of Fante's novels, *Ask the Dust* (1939) which, following on the heels of the highly successful and acclaimed *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), had fallen immediately into general oblivion in the United States, and now serves the editors and contributors as an ideal prism to highlight Fante, his times (particularly Los Angeles during the Great Depression), his American-Italian identity, and his major themes.

Part 1 inaugurates the volume with four fresh and insightful analyses of the novel, focusing on its (politically and ideologically infused) translation by Elio Vittorini in fascist Italy (Valerio Ferme), on religion and the highly ambivalent Italian American diasporic experience, with special emphasis on two key concepts of diaspora theory, social alienation and selective accommodation (Suzanne Manizza Roszak), on the social history of 1930s Los Angeles and Mexican identity, manifested in Bandini's love-nemesis and "ethnic mirror" (59) Camilla Lopez, as characterized by "systems of racial rejection, exclusion and expulsion" (77) (Meagan Meylor), and on Fante's intent in *Ask the Dust* to create "a *Ramona* in reverse" (85), a criticism of false and misleading notions of L.A.'s systemic stereotyped Spanish colonial past (Daniel Gardner).

The contributions in sections 2-5 bring vividly to life how fundamental Fante's influence has been on the artistic work of many. The volume offers the pleasure of reading very moving

John Fante's 'Ask the Dust'

Cinzia Scarpino

personal stories of how initial adoration transformed into inspiration, depicting processes of discovering Fante and finding one's Self. For Joel Williams, for example, serving a life-time sentence in a high security prison, *Ask the Dust* became his "textbook" (197) on which he modeled his own writing. And then, after the publication of three books and a number of shorter pieces, and supported by Fante's biographer Stephen Cooper, his fourth parole consideration was finally granted in 2014. Alan Rifkin's piece is a gem disclosing how *Ask the Dust* has functioned as a magnet for the literature of Los Angeles and Southern California. Giovanna DiLello, also a second-generation Italian immigrant, recognized in Fante an intriguing object for a documentary film, *John Fante, Profilo di Scrittore* (2003), which would eventually win her the prize for best documentary at the Los Angeles Italian Film Awards (2003). She also initiated and still directs the annual Fante festival, "Il Dio di Mio Padre", thus finally securely positioning Toricella Peligna (in Abruzzo), the home town of Fante's father, on the literary map.

Miriam Amico, also journeying from Italy to America, did not only discover through Fante a way towards self-confidence as well as pride of origin and roots, her *italianità*, but also, that in all the fascinating and unexpected materials archived in the UCLA special collections, ironically enough the original manuscript of *Ask the Dust* is actually missing (174)!

Robert Guffey analyses Noah Van Sciver's graphic novel *Fante Bukowski*, a 2015 "humorous warning about the dangers of losing oneself in another's identity and the importance of finding your own way through the dark forest of the mind" (155). And Philippe Garnier explains very convincingly the reason why the French love(d) Fante and Bandini so much – their love for the literary cliché of the struggling artist, Bandini as well as Fante.

J'aime Morrison and Chiara Mazzucchelli, as well as Jan Louter, present us with another set of stories of artistic cross-pollination, demonstrating how Fante's novel and his Bandini – particularly in such timeless aspects as the immigrant experience, race/racism, processes of (attempted) assimilation, and the complex relation to Camilla Lopez – have influenced innovative performance art (DUST – a ballet chanté), music (e.g. Sheryl Crowe, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Vinicio Capossela and Marracash) and documentary/ "visual film" (249) (*A Sad Flower in the Sand*).

Fante comes alive in many of the articles, through reprints of archival materials, especially of letters, and Stephen Cooper's (auto)biographical stories. With its diverse array of contributions, ranging from academic to artistic, this volume confirms the extent to which Fante's work has influenced and inspired the work of so many others through the decades and to this day. He does belong on the big bookshelf of accomplished American authors, neatly tucked in before Faulkner and followed by the likes of Fitzgerald and Frost.

So next time we, booklovers and readers of American fiction, walk the shelves of the L.A. library, we will look for Bandini, presumably shelved somewhere between Baldwin and Bellow and followed by Boyle and, yes, Bukowski, and will nod to Dreiser and Mencken – and Fante.